

The *Rupantara* project. A school at cemetery

Valentina Calcaterra

Catholic University of Milan, Italy

CORRESPONDENCE TO

Valentina Calcaterra

e-mail: valentina.calcaterra@unicatt.it

Abstract

The paper presents the Rupantara program, an educational project set up by two social workers in India to support children from a Grave-Diggers community to develop their skills and improve their life. These children often lost their interest in attending school because they have learning disabilities and they don't have individual attention in the class, but also because of their emarginated life condition. The social workers organized a special school at the cemetery where children live through academic, creative and communication activities. An analysis's of the project is presented in the paper, principles of relational social work are underlined. Rupantara is a community development project and its final aim is to empower the life condition of these vulnerable people.

Keywords

Grave-diggers community – Educational program – Empowerment – Social justice – Social work

Introduction

India is a big Country with more than one milliard people, second Country in the world most populated. Its vast territory has climate, cultural, religion differences from the north to the south of the Country. India has become the fastest developing Country in the world relating to the social and financial development. Bangalore city is an example of this development, known as the Indian *silicon valley*, in the city you can find skyscrapers, palaces, shops, offices, schools and universities, the roads are always traffic congested that means the city is always active and most people can find a job.

However, this progress doesn't involve all the communities and there are still several contradictions in the city. So, next to the palaces, you can meet people who are washing themselves at the edge of the road, people asking for charity, just out to the centre there are makeshift camps of street-families, a little further there are slums, real cities in the city.

A community that lives at the progress fringe is the *Grave-Diggers* community, those who dig up tombs. For many years in India people who make this job and their families, also children, have suffered from both social and economic oppression and unfortunately they accept this social condition even today because they are used to be emarginated.

Usually grave-Diggers families live in the cemetery where they work, they get the job from generation to generation or it is assigned to them according to a ministerial program to promote job inclusion because these families were belonging to what was considered the untouchable cast.

Bangalore city has over than 30 graveyard looked after by more than one hundred workers, the 90% of the entire graveyard population has never been to school.

The men do most of the work, however both women and children give help, with the consequence that often children don't attend school to help their parents.

In India compulsory schooling is regulated, however it is difficult to control on it and in many cases grave-diggers families don't persist to make their children attend the school because they need helps in the work at the graveyard or because they are not confident with the idea that they can change their social condition through education.

It is also important to know that there are no sufficient schools according with the population and there are classes with more than 100 children; it is easy to understand that is nearly impossible to give individual attention to all the children, thus they lost interest in attending school. However, the only way to empower these communities is educate every individual, started to children.

The Rupantara project

One of the programs to meet this goal is *Rupantara*, a project run by the «Hand in Hand» charity and born in the Kalpally Hindu cemetery in Bangalore, in the south of India. Rupantara is a Hindu word and it means transformation. The project has started from the idea of a young social worker who has done research on «Living and Working Conditions of Grave Diggers in City». This social worker met children from a grave-diggers community during a funeral, a year later he noticed that nothing was going to change for the kids, thus in February, 2016, along with a classmate, he started with the project of this unique «School at cemetery».

At the start of the project around 25 such kids were roped in, most of them were school dropouts while a few were going to a government school. Moreover social workers found that several children have learning disorder and are not interested in going to school. With the project they have initiated a daily program through which the children are given academic support after school and are introduced to creative ideas of learning and expression with activities, doing a special «school» on the tombs.

Rupantara is mostly a volunteer based program; most of volunteers are students in social work doing their practice learning.

The aim of the program is to ensure that all the children looked after can know and develop their skills: the children's growth is encouraged through several activities not only related to improve academic learning on math, how to read and write in English and in Hindu or other academic disciplines; activities are thought also to help children in develop communication, social and creative skills.

Rupantara is a project that aims to increase the life horizon of these children beyond the graveyard where they live, thus social workers engaged with the program and volunteers organize excursions to museums and city parks, creative laboratories and, in case of foreign volunteers, simply lessons of Spanish, French or other foreign languages.

The program has assessment criteria: in the short term assessment every child is evaluated on his/her academic performance, communication and creative skills; in the long term assessment, that is quarterly, the staff writes a detailed report on each child's cognitive and behavioural learning.

At the end of the first year of activity most of 40 children have attended the project. The experience of working with children has enabled social workers to understand that, in order to effect change, it is necessary to involve their families in the project. While fathers are shy and they are not so involved, instead most of children's mothers are happy with the project and social workers have developed activities also for them. They do counselling and support women in create some objects (like souvenirs, gifts, ...) to sell. 15% of the sell earn is used to buy new materials, 15% of it goes to the woman who made the product and 40% goes in an account for their children, however the aim is not only to raise money, rather to stay together, empower women agency and understand the value of partnership. However, there are a lot of challenges to face with. Find financial support to continue with the project is the most important challenge. The two social workers, which have started «Rupantara», put the last salary of their job to start the program, and then they go on with support from friends and donation from private. They use social networks and local media to make the project known and find supporters. The financial issues is relevant in ensuring the children's right to education and in relation to the quality of the service. Furthermore, Hand in Hand has the desire to replicate the project in the same format across other graveyards.

In February 2016 it has been celebrated the first year of Rupantara project, children shown their skills in read in English and Hindu to their parents, they sang and danced, and thanked the volunteers.

A relational project of community development

The naturalness with which these children welcome you in their unusual world is impressive. Instead, it is not surprising that a social worker started with this project and not a teacher, this is because it is not only to support children in their academic

performance, rather it is to promote individual and community empowerment (Adams et al., 2009), to create possibilities of social inclusion, to fight barriers and discrimination (Thompson, 2006).

Motivation is the children's motto, motivation to learn and hope in a better future that is theirs and different from what is predicted according to their family history. Motivation is also the volunteers' motto, most of them are social work students and they have motivation to learn how to be a good social workers being close to these vulnerable people and receiving their helps in forming their professionalism.

The most important outcomes that social workers refer are not related only to the improved academic skills of children, rather to their curiosity about the world and their capacity to imagine a different future for their lives. The smile of these children motivates these social workers in going on with the program.

Rupantara is not only an after school project, it is a community development project (Twelvetrees, 2002) starting with the empowerment of the children and than that involves, like concentric waves, even adults around them and future generations.

The project's approach is consistent with the Relational approach to social work (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007, 2012) which values people's life experience by considering them as active players in the project and not merely as beneficiaries of the support provided by social workers.

The value of social justice (Dominelli, 2002) is at the centre of project and we can find principles of relational social works (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017): democracy and respect for people's lives, reciprocity in learning and helping, freedom of action and creativity. Another important principle that we can find in Rupantara program is inclusion that means to support people in having equal opportunities and to actively participate in building their own welfare.

The transmission of knowledge by the social worker aims to promote agency and capabilities. Social workers and volunteers involved in this social educational relationship do not write on blank sheets of paper, they are not moulding the clay according to their own conviction of what is right and good, rather they are meeting people who have their own history, roots and desires which must be respected, and whose skills are recognised and valued.

Each person possesses different skills that are, first of all, emotional, relational and experiential knowledge (Borkman, 1976) unique and irreplaceable. It is therefore necessary, in social educational relationships, that social workers recognise these experiential competencies and help individuals, including children, to become aware of them and learn to use their skills to raise their rights. This is the advocacy function of social workers (Boylan, Dalrymple, 2009, 2011; Dalrymple, 2004).

The issue of the empowerment of people living in emarginated communities, like the grave-diggers community, calls for a social work that doesn't disable the people which work with (Illich, 1977), instead stands up in the name of the people's right and builds

a relationship of aid that support vulnerable people in achieving their own strength to define their welfare. Only through the empowerment of the very people involved is it possible to being activated those processes of welfare and of life conditions' improvement.

References

- Adams R., Dominelli L. & Payne M. (etd by). *Critical practice in social work*. London: Palgrave.
- Borkman, T. (1976). Experiential knowledge: A new concept for the analysis of self-help groups. *The Social Service Review*, 445-456.
- Boylan J, Dalrymple J. (2011). *Advocacy, Social Justice and Children's Rights*. Practice: Social Work in Action, 23(1), 19-30.
- Boylan J., Dalrymple J. (2009). *Understanding advocacy for children and young people*: Open University Press, UK.
- Dalrymple J. (2004). Developing the Concept of Professional Advocacy. *Journal of Social Work*, 4(2), 179-197.
- Dominelli L. (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work: Theory and practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Folgheraiter F. (2004). *Relational Social Work. Toward Networking and Societal Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Folgheraiter F. (2007). Relational Social Work: Principles and Practices. *Social Policy and Society*, 6(2), 265-274.
- Folgheraiter F. (2012). *The Mystery of Social Work*. Trento: Erickson.
- Folgheraiter F., Raineri M.L. (2017). The principles and key ideas of Relational Social Work. *Relational Social Work*, 1(1), 12-18.
- Illich I. et al. (1977). *Disabling professions*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Thompson N. (2006). *Anti-discriminatory practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Twelvetreets A. (2002). *Community Work*. London: Palgrave.

Calcaterra, V. (2017). The Rupantara project. A school at cemetery.
Relational Social Work, 1(2), 102-106
doi: 10.14605/RSW121707



Relational Social Work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License