

# Espacios y patrimonio histórico-educativo

Paulí Davila y Luis M<sup>a</sup> Naya  
(Coordinadores)



# **ESPACIOS Y PATRIMONIO HISTÓRICO-EDUCATIVO**

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Paulí Dávila y Luis M<sup>a</sup> Naya (Coordinadores)

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# **BETWEEN THE DESKS OF THE ITALIAN RURAL SCHOOLS IN THE FIRST HALF OF XX CENTURY. THE TEACHERS' VOICE IN SCHOOL LIFE STORIES**

Michelina D'ALESSIO  
Università degli Studi della Basilicata  
Potenza  
Italy

## **Introduction**

Following the survey opened by the post-80s educational-historical research (Julia, 1996; Viñao, Casenave, 2010) and in reply to the “need of everyday reality” (Covato, 2016) evoked to interpret the educational past, this contribution aims at revealing sources that can be relevant for the analysis of early XX century rural schools in Italy. Once the topic has been defined, it will be useful to illustrate in details the foundations of this work, the selection modalities of the sources, and the guidelines along which the school life stories will be narrated, by chasing the voices of the country teachers (Raicich, 2005)<sup>1</sup>.

The historiographical framework of this study has a double implication: the attention of the female mark of the teachers' writings and the consideration for the typology of the educational spaces where the rural teacher “fought her battle on an outpost of civilization, in the countryside, where prejudice and illiteracy were stronger, alone against a hostile environment” (Raicich, 2005, 31). The observation of the everyday school life between the desks (D'Alessio, 2011), the educational microspace par excellence, collects hereby the developments of the disciplinary organization, on the level of the renovation that will interest school life, in its various local situations.

The attention that shifted from the history of school culture to the educational material culture (Meda, 2011), is further pushed towards the analysis of the social aspects that day by day have emerged from the school walls. Therefore, an access key to a past time and space is given by a new knowledge tool represented by a set

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1 Raicich focused the delays of the “historiographical dignity” acknowledged to the figure of the primary school teacher, pointing out the first works concerning the female education at the end of the 80s, by underlining how, besides the contributions on local situations, a rich bundle of information can be found in important documentary funds kept at the State Central Archive. See COVATO, SORGE, 1994. After many years the calling has been only partly received by the researchers.



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of writings of the Italian rural teachers, dating back to the period ranging from the first decade all through the first half of the XX century.

The first part of this study aims at defining the typology of the source, in its time and historical-educational framework.

The writings found so far, collected in a representative sample that is likely to be further integrated in future, have the form of descriptions, stories, complaints, and always combine the various points of view of the authors. The viewpoint shift from a dimension of pure observation - that helps to reconstruct the rural educational settings - to a more subjective one, represented by the narration of the pupils' life events; it furthermore assumes connotations of criticism and protest and, in other cases, it appears as the literary elaboration of concrete life facts.

"School memories" assume therefore a multiplicity of connotations, that emerge from their very titles - that will be dealt with shortly, halfway between observation and representation of the school relations and memories of the past: not only new faces emerge (Chiosso, Sani, 2013) in the form of profiles of protagonists so far neglected (Zago, 2016), but also the look on collective educational experiences, for too long considered marginal in relation to the general history.

Such writings are part of a specific genre of the minor school literature, that of the "teachers' school writings" (D'Alessio, 2015), which aims at exploring diverse situations that are relevant to the educational history of our Country. Such history has been for a long time considered homogeneous in the historiographical approach of the past generation scholars; afterwards, a conception of school that was purely national - and examined through political/institutional or social/economic approaches -, has been dismantled in favor of a more pluralistic approach that took into account not only regional, but also territorial and even rural contexts. The current research trend, in fact, gives particular attention to a national school history made of plural and diverse school stories. In this respect, the rural teachers' writings are relevant to the attention given to the rural dimension of the alphabetization processes of Unified Italy. The case studies reveal a manifold school texture in the Post-unification Italy, having overcome the identification between legal school and real school, and focus on the report, representation and narration of diversified local school situations.

To sum up, on a methodological level, we attempt at "dislocating" the attention around more than just one place:

1. *a well identified historiographical place*, made by the texts of a female school literature to valorize as a specific thread of the national school history, that includes the teachers' professional writings (half way between the results of a literary attitude and work evidences);
2. *the material places distant from the big urban centers*, namely the rural learning places, with a particular focus on the school spaces in the small rural centers, on the poor conditions of village classrooms (not only in Southern Italy), the classes, the reprimands, the cleaning conditions, the relationships with families, the educational and, with the Fascism, propagandistic mission;
3. *the places of the Country's educational memories*, linked to the daily teaching practices of country teachers.

# 1.

## **Writings from Italy of distant schools: the pen of rural teachers**

Our study starts from the description of the texts found, as evidences of the school processes that were taking place in rural and mountain spaces. In particular, some writings take us between the desks of rural schools: the end of the year reports, the articles found in the school press, the critical essays on the “educational mission” in those environments, life narrations, readers, all representing the tiles of a mosaic on personal and professional experiences taking place in the most remote realities of the Country.

The writings express the various forms of the educational engagement that teachers carried out by means of multiple tools ranging from the reading books to the stories, the school manuals, the educational and recreational journals (Chiosso, 1992, 1997), the autobiographical memories, that witness the process of a gradual feminization of the teaching profession (Ascenzi, 2012; Marazzi, 2015). Found for a long time in the literary pages, the figure of the female elementary school teacher has been transferred into more concrete existential and professional connotations (Soldani, 1993) and to a more tangible profile - education, career, teaching activity (Porciani, Covato, Ascenzi), in the national educational life (Ghizzoni, Sani, Tedde et al.).

On such a thread of female writing we can place the texts dating back to the first 40 years of the XX century. Their titles can be on one hand the key to interpret the writing intent of the teacher or sometimes school inspector (it is the case of Clelia Allorio); on the other hand, they allow to follow the ruralization process pursued by the Fascist regime, with respect to the tasks assigned in the peasants’ school (Montecchi, 2015). A very relevant component concerns the identification of the geographic origin of such writings, by recording a plurality of places ranging from the North all through Sicily, but all of them revealing a common tract in the teaching methods used in rural and mountain schools.

Generally, we can notice how such writings respond to a type of short and rather controlled narration, due to the teachers’ concern for the quality judgement of their writings, which oscillate between the adoption of the late XIX century literary model, represented by a narrative based on the realistic representation, and the evocation of a single moment of individual experience, represented by the short story and its detailed descriptions, and by articles and essays appearing in journals. We will hereby examine some of the texts found, selected as samples of such expressive styles and their educational purposes.

It will be useful to start from a few writings, mainly descriptive, of the single small rural school whose image is given to us by the “personal direct knowledge of my little pupils” (Bragalenti, 1913) with their “long, long pants, the tight, short jackets all buttoned-up and the dirty little boots” , with a rather literary tone of “impressions and sketches” of the class, accompanied by the smile of the teacher to the pupils that shows through the pages. Even on the pedagogic and school journals we can find

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articles and original memories. For example, in the journal "La Tecnica scolastica" ("The School Technique") we can find an editorial dedicated to "the voice of a young country teacher", that of Amalia Paluffo in a description of her pupils: their "rough, simple, touching affection is shown in sometimes funny ways and through various gifts. On my desk there are often bundles of flowers, dead birdies, butterflies, twines, buttons, sucked-up candies, fruits: all tributes that I receive every morning from my pupils when they come by my desk to say hello" (Paluffo, 1923). The teacher goes further in the description of the class, by focusing issues such as the discipline, the attendance level of the rural pupils, the long walking distance to the school, the lack of difficulty in keeping the discipline, because "kids are shy: it takes a strict look to bring them back in the ranks", the difficulties connected to the study and the relative outcomes. An important issue that Paluffo addresses is that of reprimands. The teacher admits that "you don't know how to give reprimands: the bad mark does not matter, nor the failure: almost all of them repeat the same grade for 2-3 times with great indifference". Families are not interested in school matters and having the pupils love the school is all teacher's business.

Other reports seem more relaxed. The narration of a visit to a Sicilian rural school (Brunno, 1914) gives an accurate portrait of a country teacher and of the educational and hygienic propaganda carried out in the villages, by means of Sunday conferences, the establishment of an itinerant library, the promotion of a feeling of mutuality between the pupils, the open-air classes, the use of alphabet and quinine against illiteracy and diseases, the body care, the manual little works, with the aim to improve "the method and to increase the school's benefits" by means of "study and experience" .

Another reflection, markedly literary, comes from a teacher about the tasks of rural schools after WWI, when "the issues and needs of our nation are so serious to make veins and wrists shake, and every citizen's duty is severe, hard: the schools' task is equally hard, necessary, and noble" for the "titanic work of social reconstruction and pacification". In such a framework the "humble country teacher" will find "in and out of the classroom, [...] in her bounty and her faith in all human ideals, the strength to carry out this mission with dignity" in the "passion for doing the great deeds" (Margadonna, 1914) that a woman is supposed to do, by exercising an "enormous civil and moral duty". It is furthermore reported how "the woman who works in the field, for many obvious and painful reasons, is completely unprepared" to a lower intellectual level, even for the "credulity and mysticism that only those who live in our rural populations can testify". The teacher concludes by saying that she has spoken "with very ordinary words" with "a modest voice and noble intents" hoping that these "very modest pages might persuade these noble souls that a humble rural teachers follows them with sympathy and devotion" in the "daily work": the general tome is nonetheless affected by the rhetoric of school's images and definitions "in the wonderful rise of our Nation in this century", when "the noble avant-garde will be the light bearer in this dark walk towards the eternal light of science and wisdom".

A leaflet dense with observation about the multi-class rural school was written by the teacher Pellegrina Marchi-Matteucci, who illustrates its main deficiencies and the

teacher's field of action (Marchi-Matteucci, 1920). The teacher claims that, in order to absolve to its mission, the school needs "a favorable environment where to carry out all the activities that lead to the achievement of the school purpose". Thereby she observes that "too many of our schools are in a miserable, shameful state, especially in small centers". The leaflet therefore addresses the legislative dispositions that have interested the reformation of the multi-class school ever since the Credaro Law, when "an experience of about 70 years has taught us that the Townships [...] don't know and cannot duly manage schools", often reduced to "poor buildings, without any supply, or furniture, or careful surveillance". It is therefore required the "joint intervention" of the society and the families. In particular, Marchi-Matteucci underlines the necessity for the teacher to acknowledge the nobleness of her mission, especially with respect to the "education of civilians and soldiers to the Country", but demands proper means and suitable spaces where to carry out her work, well knowing how "the education of children depend on the physical and moral environment they live in".

The pages written by Antonietta Di Napoli are a sample of the teachers' beliefs with regard to the role of Fascism, that, in the 30s, "gave official rise to the rural school and to the legislators' interest to its fate" (Di Napoli, 1940). This short leaflet talks about the relationship between rural school and State that, in the teacher's opinion, was effectively synthesized by the Opera Balilla after 1935-36, with a whole "apparatus of assistential and integrative works aware of the new concepts of life and school". It is furthermore significant the reference to the teaching activities aimed at professional training, carried out in the professional female schools. It is underlined how the Fascist culture especially permeated rural realities, where the spirit of revolution and the ethical sense of the State penetrated the consciences with permanent pedagogic effects". The next step deals with the passage of rural school's jurisdiction onto the Minister of National Education, in other words the State, until the emanation of Minister Bottai Decree which disciplined the structure of rural primary schools, by specifying their functions and objectives.

The teacher points out that the new Italian rural life is "inspired to the political and economic regulations of the fascism" and to the aim of making the rural people proud of their own status as country people, "intended as a noble title and not as a mark of inferiority". The reflection also gives account of the new address based on the "environmental adaptation, professional preparation, in-depth analysis of the social value in relation to the value of the rural element. The task of the school and the teachers is to keep the love of the rural people for their life and work alive. Afterwards, the teacher suggests a few modalities for drawing both practical and scientific/educational teachings from the seasons and other natural phenomena. To the purposes of a specific agrarian education, in rural schools there is little field where to experiment new cultivations, useful to the fulfillment of an agrarian autocracy. The teacher closes her report with a look on the educational, professional and practical character of the new rural school, based on which the Fascist rural school is no longer "in subordinate position, but is on the same level as the city school in its complex set of educational activities". Di Napoli's pages illustrate effectively the work of the country teachers in the ruralisation process of the

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schools in the 1940s, emphasizing the goodness of their action “for the spiritual well-being of the rural workers”, in function of the Regime propaganda.

The considerations expressed so far address the real conditions of rural schools, as they emerge from the reports, the essays, the narrations and the articles that are part of our survey.

## **2.**

### **The school in small rural centers**

In the spaces located in small rural centers, the educational delay is mostly attributed to the “unhealthy and unseemly premises” where schools were located, in overcrowded and not hygienic classrooms, in small desks where children squeeze in, often with a brazier where to keep their cold feet warm, with no light nor air. Many teachers claim that it is impossible to educate a child “when he is closed up for hours and hours in small, indecorous, overcrowded environment, with no courtyards or gardens, where after an hour the air is unbreathable and the narrowness of the space does not allow to stretch” (Marchi-Matteucci, 1920) . A specific interest thread is therefore the one connected to the evolution of the school construction from the unification of the school system to the developments of the historical Left and even more of the Giolitti age, that witnessed a gradual allocation of funding for the construction of schools, especially primary schools, straight to the Fascist era (Viola, 2015).

At this respect, it is worth reminding the work carried out by the Fascist “Opera” against the illiteracy during the Fascist age, especially the seven-years of activity carried out by the National Association for the Interests of Southern Italy (ANIMI) in the interest of rural schools (D’Alessio, 2015). One of the practical means adopted to fight illiteracy in rural populations was the educational and sanitary propaganda carried out through the rural teachers, specifically trained for the purpose (e.g., in Maratea, Southern Italy, in 1924 and in 1926). In the framework of the renovation of rural didactics, lies the diffusion of culture and the increase of the educational works in Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia. Here, following the statements of Salvemini and Isnardi (Isnardi, 1920), the intellectual reflection considers that “with reference to school as well as to the national economics, there are two distinct Italy’s, not equally supported by the State”; some other claim that “even more evident and unfair is the contrast between the rich, industrial urban Italy and the destitute, rural peasants’ Italy” (Latronico, 1921). The rural teachers’ writings confirm this substantial educational disparity between the two Italy’s, not so much in the geographical division North/South, but in terms of urban versus rural schools. This is the foundation of the statement concerning the gap between “two societies, between the Italy of rural school and that of city schools” (Raich, 2005, 69) .

The teachers’ narrations give an idea of their social and cultural relevance, especially in rural environments: the sanitary propaganda goes through the influence

that teachers had on families, which also had beneficial effects on the attendance level of the pupils; mothers were persuaded to have bigger care for their children's hygiene and to respect the school itself. From the report given by the regional Director of the "Opera" in Basilicata between 1921 and 1928, we can draw the considerations exposed by the rural teacher of Lolla, province of Potenza, entirely built by the ANIMI, who recalls the "fight against the laziness and superstitious ignorance of the pupils' families, who, accustomed to live in filthy and unhealthy environments, consider cleaning a privilege for civil people". In the countryside, indeed, "where people still believe blindly in the mysterious virtues of the miraculous recipes of medicine women or witches, the achievement of a change in mentality [...] demonstrates the usefulness of the teachers' propaganda in the sanitary field" (Viola, 1925). A particularly emphasized aspects is the belief that physical conditions influence moral conditions because "there is more connection than it is thought between physical and moral cleanliness" (Marchi-Matteucci, 1920). The initiative of the rural teacher will be therefore addressed in such a direction that "the child finds in school the highest possible number of elements of physical well-being, intellectual, moral and esthetic elevation. He gets no cleaning at home? Not for this reason he will have to be mortified at school [...] We need to provide him with water and soap, and accustom him to cleaning . It is possible that such practice will be transferred to his family, by imitation". It appears evident how the rural teacher is not only called to a didactic mission; hence, the need for a true "school sociability" that stems from the "equality of hygienic conditions", considering how "cleanliness, which is highly moralizing, has been thus far neglected". From an extract, the teacher "who demands short hair, clean heads, faces and hands, trimmed fingernails, decent clothing appears as one who exerts an action of arbitrary tyranny"; on the contrary, teachers need to be supported in their "moralization work" towards the adoption of "healthy habits".

The hygienic propaganda, which was aimed at raising awareness about the sanitary deficiencies and the superstitions that had been already addressed by "the school legislator at the end of the 1800s", became, from the beginning of the XX century, so "pervading to become transversal". Teachings, regulations, prohibitions and controls can be found in the paragraphs dealing with the moral and civil education, calligraphy, 'lessons of things', natural and physical sciences, home economics and physical education. Such prescriptions were detailed and careful to every aspect of the children's lives, from the correct sitting posture, the preferable writing style, the recommendations on how to carry the books, the choice of schoolbooks, the protection modalities from infectious diseases, the most suitable clothing to avoid deformations and lungs diseases" (Targhetta, 2010). In addition to these themes, are furthermore reported the conditions of the "school buildings", often located in hovels and stables, and of the school furniture "built half a century ago, with dirty desks, not sufficient to sit all the students" and the "deficiency of teaching supplies".

In addition to these records, that contribute to reflect on the educational physical places as the scenes of a slow process of illiteracy erosion in the countryside, the other element of interest that can be drawn from the female teachers' writings deals with the memory of the educational models and the everyday reality in rural places.

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### 3.

#### **The teaching life between the desks of the rural school: the teachers' educational memory**

Within the range of the memorial and literary activity (Bini, 1981) carried out by the teachers of Unified Italy, we can place some of the short works discovered about the specific theme of school memories concerning rural spaces. Actually, it is worth giving account, besides a more marked literary vein generally deriving from the "teachers' expressive drive" (Raicich, 2005), to a conscious professional mark.

In particular, the last part of the survey aims at revealing a few passages that are representative of an approach that is markedly conscious of an "educational mission" in rural places. The teachers show not only a descriptive ability - although useful in the documentation of the educational reality in a rural school - but also pedagogical ones.

Female rural teachers have long been confined into a collective imaginary where they were stereotyped as lonely, poorly prepared, inactive, spinsters; only recently they have been reevaluated thanks to studies, in some cases also films; reports, articles, short leaflets or long essays show the ability of the teachers to voice their own beliefs about the teaching regulation in country schools. As a matter of fact, a few teachers show some temperament in the exposition of their disapproval of what it is considered "a true pedagogical monstrosity, and the wish that every teacher might have no more than one class and no more than fifty pupils". The criticism is addressed towards the multi-class rural school, where a teacher has three classes, all of them crowded (sometimes with even 170 pupils), three teaching programs to carry out in an unfriendly school and family environment. Some of the teachers show a good level of competence not only about legislation, but also about the pedagogy and the teaching structure of the rural school (Liotta, 1921). They are able, for example, also to understand the limits of special interventions such as the Law n. 383 of 15 July 1906, that had not sorted out the financial issues of the 20.000 rural schools of that time, with 3 classes of about 70 pupils, in spite of the progresses deriving from the opening of new State-founded rural schools, the transformation from optional into compulsory, and the doubling of overcrowded classes. But the greatest polemic addresses the so-called "issue of internal hybrid teaching", that reflected the premonitions of a group of pedagogues that had anticipated the failure of the single 3-class rural school with an only teacher and an only timetable. They considered a "pedagogic contradiction" the fact that "said schools have three classes conducted at one time by the same teacher, who carries out simultaneously three different programs only to remain with a fistful of flies" (Liotta). In their opinion, "the 3-class rural school, rather than educational, is simply fatal!" Likewise, the teachers prove to know very well many of the remedies imposed by the so-called "adaptation didactics", followed by the article 33 of the Credaro Law in 1911, which provided for the rearrangement of the multi-class rural school's structure according to sections, hoping in the resolution of the problem.

The teachers' educational memories become more intense and full of information when they report close aspects of the daily teaching practice.

The belief in the mission of the rural school and its fight against the illiteracy, mostly moral, emerges from many sides, in close connection with the work of the rural teachers in a Country where “more than one third of the total population lived in rural places”: the teachers are called to the duty of using all their pedagogical skills and techniques in the contribution to the great work of national regeneration and celebration of the human spirit”. The long path towards the recognition of the equal pay between rural and town school teachers is well known (Barausse, 2002); moreover, it was exactly the saturation of the better paid city posts that caused the destination towards rural schools for country or mountain female teachers.

The writings show a good level of expertise that goes beyond the mere literary ambitions of teachers and testifies their adherence to everyday life and people’s interests; this derives from a professionalizing path not always linear or easy that is reflected in the ability of creating a “school conscience [...] in our rural population” making school “the center of the civil life” (Nencini, 1920) in small villages or even small clusters of farm houses.

The awareness of their educational tasks is often supported by the ability to suggest concrete realization paths: the book to bring into farm houses; the little school library; a little school museum organized by the teacher; the initiative of the private correspondence followed by the teacher aimed at conquering the people’s trust; the subscription to the agrarian journal; the chats with the pupils’ families; the diffusion of means of practical utility, like “personal, house and public hygiene”.

The main task of the teachers is commonly addressed to the construction of a national sentiment and to the “moral and social elevation of those populations”, since in most part of the rural people the school sentiment is still not developed, “as they are [...] still slave of the physical need, ignorance, superstition and misery”.

Hence the belief in the role of the true educator who has to contribute to the gradual civilization of the people around him, by exercising a “true apostleship”.

## **Conclusions**

The present study has drawn from a collection of teacher’s writings published in about 40 years of XX century national history, with the aim to acquire useful hints along the research paths traced by the historiographical transformation of the educational sector of the past decades. Its purposes are: to give value to some unpublished sources specifically attributable to female writing, as places of historiographical interest; to recompose the profiles and experiences of some protagonists of the educational history that still need to be acknowledged by the official history, often careless towards those who have worked in distant places from the bigger centers of culture; to reconstruct the teaching daily life in the rural educational spaces, and to relocate the facts narrated by the rural teachers in the very places of their “first assignment” (this is the title of the italian film directed by Giorgia Cecere, 2011), where the processes of a still unknown society were developing.

Its final purpose is to acknowledge the role of the teachers’ writings in the official historical survey.



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