

## Col-laborate. The Italian case of the Serendipity school in Osimo

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**Riassunto:** *Questo articolo muove dalle istanze di collaborazione che provengono dai contesti di lavoro produttivo per giungere ad illustrare come si può rafforzare la disposizione collaborativa fin dall'infanzia in vista della conquista di una padronanza funzionale sia al lavoro sia alla vita in generale, facendo leva sull'esempio educativo offerto dalla scuola Serendipità di Osimo. L'articolo, redatto con un'impostazione metodologica di tipo critico-argomentativo, nonché basato sugli esiti di un'osservazione diretta e di un colloquio in profondità (intervista non strutturata), si articola in quattro segmenti: nel primo si evidenziano i bisogni di collaborazione espressi primariamente dalle organizzazioni produttive e le difficoltà a soddisfarli, per poi chiarire l'oggetto d'indagine e le prospettive educative che s'intendono seguire con l'esplicitazione dello stesso; nel secondo si descrive il passaggio dalla pulsione congenita all'interazione-collaborazione ai fattori ambientali che, già nell'infanzia, tendono ad annichirla; nel terzo si analizza l'opera della scuola suddetta in termini di educazione alla collaborazione e al lavoro; nel quarto si dipanano le riflessioni pedagogiche in ordine a quest'opera, ponendo in luce i vantaggi di una tale educazione.*

**Abstract:** *This article begins from the collaboration instances deriving from productive work contexts in order to arrive at illustrating how the collaborative disposition may be strengthened since childhood with the aim of achieving a mastery which is both functional to work and to life in general, using the educational example offered by the Serendipity school in Osimo. The article, written in accordance with a critical-argumentative type of methodological approach, and based on the results of a direct observation and an unstructured interview, is divided into four segments: the first highlights collaborative needs expressed primarily by productive organisations and the difficulties in satisfying these, to then clarify the object of the research and the educational perspectives that we intend to follow with its explanation; the second describes the transition from the congenital impulse to the interaction/collaboration to the environmental factors that tend to annihilate it already during childhood; the third analyses the activity of the above-mentioned school in terms of educating towards collaboration and work; the fourth clarifies the pedagogical reflections relating to this activity, pointing out the benefits of such an education.*

**Keywords:** *collaboration, work, childhood, pre-school and elementary school, education.*

## Instances of collaboration in work contexts (and not only)

After a century dominated by a strict technical division of work, the requirements linked to the post-Fordist transformation of productive work (and not only), and of the organisational arrangements which regulated it, have led us over the last few decades to focus our attention on the urgent need to fuel and optimise collaboration among workers, investing multiple personal and interpersonal dimensions with significant importance in order to favour its successful implementation.

Without going into the minute details of each single factor which gave substance and still substantiates this transformation, as they have been widely analysed and described in other papers, the increasing immaterialisation of doing is now an established fact as is noted by the economist E. Rullani. The creator of the term “cognitive capitalism” (Rullani, Romano, 1998), as well as author of numerous essays on knowledge economy, argues in fact that «work performed in an advanced industrial system is nowadays essentially cognitive work, in the sense that it employs the worker’s mind in order to control machines and men, to solve problems, to communicate and perform other cognitive activities» (Rullani, 2002, 23). This complex “cognitive exercise”, propped up and crossed respectively by technological support and information flows, cannot do without networks of knowledge sharing, of socio-technological interactions and relationships, of learning and co-learning adjustments, of exchanges, mediations and negotiations, etc., in a nutshell of collaboration.

Collaboration moreover is that distinctive predisposition which should support that typically post-Fordist process of decentralisation of managerial and production liabilities which answers to the concept of “flat hierarchy” (Negrelli, 2007, 21) or “compressed hierarchy” – as recently heard in a television interview given by Fiat Melfi workers – and which is put into effect by the modern team work structure, where in addition to cognitive skills, those which are exquisitely relational (communicative, ethical and emotional-affective) are also obviously challenged.

All these capabilities have further to guide businesses during their tortuous wandering through the maze of strong international competition exacerbated by globalisation, not only by satisfying the constant stress towards total quality of processes and products, but mainly by guaranteeing a constant creative and innovative impetus (Costa, 2011), through that inventive cooperation between brains and affections men-

tioned by M. Lazzarato rereading *La logique sociale* by G. Tarde (Lazzarato, 2002).

Finally, collaboration is indeed an indispensable aspect within the confines of a company, but it must inevitably expand beyond these, given the proliferation of business-networks (with offices in many parts of the globe) together with the requirements of out-sourcing.

Collaborating, however, is not easy. It is not in itself, it is not in today's socio-cultural spirit and even more so when working with people who were not chosen (whether colleagues or superiors or customers and suppliers) and towards whom negative feelings may well be harboured. It requires, therefore, a significant expenditure of energy, especially psycho-emotional, and it often produces disagreements, anxieties and concerns that lead to stress related injuries. It is moreover difficult because these relationships, even though they may be positive and healthy, in the current work conditions which are characterised by numerical flexibility or employment, are ephemeral, unstable, and precarious. In order to work well together, and where necessary to re-adapt to changing situations and other people, the fact that managers or employers should require this is not enough. As is stated in other writings, which eminently focus on the emotional dimension, a punctual training is necessary, giving the opportunity to develop the required skills and, at the same time, of protecting the equilibrium and health of working men and women, respecting a twofold interest: the company's and the staff's well-being.

But the object of this article is not on such a training, calibrated on adults, but on how we can strengthen the collaborative attitude from an early age in view of an adult age engaged on several fronts. In other words, how cooperation for the aforementioned purposes may be "trained" and, simultaneously, relying on useful means for this purpose – manual work above all –, how the seeds which will educationally grow a labour person-centric culture, as well as an economic and consumption action, may be sown, and a sense of collaboration reaching beyond the boundaries of the workplace (with positive repercussions) may be renewed: indeed, post-Fordist work brings with it various promises of freeing the human potential after a long period of alienation, but, at the same time, it hides bio-political pitfalls which evoke the ghosts of an achieved self-alienation (Marazzi, 1994; Gorz, 2003; Demichelis, Leghissa, 2008); whilst on the one hand capitalist economic action has long been inclined to impose an ethical reductionism based on profit (forgetting the person as an end) and consumption as the

main parameter of wealth, on the other self-referential individualism, loss of a sense of community, intolerance towards deviants and differences and defensive closures are the features that increasingly shape the substance of life within social settings, not so much with others, as among the others.

In order to illustrate how these educational goals may effectively be attainable, the following pages will focus on the work done at the Serendipità (Serendipity) school in Osimo, whose pedagogical cornerstone is “doing”, as anticipated a doing to be understood as working, and, in fact, collaboration, hence the choice to use, in the title, the term *col-laborate*, which jointly refers to the verb of our first key word and, from the Latin *labor*, to labour (as a means of education), including the difficulties inherent to its implementation.

### **Interaction and collaboration in childhood: from congenital drive to competitive thirst**

Before focusing on what is carried out in the cited school, it is worth dwelling on the relationship between early childhood, interaction and collaboration. The proof that the congenital “drive” of interaction gives an outlet to collaborative tendencies which evolutionally progress and strengthen and that the gradual discovery and understanding of differences (with its baggage of contradictions and obstacles) induces the child to not withdraw into himself but to project himself so to speak into a collaborative dimension, thereby reaching important results in terms of overall development, is provided by several studies that evidence a well-defined procedure, without prejudice to the natural individual evolutionary differences.

For example, R. Sennett (2012), in the second book of his trilogy on the “*homo faber* project”, notes those regarding the new-born, who progressively cooperates in breastfeeding; those by J. S. Bruner (2005) and J. Bowlby (1975) concerning the diversification of communicative weeping after the first two months of life (and later the strict equivalence between crying and suffering), the sign of a collaborative request; and those within the second year, on the anticipation and response sequences (in relation to other children) which bring about a more complex collaboration. Regarding the fact, also, that the incipient recognition of the differences from oneself (human or material) does not inhibit interactive drive, but on the contrary becomes more frequent and deepens the collaborative instance,

regardless of the lack of parental stimulation, the author appeals to studies that show that the child, also as a result of his awareness of physical separation (from the mother, from other children, from objects), does not build barriers between himself and the world, but vice versa begins to imitate the behaviour of others and to intensify his exploration of objects during the second year ending with collaborating in collective tasks during the third year thanks to these prodromal experiences.

As age progresses, around four years old, it is still J. Bowlby who underlines how the transition from the simple and solitary repetition of gestures to the repetition of joint exercises or activities determines the emergence of an emotional connection, and he also states that notwithstanding any disagreements in the continuous repetition, no discouragement is generated and the will to continue in order to improve therefore never fails. When, still around the age of four, the child is able to think of his behaviour in terms of self-consciousness and to distinguish between the act and the person who carries it out, the occurrence of reflective capacity and self-criticism does not lead to isolation, but rather, as is said by E. Erikson (1966), leads him to give shape to shared reflexivity, as happens when children around five/six years old decide together the rules of the game rather than accepting those which are given.

Moving over to another angle, the evolutionary role which inclination plays, as reminded at the beginning, in the construction of thought and speech and in the clarification of intellectual potential, must not be forgotten. In this regard, L. S. Vygotskji, who criticises J. Piaget's vision concerning an absolutely linear evolution running from the individual to the social, believes that language primarily has a social origin, moving from undifferentiation to differentiation/hierarchy of its initial forms, and that the egocentric thought/language which J. Piaget talks about is not something which is gradually abandoned during the age of development, but emerges as a congenial way to shift external social behaviour to intrapsychic functions (Tryphon, Vonèche, 1998, 8). Again, L. S. Vygotskji (1973) states that, along with imitation, supporting the child's upward motion of collaborative effort is crucial in order to increase and expand his intellectual baggage, particularly when he is trying to resolve various issues.

To what we have stated so far, we can return to R. Sennett and conclude with him that interaction-collaboration, conceived as an exchange from which participants derive mutual benefit, is an immediately visible imprint as it is inscribed in the genes of all social animals, functional to

survival as well as to human progress on multiple fronts (Sennett, 2012, 15). Nevertheless, according to the sociologist, this imprint fades quickly, as the interaction and collaboration attempts which the child carries out up to a certain age in order to satisfy his innate needs, often stumble into opposing grips which prevent its long lasting mastery. This is where the environmental factor comes into play, this time in line with Piaget's approach (Piaget, 1967). This is not the above mentioned absence of parental stimulation, to be precise of socialising stimulation, i.e. living in contact with uncommunicative and withdrawn parents, as the interactive-collaborative drive, as described, finds its vent in any case, although not as strongly as with communicative and sociable parents. Verily it is an environmental conditioning which can atrophy the desire to interact collaboratively and to convert this into competitive thirst. In this context, R. Sennett refers to: the impact of social media on the perception of self, of others and therefore, of the us (for example: my friend has more virtual friends than I do and receives more *likes* on what he posts); the effects of the distribution of wealth on the realisation of belonging to an unprivileged class; the sense of inferiority given by the impossibility of being able to access certain consumptions; and, given the distinctions that may be made in relation to the Anglo-Saxon education system, the imposed or internalised inequality at school. According to R. Sennett, all these environmental inputs find wide resonance when entering school, by triggering "envious contrasts" which fuel competition instead of cooperation and determine the gradual loss of the above mentioned will, entirely adhering when reaching the age of ten, to the logic of me versus you, or us versus you (Sennett, 2012, 149-165).

At this point R. Sennett turns towards adults and in particular towards their working universe, suggesting ways forward in order to solve the criticalities of that universe, destabilise the enduring of an essentially tribal society and retrieve what is being lost already during the first years of life in order to enhance the continuity of a collaborative existence. Among these paths there is one in particular that has caught my eye, in the belief that it is appropriate to adopt it in schools from an early age, especially as most of them have forgotten the high educational value of real work: building on the example given by what happens in a craft workshop – where the pace of work coincides with shared rituals, where gestures which modulate connected rhythms animate informal social relations and share them through bodily sensations, where the resistance of matter teaches the management of resistance prodded by encounters with dissimilarity and where the whole

is summed up in creating a collaborative spirit –, the sociologist exhorts not just being together, as an antidote to suspicion and interactional roughness, but doing difficult things together (*Ibidem*, 219-242).

Falling back on the elucidation of the object of this article, therefore, in order to strengthen and “train” collaboration and to reach the objectives mentioned, in order not to relegate the cited evidence into oblivion and to restore practical nourishment so as to take a permanent road of relief, doing difficult things, among others, together, is necessary. And this, and not only this, comes true in the Serendipity school.

### **Educating to work and collaborate: the Serendipity school in Osimo**

Set in the countryside of a small hamlet in the municipality of Osimo, the school was founded in 2013 by Emily Mignanelli and Veronica Pacini, two young women graduates respectively in Primary Teacher Education – childhood curriculum (University of Macerata), with a specialization in the Montessori Method, and in Anthropology (University of Bologna), with specialization in Paris. Serendipity, whose name, as Mignanelli admits, is also due to the random happening of certain educational events – such as finding an animal bone in the fields around the school building and grasping the opportunity to carry out some ad hoc research in the library together with the children – is a private school with a libertarian approach which takes its inspiration, in some ways, from Tolstoy’s pedagogy and from *The Child’s Right to Respect* by J. Korczak (1994), but mainly from Summerhill by A. S. Neill (1956; 1979). Nevertheless, the use of the Montessori Method is crucial.

That said, this has nothing to do with the negative sense of the term libertarian, which could refer to anarchy or to a school which, as P. Viotto writes (2006, 283), “abandons the individual to himself”, but with a libertarian approach which from Summerhill’s experience draws both «the accurate distinction between freedom (satisfying individual desire within a functional context whilst respecting the wishes and rights of others) and anarchy: “freedom does not mean lack of common sense”», and further key points, such as “the pupil’s self-adaptation”, the “horizontal relationship between adults and minors” and “self-government through the Assembly”. In short, according to A. S. Neill’s lesson, the focus is on «relationships, relations, personal involvement, authentic feelings, on the overall climate of

the school as a life environment [...] in which the values and wishes of the child are kept to the forefront» (Scurati, 1996, 91). We will be able to give a detailed account of these principles and perspectives by clarifying the given approach and the activities.

Serendipity is a combined pre-school and primary school, which is home to twenty-three children aged from three to eight years old. From Monday to Friday, the school day begins at 8 am and ends at 5 pm, with the constant presence and supervision of the two teachers. Pupils enter between 8 and 10: those attending primary school have Italian and Mathematics classes every other day from 8:30 to 10; in the meantime, those attending pre-school use the Montessori-style organised space and the materials kept there independently. The pupils of the primary school are made aware of their training path and of the final skills they must acquire through a map (one for Italian and one for Mathematics) where the intermediate waypoints reached are stamped, and are responsible for respecting the itinerary and may responsibly choose whether to attend classes or not (self-adaptation). Should a considerable gap become evident through a joint monitoring (teacher-pupil), this is bridged by individual lessons.

When the “big ones” have ended, at 10, it’s time for a snack, which all the children prepare together dividing their tasks (slicing the bread, setting the table, etc.).

Once the snack is finished, it is time for assembly (self-government), where the children and the teachers, considered as equals and not as superiors (horizontal relationship), express their proposals on various themes: a different child takes on the role of mediator each day, managing turn-taking and collecting the proposals which are then discussed and voted by a majority. Children can desert the meeting, although they have the opportunity to delegate a companion as spokesman, as they are aware that this is the only place where they can exercise their rights and that there is no right to an additional appeal.

Immediately after the assembly, teaching/learning is resumed in a special workshop, where group work relating to time and space is carried out together with scientific lab workshops which affect all the pupils. Every day at least three/four experts (music, theatre, dance, art, etc.) who integrate the educational plan flank the two educators.

Lunchtime is at 1 pm. The menu is vegan and families take in turn to bring the bread, a dessert and, every three days, the fruit; a grandparent and some parents also take it in turns to cook. The children, however, are always



engaged in helping in the kitchen and have the task of setting the table, clearing and cleaning.

Once lunch is finished, the children play outside (primarily “social games”) (Perucca, De Canale, 2012, 101-103) – even in the coldest seasons, using thermal tracksuits imported from Sweden – and work, inside or out. For example, and clearly depending on their age: they load, unload and arrange the wood for the fireplace in the kitchen and prepare the bundles for lighting the fire; they cultivate the organic garden owned by the school, remove the snails from vegetables, rip out weeds, etc.; they are in the process of publishing their own school newspaper, which will become regular, where they narrate their experiences, with the help of photographs; they have created, designed (at first individually and then agreeing on a common project) and built, with the support of a craftsman (who gave them tips), a play house that stands in the garden; in the same way they have dug and created an artificial lake in front of the school; invented and made playing cards that they then sold in order to pay for a school trip; they also made the stalls on which the cards were displayed for sale by themselves; they have collected acorns to adorn vases which were also sold; they made a wooden bench; etcetera, etcetera.

In the next section we will return to the subject of work and to the other previously mentioned aspects. Now, in order to define the background, we must open a short chapter concerning the students’ parents. They cannot enrol their children at Serendipity because, for example, it offers longer opening hours, or has a beautiful environment, or because it is located in the countryside. Parents, instead, are required to make a conscious and responsible choice, aware of the cooperative role which they are encouraged to adopt and convinced of the educational philosophy. In order to ensure these conditions, before their children can attend the school, they are required to attend six months of meetings with the teachers, meetings which, as Mignanelli says, «are used to outline the meaning frame within which the educational plan needs to be placed». Once the educational agreement has been reached and the children accepted, the parents are also asked to attend the school every three weeks in order to set up meetings among themselves and with the teachers, where the performance of the children, what they do, the annual goals, the tasks of the parents themselves, etc. are discussed, given that the educational prospectus may not be discussed. Should needs (to assist certain activities) or specific issues arise, working or in-depth discussion groups are set up, in an attempt to overcome these

difficulties. Going back to the tasks, we have already seen that parents help in the kitchen and provide some of the food; in addition, if they are competent in any discipline, art or craft which is useful for educational-teaching purposes, they are warmly encouraged to join the package of external paid experts for free, whilst they may voluntarily contribute to help the inside and outside cleaning together with the children, in exchange for a discount on the monthly fee.

### **Collaborate for work and life**

The picture just sketched, the result of a limited time observation of the school and particularly of an in-depth conversation with Ms. Mignanelli based on an unstructured interview, certainly cannot allow putting forward truly comprehensive reflections. In order to do so, we must wait for further investigation (and for the completion of the primary cycle). However, it can allow reliable ongoing reflections.

First, it seems quite clear that the educational work set up in Osimo is animated by collaborative intentions which aim to cultivate individual potential within a collective harmonisation, of responsibility as a dimension of exercising freedom and independence, in its turn, as a dimension of exercising responsibility (Corsi, 2003, 31-40). Students are constantly encouraged to drink from the fountain of reciprocity, invited by the various moments which punctuate their day and by the activities, to listen to others, to understand others, to engage in an ethical view of each other, to mediate and negotiate viewpoints, ideas, thoughts, wishes, thoughtfulness, to “feel” others, until reaching a state of feeling together, by empathising. Agreeing with L. Mortari (2015, 178-198), it could be said that they are encouraged to demonstrate mutual caring work. At the same time, the evidence mentioned above is strengthened by celebrating a pro-active freedom which emphasises the capacity to answer personally and towards others regarding behaviour, communication and co-education, striving towards conquering an independence which does not in any way result in self-sufficiency, but in finding a healthy interdependence (in this regard it is worth recalling the episode of a child who did not attend the assembly forgetting to delegate someone and who was then rebuked by his mates whose majority decided to make his attendance of the Assembly compulsory for three weeks). In the latter sense, we could also claim to be faced with a school of

moral education, where, thanks to an inherent cooperation in various activities (cooking, assembly, group work, social games and work), it is easier to transmit the importance of accepting the rules of reciprocity in order to reach a consensual objective and, thus, the transition from heteronomy to an awareness of the common good (Serafini, 1990; 2005). Moreover, continuous interface with otherness (not without its load of disappointment and/or dissatisfaction), exercising the courage to make suggestions and the daily need to reach agreements, constitute a significant emotional-affective test and encourage discriminating behaviour and active identities.

Secondly, reconnecting with the school's inclination towards "relationships, relations" and to its expansion towards a "life environment" whose educational strength exceeds the boundaries of school education, it is equally clear that the involvement of parents, together with their assistance, marks the shift from a micro to a macro-social order in which the collaborative flow and strength extend bilaterally. On one hand we have children, who add the collaborative experiences of their parents to their first-hand collaborative experiences, thereby obtaining a renewed voluntary impulse, and on the other the parents, who feel a responsibility because of their pre-registration meetings together with the help they provide, and thereby enrich their homes with collaborative habits, creating a seamless virtuous circle (here we must instead mention the episode of the child who was successful in exporting the assembly procedure to his home).

Thirdly, still constantly keeping in mind the beating heart of collaboration, it should be noted that work – and as mentioned also the fatigue of labour – represent the real key to education. In agreement with R. Sennett, doing difficult things together really consolidates a collaborative propensity, rightly nurturing the hope that a long-lasting mastery may be fired up, unlike those schools which have lost sight of manual labour. When doing difficult things together and doing them in the manner of Serendipity, not only does, to quote A. Agazzi (1958, 125), «the human spirit – mind, intellect, intelligence, insight, intuition, processing, volition, expression – using one's hands» work, not only does one obtain the apology of the claims written in the first instance in this paragraph, significantly supporting ethical, social, and emotional intelligence, whilst concurrently increasing one's self-esteem (Perucca, 2005, 23-24), not only are the rituals and gestures of cooperation learnt and «one learns not to resist, conceding what seems best for everyone and for a job well done» – in the words of Mignanelli herself – and not only does one develop and improve reflective skills and problem

finding/problem solving in co-design and co-creation developed and improved, but there is also an increasing understanding of work from a strictly human point of view. Mignanelli in fact, inspired by the children's stories, says that in their eyes «work gradually becomes a way to satisfy foremost an intrinsic, motivating and meaningful need in itself». With it, in fact, leaving aside the rest, they «can test their limits and potentials, satisfying an essentially personal need, and they are extremely gratified by what they manage to obtain, in spite of the effort involved». On the contrary, the effort is in no way an obstacle, it is *a conditio sine qua non* of the gratification. In this we can see C. Freinet's thoughts on labour (1977, 196-197): work as «a fulfilment of that life and activity need which is like a barometer of our specific power»; and again: «I only call work that activity which is so intimately linked to being that it becomes its function, the exercise of which is in itself satisfactory, although it requires effort and suffering». Within this perspective, the integration of work consciousness for a person can simultaneously (and conceivably) constitute a new cultural imprinting and a basic vaccine, provisionally hostile to an utilitarian engulfment as well as capable of prematurely eradicating the viral charge of the ethical deviations of economic action, with an attached and future relativism of work's pathological growth and the bio-political risks of self-alienation. Concerning consumption however, Mignanelli notes that the corresponding appetite diminishes with work and the related imagery changes, i.e. the fulfilment which children have at an individual level and the one deriving from products they consider "necessary" gradually distracts them from the importance of media and from the sirens of consumerism, as they are already happy with what they have created. In addition, the children, in the light of their actual work experience and small self-financing sales, question each other in the assemblies concerning advertising and the "illusion" of marketing. What is more, and we hereby close the subject, doing difficult things together and doing them with real tools (hoes, shovels, spades, shears, knives, etc.), obviously under the watchful eyes of the teachers, provides benefits both in terms of risk education (inescapable if wishing to avoid them seeking it in other forms when older) and in terms of reinforcing subjective and inter-subjective responsibilities.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that such an education, an authentic training ground for cooperation, is adequate in order to avoid the fears associated with the drying up of the collaborative sphere; engaging in educational aspects valid for the purposes of social life and work – for the

invoked collaboration and its manifold reflections as well as for personal and organisational well-being and maintaining a reason to open up which transcends any relational insecurity –; thus instilling deep “collaborative habits”; stimulating reflections on doing and on consumption even capable of generating an educational culture of work and a conscious and constructive criticism of the business world from the bottom, sensitising the minds of children and adults together. Likewise, there is no doubt that this mode of education should be spread, conveying the importance of *col-laborating* in higher education schools up to university level, even independently from loyalty to a libertarian approach. The one proposed is, in fact, just one example. Our pedagogical hope, therefore, is that examples of this kind should proliferate both horizontally and vertically, in the private and in the public sectors, providing a progressive expansion and a timely acceptance of a concern which cuts across many fields of the human existence.

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