

We paid a return visit to Casa Luminii in September, and it was great to be back. Our first visit in April had allowed us to see what contributions we might be able to offer to the children of Slatina, and the purpose of this second visit was to begin to put those ideas into action. The overarching aim of our involvement with Casa Luminii is to try to help in developing additional ways of nurturing the children's communicative development. A key element of our approach is an intervention called Intensive Interaction, which encourages adults to use the children's own sounds, movements, and behaviours as a basis for responding to them – in some sense a very sophisticated form of imitation. It has been used widely in the UK with special needs children and adults, but this is the first time it has been tried with children in Romania.

Our efforts turned out to be as successful as we could have hoped. We had planned to run a research study that involved videotaping the children in interaction with adults, under comparative conditions where the intervention was and was not being used. When we arrived, we realised that a new group of volunteers would soon be arriving, and this seemed the perfect way to try out the intervention. So the 12 volunteers on the early-September trip became both 'practitioners' and participants in a research study! We taught them the basics of Intensive Interaction, and then filmed them trying it with the children.

Their experiences were extremely positive, as illustrated by some of the comments we received afterwards:

Before we were told about Intensive Interaction, all I had seen of Mihai was his hugging somebody, making limited contact. Within seconds of trying imitation, he was looking at me and communicating more, by clicking his tongue, blowing raspberries, and smiling. This continued for the hour that he stayed at the Centre with me. I kept it up for the duration. Bianca and I began to have a conversation with the sound 'aah'. I would wait for her to say it, and then I would respond....She absolutely loved this game and every time I would give in and eventually say 'aah', she would give me the tightest hug and laugh. What we've been introduced to this week is amazing. Everything that we were told did work, although I had had doubts. My opinion has completely changed. I feel like I've been witness to something special and am very grateful to have had that opportunity. It will make saying goodbye to the children really hard, though.

Indeed, the comments offered by the students were so insightful that we have decided to publish a paper based just on their reflections. Since our return to the UK, we've made good progress on the research front. We've finished a draft of a paper that documents those comments, and we've begun the analysis of the videotaped material. Both of these studies should eventually be published in academic journals, which should help the wider world to realise the potential of children, even when they are as damaged as those in Slatina. It should also go a long way to increasing awareness of the innovative work already being done by Alex and Sandu at Casa Luminii.

We are now working to set up a research network that will bring together all the researchers who visit Casa Lumini. We plan to call this the Romanian Abandoned Children's Research Network, and it will be chaired at the University of Dundee (where Suzanne is employed in the School of Psychology), with partner members coming from any other interested institutions. The advantage of a network is that it should facilitate opportunities to carry out high quality research in Slatina.

Finally, Sarah has been successful in finding funding for a training exchange, which is now scheduled for March 2007, when a number of staff at Casa Lumini and the apartments will visit the UK, where they will be able to visit organisations that work with special needs children. They will spend time in both Manchester and Dundee. In Dundee they will be able to join a one-day seminar that is taking place, which brings together staff from throughout Scotland who work with communicatively impaired people. Alex will be one of the speakers at the seminar, talking about the programme she has developed at Casa Lumini. Suzanne has even been successful in landing a book contract, to which all of the speakers will contribute a chapter. This means that details of Alex's programme will finally be available to a very wide audience.

We would like to thank all those volunteers who worked so enthusiastically with us in September. It was a delight to work so closely with you, and we are glad you felt you benefited so much from incorporating Intensive Interaction into your work with the children. We continue to have the highest regard for all that Sandu and Alex and Sarah have managed to achieve for the children of Slatina, and hope that our efforts can increase international awareness of those accomplishments.

