

# *Material culture and listening to birdsong*

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## **Introduction**

Not so long ago, a local newspaper announced the arrival of a special guest star, a pink flamingo, at the natural reserve. Here follows the translation of a brief extract:

“For a few days now, one of the most fascinating migratory birds in nature has chosen the wet environment of the protected area near the Adriatic Sea for a stopover. This is certainly a special event. Inevitable, especially in the social era where news runs fast, is the curiosity of photographers and visitors, who discreetly continue to observe and try to immortalise the animal with such characteristic plumage and the usual posture with its raised leg.” (Capponi, 2022).

This article recalls the press cuttings carefully selected by the infant school teacher Sara Bertuzzi, former student and disciple of Giuseppina Pizzigoni, the founder of the Rinnovata School in Milan and the pedagogical “experimental method” which bears her name. These enchanting stories of animals and nature, of science and culture are used to educate children in truth and in liberty, to “experience, think, draw, observe, speak, create, reflect and share together.” (Chistolini, 2021, p. 32). For example, our solitary flamingo could spark an interest and arouse questions about the world. What is migration? Why do birds migrate and where do they go? Which birds migrate? How do they understand that it is time to go? How do they navigate in the sky? Do they, like us, look at the stars? Do people also migrate?

With true animal stories, the awesome outside world enters the inner space of the school. What is more, the Pizzigoni Experimental Method paves the way for the school to open its doors wide open so that the children may in turn venture into the world, with joy and amazement. This allows them to become protagonists, young scientists in direct discovery of new knowledge and experiences. The elements of nature such as water, the sky, plants, animals, the earth, and also human activities such as, for example, those of the shepherd and the artist offer endless possibilities for observation, reflection,

creation, and the acquisition of new languages and learnings. More specifically, the children's immediate interactions with the shepherd and his herd of sheep helps them understand the wool cycle (Salvadori, 2010). Also, the observation of the cycle of the seasons outdoors, is further enriched with the children's production of their own calendar and newspaper. The perception of space and time, life and death, are no longer abstract concepts acquired during a 'lesson', but founded instead in the concrete, "through the experience of things and their intrinsic and relative value." (Pizzigoni, 1929, p. 6).

## **1. How many collections!**

The Pizzigoni Fund located at the University of Roma Tre in Italy is a unique custodian of the works of Giuseppina Pizzigoni and Sara Bertuzzi. Glass cabinets in the hallways outside the Fund exhibit classroom projects produced by the children of the Rinnovata school as well as those created by their teachers. Red boxes inside the Fund preserve original didactic materials and a rich library of pedagogical volumes can be found on the shelves.

It is in this setting that one hundred school children from Rome came to experience a school from 100 years ago and take part in the joint research project between Germany and Italy, specifically the Universities of Leipzig and Roma Tre entitled "Historical learning processes of primary school children in museum collections". Upon arrival the children and their teachers were welcomed by the research team at the university entrance. A room with seating was made available to the children where they could drop off their coats and bags, have their snack and drink at the beginning and end of the session. They were also given some time to socialize. Once they had settled down, the children were divided into two groups which were accompanied by the researchers: one went outside in the courtyard, while the other group stayed inside to explore the Fund with Spririmpolo, a hand puppet made by the teacher Sara Bertuzzi. By the end of the day, each group completed both indoor and outdoor trails.

The following table lists the six stations which composed the indoor trail. These will be briefly described below and then some of the findings from the fourth station with bird whistles will be discussed.

**TABLE 1 - INDOOR TRAIL**

<b>Station #</b>	<b>Station name</b>
One	Calendars made with children's drawings
Two	Hand puppet theatre
Three	3-D model of a Rinnovata school classroom
Four	Bird whistles
Five	Lavender plants
Six	Geometric shapes

*Station One - Calendars made with children's drawings*

Collection materials, including those created by children, can be found in glass cabinets on two walls of the hallway. Pizzigoni school children prepared a calendar with their teacher Sara Bertuzzi. Day by day she collected the children's drawings and placed them in the calendar so that the visualization of the drawing and the personalization of the object would support the children in their approach to reading, learning and interpreting the calendar. This station was used to further welcome the children to the university as well as to introduce the Fund and the idea of collections.

The children looked at four panels taken from the calendars which were laid out on a cabinet. A cover panel also identified the calendar. The children were asked: "What kind of things do people collect?" and "What kind of things do you collect?". It was then explained to the children that the calendars were created by using pictures drawn by children 100 years ago, and that these very same calendars were then used in their school.

*Station Two - Hand puppet theatre*

The trail continued to the hand puppet theatre. There was a table and backdrop, both covered with a green and yellow paper suggestive of a forest. On the table there were five hand puppets (six with Spirimpolo) representing different animals: Big Lion, Small Lion, Wolf, Owl, Donkey. The children were introduced to Spirimpolo's friends who came from the forest, the sea, the mountains. The children took turns playing with the hand puppets, treating them with care, and created different voices and stories with the animals. In some groups there was a performance with a moral to the story, in others the story telling was representative of human exchanges in a town square.

### *Station Three - 3-D model of a Rinnovata school classroom*

The third station was a 3-D model of a classroom from Giuseppina Pizzigoni's Rinnovata School in Milan. This model was open on two sides to allow for interaction with the children. An indoor area and an outdoor area were represented. On one wall of the indoor area there was a blackboard and a paper figure representing Giuseppina Pizzigoni standing by it. The other wall had three large windows looking onto a green field outside. Wooden models of sheep decorated with real wool were placed in this field. The children observed the field outside the classroom and moved the sheep into and out of the classroom. They remarked how their school was different, and the lack of available outdoor spaces to play and learn.

### *Station Four - Bird whistles*

At this station there was a round table set with pictures of birds. Bird whistles were placed on these pictures. A nest with a bird made of polystyrene and feathers, and a wig made of bird feathers composed the table centrepiece. The sound of bird calls was played using Bluetooth and a hidden speaker in the bird nest. This unexpected sound caught the children's attention, and they moved from the 3-D model of the school and field to the station with bird whistles. They all stood around the table and tried to work out what the whistles were and how to use them. They then identified the sound of the bird calls produced by the whistles and the MP3 recordings and matched them with the pictures on the table.

### *Station Five - Lavender plants*

The fifth station took advantage of the architecture of a wall and a decorative basin filled with small stones. Two small pots of lavender plants were placed in this "stone garden". Hanging on the wall behind was a blown-up photograph of Giuseppina Pizzigoni in the garden outside the Rinnovata school. In this picture young children are using a wheelbarrow while others are tilling the soil. In fact, the schools of the Pizzigoni model involved the active use of outdoor classrooms and garden workshops in which the children learned gardening techniques and the first rudiments of agriculture. In addition, the children spent time together outside the classroom, exercising their motor skills and testing their socialization and personal autonomy regulation skills. At this station several plastic magnifying glasses were placed on the ledge of the small wall enclosing the stone garden. They were used to observe the lavender plants and the photograph on the wall, as well as to examine the treasures they found while digging up the stones.

### *Station Six – Geometric Shapes*

In the sixth and final indoor station, the children's attention was drawn to the glass cabinets exhibiting different geometrical shapes and children's works. The children were shown a puzzle and told its history. A girl from the Rinnovata School called Licia, drew a picture. This picture was copied onto a wooden base and transformed into a puzzle to be used by other children. The researchers recalled how the objects in the Pizzigoni School were created or designed by children. Brightly coloured geometric shapes were then placed on the floor: red triangle, yellow trapezium, green square, blue rectangle, white circle. The children were told that it was now their turn to build or create something. The children worked both individually and in groups, and the new objects, such as a hamburger, a bedroom and a very high tower, were all inspired solely by their creativity and imagination.

### *Closing circle*

Once the groups of children completed both indoor and outdoor trails, they went back to the refreshment area. There was a closing circle in this room together with Spirimpolo, the children, the teachers and the researchers. The children talked about what they had enjoyed most about the day, while others re-enacted a summary of the day with Spirimpolo and his friends (hand puppets and children). The children were also given a postcard depicting a photograph of the Rinnovata School to take home with them. It showed Giuseppina Pizzigoni sitting in a circle with her children in the garden, while others were tending to the vine plants. The interactive cycles of past and present, indoors and outdoors, all coming full circle within a pedagogical collection.

## **2. Looking up to the sky**

The indoor trail at the Pizzigoni Fund offers an engaging educational space on many levels. Nature is a constant element which permeates through the university walls, forever present at the Pizzigoni Fund and its precious collection of objects. It is a special place where the outside world and the classroom inside can, like leaves dancing in the wind, burst forth and explore different directions with grace and purpose. The trail moves through time and its narratives, which bear witness to a human intergenerational passage recalling the geometric shapes and cycles of Nature. The Experimental Method of Giuseppina Pizzigoni is very much rooted in the present. Hence, it is able to rekindle a relationship with the past and also envisage a future. This is not merely because the children are allowed to handle the objects of

the collection, but rather because there is an underlying and very much alive pedagogy which is experienced personally and directly through interaction with the world and observation with the senses. The station with the bird whistles offers an interesting example of the Experimental Method, moving from the forest to the fields, and then to the sky.

The bird calls immediately caught the attention and sparked the curiosity of the children, as they tried to identify from where the sounds were coming. They were smiling, tilting their heads, looking up and into the distance while gravitating as a group towards the round table. When the children saw the different whistles, they busily tried to understand what kind of objects they were and how they worked. Once they managed to produce different noises, they would then try to refine the sound by either bringing the whistle up close to their ear or by extending their forearm towards their peers, who in turn tilted their heads so that they too could hear. In those instances when they were concentrated, they continued to smile. Moments of loud enthusiasm alternated with listening silences. The tones of their voices and the language they used was polite, calm, serene. The children were coordinated in their movements, whether asking for or giving the whistles to each other. These movements went from side to side, to across the table in all directions. Even the shyest children interacted with others, no longer immobile or with a closed posture, they began to physically interact with the other objects on the table and the children around them. For example, a little girl put the wig of feathers on her head and turned to show her new cap to a friend. The wig was then passed on around the circle and the children admired each other. When they were finished with this game, the wig was placed back in the middle of the table. In another group, the whistle activities were interrupted by the accidental decapitation of the polystyrene bird. This was initially met with nervous giggles and jokes about death, and later resuscitation once the missing toothpick was found and the bird put back together. The activities at the station with bird whistles finished with a creative moment in which the children reproduced with their voices the sounds of the birds, in some cases also combined with movement. Interestingly there was a progression from bird sound, to call, to song as the learnings gained from listening to another were being integrated on a deeper level with listening to oneself, and therefore also allowing for that self to be freely expressed in the world and within the group.

## **Conclusion**

Giuseppina Pizzigoni's Experimental Method, inspired by her own experiences in nature (Pizzigoni, 1946) is all about movement. Moving into oneself and moving into the world through the senses. By observing the world, the children set out on a process of scientific investigation and try

to find answers to the questions What? How? Why? Their gazes mirror their experiences at the Fund. They shift vertically, from the birds in the sky to the lavender plant in the earth. There is also a horizontal gravitation, a proximity as the children share learnings with and acknowledge their peers. These different axes, offer multiple forms of interactions and possibilities which the object can only hint at or intimate. The true exploration extends beyond the object itself. In fact, in time the object will slowly lose its sheen, whereas life always propels forward in the search for sense and meaning by engaging in and with the world. By exploring the world, the child reclaims his or her humanity and belonging.

In much the same way, the bird whistle is not the dead collection item recalling the decapitated bird. It is the call, the awakening of the soul that wants to be liberated, where emotions and actions meet in the breath, in the production of sound and the most profound expression of the self. A breath that from the child's inner depths, like the whale from the bottom of the sea, rises to the surface and fuses together the elements of air, water, earth and fire, brings harmony to the self. The soul, like the eagle, flies. It yearns for the horizon. The collection objects at the Pizzigoni Fund were created for children by children and teachers from the past and handed down through the generations. As Sara Bertuzzi recounts, "for Giuseppina Pizzigoni, the rights of the child are to live in joy, in beauty and in that which is sacred. As much as that of being educated in a way that is respectful of their personality and liberty" (Chistolini, 2013, p.13). These objects remain relevant to this day because they have adapted to the changes in the world and more importantly because the child is always in the centre, in the heart. There is stability in life, there is stability in movement.

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