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# Preserving the memory

## For a biographical dictionary of education

Giorgio Chiosso, Roberto Sani

### 1. *The reasons of a project*

The history of education and pedagogy has been marked in Italy – as it happened, after all, also in other national realities – by a prevailing attention toward the political-institutional issues and the history of the pedagogical theories. This perspective – which has anyway produced important works that remain as milestones in the Italian cultural history – has been for a long time affected, on the one hand, by the ideological debates and by the consequent attempt to establish a hegemony on the plane of the educational and schooling policies (see the opposition between Catholics-lays, communists-anticommunists, etc.); on the other hand, it felt the effects of a sort of subordination of the pedagogy to the philosophical thought, with special regard to the duplex variant of Idealism and Marxism.

In this situation, it is absolutely normal the absence – or the minor development – of a real historical-documentary tradition characterised by the aim to put the search and methodical organisation of sources before the historiographical analysis. It is meaningful, for example, that in the Italian historical-educational patrimony, not only enterprises analogous or at least similar to the *Monumenta pedagogica Germaniae* are still lacking, but – more simply – even a significant production in the field of the collation of the legislative-normative sources is missing too.

In recent years only, also thanks to a new historiographical culture and more attentive toward the real school experiences and practices, as well as toward the real condition of childhood in its various aspects (private, public, recreational, literary and so on), the demand has appeared to implement sources that had been neglected for a long time (such as, for example, documents related to ministerial enquiries, school journals, textbooks and educational publishing in general, notebooks and school registers, regulations of school institutions, games and children's books, material regarding the so-called "rites of passages"),

sources that return to us the “live” history of the educational life and the vicissitudes of its protagonists. The attention toward this kind of source obviously is not an alternative to the analysis of theories and of political-school debates, but rather it offers an integrative perspective, and allowing a historical reconstruction which is more well-articulated, verified and compared with the reality.

Toward this direction move some significant researches, which have appeared in the last fifteen years. The series of books, first of all, must be mentioned – printed on initiative by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage – where important documents are published which are preserved at the Central State Archives, and which refer to various moments of the Italian school life. We should recall secondly some meaningful quantitative enquiries about the development of literacy process in some areas of Italy (see for example the researches by Marchesini, Toscani, Vigo, in the wake of the historiographical lesson by Cipolla and De Dainville). Finally, let it be permitted to us to mention the works – published by the research group which is involved in the project mentioned hereinafter – such as the repertories produced about the pedagogical and school periodical publishing (1997), and in consequence of the two TESEO projects regarding the school-educational publishing in the nineteenth century (2003); and in the early twentieth century (2008).

## *2. Enhancing the value of new sources*

These researches show the existence of a treasure house full of unpublished documentation, from which it clearly emerges that the modernisation processes, and the educational models which have made that modernisation put into reality, are fruit of a very complex and variegated series of elements, which not only descend simply from political choices (which however have played a crucial role), nor from theoretical and ideological approaches, as for a long time we have believed, maybe too much simplistically. Actually, the reality seems to be much more complex and articulated, and less easy to be brought back within pre-constituted categories.

Another element of relief must be taken into account, i.e. that in these new scenarios some figures stand out of educators, school men, children’s writers, pedagogists, who often have been non-appreciated or even neglected at all: but without their action and their passionate commitment to the cause of education, crucial processes for the history of our Country, such as the literacy and the mass-schooling processes, as well as the transmission of the national feeling, the acquisition of professional skills and so on, had never been possible.

On the base of this strong conviction, and relying on the results already obtained from the previous researches in the field of historical-educational publishing, now it seems that the moment is arrived to systematically organise, first of all, materials about the very numerous protagonists of our educational and

pedagogical history. The history of a nation is not only a history made of diplomatic, political or economical events, but it is also the history of a people and, in this case, the many stories of individuals who – pushed by deep ideals – operated in the sector of education, of schools, of children's and young people's culture. This memory is worthy of being preserved.

Coming to a more closely practical plane, everyone who works in the field of the historical-educational and historical-pedagogical research is perfectly aware that up-to-date tools are missing, which are able to offer the basic information about the major and minor leading figures of our history. The biographical reviews concerning pedagogists, school men, educators and writers for children, which are available to this day, are partial enough and inserted inside encyclopaedic works, or included in the still unfinished *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Biographical Dictionary of Italians). In other, more specific, cases, the existing tools seem to be very out-of-date. The latest (and unique) sample of a biographical dictionary of pedagogists and educators, moreover incomplete and sometimes inaccurate, dates back to the late 1930's: it is the case of the review *Pedagogisti e educatori* (Pedagogists and Educators) edited by Ernesto Codignola. Relatively scarce are also the biographical items inside the more recent *Enciclopedia pedagogica* (Pedagogical Encyclopaedia) and especially regarding leading figures at a national level.

Hence, the idea to give birth to a *Dizionario biografico dell'educazione* (Biographical Dictionary of Education), conceived and arranged by a group of scholars from various universities (Turin, Genoa, Milan-Catholic, Verona, Macerata, L'Aquila, Campobasso, Roma III, Napoli "Federico II" and Napoli Suor Orsola, Catania), who have been working on this enterprise, together with many researchers, for the last two years.

The main aims of the *Dizionario biografico dell'educazione* are:

- to make a census of educators, pedagogists, school men and children's writers who, at diverse levels, with diverse responsibilities and working in very different areas, operated in school and educational field, i.e. by opening educational institutions (kindergartens, houses for poor and abandoned young people or for prisoner minors, primary schools, workers' schools, schools for deaf-mutes, for handicapped, and so on); by promoting children's and adults' literacy through pedagogical and political debates; by producing didactical material and readings specifically aimed at subjects in developmental age; by animating the reality of young people through physical education, sport, juvenile associations;
- to restore the collective memory with the extraordinary richness of men and women who devoted themselves in various areas of education and writings for children: not only the names of well-known scholars, or the most famous writers, but also and especially all those protagonists of many local events, who contributed all the same to developing and promoting the very history of Italian education.

### 3. *A project which is already under way*

The project – co-ordinated by professors Giorgio Chiosso (University of Turin) and Roberto Sani (University of Macerata) – is already in advanced stage of building. In particular the following phases have already been achieved:

1) arrangement of a database, gathering around 2,300 names, but still to be implemented (a total amount of around 2,500 biographies is expected). The database has been drawn up by using five kinds of main sources: a) general and special, or local, biographical encyclopaedias and dictionaries; b) general and special histories of education, of school and welfare institutions, and histories of children's literature; c) principal bibliographical repertories of authors of pedagogical and educational works, as well as authors of works for children; d) archival documentation, from central repositories (Central State Archive) as well as from local archives (decentralised State Archives, Municipal Archives, and so on); e) obituaries which have been published on school- and pedagogical periodical publishing;

2) arranging a standard descriptive architecture for each biographical item, on the base of the following essential identification data: year of birth/death, region of provenance (and/or the region/regions where the individual worked), bibliographic references, and a summary biographical sketch of descriptive nature;

3) building of research groups at regional/interregional level, and enlisting of collaborators who are able to draw up, in a transversal way, that is groups of figures having in common homogeneous interests and/or experiences (such as educators of deaf-mutes, or people working in the field of physical education and sport, educators belonging to single religious Congregations, leading figures in the world of juvenile associations, etc.);

4) assigning of the already selected biographical items (about 1,250) to single research groups and to single collaborators. Of these biographies, around 700 have already been completed, and the remaining are under completion.

The publishing of the *Dictionary* is expected within the year 2011, and it is foreseen as a tangible contribution, by the world of Italian education and pedagogy, to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the national Unification.

Giorgio Chiosso  
Department of Education  
University of Turin (Italy)  
g.chiosso@unito.it

Roberto Sani  
Department of Education  
University of Macerata (Italy)  
sani@unimc.it