

Developing New Ways to Communicate with Children

In April, two child psychologists came out to the centre to see if they could help us find new ways of communicating with the children. Dr. Suzanne Zeedyk is based at the University of Dundee and Dr. Cliff Davies recently retired from the University of Manchester. I originally asked Cliff to visit the centre following some inspiring lectures he gave at university when I was in my first year. Both Suzanne and Cliff are truly amazing people and have already done so much for the children at Casa Lumini! I am in no doubt they will continue to lead by example and inspire others. They have written the following piece to tell you about their trip.

We were delighted when Sarah invited us for a visit to Romania, because we had heard good reports about the work that was being carried out at Casa Lumini. Sarah felt that one of the techniques we have been working with in Britain might help to develop the children's communicative skills, and we were pleased to have the opportunity to find out.

The technique we were working with is known as Intensive Interaction. It has been used since the 1980s, developed through the efforts of leading practitioners such as Gary Ephraim, David Nind, Melanie Hewett, and Phoebe Caldwell. Its basic premise is relatively simple: when engaging with a partner who has communicative problems (like the children at the Centre), you respond to them using their own vocalisations, body movements, and rhythms. While at one level this could be called 'imitation', it is more than that. You are not simply copying, but are responding to them using actions that are familiar to them. Familiar actions have meaning for them, unlike the kind of responses they usually receive from other people. In effect, someone is finally talking to them in a language that they recognise. The research we have been carrying out shows, over and over again, that they very quickly become interested in their partner - looking at them more, smiling at them, being more animated, and often joyfully hugging their partner. This technique has been used a lot in the UK and also in Scandinavia (where practitioners such as Inge Rodbroe prefer to call it Co-Creative Communication) to work with people with autism, severe learning disabilities, and deaf-blindness. We were pleased to be given the chance to see how helpful it might be to disabled children at Casa Lumini.

The outcome was better than we hoped! We found that within seconds of beginning to respond to the children in this way, they began to engage intensely. We have some great video tape of Floreen turning suddenly to sit face-to-face with Ionuț, both of them animatedly moving their fingers in front of their eyes. Floreen sat still and focused for much longer than is usual for him. There are also some tremendous video clips of Mirella and Ionuț rocking back and forth together, with Mirella 'testing' Ionuț to see if he will change the speed of his rocking. Both of them are smiling and laughing. It's almost as if Mirella is teasing Ionuț, and they are both laughing together when Ionuț 'gets the joke'. Two other good examples of successful moments are when Bianca, who often sits staring vacantly into space, became animated and excited when Cliff interacted with her, moving in and out towards each other so that they were eventually touching noses! And Lily, one of the children confined to the apartments, amazed the care staff in the apartments when she shook her head back and forth in time with Becky Hallworth, and was soon throwing herself on the bed in gales of laughter, waiting for Becky to 'take her turn'. The care staff had never seen Lily so animated or responsive. So we are very pleased at these initial results, and keen to return to continue working with Alex and her staff

to develop this technique further. (We would add a note of commendation for Ionuț and Becky's skills – they were immediate naturals at using Intensive Interaction!)

We were extremely impressed by the professional quality of the programme that Alex and her staff have developed to advance the children's abilities in 5 areas: self-care, cognition, socialization, sensory awareness, and motor skills. We hope that Intensive Interaction will bring new elements to this programme. Moreover, by using our professional networks, we think we can bring international attention to the work they are already doing. We think that Casa Luminii is a Centre of Excellence that the world needs to know more about.

Since our return to the UK a couple of weeks ago, we have managed to make headway with our plans for the future (even in the midst of marking exams!). We have begun to seek out funding for a training exchange, which would enable us to bring a team of British professionals to work with staff in Romania and then bring the Romanian team back to the UK for a training visit. We have also begun to write a proposal for a research study that would be able to document just how effective Intensive Interaction seems to be for these children. If that can be demonstrated empirically, then it should be possible to help more children in the care of the Romania government, perhaps in other cities or even in other countries such as Bulgaria and India. We are also investigating the possibility of translating some of the books and training materials that are available in the UK into Romanian, so that staff working with children will be able to better understand how to use Intensive Interaction and other techniques, such as Sensory Integration, that we think are likely to be effective. Our progress has been particularly helped by the local media's interest in the story, and this last week saw us giving a flurry of interviews about our visit, which were broadcast on BBC Scotland radio and television. Interested readers can find the archived story on http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/tayside_and_central/4970062.stm. This media coverage has led members of the public to get in touch to ask how they could help, and we quickly recommended that they sponsor children or donate toys and clothes that the children might use. It is a real pleasure for us to be able to use research to make a practical difference to people's lives.

We wouldn't want to end this piece without commenting on some of the other highlights of our trip. One was the welcome shown to us by Alex and Sandu and all of the children. Theirs is a deeply loving and affectionate home. We all had a barbecue on the last day of our visit, and we are still giggling over Bobby's interest in how binoculars work and Alex's determined attempts to improve her English skills by narrating what turned into a short film on 'English volleyball'. We also have great photos of our ride in the donkey cart, with all the kids piling in as well. Cliff felt so worried about the poor donkey that he got out and walked on up all the hills! Our thanks to Alex for organising this 'Rolls Royce' taxi for us. That day in the countryside allowed us to see the land that has been purchased for the Respite Care Centre, and the baby goats that were already grazing on it gave a real sense of what it might mean for children like Șoșoi and Bianca and Mihaela and Johnny and all the others in the Centre to be able to spend a whole week in the sunshine and fresh air. We began wondering if Ground Force might come and do the landscaping...

Another highlight was the optimism we felt upon meeting the two managers of the apartments: Amelia and Isabella. We had come to realise, from our visits to the apartments and the orphanage in Balș, how little the care staff engage with the children. But Amelia and Isabella asked to meet with us and spent quite a lot of time learning about techniques they could

encourage the staff to use. Their energy makes us feel optimistic that things really can change for the better in Romania, and we have all agreed we will continue to work together in the future. This is a rare opportunity, and we intend to make the best of it.

One final highlight was the time we got to spend with Medlink volunteers. The period that we were there happened to cover the week that one group was ending their visit and another was arriving. We really enjoyed speaking to the volunteers and learning more about what motivates them to become involved in the Med-Link visits. In fact, we even began to dream up ways in which future volunteers might be involved in the research studies we are planning - for instance by investigating how easily people can be trained to use Intensive Interaction. So many of the students said to us that their visit had been a 'life changing event', and we understood exactly what they meant—for that is how we have come to feel about the time we spent at Casa Luminii. It has been a life changing visit for us.

We are grateful to Sarah Parry, Alex, Sandu, Becky and all the members of the Casa Luminii community for making our visit so fulfilling. We heard so often about the involvement of Paul and Margaret Hallam and the wider LIM community that it almost felt we'd met them in person too! Our esteem for Sarah grew over the week, as we realised just how much work she undertakes on behalf of Med-Link and the children, and that the Med-Link Appeal would be non-existent without her guidance. Our resounding memory of Alex and Sandu is not simply what great hosts they were, what a powerful spiritual force they are in the area, and what strong professional skills they offer to Slatina - but of what loving parents they are. Who could resist becoming a member of such a visionary and committed team of people? Not us!

