



University-Community Partnerships for Transformative Education

Sowing Seeds of Resistance and Renewal

Edited by Mara Welsh Mahmood
Marjorie Elaine · John Cano



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ISBN 978-3-031-60582-6 ISBN 978-3-031-60583-3 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60583-3>

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La Mia Scuola è Differente, an After-School Program with an Intercultural Focus: The Challenges and Opportunities of Program Development

Lisa Bugno and Luca Agostinetto

My first day of observation begins. I feel a bit tired from the ongoing exam session, but also very curious about the upcoming experience. The school is located in the outskirts of Padova. The spacious garden immediately catches my eye (it's well-suited for outdoor activities that involve free play and a connection with nature)' (Carmela, field note, June 27, 2022).

To reach the building housing the gym, we need to cross a part of the extensive garden. The gym is painted in orange and blue and is shared with the middle school; it's actually located in the same building as the middle school.

This chapter is the result of a collaborative work: specifically, Lisa Bugno wrote paragraphs 1, 3, 4, 5, and Luca Agostinetto wrote paragraph 2.

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M. Welsh Mahmood et al. (eds.), *University-Community Partnerships for Transformative Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-60583-3_16

The volleyball and basketball courts are marked on the floor. It's very hot, and even with the doors open, the temperature is quite high. I observe while standing near the doors. There are 13 children in the group, including five boys and six girls [...] I'm particularly drawn to one boy, M., as he seems to move differently, cautiously, and appears to be receiving special attention from both his peers and the educator. The educator suggests playing dodgeball. During the game, M. is frequently encouraged by his classmates, and his name is repeated many times, including the rules of the game, which are reiterated multiple times by the educator. He seems to speak very little but actively participates in the game' (Elena, field note, June 27, 2022).

I observe that the way activities are presented does not seem to engage or motivate the children very much. Consequently, they easily lose interest and seek other activities, often disturbing those who are diligently trying to participate. [...] Starting from 2:40 PM, the children are taken to the garden for free play' (Alessia, field note, June 27, 2022).

This chapter focuses on the launch of La Mia Scuola è Differente (in English: My school is different, LMSD), a new after-school project in Padova, a small Italian city located in the northeast of the country. Specifically, it describes the challenges and opportunities encountered during our entry into the school-community partnership established in 2019. Writing this chapter gave us (the co-authors Lisa and Luca) the possibility to pause for a moment to reflect on what has been accomplished so far and what directions the project should take (Figs. 16.1 and 16.2).

The opening vignettes feature insights from some of the key participants in the endeavor. These individuals include three university students, Carmela, Alessia, and Elena, who were involved in the research process. Due to their academic commitments and classroom responsibilities, they were not able to contribute to the writing of this chapter. Nonetheless, they generously shared their notes and thoughts with the authors regarding their first experiences in the after-school program. These passages contain rich descriptions that foreshadow some of the themes we will explore in depth throughout the chapter, offering readers an initial glimpse, a taste of La Mia Scuola è Differente as experienced and described by those who played a vital role in its creation. Indeed, from these few, yet rich lines, we are able to gather insights regarding the garden, the approach to presenting activities to the children, and the role of the observers.



Fig. 16.1 La Mia Scuola è Differente gym activities

INTRODUCTION: THE ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE AND CONTEXT

To better understand how and why LMSD was conceived, the Italian context must be defined. There are two main issues we need to consider. One concerns the issue of interculturality, in both theoretical and regulatory terms. The other has to do with how the presence of people with a migrant background has evolved in the country, which has several very important specificities.

Starting with the first issue, the approach to the concept of interculturality in Italian educational circles is consistent with the most authoritative international theories and views on social policy. This is particularly true of Italy's educational legislation, which is one of the most advanced in Europe. After struggling a little initially, the last 30 years have seen education theorists gain a strong grasp of the need for interculturality to focus on integrative and inclusive learning, rather than on filling gaps in students' knowledge (Allemann-Ghionda, 2013; Banks, 2010; Fiorucci,



Fig. 16.2 Free play in LMSD's garden

2020; Gundara, 2000). Interculturality should be seen as the education system's response to today's changing ways of integrating and including numerous diversities (Vertovec, 2007; Zoletto, 2020) expressed by complex societies (Grant & Brueck, 2011).

From an educational perspective, interculturality can be defined as an intentional, transformative project that addresses our multicultural reality (Agostinetto, 2016), with the goal of nurturing the mutual enrichment

that can stem from diversity and from our encounter with otherness (Buber, 1993; Milan, 2007). In line with a European framework clearly outlined by Barrett et al. (2014), taking this perspective demands that we refer to the concept of “intercultural competence”. This term is used to describe a complex construct that includes cognitive, social, affective, and behavioral elements of our ways of being as individuals, and our relations with otherness and with the world (Portera & Milani, 2019). It is in this sense that we often return to the dynamic model proposed by Dearsdoiff (2009), in which intercultural competences are developed in a revolving exchange between *internal outcomes* (adaptability, flexibility, empathy) and the practical experience of encountering otherness (*external outcomes*).

Italy’s regulations and guidelines on education clearly express this theoretical approach. Among the numerous recommendations issued in recent years by the Ministry of Education, at least two are particularly worth mentioning. The most important concerns the “Italian approach to intercultural education and students of migratory origin” (*Ministero Italiano dell’Università e della Ricerca* [MIUR], 2007), which explains that

the Italian school system chooses to adopt an intercultural perspective—or, in other words, to promote a dialogue and exchange between cultures—for all students and on all levels: in conducting lessons; school curricula; teaching methods; subjects taught; relationships; and life in class. Choosing an intercultural approach therefore does not mean merely adopting strategies for immigrant students’ integration, or measures to meet special needs. It means embracing diversity as a paradigm of the very identity of a pluralist schooling, an opportunity to open up the whole system to every sort of difference (of origin, gender, social level, academic history). (p. 9)

Today in Italy, there are schools that are lagging behind, retaining naïve approaches that sometimes tend to be more assimilationist (and consequently exclusive) instead of striving for an authentic integration. In regard to teaching practices in particular, we all too often encounter rhetorical attitudes to interculturality that have good intentions, but which are “staged” in superficial and stereotyped ways. These efforts are often marginal in relation to a school’s activities (Agostinetti, 2016). They are tacked on, but have no influence on how the school system works, its educational content or teaching methods (Favaro & Luatti, 2008). There are also highly positive cases, however, where schools succeed in giving substance to intercultural principles. These schools are able to support the

genuine integration of students from migratory backgrounds in effective and creative ways (Ongini, 2011, 2019), even if such experiences struggle to become systematic and connect with the broader social fabric. So the picture we see in Italy's schools is rather hazy and very mixed—what Tarozzi (2015) neatly described as a “ghost of a model”.

LMSD was conceived in this larger context and with the intention of drawing on this body of knowledge and the resources of the local community to fully implement intercultural practices in a way that successfully integrates students from migratory backgrounds. To complete the picture on the situation in Italy and more fully understand the development of LMSD, we now take a brief look at the second issue mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, that is, how the country's multiculturalism has evolved and its specificities.

Like most of Europe, Italy is now a multicultural country, but one of its distinctive features lies in its lengthy history of emigration (migration out of the country). Since the unification of Italy in 1860, as many as 30 million Italians have moved abroad. There are currently about 60 million people of Italian extraction around the world, and more than five million Italian citizens residing in other countries (Fondazione Migrantes, 2021). It is only since 1973 that there has been an increase in the number of people moving to Italy compared to the number leaving the country, and even now—despite a rapid increase in the numbers of migrants arriving from all over the world in recent decades—Italians have retained a tendency to emigrate. So we can say that Italy is “a country of emigration and a country of immigration” (Fiorucci, 2020, p. 17).

As of 2020, the number of people with migratory backgrounds routinely present in the country amounts to just over five million. They live mainly in the north (58.5%), and 52% of them are women. Their reasons for coming to Italy, as stated on their residence permits, are to join family (48.9%) or work-related (43.4%), while 5% are motivated by the need for international protection. For these people with migratory backgrounds, the economic situation is not very encouraging. Their integration is still “subaltern” (Ambrosini, 2007): the jobs they do are under-paid, dangerous, and hard; and 26.7% of the foreign families in Italy live in a state of absolute poverty, as opposed to 6% among the Italian natives population. The foreign population includes just over a million minors (under 18 years old), 72% of whom were born in Italy. The number of foreign students attending Italian schools has been rising constantly and, in the 2019–2020 academic year it amounted to 10.3% of the total. Although about one in

three foreign students still lags behind in their school careers, this proportion is gradually shrinking. Encouraging signs include the fact that the academic performance of second-generation foreign students increasingly resembles that of their Italian peers, and the number of foreign students attending higher education (beyond Grade 8) is gradually growing.

LMSD was conceived in the context of these fragile steps forward and the fragmentary intercultural scenario in Italian schools and strives to develop a genuinely effective, democratic, and inclusive program.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

Historical Background of the District

The project La Mia Scuola È Differente (LMSD) aims at operating an after-school program focused on promoting diversity, increasing social inclusion, and empowering children who attend primary and middle schools located in a socially complex part of Padova called Stanga. Educational processes are always culturally situated: the environment is an integral part of the life system and this means that people, relationships, and the spaces in which they (co-)exist are strongly connected. For this reason, it is important considering the background of the project. The program runs year round and it is twofold: while the after-school program takes place during the school year and is primarily a “classic” homework activity in the afternoons, managed by a local social cooperative, the Summer version is much more aligned with a UC Links model. (For more information about UC Links programs and the global UC Links network, visit <https://uclinks.berkeley.edu/>.)

The Stanga district is very unique; it was created in the 1920s as the city’s first industrial area, which means that it was not intended for people to live in but for manufacturing activities. In the 1950s and 1960s, the neighborhood saw further development; the industrial area was enlarged, the motorway was completed. With the manufacturing crisis in the 1970s, some large industrial plants closed or transferred to other locations and some residential complexes began to develop, while in the 1980s, management and commercial activities spread in the area. In the 1990s, Italy experienced its first major waves of migration and the Stanga became the district where people with migratory backgrounds first settled, because it was the only area where they were accepted as renters.

The neighborhood thus became what many call a ghetto, with Anelli street as a symbol of widespread social unease. Due to the lower cost housing for working-class families, Anelli street began to host an ever-increasing number of people with migratory backgrounds, and in a few years almost all the native Italians left the area. Moreover, criminal activities proliferated, mainly linked to drug trafficking and prostitution, generating tension between different criminal groups. Interventions by law enforcement failed in changing the situation and, over time, there were no attempts at ‘social recovery.’ The worst outcome of this situation was the construction in 2006 of the so-called ‘wall of Padova:’ a three-meter high, ninety-meter-long metal barrier designed to isolate the area from the rest of the city. Reported also by the international press (the BBC, *The Guardian*, and the *New York Times*), it was one of the most resounding political and social failures related to immigration recorded in Italy. Later, the buildings in the fenced-off area were completely cleared and some flats were walled up to prevent their reoccupation. During the Summer of 2019, the municipality took ownership of the buildings and began the works to settle the new police headquarters in Padova.

Today, the neighborhood is still affected by cultural segregation, a lack of integration with Italian residents, violence, drug traffic, and social stigma, and 14% of the total migrant families living in Padova live in this area, which is unfortunately still known for its “social disadvantages.” It is in this context that the 7th Istituto Comprensivo (District) of Padova “San Camillo” finds its home; the district includes four primary schools and three secondary schools, and over 80% of students have migrant backgrounds.

The Project La Mia Scuola è Differente

La Mia Scuola È Differente project began in 2019 thanks to provisions from the Child Educational Poverty Fund. The project’s primary goal is to cultivate individual and collective transformation and seeks to achieve this goal by creating a participatory culture of learning characterized by principles and practices of respect, mutual support, inclusivity, lifelong learning, and self-appreciation. Substantial efforts have been invested in collaborating with local stakeholders to achieve this goal. Collaborative partners include the school district, the municipality, the university, Fenice Onlus, ZaLab, Renato Franco Association, Mary Poppins Social Coop, and Eos Cultural Association.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify why the title “La Mia Scuola è Differente” was chosen for this project. This name invokes the dual meaning that the word “differente” can have, at least in Italian. The first meaning relates to the sense of “difference” in comparison with dominant cultural norms; it refers to the significant diversity of backgrounds among the children who attend the school. For example, in the primary school that hosted the activities we will discuss later, the percentage of children with a migratory background is 54%, and more than 15 different nationalities are represented.

The second aspect pertains to the fact that, in connection with this diversity and the neighborhood in which it is situated, the school has experienced the phenomenon of “white flight” (Cordini et al., 2019). In fact, the literature suggests that “there are three main drivers of school segregation: the residential distribution of the population, regulations concerning school placement, and parental choice concerning their children’s education” (Cordini et al., 2019, p. 3217). For this reason, in recent years, the staff working in these schools have been committed to trying to reverse this trend by offering high-quality education that can also attract Italian families.

In other words, schools like the ones in San Camillo’s district have acted as community focal points, fostering actions that respond to the fundamental needs of the neighborhood: improving interpersonal/intercultural relationships, developing community networks with private and public local organizations (NGOs, volunteer associations, municipal districts, etc.). By using the school as a socially inclusive community hub and a transformative space during afternoons, the project reinforces the school’s role as a barrier to social exclusion in the neighborhood. Maestro Fabio, a teacher at the primary schools close to Anelli street, has promoted initiatives for the wellbeing of Stanga district students for years. When asked how he would describe the situation at his school, he introduced the metaphor of frontiers/borders (*frontiere* in Italian). Maestro Fabio conceptualized the area as a frontier: “it is the place where the most important exchanges and changes take place, but it is also the place where conflict can start or develop. Borders are often places of contradiction, from which we as a community can emerge ‘weakened’ or ‘strengthened.’” He is convinced that to change the situation of segregation, the whole community must be activated in its educating role: “frontier schools” must create a high-quality education starting from their specific context, translating problems into opportunities. Focusing only on reducing differences and

tackling educational poverty does nothing but reiterate the stigma. La Mia Scuola È Differente has been planned and developed to make high-quality innovative programs for everyone.

The part of the project we are considering is located at Giovanni XXIII school in the San Camillo district and includes several activities offered throughout the Summer. The fundamental one here concerns an after-school program that meets 5 days a week during the end of June and July for 8 hours and engages children from six- to 10-years-old in various creative, innovative activities that foster their linguistic, emotional, scientific, and technological skills. The educational initiatives are carefully designed to promote quality experiences, embodied learning, with special attention to family engagement.

The school district and Fenice Onlus, a local nonprofit providing robotics and a range of other activities, have established a partnership with third-sector organizations in the surrounding area, all of which are involved in education in various capacities, enriching the Summer offerings of LMSD. The educational initiatives are extensive, as discerned from the project's previously stated objectives. They look to support learning but, more importantly, to stimulate students' curiosity, open school facilities to the community, and assist families by extending the school day. In addition to coding and robotics programs, other project initiatives involve radio broadcasting in partnership with ZaLab, an association for the production, distribution, and promotion of social documentaries and cultural projects.

The University of Padova plays a significant role in various project initiatives. Specifically, the Department of Psychology contributes through the "Isola della Calma" (Calm Island—<https://isoladellacalma.dpss.psy.unipd.it/>), a service providing continuous professional psychological support that is readily available to children during moments of difficulty.

The other department involved in the project is the FISPPA (Philosophy, Sociology Pedagogy, and Applied Psychology), particularly our research group specializing in intercultural education. As previously mentioned, we did not initially join the partnership at the project's inception but were invited to participate while the project was already underway. At the beginning, our primary role involved conducting evaluations, which led to a collaboration concerning after-school activities.

The Garden, a Multidimensional Metaphor

The Giovanni XXIII and the Pacinotti primary and secondary schools share the largest green area in the neighborhood: 10,000 square meters of garden, where the Summer version of the after-school program is offered as part of the LMSD project. During the Summer months, the multiple offerings include sports activities, artistic endeavors, programs on sustainable energy, and English-immersion activities (Figs. 16.3 and 16.4).

LMSD is much more than a solution to keep children safe and engaged in learning. The garden of the two schools plays a fundamental role in the project because most social interactions take place outdoors. This is where the children gather in a circle in the morning, engage in various activities, meet to play freely between activities, have lunch, and wait for their caregivers to pick them up. The garden is thus an important relational space; it is here that children invent games, stories, and adventures, talk, collaborate, laugh, cry, argue, and make peace. It is a place rich in growth, participation, change, in essence, a generative “being together.” Maestro Fabio



Fig. 16.3 Outdoor activities during the pandemic

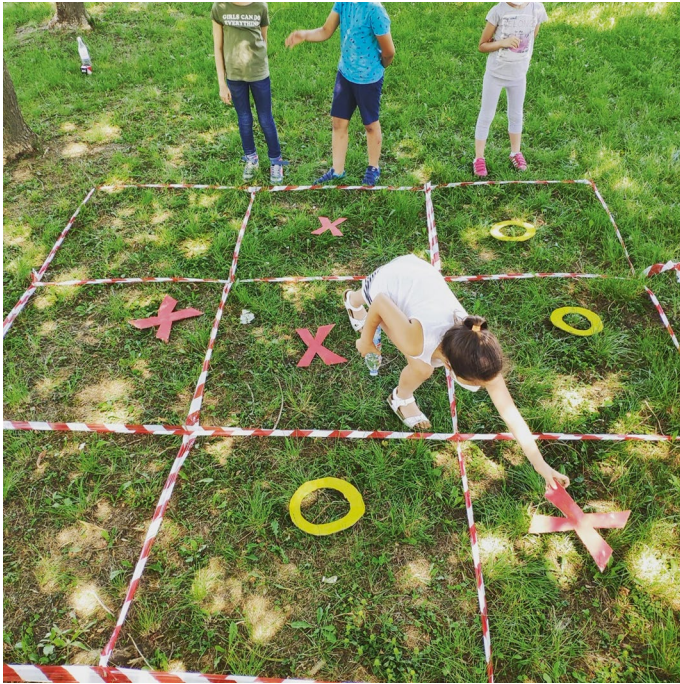


Fig. 16.4 Garden activities during the pandemic

also shared his thoughts on the garden space: “I saw the kids outside feeling a lot more comfortable than I had seen them in the classroom. For them, the garden is the school. The garden is for them a place of integration and relationship.”

The garden is a pedagogical metaphor often used in education, including in this book. However, the perspective that, in our opinion, best represents what happens in the green space of this small suburban school relates to interculturality. The garden corresponds to a form of relationship, an aesthetic balance subjected to careful guidance (Milan, 2007). This allows individuals to become, to be authentic, to realize themselves in inhabiting, in assuming a space and giving it shape. The most interesting aspect here is that, from this perspective, one cannot inhabit alone: rather, one must engage with otherness. It is on this very ground that the meaning of interculturality is played out: it is subversive, enriching,

challenging (Panikkar, 2002), and requiring a “dense dialogue” (Taylor, 1993).

Also thinking about the specificities of the whole project, the image of the garden is particularly effective. In addition to representing a reality and an important characteristic of the context in which the after-school program is situated, and serving as a theoretical reference that has long interested those involved in education, it is a metaphor that aptly captures the nature of the partnership. It illustrates the mutual benefits of the partnership between the program and the community. It also provides a framework for understanding how the partnership can be improved, by providing opportunities for greater collaboration and communication.

When the LMSD partnership expressed interest in involving our intercultural education research group (at the University of Padova) to support these activities, we conducted a literature analysis to study how research has contributed to after-school programs. One of the main and promising outcomes of this literature review was the identification of the work of Marjorie Elaine at B-Club (Chap. 6) and University-Community Links (UC Links). This led to an intriguing and significant exchange that provided direction for participation in the LMSD project within a broader horizon of participatory action research (Martinez-Vargas, 2022; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This helped us see the potential to revolutionize the way the after-school is approached in LMSD.

The UC Links model inspired the research group to formulate a project with two overarching goals: to understand how the UC Links model could be adapted to the LMSD project, and to explore how the research group could actively and effectively contribute to the school-community partnership. As a result, the research questions encompass multiple levels. On the one hand, it became imperative to participate actively at LMSD in order to understand the nature of the activities offered to children: to determine the educational significance of these actions, their potential to foster intercultural interactions, and the extent and nature of family engagement. We recruited three undergraduates studying to become future primary school teachers. We considered how their participation could contribute to the after-school program and how this experience could promote their personal and professional development.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will expound upon the challenges and opportunities associated with initiating such a collaboration, as highlighted by our fieldwork, and outline our aspirations for the future.

KEY IDEAS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Partnership

The LMSD partnership is a dynamic and expansive collaboration, characterized by a rich diversity of participating entities, each contributing from their unique perspectives and missions. This diversity arises from a variety of factors, with one of the primary distinctions being the nature of these entities. Among the partners, there is a mix of public institutions, social enterprises, and entrepreneurial businesses. These inherent differences in organizational identity naturally translate into contrasting objectives and modes of contribution to the project.

On the one hand, these distinct missions and approaches can pose challenges when aligning strategies and objectives. For example, an enterprise may prioritize different issues than a public school. On the other hand, these divergent priorities, while potentially challenging, created an environment where diverse perspectives converge, fostering a holistic view of the LMSD objectives. Indeed, it is precisely this multifaceted approach that likely played a pivotal role in securing funding for the project.

Another noteworthy challenge in this diverse partnership lies in the disparity of terminology and nuanced understandings of educational matters. For instance, among the partner organizations, all entities have significant involvement in education. These include a cooperative managing a parish preschool, the public school cluster, more than one social co-op engaged in collaborations with schools for offering specific courses in technology, green practices, English language, sports, filmmaking, and environmental sustainability, as well as our research group, specialized in intercultural education and early childhood development. The differences in interpretations of learning concepts can be striking among these entities. This divergence fundamentally shapes how educational programs are designed, what is envisioned for children's educational experiences, and even the fundamental understanding of the role of children in the learning process.

Furthermore, the distinction between profit and non-profit entities within the partnership is another aspect that merits careful consideration. For instance, a future area of focus for our research group will undoubtedly revolve around the transition from having graduating students primarily engaged in observations and providing support to the educators in the cooperatives to a more proactive role where they may directly engage with groups of children, offering supplementary educational activities alongside the cooperative educators.

The Involvement of University Students

The Italian university system differs from the American one in that, in Italy, those aspiring to become teachers at the primary education level follow a predefined 5-year program. The first year focuses on theoretical and general pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and intercultural education. From the second year onwards, in addition to courses in linguistic, literacy, historical, geographical, mathematical-scientific disciplines, physical education, visual arts, and music, students engage in coursework related to teaching methods, special pedagogy, clinical psychology, developmental psychology, education, legal disciplines, and health and hygiene. Practical laboratories connected to theoretical courses and mandatory internships are integral components of the curriculum. The internships take place in schools for 600 in-person hours.

This well-structured academic pathway is defined in its principal aspects by the Ministry of Education, and students must carry out their internships during regular school hours, not during the after-school time. This constituted the initial challenge, which we successfully overcame: upon completing their academic journey, the students are required to write a thesis that delves into theoretical aspects and includes empirical elements. In the Spring of 2021, we engaged Carmela, Alessia, and Elena in the process of developing their theses. Another challenge lay in the fact that, in their academic curriculum, the students follow a very general research methodology course and are not specifically trained in ethnography or participant observation. Therefore, it became essential to implement an initial training period in which these elements were approached from a theoretical standpoint.

Following these initial two phases (graduating students' involvement and training), the research group embarked on the substantive work in the Winter between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. Restrictions and measures for COVID-19 containment had delayed the beginning of the after-school program. Nevertheless, Carmela and Elena had the opportunity to gain experience with this format after regular school hours. The core of the project, however, unfolded during the Summer of 2022. The three graduating students spent the latter part of June and the entire month of July participating in the LMSD campus activities. Thanks to the Fulbright program, we had Marjorie Elaine (co-editor of this volume) as a visiting scholar, affording us the opportunity to engage in participant observations alongside her and to conduct meetings for data analysis and

reflection. This latter aspect proved valuable as it enabled the research group to make significant progress in terms of field note compilation and reflection work.

In the following months, we collectively devoted our attention to field notes and their rewriting process. Specifically, Carmela, Elena, and Alessia were guided step by step in reflecting upon the contents of their initial texts. This process was longitudinal and began even before their presence in the after-school program. In fact, following extensive discussions on participant observation, traditional after-school opportunities, and UC Links initiatives, they drafted a text outlining their expectations about the campus. Then, throughout their time at LMSD, they gathered field notes, which were revisited by the chapter authors themselves on three separate occasions, each time focusing on different specific details. Once collected, these field notes were transformed from jottings into texts that could be comprehended by a third reader, in accordance with the specific requirement of explaining what they had observed to an external person, someone who would never have the opportunity to experience the particular after-school environment and the situations they encountered. Attention was given to details, including tactile and olfactory sensations, as well as the emotions and feelings experienced. They allowed room for perceptions and thoughts that the experience had provoked in them, mindful of their particular educational backgrounds, and their trained perspective as future teachers.

Afterwards, a second phase was dedicated to selecting a focus, a particular aspect that had struck them during their time in the field. It is interesting to note that the themes that inspired them were quite diverse but highly meaningful. Elena chose to concentrate on after-school programs as a platform for social justice, Carmela focused on stereotypes, and Alessia explored conflicts and their resolution. These elements narrate the convergence of their interests and sensitivities with the shared experience they had with the children who attended the after-school program, bringing forth richness and significance.

The third stage revolved around interpreting their experiences through the lens of intercultural theory. While the initial steps were centered on their observations and the recursive deepening of their thoughts on the lived experience, at a certain point, we had to recall the theoretical framework.

Engaging Children as Active Learners

Involvement of children and caregivers in the LMSD after-school program has proven to be a multi-faceted experience, characterized both by achievements and potential, as well as areas for improvement. In terms of children's participation, the program offered a wide range of activities. However, many of these activities were essentially predetermined by the other partnering groups and allowed limited space for children's initiative. As a result, children were limited to following instructions instead of engaging in creative exploration, and this hindered the children's creativity and prevented them from developing their own ideas and opinions. For instance, the university students noticed that, due to the predefined structure of an English language session, some children were left on the sidelines. During another observed activity, the children were encouraged to color T-shirts, which was attractive to them; however, the educator's style and method of guiding was dominant, even though the children were free to choose what they wanted to illustrate on their T-shirts. Another educator, in the gym, gave the children the opportunity to choose from a selection of previously offered games, which were presented in a variety of formats. The children were free to select the game that interested them and were encouraged to explore all the options available. The educator also provided guidance when needed, but the choice was always up to the children. This approach allowed the children to be more engaged and motivated in their learning process. It gave them the opportunity to explore different games and activities, and to take ownership of their playing and learning. Furthermore, this approach also encouraged creativity and problem-solving skills, as the children had to come up with their own solutions when playing the games.

Interestingly, the moments when children's interests emerged most vividly occurred during breaks in the garden between various educational activities. Indeed, breaks allowed the children to venture beyond the structured learning environment, to explore their own interests and passions without being pressured by performance. Playing games impromptu together, for instance, promoted children's Italian proficiency while bringing them together. Furthermore, the garden provided opportunities for children to develop emotional resilience and foster their creativity. It was also a place where children could interact with nature, which allowed them to learn in a unique and untraditional way. Indeed, captivating discussions about insects and a thought-provoking exchange on languages, facilitated

by Marjorie, exemplified instances where children's curiosity and self-driven exploration thrived. During one of these breaks, we created an informal space where the children were encouraged to tell and share something about their own personal experiences related to the languages they know, along with discovering others' abilities and trying to pronounce words in other languages. The stimulus, the tool employed to engage the children's attention, was a small automatic translator. In a short period of time, the children quickly took control of the situation, enjoying themselves as they tested the translator, making it repeat the same words in various languages, laughing when it made mistakes, and finding alternative words when they were unfamiliar with the ones suggested. It was indeed fascinating to observe that the children were unaware of each other's abilities to speak different languages. However, it is essential to consider that these children are typically grouped in classes, thus not having an in-depth knowledge of each other. Additionally, it is worth noting that one of the primary concerns of teachers in our country often revolves around ensuring that Italian is learned to the best of their abilities, which often leads to fostering exchanges primarily in Italian. Hence, the after-school setting could serve as an informal environment where could also take place (as evidenced by Chaps. 3, 4, 6, and 10 in this volume). As a result, this experience can really be valuable for the children, as it gives them the opportunity to build their self-confidence and recognize their potential, as well as improving their communication skills.

DISCUSSION

Community projects that involve multiple partners often encounter a range of challenges at their inception. These challenges are well documented in the literature on community development and collaborative initiatives. Issues related to effective communication, power dynamics, and divergent objectives and expectations have been identified as common obstacles (Bryson, 2004; Gray, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Navigating these complexities requires smart leadership, clear communication, and a commitment to establishing shared goals and processes. The early stages of community projects are pivotal in shaping the trajectory of collaboration and often demand substantial time and effort to overcome these initial hurdles. It is true that the challenges described in the preceding paragraphs have outlined various obstacles, but it is equally true that they can be viewed as opportunities.

In order to engage graduating students, finding a formal method of involvement has been the primary challenge. Adopting a research-oriented perspective to address the empirical component of their theses has proven to be a viable approach. However, this approach has its limitations as it means that individuals engaging in after-school programs have a limited amount of time, typically a few hours a day for a couple of months, and it also positions them more as observers and less as participants. On the positive side, involving individuals at the end of their initial teacher education has several advantages for their personal and professional development. As a result of their formal educational experiences, they are more aware of the dynamics of the teaching and learning relationship. Furthermore, their ability to interpret verbal and non-verbal cues from children increases in an informal after-school environment because it is characterized by smaller groups and allows for more interaction than in a typical classroom. Additionally, university students have the opportunity to participate in and learn from a community project that bridges the gap between the university, school, and community and provides a unique platform for social justice initiatives.

The LMSD project holds significant importance for the children it engages, not only as a safe space but also as an opportunity for educational experiences that would otherwise be out of reach. When viewed from a family-centered perspective, LMSD can be understood as a service that supports caregiving. It operates on a continuum encompassing promotion, prevention, and protection (Milani, 2018). By creating conditions that promote each child's growth, intervening early in matters that may affect people living in an area of high socio-cultural complexity, and addressing temporary family difficulties, LMSD may serve as a critical agent of social justice. Ensuring social justice in terms of equal opportunities for children is one of the most intercultural actions possible.

Regarding the issue of participation, strides have been made, but there is room for improvement, particularly in engaging children in opportunities to actively steer the direction of their own learning. The informal after-school context is particularly suited to this purpose. It is crucial to acknowledge that these points collectively underscore the need to strengthen and consolidate the effective collaboration of diverse partnership entities. This can be achieved through several means: dedicating time to partner meetings to facilitate group evolution, developing a shared lexicon and common meanings, identifying shared values to define educational and intercultural purposes, and subsequently delineating short- and long-term objectives for all involved entities, including children and caregivers.

We cannot deny that the LMSD process is still undergoing a considerable amount of flux: unless we embrace the potential that these initial phases of program development offer, the early stages can seem intimidating. As a result of this, we as a group of partners should be aware of this opportunity and take full advantage of opportunities to learn and grow by improving LMSD as a whole.

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