

Performing Arts Center Multimedia

Art for Social Change -
Play against violence

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Objectives of the project

The project is concerning the group of children and youths from the Institution for protection, care and upbringing of children and youth "Ranka Milanovic", and concerning the implementation of this project, the following objectives were settled and realized:

- to improve and open an active communication process of the working group with their community, their institution and outside world using juggling and acrobatic techniques as a powerful communication tool;
- to gain appropriate and adequate knowledge and skills that promote the positive qualities that they possess but also empower them for their future work;
- to implement these performable skills (juggling and acrobatics) in their everyday life, especially in their youth work, transferring them to the younger children that they live with;
- to manage to prepare and to realize a street performance that promotes their collective artistic and unique work and the efforts of their institution for their broader social inclusion. Through their performance and using their previous and subsequent youth work to find a way to communicate successfully with the other children outside their institution, using nonverbal and applicative medium but also by inviting them and including them in their working teams.

Project description

The project "ASC-Play against violence, 2004" started in February, and ended with a public performance in June, 2004. One part of the ASC program was implemented by PAC Multimedia, Skopje as a resource centre, and a NGO Art Forum Skopje as an implementing organization. This project was divided into two working sections from which one was realized with two working groups from a Home for children without parents and parental care "11 Oktomvri" and the other, the project of our interest, was realized with a two working groups from the Institute for protection, care and upbringing of children and youth "Ranka Milanovic".

The groups from "Ranka Milanovic" were divided into one small group (09-13 years) and one big group (14-19). During the workshops sessions they worked and gained the techniques of juggling and acrobatics, making hand made materials and tools for juggling and preparing dance/performance choreography for the final presentation-public performance. The facilitating team which was leading the two working groups, consisted of young people who were conducting these skills: juggling and acrobatics, a psychologist (theatre performer) and youth worker.

After six months of work, the children prepared themselves for the public and interactive performance that was running together with the presentations of the other included groups of young people from 6 other organizations. It provided them with a new opportunity to communicate with the other co-workers and to introduce other methods of working, using different forms of creative expression.

Social context

The criteria according to which young children (under 18) are placed in the institution-Institute for protection, care and upbringing of children and youths, "Ranka Milanovic" is a punishment given out as a consequence of a criminal act.

The most common are acts of stealing and street fights. Some of the children have big police records. There is also a category of children who had no delinquencies before their arrival in this institution, but have been socially and educationally neglected. The one thing that they have in common is their low social status and disturbed family relations. Within the compounds of this institution, there is a dormitory and a type of an elementary school. This Institute is situated outside the city in the industrial zone, so we could say that there is a lack of communication and interaction with the outside world and people (other children) and with that they are again socially completely shut out. The intellectual level of most of the children does not correspond with their biological age and they have difficulties in understanding abstract constructs or verbally transmitted point of views. One fact that is also important is that only boys live there in the dormitory, so again this kind of gender separation puts an accent of not having a role model of the opposite sex to demonstrate different behaviours, so in this situation the children are mostly engaged in a male games in which aggression and fights are a normal thing. Outside this institution they are labeled as very aggressive children and with that stigma they are placed on the margins of social communication, in other words they are excluded from all useful community work and are ignored. When something criminal is done in their surroundings they are always here to take the blame.

Methodologies

The Methodology that was used in the ASC Program is putting an accent on the arts (especially theatre) as a powerful tool for children and youth expression in their community, and for boosting their self-esteem and self confidence, especially if they come from an environment with low social status.

This kind of work in total, reinforces the ideas of the children and their ways by its imple-

mentation. This means that from the start we are placing the children in the decision-making process by creating and stimulating an eligible body called Children Board, consisting of two representatives from every organization -young facilitators who have already went through the working process as participants, but who also are facing the same community problems and similar living conditions as the working groups. So they are included actively in conducting the workshops and serve as positive models for the children in their group. Children Board has a function to be a representative of the ideas of the children included in the ASC programme.

This means that in the beginning of the working process they decide about the concept of work, art techniques included, theme of the work, promotional materials. The working process is lead by mixed working teams of facilitators that come from different communities and social backgrounds, in order to offer a variety of experience and attitudes. With that we wanted to provide the children from "Ranka Milanovic" with different points of views about their perceived situation outside of their living conditions and acquisitions, or in other worlds to place a field so the empathy will find its way.

For me as a psychologist and as a performer, this was an opportunity to contribute in the design of the workshops that are really responding to the needs and capabilities of the children considered. When the needs, interests and capabilities of the group are detected, we empower their qualities and positive aspects of their living by providing them with the knowledge and skills, that are easy adaptable and the children can enjoy using. We work on concrete tasks so the results can come instantly and are visible, and from the beginning this result becomes a strong motivational factor. In these working groups we insure that these practical placements will be connected with the social skills that we would like the groups to receive practice in their future life. We use this tasks to connect them with the basic principles of real life and to face them with the social skills that they have to adapt in order to gain greater self-confidence, self-esteem, assertiveness, feelings of usefulness and critical attitude towards the outside world.

In doing this, we simply empower and include the "learning by doing" principal in our work. Because the leisure time of the Children of "Ranka Milanovic" is not constructively used (social isolation, high level of aggression, etc.) we also engaged them in some skill-transfer activities, so the older student's had to work additionally with two younger ones, to present the movements that they gained and to learn from those movements. The final moment of completing the working cycle, is the creation of a performance that contained the following components: to be open to the public, to be interactive, transparent and to present the outcome of the working process. In this form we provide the children with a first contact with the public, where they can reflect their living conditions, thoughts and problems by being funny, interesting, constructive, creative and positive.

Critical points and applied solutions

After the detection of the problem of the children's insufficient verbal communication because of a poor educational background (some of them were from Romany ethnicity) but strong physical capabilities, good sense of rhythm and movements and a lot of persistence, we found a way to include them more actively in this working process by offer-

ing them an opportunity to learn some acrobatic and juggling techniques and to use them in performance. In order to be more accepting of the techniques that we offer, we engaged a youth worker who had a similar social background but through the ASC programme found a way to be positively used in his community, to work with these children and to serve as a model of positive identification for them. Because of their geographical but also social isolation "performance" attitudes, we found a way to present their work using a public performance and provided them with some already existing professional groups of jugglers to work with them on public exhibitions. So some of them already started to earn money performing with these groups (Fuzz Bubble-Skopje) on the streets, squares and parks.

Interaction with partners (communities, public or private institutions, others) and Financing - fundraising strategies

PAC Multimedia, together with the NGO Art Forum, Skopje implemented the ASC methodology in two key institutions in Skopje. One of them was the Institute for protection, care and upbringing of children and youth "Ranka Milanovic". After arriving to a constructive agreement with them, they allowed us to work with their children in their working space and to engage as many children as possible.

The programme, Art for Social Change-Play against violence is funded by the European Cultural Foundation and Future Trust. However, in order to implement this kind of programme we also had to stay in active contact with the concerning Ministries such as the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Centres for Social care. In order to get approval for this kind of work and also to include people that have professional and personal skills to carry out this kind of engagement, we created a good team of people involved in this work including a psychologist, social worker, artist, and youth worker.

Evaluation of the project - conclusions

Because we have clearly practical workshops, we focused on getting measurable results for the group work. So mostly we evaluated success by the level of gain from the appointed juggling or acrobatic skills. With these kinds of groups it is not appropriate to evaluate the process in the group by giving a critical opinion of the daily process, so we evaluate it on the level of engagement of the young people in their understanding, accepting and performing of the appointed skill.

The activities that were included in the working process, were the learning of highly applicable skills, so the level of applying the skills in the final performance showed also those achieved in the goal. Also, those skills empowered them and gave them the opportunity to earn some pocket money performing with other groups. Another measurable factor was their consistency of the children's attendance of the sessions and also their decreased level of "runaways" from the dormitory. With the performance, we get an external evaluation from the audience who were present for the performance. Practically they became the stars of the evening.