
Expanding the Present.

Collaborative creativity and Imagination in workplaces to design “the Near Future” of Family-School-Service Collaboration

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Abstract: Creating interprofessional spaces involves more than just exchanging information; it requires a mutual commitment to co-constructing knowledge and identifying shared goals and practices. In this process, imagination plays a fundamental role. When understood as an 'expansion' of experience and possibility, realistic imagination stimulates reflection on systematic practices and the representations, contradictions and desired changes of professionals. This paper presents a case study conducted with an interprofessional group working with children and families in Italy within the P.I.P.P.I. programme (Programme of Intervention for Preventing Institutionalisation), a national programme supporting vulnerable children and families. The presentation focuses on an exercise in which professionals are asked to write creatively and collaboratively about the near future of school-family-service collaboration. This narrative approach enables us to understand the proximal experience of professionals in their context, from analysing the future to addressing the challenges of the present.

Keywords: interprofessional work; service-family-school collaboration; imagination; narrative methods

Introduction

Service-family-school collaboration is often understood as a process of networking between persons who, on the basis of their own interpretation of a problem, get in touch by asking each other for the resources each believes to be appropriate. In a research on preventing children's vulnerability, Edwards (2011) proposes instead to base collaboration on the creation of interprofessional and community spaces in which to engage in co-constructing knowledge and understanding of the problem. The issue is not one of diluting specialist expertise or assuming one another's professional roles, but rather of gaining sufficient insight into the purposes and practices of others to enable collaboration' (Edwards, 2011, p. 34). Such collaboration extends beyond the mere exchange or transfer of information; it entails a genuine, reciprocal commitment to the identification of shared horizons and the practices through which these may be realised. At its core, it underscores the inherently relational character of effective agency (Edwards, 2011).

This horizontal working, which takes place at the boundaries of communities and professional practices, consists of negotiating interpretations of tasks and ways of accomplishing them: at the boundaries, the

categories, values and goals on which practices are based are revealed and, at the same time, the categories, values and goals of the work of others are recognised and paid attention to.

In the constitution of a symbolic domain for interprofessional and community work, imagination occupies a foundational role. Following Zittoun and Gillespie's (2016) cultural-historical approach, imagination is conceived not merely as a faculty of mental representation, but as an *expansion* of both experience and possibility, thereby foregrounding its generative and transformative potential.

According to Vygotskij (1987) "no accurate cognition of reality is possible without a certain element of imagination, a certain flight from the immediate, concrete, solitary impressions in which this reality is presented in the elementary acts of consciousness. The processes of invention or artistic creativity demand substantial participation by both realistic thinking and imagination. The two act as a unity" (p. 349). In outlining the relationship between imagination and experience, Vygotsky identifies the combinatory capacity of the human mind as the foundation of creative activity. He inquires into how this combinatory creative activity occurs, and stresses that its development depends on the accumulation of our experience (p. 55). Thus, the first and most fundamental connection between imagination and reality lies in the fact that every product of imagination is assembled from elements derived from reality and preserved through prior experience. As Vygotsky notes, it would be a miracle for imagination to generate something entirely *ex nihilo*, without drawing upon the reservoir of lived experience.

Within this theoretical framework, our research with an interprofessional group commenced by eliciting and sharing experiences of working within multidisciplinary teams, with particular attention to their constitutive elements, interprofessional dynamics, impacts, and discursive practices (first stimulus). Subsequently, the use of narrative tools was introduced as a means of stimulating professionals to envision and design prospective systems of collaboration among services, families, and schools. The writing process itself became a collective arena in which participants articulated motives and professional expectations regarding collaboration, while the narratives they produced functioned as second stimuli for analyzing the current activity system in both its historical-genetic and actual-empirical dimensions (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

The aim was to examine the potential of the *letters from the future* narrative tool to decouple professional imagination from the immediacy of proximal experience, thereby opening a space for the exploration and identification of possible alternatives and transformations within the system of collaborative activity

Methods

This paper presents a case study conducted with social workers, educators, psychologists, teachers, neuropsychiatrists working with children and families in Italy within the P.I.P.P.I. program (Milani, 2022). P.I.P.P.I. is a national program for supporting children and families who live in a situation of vulnerability. The program is coordinated by the Italian Ministry of Welfare in association with the University of Padua, and the Universities of Torino, Verona, Trieste. P.I.P.P.I. is an intensive support program, and its name is an acronym for Program of Intervention for Preventing Institutionalization. It is based on interprofessional collaboration and collaboration between professionals and other formal and informal actors, families included. The local authorities that have participated in two or more implementation of the program can join the advanced module and constitute into a Territorial Laboratories (LabT): a collaborative space involving professionals and researchers to analyze the local system, promote learning and situated innovations involving different key actors who contribute to the wellbeing of children and families (Sità, Di Masi, Petrella, 2023).

The presentation focused on our experience of using the narrative tool *letter from the Future* (Zanzibar Protokol) in a LabT project. Professionals were asked to write about the near future of school-family-service collaboration (Kloetzer, 2025).

The letters have been written by an interprofessional group of 45 professionals (educators, social workers, psychologists, teachers, school principals) working in child and family welfare in the Tigullio gulf area (Nord-West of Italy). We used the following prompt as a trigger question to stimulate a near future imagination: "It is 2034, and you have the opportunity to write yourself a letter from the future that you receive today. What would you tell us about school - family - services collaboration in your region?"

The narrative tool allows us to represent the proximal experience lived by professionals in their context "what is" starting from a near future imagination "what it could become", i.e. from the analysis of the future to read the question of the present. It is a practice of realistic imagination and a stimulus to reflect on systematic and professionals' representations, contradictions and desired changes.

We present the key contents that emerged from a thematic analysis of these 45 letters, focusing on what it means to cross professional and institutional boundaries, trying to establish collaboration and to search for shared knowledge, while expanding the *bubble of now*.

Findings

The analysis of the *letters from the future* constructs an ambivalent imaginary of school-family-services collaboration, simultaneously infused with utopian projections and dystopian anxieties. The contradictions articulated by professionals reflect the broader socio-historical conditions in which they are embedded: precariousness in working life, the destabilizing effects of wars, the erosion of public commitment to welfare, and the transformative yet disruptive presence of AI technologies. These macro-structural pressures manifest at the micro-level in recurrent experiences of incommunicability, the absence of a shared lexicon across professions, and the persistent economic and social undervaluation of educational labour.

The recurrent evocation of "a common language" signals more than a technical demand for terminological alignment: it embodies the aspiration to transcend disciplinary boundaries and open up symbolic spaces as sites of unpredictable, and potentially transformative, understanding. At the same time, the topic of "borders" offers a glimpse into the blurring of the boundary between professionals and non-professionals. This is evident in their shared vulnerability in the face of injustices and precariousness experienced by individuals and families in the contemporary labour and economic system. It also suggests the potential for creating a caring community that transcends the disparities in power and opportunities associated with each person's social role.

a) Sharing "a common language"

"School-family collaborations have taken on a new value in respecting the figure of the teacher and the importance of parenthood. The times of long meetings and endless phone calls are over. We only speak one language! Inclusion, support, collaboration, listening are now internalized by everyone. I no longer feel like an alien" (school educator).

In these letters from the future, social and interprofessional work takes place in a space where communication takes on multiple, layered forms, such as voices, semantics, specialised languages and

'dialects' that constantly oscillate between the aspiration for a 'common language' and resistance to differences. Educational and social work is often reduced to collecting and managing information. The dialectical tension between *information* and *understanding* is crucial here: the risk is that technical simplification, rooted in organisational monolingualism and the lexicon of efficiency, obscures the richness of 'dialects', living and contextual languages. These are places of creativity and transformation.

b) *Crossing and inhabiting borders*

The problem of institutional and relational boundaries is rooted in a similar tension: these are not static barriers, but rather permeable thresholds that are continually crossed and renegotiated. For instance, the role of the educator is characterised by a constant tension between underestimation and redefinition within the team as an assessment actor. The fine line between professional function and identification with the users is also highlighted as being precarious, in a circuit of reciprocity. The space for the encounter between professionals and beneficiaries thus becomes a boundary device: a place where the continuity and circularity of relationships shape the conditions of collaboration itself.

“Everyone needs support in growing and developing. As an educator and then as a mother, I have benefited from this collaboration, too, because your own well-being and that of those around you is fundamental. Education today means physical, psychological and economic well-being: a network of services aimed at people for people. You work for others, but others work for you, not as a means but as an intertwining” (early childhood educator).

In this scenario, the question of knowledge emerges from collective trajectories involving the activation of opportunities and tools, which sometimes manifest as specific actors — such as schools, families and networks — that are not only contexts, but also competent subjects. The affective dimension is also relevant to this process: trust, passion and desire, as well as effort and resistance, act as generative or limiting forces in the configuration of interprofessional practices.

Nevertheless, the concept of institutional functioning is still largely influenced by neoliberal logics, which primarily define collaboration in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and consistent achievement of objectives, thereby shaping professional discourse with performative and prescriptive semantics. This results in contradictions articulated as polarities: mechanical response *versus* organic response; information *versus* understanding; medicalisation *versus* the centrality of the educational act; and reparative function *versus* transformative function.

Ultimately, change can be interpreted as a dual process: firstly, as a subjective transformation resulting from individual learning and re-elaboration, and secondly, as change imposed by institutional mechanisms and socio-historical contexts that continuously restructure the margins of possibility for social work and interprofessional collaboration.

If we take these polarisations into account as dialectical forms, we can consider them as engines of development, levers for imagining innovation projects towards desirable future forms of interprofessional work.

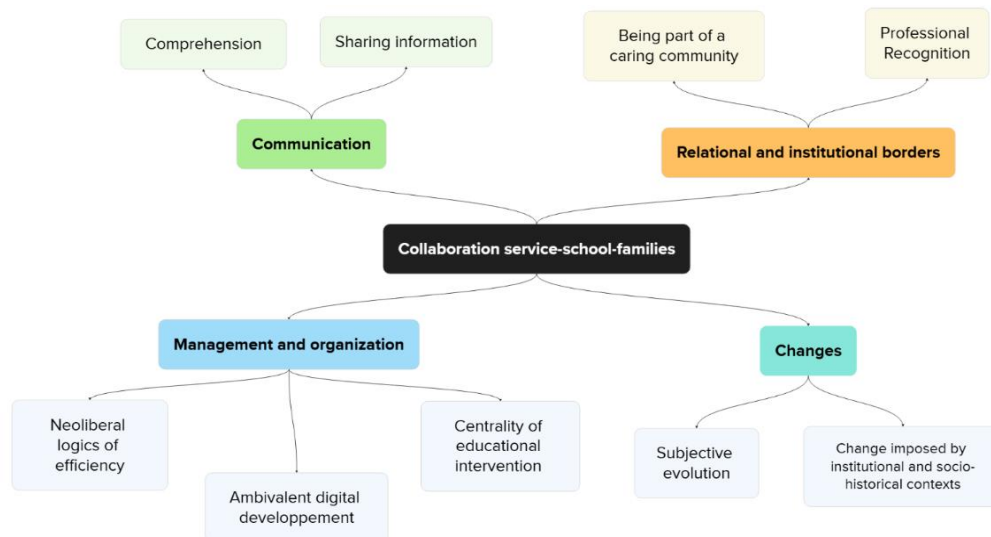


Figure 1 This diagram summarizes the initial analysis of the data emerging from *Letters from the Future*. The four main themes (communication; relational and institutional borders; management and organization; changes) are divided into categories that highlight the main contradictions or internal tensions that professionals are facing.

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