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Implementing the Quality of Life and Potential of Social Farming

Catia Giaconi 

University of Macerata, ITALY

Noemi Del Bianco 

University of Macerata, ITALY

Ilaria D'Angelo 

University of Macerata, ITALY

Alessandra Marfoggia* 

University of Macerata, ITALY

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Abstract: The present study explores the Quality of Life (QoL) of young people with intellectual disabilities engaged in a social farming initiative, known as “Tuttincampo: Social Farming and Inclusivity”. The project stands as an innovative approach to improving social inclusion and providing vocational education and training. The initiative seeks to offer a viable alternative to traditional rehabilitation day centers by establishing a network of both public and private institutions. To explore the QoL of the young people we analyze data from the Personal Outcome Scale (POS), a tool that investigates the perception of QoL through self-assessment and hetero-assessment. Data were collected at the beginning and at the end of the social agriculture project. The results obtained confirm the importance of planning pedagogical actions to support social inclusion and vocational training for people with intellectual disabilities, highlighting, as well, the potential of social farming as a new “space” to achieve a higher level of QoL.

Keywords: *Intellectual disabilities, personal outcome scale, quality of life, social farming.*

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Introduction

This paper investigates the Quality of Life (QoL) construct in young adults with intellectual disabilities who actively participate in a unique social farming project called “Tuttincampo: Social Farming and Inclusivity.” The lines along which the project is implemented provide the operational background within which educational interventions are carried out. On the one hand, these interventions aim to implement specific QoL domains, such as social inclusion and interpersonal relations, while on the other, they seek to activate processes related to the adult life of the person with disabilities, specifically pertaining to work.

In greater detail, the contribution starts by outlining the main European Union (EU) policy lines that have contributed to the development and recognition of social farming. Specifically, we focus on the innovative approach to the functions attributed to agricultural activities that, over the years, have helped to shape the concept of social farming and its relationship with the construct of QoL for people with disabilities. We then explore the multidimensional QoL model proposed by Schalock and Verdugo (2002, 2006) and Schalock et al. (2010, 2016), which enables us to assess the impact of social farming on the lives of people who practice this activity.

In the complex framework of educational design oriented towards QoL models, interesting perspectives arise from the combination of nature and education. In particular, we refer to the conceptual framework known in Italy as social farming.

Pointing to the main European standards and legislative references in social farming, the European Union adopted an innovative approach that recognized the role and importance of farming with regard to everyone's QoL. This innovative perspective began with the Report of The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, introducing the concept of agricultural multifunctionality (United Nations [UN], 1993, p. 178). Subsequently, The Cork Declaration: A Living Countryside, presented at the European Conference on Rural Development (European Commission [EC], 1996), further reinforced this approach. Through these foundational documents, the European Union acknowledged the crucial position of farming, emphasizing its significance in contributing to the overall well-being of society. This means that agriculture is not an activity restricted purely to food production but is recognized as having multiple functions, namely the preservation of the environment and biodiversity, the protection of the landscape and cultural heritage, social and

* **Corresponding author:**

Alessandra Marfoggia, University of Macerata, Italy. ✉ alessandra.marfoggia@unimc.it



economic sustainability, and the provision of services and public goods (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001).

One of the key entities adopted by the EU to support the sustainable development of rural areas, and thus to promote the competitiveness of the agricultural sector and improve the QoL of people living and working in rural areas of the European Union, is the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The EAFRD was introduced with the reform of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) during the 2014–2020 planning period (The Council of the European Union [CEU], 2005), with the aim of addressing the challenges that agriculture and European rural communities were facing, including the need to promote balanced and sustainable development in rural areas.

The EAFRD is managed by individual EU member states, which develop their Rural Development Programs (RDP) to establish priorities and specific measures for rural development in their respective territories. These programs are based on National Strategic Plans (NSP) that define policies and overall objectives for promoting rural development on a national or regional level.

Recognizing that farming has a significant impact not only on food supplies but also on the environment, culture, and social sphere, multifunctional agriculture thus laid the foundations for the evolution towards what is now known as social farming. This is a specific practice that enhances agriculture's social potential. It is used as a tool for people's well-being and to address specific social needs.

As regards the relevant regulatory references in Italy, social farming is definitively regulated by Law No. 141 (Disposizioni in materia di agricoltura sociale Legge [Provisions on social farming Law], 2015; Giaré et al., 2020), which provides a common framework for the various regional experiences already established in rural areas. This Law "promotes social farming, as an aspect of farms' multifunctionality aimed at the development of social, health and welfare, educational, and occupational integration interventions and services, in order to facilitate adequate and consistent access to essential services to be guaranteed for individuals, families, and local communities throughout the national territory, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas" (Disposizioni in materia di agricoltura sociale Legge [Provisions on social farming Law], 2015). More precisely, social farming in Italy is an innovative approach based on the combination of two distinct concepts: multifunctional agriculture and social, health and welfare, and educational services on a local level. Through agricultural production, this new sector contributes to the well-being and social inclusion of people with special needs.

Indeed, social farming is characterized by "the use of farming activities as a means to provide health, social, or educational benefits to a wide range of people" (Dell'Olio et al., 2017, p. 65). In this sense, on the one hand it adheres to the concept of rural development, as it offers farmers the possibility to diversify their sources of income and gain a competitive advantage, including as regards the added value deriving from social farming practices, while on the other it benefits society as it provides social services and improves the quality of existing services to the advantage of inhabitants of rural and marginal areas, making use of agricultural and rural resources in a broad sense (Di Iacovo, 2011; Giaré et al., 2018; Hassink & Van Dijk, 2006; Zampetti et al., 2011). Farm resources can consequently be used for the development of care services (rehabilitation and care of fragile individuals, including people with disabilities); the provision of employment and social inclusion services (such as training and re-employment paths); or the development of recreational and subsidiary services for citizens (from farm kindergartens and nursery schools to summer camps, educational farms, etc.). Although studies (Chou et al., 2010; Correale et al., 2019; Hall, 2010; Vornholt et al., 2013), highlight how the QoL levels of persons with disabilities can be implemented through the development of work opportunities, which can contribute to the achievement of a dignified adult life, further research is needed in this direction. Specifically, the lack of quantitative evidence on the QoL of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the context of social farming (Murray et al., 2019) underscores the necessity of further investigation (Europe Union Common Agricultural Policy [EU CAP], 2023).

Literature Review

The legislative landmarks that emerged in the previous section allow us to appreciate the pedagogical dimension closely linked to social farming and the construct of QoL, since specific educational interventions implemented in rural areas can actually contribute to the overall well-being of people with disabilities, as we will see in the following sections.

As previously mentioned, among the numerous conceptualization proposals found in the literature, the highest consensus is observed regarding the multidimensional QoL model proposed by Schalock and Verdugo (2002, 2006) and Schalock et al. (2010, 2016). As a multidimensional concept, it is grouped into three transverse macro-areas ("well-being," "independence," "social participation") (Schalock et al., 2016, p. 2) and divided into eight domains ("social inclusion," "interpersonal relationships," "physical well-being," "material well-being," "emotional well-being," "personal development," "self-determination," "rights") encompassed by various aspects of an individual's well-being and satisfaction in life. The QoL model therefore encompasses various factors that contribute to an individual's general well-being and satisfaction in life, delving not only into objective conditions, but also into the person's subjective perceptions, such as life satisfaction, health, social relationships, and personal fulfillment. The QoL model allows for a thorough exploration of this dimension, suggesting actions for reconsidering the perspectives of services for people with disabilities, especially adolescents with intellectual disabilities who face the greatest difficulties in accessing adulthood

(Cottini, 2016; Schalock & Verdugo, 2013), translating into practice the values encompassed in the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (Amor et al., 2023; UN, n.d.). In this direction the multidimensional model, thanks to a cross-cultural nature (Jenaro et al., 2005; Schalock et al., 2005, 2008; Verdugo, Arias, & Gómez, 2006; Verdugo, Gómez et al., 2006; Verdugo & Schalock, 2001), allow to extend the point of view to the dimension of age (Crespo et al., 2012; Efklides et al., 2006; Prieto-Flores et al., 2012), education (Faragher & Ommen, 2017), mental and physical health (Göksel Karatepe et al., 2011) and the family field (Boehm & Carter, 2019). Despite the “manifesto” (Giacconi, 2015a, p. 14) of the construct of QoL allows the professionals to use a common language and share the planning criteria, Schalock and Verdugo specify “Quality of life might best be viewed as a sensitizing concept (rather than a definitive one) relevant to public policy determination; evaluation of services; and development of innovative local, national, and international program” (Schalock & Verdugo, 2002, p. 458).

The growing interest in QoL in the field of special pedagogy (Schalock et al., 2010; Scott & Haverkamp, 2018; Simões & Santos, 2017) leads our attention to investigate how social farming initiatives can significantly contribute to improving QoL; a correlation that is still little researched in the literature (Murray et al., 2019), but which we believe is fundamental to the adult life of people with disabilities. Indeed, by addressing various dimensions, both subjective and objective, social farming can contribute to improved physical health, mental well-being, social connections, and a greater sense of purpose, and can foster the development of skills, empowerment, and autonomy. However, it is precisely the construct of QoL that can make a decisive contribution to social farming experiences, as it allows its design to be directed towards significant dimensions in the construction of adult life paths.

On the basis of these considerations, with the objective of accommodating individuals who struggle to find appropriate solutions for their employment and social inclusion needs within the work landscape, and who are at risk of experiencing isolation, regression, and marginalization once they leave the educational system, the “Tuttincampo: Social Farming and Inclusivity” project was initiated in September 2021. This project, which concluded in September 2023, aims to test a new social integration approach by employing social farming tools. Its goal is to offer a viable alternative to traditional rehabilitation day centers for individuals with disabilities. As previously indicated in other studies (D’Angelo et al., 2022), the “Tuttincampo” project is a collaborative initiative involving the University of Macerata, the Anffas Macerata Foundation, “Si.Gi.” farm and the Marche Region. Its primary goal is to provide employment opportunities for individuals who struggle to find suitable work options. By engaging participants in farming activities and allowing them to participate “in all stages of agricultural production” (D’Angelo et al., 2022, p. 143), including sowing, harvesting, processing and sales, this project aims to explore a new approach to social integration. The phases into which the project has been divided include an initial survey of the needs, expectations, and preferences of a group of young adults with intellectual disabilities. This was followed by the selection of a work group consisting of young individuals with disabilities, and subsequently, a training activity was conducted to introduce them to agricultural work on the farm. Afterward, a final survey of the QoL levels attained after three years of activities was conducted (D’Angelo et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2019).

This project pushes our attention to investigate the QoL levels experienced by project participants and ensuring their representation of the entire reference population, the following section will analyze QoL data pertaining to a 22-year-old woman with intellectual disabilities and her mother. This analysis will encompass both pre-project and post-project perceptions. To uphold anonymity, the case under examination will be referred to as “G.”.

Methodology

Research Design

Before going into the details of the QoL analysis, we will briefly introduce the specific methodology used. Specifically, we decided to use the POS (van Loon et al., 2009, 2017) as a tool that is based on the QoL framework (Schalock & Verdugo, 2002, 2006; Schalock et al., 2005, 2010, 2016), being also the most widely used constructs in studies assessing the QoL of people with disabilities (Amor et al., 2023).

In addition, the POS return the overall level of the QoL construct both from the person’s point of view with intellectual disabilities and from the caregivers perspective (De Windt & Lannau, 2009; Guàrdia-Olmos et al., 2017; Van Havere, 2011; Van Hove et al., 2011), achieving both subjective and objective “angulations”. As already pointed out in other research (Del Bianco & Accorsi, 2019) the intersection of data from the total raw scores in the individual’s self-assessment scale with those from the caregiver’s assessment scale, provides additional meaning that is crucial for a more thorough evaluation of the QoL index (van Loon et al., 2017).

We used the POS even because it is a highly versatile tool that makes it possible to program person-centered interventions, in order to make potential organizational changes. This method is used to provide general information on an individual’s ongoing QoL, without becoming the criterion by which the assessment of his/her QoL is determined (Del Bianco & Accorsi, 2019). The purpose of using the POS is to comprehend the specific situation of the person in order to enhance their care and emphasize potential achievable outcomes.

As a tool validated by cross-cultural research, the POS evaluation aims to assess QoL in people with intellectual disabilities on the basis of three factors and eight domains: (a) Independence (personal development and self-

determination); (b) Social Participation (interpersonal relations, social inclusion, and rights); and (c) Well-being (emotional well-being, physical well-being, and material well-being) (Jenaro et al., 2005; Schalock et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2010). The POS investigates the eight QoL domains by means of six questions (items) for each domain, resulting in a total of 48 questions. For each question, the person is provided with three possible answers to indicate the extent to which the question applies to them. Depending on their own experiences, they can select the most appropriate option from “always” (3), “sometimes” (2) or “seldom or never” (1). Consequently, the value for each domain is derived from the total of the item scores and consistently falls within the range of 6 to 18, with a lower value indicating a higher level of criticality.

In the detail of the Tuttincampo project, the POS scales were administered by a pedagogue to all members and their caregivers. The data obtained from the self and proxy report were cross-referenced with each other and the cross-referencing also took place between the data obtained in both the initial and final phases of the project for each participants and his/her caregivers, with the aim to compare the results obtained before and after the social farming intervention. For illustrative purposes, we report below only the data obtained from the POS administration of a case study: G. and her mother.

Sample and Data Collection

The POS scale was administered both to G. (a 22-year-old woman with minor intellectual-relational disabilities) and her mother via interview. The administration took place at the beginning of the project (October 2021) and at the end of the project (July 2023). The administration of the scale during the project's initial phase provides a snapshot of G.'s situation at the outset, while the administration at the end gives us an understanding of whether the educational intervention with regard to specific domains was effective or not.

As already mentioned in the previous section, the POS aims to assess the eight QoL domains, with 48 questions. All items on the scale were covered during two sessions of approximately one hour each. This consistent duration caters to the subject's requirement for her own pace and the additional time needed to comprehend the question and formulate her response.

Results

The initial administration (October 2021) of the POS to G. (Fig. 1, blue line) reveals that her perceived QoL is in a range between 11 and 18. The least satisfactory domain is “material well-being” (score 11), followed by “personal development” and “social inclusion” (score 13); “rights” (score 15); “emotional well-being” and “interpersonal relations” (score 17), while the most satisfactory are “self-determination” and “physical well-being” (score 18).

The scale was also administered to G.'s proxy (Fig. 1, orange line), which allows us to appreciate G.'s QoL profile on the basis of the following scores: “social inclusion” (score 13), which represents the least satisfactory domain; then there are 5 domains that recorded the same score of 15, and these are “material well-being,” “physical well-being,” “emotional well-being,” “personal development,” and “rights.” a better result is attributed to “self-determination” (score 16); while the highest level is achieved by “interpersonal relationships” (score 18).

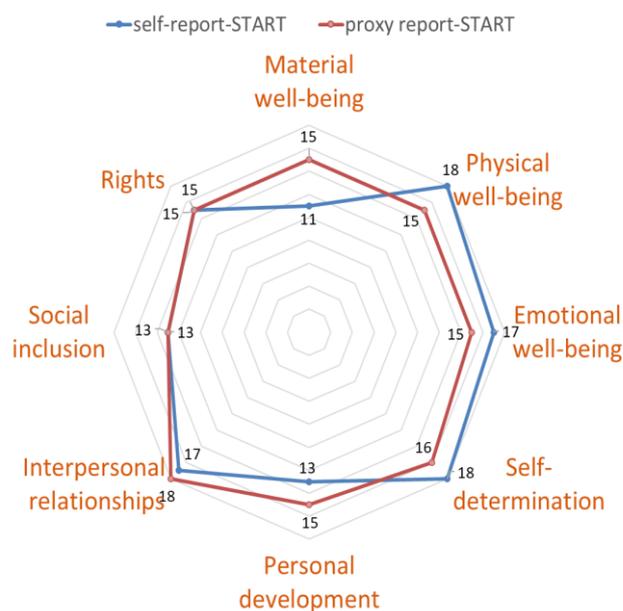


Figure 1. Self-report and Observer/proxy Report at the Start of the Project

At the end of the project (July 2023), the POS administered to G. (Fig. 2, blue line) shows that the domain perceived as least satisfactory is “self-determination” (score 11), followed by “material well-being” and “physical well-being” (both scoring 13); at a higher level, we find “social inclusion” and “rights” (both scoring 14); this is followed by the domain of “interpersonal relations” (score 16); and finally the two highest scoring domains, which are “emotional well-being” and “personal development” (score 17).

The administration of the scale to G.’s proxy, also at the end of the project, shows (Fig. 2 orange line) the perceived QoL with the respective values: the domain perceived as least satisfactory is “social inclusion” (score 9); this is followed by “material well-being” (score 14); a higher level is achieved by “self-determination” (score 15); the next position is occupied by the domain of “rights” (score 16); among the domains which recorded a better level of satisfaction, we find “physical well-being,” “emotional well-being,” and “interpersonal relations” (score 17); finally, the most satisfactory domain indicated by G.’s proxy was “personal development” (score 18).

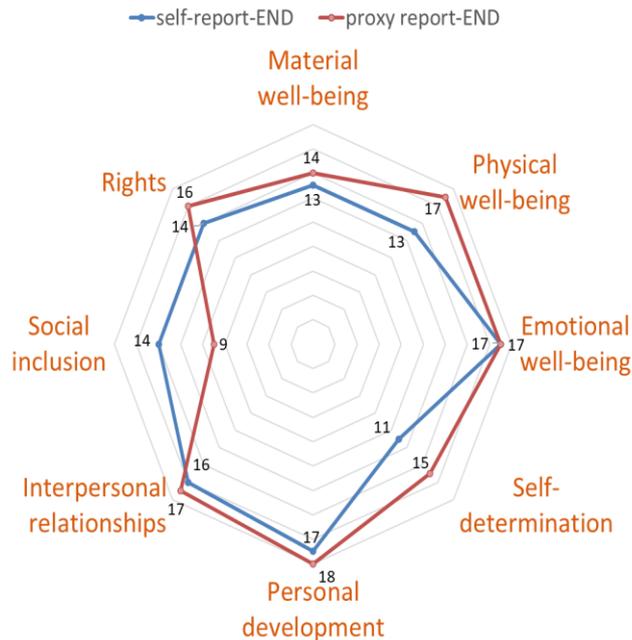


Figure 2. Self-report and Observer/proxy Report at the End of the Project

In order to illustrate the overall perceptions concerning G.’s QoL both before and after the project, we compare the perceptions in Figure 3. The light blue column shows the values attributable to the POS administered to G. before the start of the project, while in dark blue we see the values G. attributes to her QoL domains at the end of the project. In orange, on the other hand, are the POS scores given by G.’s proxy. The lighter columns represent the values obtained from the scale administered at the beginning of the project, while the darker columns indicate the scores obtained from the scale administered at the end of the project.

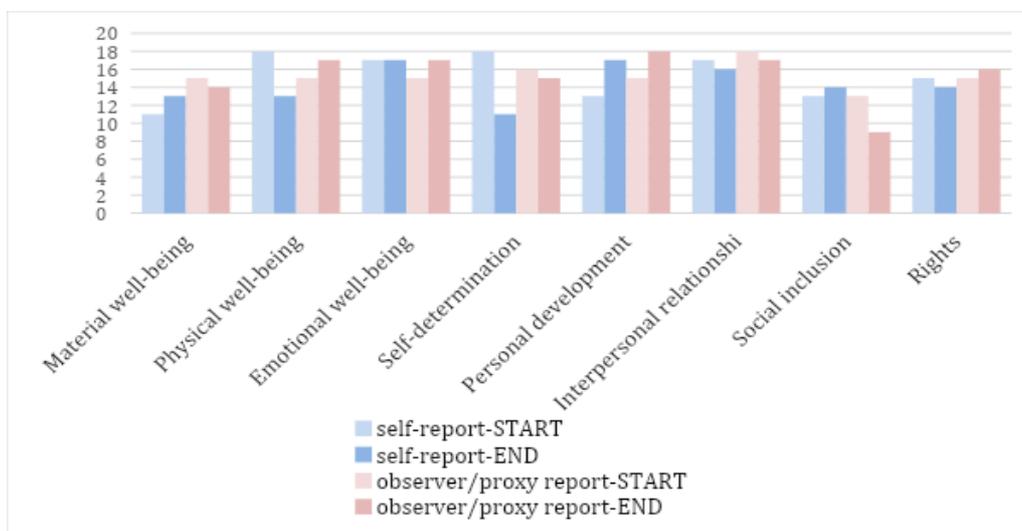


Figure 3. Self-report and Observer/proxy Report both at the Start and the End of the Project

Discussion

As emerged from the reconstruction of the legal frameworks and literature on the subject (CEU, 2005; EC, 1996; EU CAP, 2023; Hassink & Van Dijk, 2006; OECD, 2001; UN, 1992), social farming can represent an important opportunity for QoL of people with disabilities (D'Angelo et al., 2022; Hassink & Van Dijk, 2006; Murray et al., 2019; Stoneham et al., 1995). Within a structured yet flexible context that allows people with disabilities to acquire skills that can later be used in work environments, they can find a protected space in which to experiment with adult life skills (Vornholt et al., 2013). As the reference studies testify, "the possibility of frequenting different environments rich in stimuli and offers, which can provide opportunities favoring the development of all the mental and cognitive strategies useful to deal with the complexity of the social and cultural situation" (Mura, 2005, p. 157) allows the person with disabilities to develop an ability for self-determination, stimulating self-reflective changes, even simple and basic ones, which contribute to building their identity as well as to more general personal development (Caldin, 2003; Mura & Zurru, 2013, 2017; Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013; Wehmeyer et al., 2018). Indeed, developing agricultural cultivation and processing skills has enabled G. to experiment and face new challenges in a flexible and safe learning environment. The development of new strategies to overcome the daily difficulties associated with agricultural work contributed to the increase in G.'s and her mother's perceived levels of "personal development." specifically, as regards the "personal development" domain in the first administration of the POS to G., it obtains a score of 13, while in the final administration it reaches a score of 17. To illustrate this, we can report that in response to question no. 3 (concerning the "personal development" domain), which investigates how many new activities (including work activities) the person has learnt in the last few months, both G. and her mother answered "few" during the initial administration and "many" during the final administration.

Another significant domain from our finding is the "social inclusion". From the data collected emerge that was assigned a score of 13 in both the self-report and the proxy report carried out at the beginning of the project. Appreciating the project's potential, her mother recognized that the opportunities for G. to foster social connections were primarily confined to activities related to the project itself. Because of this, her perception of this domain fell (obtaining a score of 9). Specifically the mother's perception is in line with what has been highlighted in the literature concerning the centrality of planning transitions (Giaconi, 2015a, 2015b; Giaconi et al., 2018; Neely-Barnes et al., 2008; Wehmeyer et al., 2018). Until a certain stage in the child's life, the family can receive support from the school, which frequently serves as one of the few certainties and is also a focal point for various opportunities for social inclusion, including as regards the acceptance of proposed services offered by the local area. Upon leaving education, the social networks of people with intellectual disabilities often become restricted and tend to be increasingly comprised of other people with disabilities or support staff (Amado et al., 2013), with few interactions with people without disabilities (Dusseljee et al., 2011). The same research highlights how, on the other hand, people with intellectual disabilities who participate in pathways, activities, or services dedicated to them have better perceived levels of social inclusion. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that when assessing their QoL levels, individuals with intellectual disabilities often exhibit a tendency to express satisfaction even in situations of lower quality. The reason behind this elevated level of satisfaction can be attributed to these individuals' modest expectations for their lives (D'Angelo, 2020; Del Bianco, 2020; Giaconi, 2015a; Hogg & Langa, 2005; Penne et al., 2012).

Conclusion

The evolution of social farming in Europe has been a subject of plural but irregular growth, as highlighted in the EU CAP Network final report (2023). Indeed, while the concept of social farming has continued to attract attention and evolve, it remains somewhat fragmented at both the EU and national levels (EU CAP, 2023). However, the European Union's policy (CEU, 2005; EC, 1996; EU CAP, 2023; OECD, 2001; UN, 1992) acknowledges the impact of social farming activities on strengthening social capital, providing social services, and integrating people at risk of isolation. Therefore, investigating plans that promote QoL for people with intellectual disabilities allows not only to translate into practice the values encompassed in the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, as mentioned above, but to encourage what is provided by European policies.

In the present study we investigated G.'s personal outcomes in relation to the output of the "Tuttincampo" project, namely, the creation of a service for young adults with intellectual disabilities able to provide adequate responses to social inclusion and training needs linked to future employment opportunities. In this regard, the use of the POS for detecting QoL levels turned out to be a decisive tool in monitoring and evaluating the outcomes related to G.'s "personal development" and "social inclusion" domains, both before and after participation in the project.

The need to organize QoL-oriented project alternatives stems from the observation of the lack of opportunities available to families and people with intellectual disabilities after leaving school. Here we are talking about real opportunities which stand out for providing activities and settings that are also desirable for people with intellectual disabilities. Setting up focused teaching tactics while they are still in school, in preparation for when they leave, involves enhancing the ongoing discussion between families and the local community with the goal of social and work integration (Caldin & Friso, 2016). In order to build a bridge between adolescence and adulthood, it becomes necessary to piece together a puzzle made up of common experiences, a broadening of horizons with respect to the "players" involved, in sharing objectives and methods. We agree with Mura that: "it is precisely the meaningfulness or otherwise of the experiences

that the person with disabilities has the opportunity to experience between school and adulthood that enables them to experience the feelings of self-efficacy and frustration tolerance necessary to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities for picturing and planning a possible Life Plan” (Mura, 2018, p. 25).

In this sense, social farming offers an opportunity to create connections beyond the school environment. It does so by weaving into institutional networks and social policies. This provides an alternative to conventional day services, aiming to collaboratively develop life plans. These plans can encompass meaningful trajectories and shared significance. Moreover, the possibility of experimenting and testing oneself with respect to working skills is a central element in terms of adult life plans. Learning to work and not learning a job (Montobbio & Lepri, 2000) proves to be key both as regards building a status within society and in terms of self-esteem and personal well-being (Beadle-Brown et al., 2012; Chou et al., 2010).

Recommendations

As emerged in this study, a long-term vision is required in order to develop meaningful support: a vision that extends through time and space and that can be connected to the individual’s past and future life trajectory. Implementing a course of action oriented in this direction means broadening and enriching the network of contextual relationships and support opportunities in which the individual can be included (Del Bianco, 2020). For these reasons, among the main recommendations for the development of further projects and research we mention the use of the networking of many actors to ensure multidimensional teamwork. In this way it is possible to realize what the project really aims at: the employment inclusion of people with disabilities. The project could really be improved if it acquired the possibility of expendable employment in the labor market for each member of the group.

Limitations

The research has provided valuable insights. However, it also has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations include the small sample size; the study focuses on a single participant. Therefore the results cannot be generalized.

Additionally, the evaluation shows findings from a short-term period (two years). A more extended follow-up would have offered a better understanding of the long-term effects of the social farming intervention. Furthermore, the research does not address the long-term sustainability of the benefits observed. It is essential to consider whether the improvements in QoL are sustainable over time or whether they diminish after the project ends.

These limitations underscore the need for caution when interpreting the research's findings and suggest avenues for future research to address these constraints and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

Giaconi: Conceptualization, design, supervision, final approval. Del Bianco: Conceptualization, design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript. D’Angelo: Conceptualization, design, critical revision of manuscript, statistical analysis, writing, supervision. Marfoglia: Data analysis, drafting manuscript, editing/reviewing.

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