

Designing Social Stories for a University Museum: Accessibility as an Opportunity for Teaching Innovation

Introduction

For museums cultural accessibility constitutes a complex challenge which implies the removal of a several and different barriers limiting inclusiveness. Entering the world of disability we find a multiplicity of architectural, sensory and cognitive hindrances referring to an extremely diverse range of intellectual disabilities of congenital as well as acquired nature. In this scenario a specific challenge is represented by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neuro-developmental disorder with a reported incidence varying from 1 child out 89 in Europe (ASDEU 2018) to 1 out of 44 in the U.S. (CDC 2020). Although defined an often “forgotten visitors” (Woodruf 2019), in the last decades ASD visitors received increasing attention from the museum community.

Literature review

The research carried out in the museum context especially after the 2000s (Davis Baldino 2012; Langa et al. 2013; Kulik & Fletcher 2016; Lussenhop et al. 2016; Coffey 2018; Woodruf 2019) has clearly highlighted obstacles perceived as well as demands expressed by families/caregivers of people with ASD:

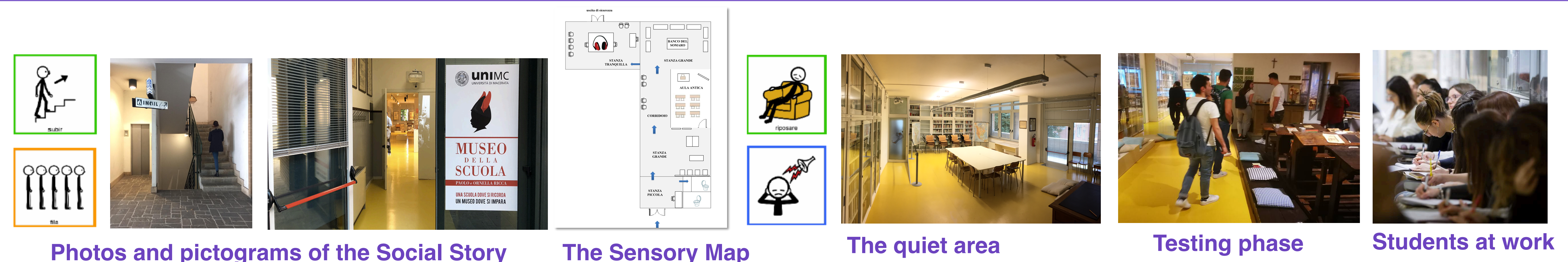
Obstacles: Anxiety about the new experience; Fear of overcrowding; Sensory overstimulation; Fear of not being welcomed and accepted; Difficulty to cope with unexpected reactions/crisis.

Demands: Preparatory orientation materials like social stories; Reserved access times; Visual aids to communication; Easy to read materials and tactile experiences; Calm areas; Art therapy.

Especially Social Stories (Gray & Garand 1993; Gray 2015) proved to be adaptable to each museum context and easily customizable by end users. Also in Italy special projects were activated like “Museo per tutti” launched in 2015, which paved the way for research and experimentation (Capasso et al. 2020).

References

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- CDC-Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020). *Data & statistics on autism spectrum disorder*, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>, last access: February 10, 2022.
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- Gray C., Garand J.D. (1993). Social stories: Improving responses of students with autism with accurate social information, *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 8/1: 1-10.



Photos and pictograms of the Social Story

The Sensory Map

The quiet area

Testing phase

Students at work

Research questions

Can university museums play a role in teaching accessibility to future museum and social educators?

How the removal of barriers to people with special needs can be turned – from an internal museum innovation process – into a learning opportunity to be integrated in academic teaching?

Methodology and results

Through a partnership with the Association of families of cognitive disabled youngsters, since the academic year 2018-2019 a pilot project was activated by involving students of the MA degree courses for museum guides and social educators, with the aim to develop prototypal social stories based on the Gray's model, provided with facilitated texts following Easy-to-read European guidelines (Inclusion Europe 2014), and enriched with AAC-Augmentative and Alternative Communication symbols.

The experimentation produced: a first guided tour protocol for people with intellectual disabilities; a sensory map showing crowded areas and quiet areas of the museum; two prototypes of social stories based on easy-to-read language and AAC; a “social article” intended for high functioning autism people. Social stories and the map were tested with a group of cognitive disabled including one person with ASD, while a second group worked as control group.

Impacts on visitors

Qualitative observations (during pre-visit, visit and post-visit phases) and educators' interviews assessed differences in behaviors of visitors who reviewed the story prior to their visit an consisting in:

- More structured and less dispersive visit;
- Higher interaction with objects and areas;
- Verbal re-elaboration of the experience in post-visit.

Impacts on university students

University students were involved in creating and analysing social stories and facilitated texts, in their role of learners, of trainees in the university museum, and finally of graduating students. By working on a real case-study and performing an authentic task, they were actively engaged in learning and acquiring professional skills, finally in developing awareness of museum accessibility and cultural barriers.

Conclusions

Although the testing phase was interrupted by the pandemic, the first results were positive and encourage to perfection materials to increase access for ASD people. On the other hand, the activity demonstrates how the removal of cognitive barriers in a university museum can become the fulcrum of innovative *Case-based teaching* and *Problem-based learning* practices, which will be incorporated in a sustainable teaching model capable to make academic learning more addressed to practice and more relevant for students.