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**In order to redirect the catastrophic trajectory of climate change that we are following, we must rethink our economy, our way of being together, our spirituality and recover an existential sense and connection with each other and the planet**

## WHAT DO I WANT TO BE IN LIFE? HERE, I WILL BE A CHANGE AGENT!

*Educating for sustainability is a 360-degree process, you learn only practicing it with ethical life choices, especially at school*

**I**t took me quite a long time to define what I wanted to do as a grown up, but after months of inner reflection and research, one day I told myself: "Here's what I'll be, a Change Agent!", someone who brings change to make the world a better place.

With an academic background in Philosophy, it is not easy to find one's place in society these days. The job market doesn't easily "buy" graduates with intellectual training: we might hold a

big potential to improve the world but too little technical expertise to generate profit. Therefore, we often end up having to invent our place in the world. The good news is that when we come up with our own projects, the results can be amazing.

I have been living in London for more than five years and I work within Sustainability and Outdoor Education as an educator and Programme Manager for ecoACTIVE:

<https://www.ecoactive.org.uk>

Even though it made things more difficult at first, my degree in philosophy did not hold me back from achieving my dream of becoming a change agent through education. In fact, it certainly helped me to pursue my vocations and be true to myself.

After integrating my university education with sustainability studies, I approached London's education and environmental sector and started collaborating with organizations enga-



**Wigwam Circuit**



**Creative recycling workshop on aluminium**

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ged in community development and sustainability.

In particular, I started working as an educator, education being one of my passions. It is thanks to my philosophical mindset that the correct approach to sustainability in my opinion unfolded: only a holistic and systemic understanding of reality can drive us towards a sustainable future.

In order to redirect the catastrophic trajectory of climate change that we are following, we must rethink our economy, our way of being together, our spirituality and recover an existential sense and connection with each other and the planet. This is not a purely ecological problem, but an all-round cultural, economic and spiritual transition.

Consequently, the first two dimensions to consider when taking action are precisely those of education and community building: we must innovate the traditional education system and recover local communities which are capable of resilience and self-sufficiency in a way that is uncomparable to large modern urbanized metropolises.

My curiosity pushed me to explore social initiatives such as ecovillages, intentional communities and alternative educational projects around Italy and Europe, in which the transition to sustainable models is already taking place.

Many of these communities are pioneers of social models of cohabitation and management of common goods and services, as a more sustainable and healthier alternative to the individualistic urban way of living or the nuclear family. In my usual idealism, I imagined that within five or ten years, given the climatic urgency, living in **cohousing**<sup>(1)</sup> solutions would be the norm, even in urban areas and large cities. Unfortunately, five years have passed, and this evolution, except for specific initiatives like the Transition Towns, is taking a lot longer to happen.



A child find a ladybird stuck in the mud and try to save it by putting it back on a branch (ecoACTIVE's photo)

Although “sustainable communities” (as I would call them) are not yet mainstream, London vaunts a third sector that can still afford to fund many community engagement initiatives, through the work of hundreds of non-profit organizations. The first years of my career flew by working for a training provider whose main focus was training in facilitation skills, teaching to manage groups and people through direct participation, consensus decision-making and non-hierarchical power structures.

By training professionals and activists to manage and communicate with their groups and staff in more democratic and empathetic ways, it is possible to influence power dynamics and hierarchies, producing bottom-up change. Another way in which local communities are supported in London is through Community Center. There is no equivalent translation for *Community Center* in the Italian language, since the Italian *Social Center* has its own particular connotation, which does not exactly correspond to it.

These are public places that belong to the community and provide a series of activities, ser-

vices and support accessible to and often managed by citizens. Services range from shared gardens to music courses, community meals, charity initiatives and much more. In 2017, for example, I managed to run a community project funded by local authorities, in the community centre of my neighborhood: I ran

## SOURCES

(1) *Cohousing* = Cohousing is an intentional community of private homes clustered around shared space. The term originated in Denmark in late 1960s. Each attached or single family home has traditional amenities, including a private kitchen. Shared spaces typically feature a common house, which may include a large kitchen and dining area, laundry, and recreational spaces. Shared outdoor space may include parking, walkways, open space, and gardens. Neighbors also share resources like tools and lawnmowers.



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**litter-picking events followed by creative recycling workshops.**

Anyone could meet us every month for an hour of litter-picking and then learn how to reuse, recycle creatively and upcycle together with neighbors and friends: <https://caticreative.wordpress.com/>

Creative recycling workshops are an opportunity to get together, promote social cohesion and civic responsibility. Any project that promotes collective consciousness is potentially a sustainability project. Indeed, if there is something I learnt in these years, it is that there can't be a sustainable future if we don't recover and protect local communities and the small scale dimension of living.

The day I told myself that I wanted to become a Change Agent, I also told myself that I would do it through education. Education, beyond being one of my passions, is one of the most important dimensions for taking action to promote a sustainable future. This belief guided me towards becoming a Forest school Practitioner, an educator and the Programme Manager at ecoACTIVE [www.ecoactive.org.uk](http://www.ecoactive.org.uk)

**Environment and education are inseparable: this was clear to me before I moved to the UK, but it became clearer when mo-**



**An example of natural art in Forest School (*ecoACTIVE's photo*)**

**vements like *Extinction Rebellion* and *Friday for Future* rose up demanding change in the education system and environmental legislation.**

During the assemblies and meetings among educators I took part in, we always felt united by the same urgency (educating nowadays should mean educating young people to be future citizens of the world, capable to deal with

global challenges such as the climate crisis and the pervasive inequality around us) and the same belief that our education system is failing in this respect.

**We can't continue to fail in educating young people to develop skills like emotional intelligence, empathy, solidarity, cooperation, care, love for nature and the other, belonging to something bigger than us, critical and divergent thinking.** Unfortunately, despite the pedagogic theory and innovations, despite the fantastic work of inspiring teachers who try to make the school more responsive to modern challenges, our school system relies by default on competition, external authority, forced imposition, repetition of useless content and standardisation of educational strategies that almost never include direct life experiences.

Outdoor education can be thought of as a big umbrella containing various movements and practices that differ from each other, but have all the same objectives in common. It is a pedagogic dimension that seeks to readdress our education system,



**Children play with earth soil and mud making seed balls to throw in green spaces to create and grow wild flowers (*ecoACTIVE's photo*)**

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summarising the best parts of the best pedagogs of our history (like Froebel, Pestalozzi, Steiner, Montessori, Dewey, Malaguzzi, Macmillan...). And the best place to do it is obviously the natural environment.

In a similar way to how many Italian grassroots initiatives are trying to find their space within the public school system (such as *Asili nel bosco*, experiential education, democratic schooling, libertarian and homeschooling etc.), in the UK Forest School has become the most popular practice. Forest school is slowly entering in the public system thanks to the opening up of the institutions and to the professional recognition of the role of Forest School Practitioner and Leader. This is a nationally recognised qualification and describes someone who is capable of planning and coordinating Forest School programmes in cooperation with school staff.

Nurseries and kindergartens often choose to spend all or part of their time in the outdoors, other times they only opt for a weekly session. Children spend time playing and learning outside, in all weather conditions (as long as it is safe of course). The green space can be a wood, a garden or a park, depending on what's available. It must be safe and as wild and rich as possible.

Some of the projects that I manage at ecoACTIVE, in central London, involve primary school children, with priority for children with some form of disadvantage or who need more support in developing social skills, self-esteem and motivation to learn. We meet the same group of children each week and we go to the closest park (luckily London has wonderful green spaces everywhere). For two hours we facilitate



Use of tools and manual activity during a Forest School session  
(ecoACTIVE's photo)

the group following some essential principles: children lead their own learning, they choose and decide what to do, nothing is forced and the adults are facilitators who help them display their own learning journey. Even rules are co-decided with the children.

What happens in practice during a Forest School session? Children freely play and play, and then they play more! They have a lot of fun, they become a team and engage with the activities they are interested in. They take supported risks in nature and develop empathy and care for the environment around them.

At ecoACTIVE we also bring to school EfS – Education for Sustainability- and teach about environmental problems, climate change and how to implement solutions. This is something most schools still fail to cover. However, it won't be only lessons on climate science which will guide our children to take action and be socially responsible. Indeed, educating for sustainability is a

360 degree process, it is cross-curricular, should be incorporated in all subjects and practiced experientially.

One can only learn sustainability by practicing it and normalising ethical choices in the daily routine, especially in school. One of the first steps in this direction is certainly reconnecting our children to nature, educating them to manage their emotions and to serve the common good. Above all, through outdoor education we should try to inspire them with hope, joy and empowerment. It is incredible how much we can learn from children and their simple wisdom and creativity, if we let them be themselves.

It's time to give space to them, and to provide them the spaces and tools that they deserve: nothing that nature can't do! ■

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*The article of the local HARINGEY PEOPLE magazine on the creative recycling project coordinated by Catia in 2017*



## Parks and crafts

She's a community worker, environmental studies graduate, educator and recycling campaigner – and Catia Squarcia can also make a shopping bag out of a piece of cardboard.

Catia has travelled the world working on eco-projects, and now she's focusing on Haringey.

The recycling enthusiast has been hosting litter walks for residents at Lordship Hub – picking up litter at the park then holding upcycling craft workshops afterwards to transform waste into works of art.

"I was always passionate about the environment," says Catia. "I have volunteered on projects and studied sustainability. I've always done creative recycling as a hobby, but in the last few years I decided to make something of it."

Residents young and old have been taking their own household waste along to the workshops, from aluminium cans to glass and cartons.

Catia says: "Creative recycling is a way to demonstrate that we should reduce our waste – there are so many things we can do with it instead of just 'buying and throwing away'. If I can teach this through art, people will enjoy and remember it.

"I like people to bring their own waste to the groups, then they can see that they can make a different choice every day. These litter walks are also about socialising, chatting, meeting your neighbour – there's a sense of building a stronger community."

Catia attends events and sells her recycled items at stalls. She says: "Most of the items come from household waste – cardboard, bags, cans etc. The best thing I've made is shopping bags from cardboard. They're nicely decorated and when people use them they can spread the word."

Catia – who has furniture at home made from wood and pallets she's found in the street – also runs children's recycling activities, delivers education sessions in schools, helps with community development projects and works for a waste authority encouraging recycling.

She says: "I would like to raise awareness around waste, recycling and litter so that people can feel more connected to place where they live. Littering is the community's responsibility. It's everyone's business."

Catia's project is supported by Spacehive and funded by Veolia. There are creative recycling sessions coming up on December 15 and January 19, 3.30pm-5.30pm at Lordship Hub, Higham Road, Tottenham, N17 6NU. For updates, visit: [www.spacehive.com/creative-recycling-art-project](http://www.spacehive.com/creative-recycling-art-project) and [caticreative.wordpress.com/info/](http://caticreative.wordpress.com/info/)



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