

The «New School» of Basilicata in Mid-twentieth Century. Arturo Arcomano's Contribution for a Different Education in Southern Italy

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Abstract: This article falls within a branch of studies aimed at highlighting the experiences of some neglected protagonists of Italian education through their professional writings. Indeed, school journals and records give an insight into the transformations that the teaching profession and school culture have undergone throughout the years. From such a historiographical perspective, this contribution highlights the «new school» experiment carried out by the teacher Arturo Arcomano (1927-2007) in a small town in Basilicata, a region of Southern Italy, in the mid-twentieth century. By looking at the material held in the private archive of this educator, scholar, professor and politician, particularly his school journals, as well as at the notebooks and school papers produced by his pupils, we can get a sense of the «new life» breathed through the school of Roccanova, where Arcomano applied the teaching methodologies that were becoming popular in those years, like the use of free writing and Freinet's printing press at school. The Arcomano case study enables us to understand both the resistance and the push towards this experimentation, which was based on a «different» pedagogical culture, and action intended to fit the environmental context. The use of the sources that can be found in Arcomano's personal archive on the one hand enables us to define the human and professional profile of the teacher, and on the other, contributes to the reconstruction of the renovation process that affected education in Southern Italy in the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: history of education; teaching methods; primary school; journal writing; school renewal.

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1. Introduction¹

After about 80 years from the Prefect Delorenzo's report, in 1876, on the quality of primary school teachers in the province of Potenza, where he claimed he had found «very few excellent teachers, a few good teachers, many of them just unsuitable or mediocre, and some of them even neglectful of methodologies and reluctant to the use of the common national language» (Lerra, 1993, p. 232), in that «eternally illiterate land» like Basilicata was considered, we can find the epigones of the first teaching era after the unification of Italy. Then came the experience of Arturo Arcomano, who called himself a «first time teacher» after the initial «alienation» that he felt at the beginning of his teaching career, in the 1950s. This is what he wrote about himself: «When I received a teaching assignment for the first time, the first grade of a primary school in one of those small towns in Basilicata, in 1946, I did not know where to start from» (Arcomano, 1959, p. 24).

Starting from a reflection on school heritage, both in its material and documentary value, this article develops further some previous studies on the teaching experiences of little-known educators from the past in southern Italy (Chiosso & Sani, 2013; Zago, 2016). The study focuses on the evolution of the teaching profession by means of some documentary sources kept at several documentation centers and school museums in Southern Italy.

The self-testimonies given by the teachers themselves become particularly relevant in this process of reconstruction of each individual and professional path (Chiosso, 2007; Covato, 1996; Di Pol, 2003, Ghizzoni, 2003; Miceli, 2013): journals and school reports give a valuable framework of teachers' lives and teaching methodologies. The teachers' reports in the school of Montalbano Jonico, in the province of Matera, Basilicata, in the 1930s (D'Alessio, 2014); the journal of the teacher T.S. on the «life of the 28» in the fascist female high school of Home Economics in the 1940s (D'Alessio, 2017b); the journals of the teacher Giuseppe Ialenti dating back to early XX century in Molise (D'Alessio, 2017a) provide the historiographical framework (D'Ascenzo, 2018) where to place the experience of the teacher Arturo Arcomano.

The selected sources are relevant as research and study resources for the significant heuristic potential that they represent in the field of the educational experience. In fact, besides the mere operation of classification of the teachers' writings as tangible documentary resources, we need to highlight these documents in their specific historical-educational value, according to the idea that the «material history is able to reveal the educational experience» (Escolano, 2017, p. 3). Such writings, often defined as «hybrid» for their mid-position between personal and professional, spontaneity and imposition (D'Alessio, 2014), are part of a specific branch of the historical-educational heritage: they are, at the same time, tangible and intangible testimonies of school life, as they provide a reflection on both concrete experience and culture of education, in a specific territorial setting, which is Southern

¹ List of abbreviations: Archivio Personale di Arturo Arcomano (Personal Archive of Arturo Arcomano) (APAA); Collezione Privata di Anna Arcomano (Private Collection of Anna Arcomano) (CPAA); Series (S.), folder (f.), file (f.).

Italy at the beginning of Italian Republic. By crossing the thin historiographical line between memories and texts, which, by definition, appear divergent from each other, we need to point out, instead, how journals offer a more comprehensive view on teachers' daily professional practices².

They are, in fact, the story of what was happening among the school desks, which acquires its proper relevance on three important levels: the socio-cultural level, as it reveals the framework of a specific time and space of our national history; the pedagogical level, as it provides information on the teaching practices; the educational level, as it presents all the stages of the gradual transformation of the traditional school cultures. This «didactic heritage» allows to retrace important elements such as: the teachers' mentality and culture; the courses' contents; the tensions between the pedagogic theories and the ministerial directions; all the knowledge and values promoted by the single learning disciplines; the professional and behavioural profiles of the teachers during their classroom practice; the way in which the national school procedures were articulated in each single territorial context; the quality and effects of teaching (D'Alessio, 2014).

This article aims at offering some partial results of the survey deriving from the exploration and interrogation of the school journals kept in Arturo Arcomano's private archives, useful to focus a specific educational setting and timeframe, the twentieth century in Basilicata, thanks to the valuable professional writings of this protagonist of the past school life, regarded as a promoter of the «new school». It is therefore proposed a focus on the experience of a «different school», such as the one introduced in Southern Italy in the timeframe between the end of Fascism and the dawn of democracy in the Country. The case study on teacher Arcomano reveals all the resistances and pushes related to the accomplishment of this innovative experiment, based on alternative pedagogic culture and actions, and entirely fitting its environmental framework, namely Southern Italy in the 1950s, and specifically Basilicata.

2. The experience of a «different school» in Arcomano's professional writings

Arturo Arcomano was born in Roccanova, province of Potenza, on 6 March 1927 and died in August 2007 in Rome. In 1938, he left his village and managed to continue his education thanks to a scholarship for war orphans in the board school of Tolmino, at that time province of Gorizia. He returned to Basilicata immediately after the war. His primary school teaching career starts in 1946 in the towns of Castronuovo, Laurenzana and Spadarea, all province of Potenza, after having obtained his magisterial license. He became tenured teacher in Roccanova in the school year 1949/1950. In 1954, he graduated at the School of Education in Salerno. The years that are considered to be the most prolific in Arcomano's teaching career, in terms of political and social commitment, human and professional growth, are

² Professional journals are part of those «self-referential writings» identified by Vinao Frago (2002, 2011), which also include autobiographies and memoirs referring to the teaching activity.

those between 1946 and 1960 when he was a primary school teacher, right before becoming a professor at the University «L'Orientale» in Naples.

Arcomano's daily working life can be reconstructed thanks to a bulk of documents stored in the archive kept by his heirs. In fact, after his death, his family started to gather and inventory the documents kept by Arcomano, that have been later considered of remarkable historical value by the Archival Superintendence of Latium. The archive is dislocated between Arcomano's childhood home in Roccanova and his house in Rome, and particularly relevant is the fund that stores the teacher's journals and the notebooks and school papers produced by his pupils. The archive is made of 276 files collected in 194 folders, and it is divided into 4 series: – series I: «Documentation transferred from Roccanova to Rome»; – series II: «Roccanova»; – series III: «Documentation transferred from Naples to Roccanova»; – series IV: «Rome» (Rapari, 2016).

The documents that have been found to be more relevant are those related to the activities of the Cooperative of School Printing (hereinafter referred to as CTS), specifically, some writings prepared for the Congress of June 1952 and some circulars of 8 September and 10 October 1952, and of the Movement of Cooperative Education (hereinafter referred to as MCE³), namely a few notes on school, education and «popular culture»; also, a draft on «The printing press at school in Southern Italy and the school newspaper»⁴. The files concerning the activity of the teacher in the school of Roccanova, regarded as a «center for innovation in education», in the decade between 1951 and 1961, are also relevant. The file n.10 contains in particular 9 journals with Arcomano's lessons and students' records⁵; files n. 11 and 12 contain papers by other teachers and the papers written by Arcomano's pupils⁶. In addition, over 70 notebooks belonging to the pupils dating back to the years 1954-1959, other writings and drawings⁷, that together make significant evidences of children's school productions⁸ (D'Alessio, 2010). Other two files (n. 16 and 23) cover the professional correspondence of Arcomano⁹ and his collaboration to some reviews, such as «Cooperazione educativa (*Educational cooperation*)» and «Riforma della scuola (*School reformation*)»¹⁰ and are related to the pedagogical experiment of the printing press. The file r16 of Roccanova also conserves 11 bulletins of the CTS written between 1952 and 1956, in addition to some letters received by other members of the MCE¹¹. In this specific container, we can also find the draft of a work

³ *Attività della CTS*, in APAA, S I, f. A1, f. 7.

⁴ *Attività della MCE*, in APAA, S I, f. A1, f. 8.

⁵ *Diari delle lezioni (1951-1961)*, in APAA, S I, f. A1, f. 10.

⁶ *Giornalini realizzati da altri insegnanti e alunni fra Roccanova, Pesaro, Fano, Roma, Firenze, Arezzo, Gravina (BA), (1952-1973)*, in APAA, Serie I, . A1, f. 11; *Giornalini realizzati dagli alunni di Arcomano (1952-1959)*, in APAA, S I, f. A1, f. 12.

⁷ *Elaborati degli alunni di Arcomano*, in APAA, S.I, f. A4, f. 15.

⁸ *Quaderni degli alunni di Arcomano (1954-1957)*, in APAA, f. A4, f. 13; *Quaderni degli alunni di Arcomano (1954-1959)*, in APAA, S.I, f. A4, f. 14.

⁹ *Corrispondenza professionale*, in APAA, S.I, f. A4, f. 16.

¹⁰ *Collaborazione con giornali e riviste*, in APAA, S.I,f. A7, f. 23.

¹¹ *Movimento di cooperazione educativa-MCE (1956-1959)*, in APAA, S. II, f. R1, f. r16.

that would be later used partially for publication (a few excerpts can be found on the volume «Scuola e società nel Mezzogiorno», 1963) on «Freinet techniques and the Southern issue». One last file worth mentioning is the one called «The school seen by the pupils», which contains the class journals of a fifth grade in Roccanova in 1958-59¹².

This article will analyze Arcomano's personal and professional journal as representative of the first stage of his career as a school innovator in Southern Italy. It is in Roccanova that Arcomano experienced, in five years, the new teaching methodologies of the time, thus turning the little town into a «living school» model in Southern Italy. In 1956, he wrote: «A school like Roccanova's must leave the uncertain, the vague, the superstition, for a new, concrete, scientific and human vision, so to contribute [...] to the evolution of society in Southern Italy» (Arcomano, 1956a).

The incessant work of this young teacher – close to the progressive ideas of socialism which saw in education the true means of redemption of the masses – made him go past the isolation of the Southern region where he operated. With a solid spirit of initiative and civil commitment he started a correspondence with many interlocutors, who would later become his friends and associates, and with whom he would found, in 1951, the already mentioned Cooperative of School Printing (Rizzi, 2017). Following this active collaboration, Arcomano, together with other personalities such as Giuseppe Tamagnini (Bergomi, 2018), Aldo Pettini (Di Santo, 2015) and Raffaele Laporta, founded the Movement of Cooperative Education which, by the way, still awaits a comprehensive study on its life and influence on the democratic school in Italy (Sofia, 2018). Lay teachers, personalities of education and culture with avant-garde ideas, were in fact the promoters of an action of pedagogical and methodological type aimed at fighting the still massive proportions of Italian illiterates and semi-illiterates who, in 1951, amounted to 5 million and 12 million respectively. Arcomano himself described it as an apolitical and ideologically transversal movement whose aim was to throw off the shackles of the traditional school and encourage the active participation of pupils, who had been regarded till then as mere «vases» to fill in with theoretical notions, detached from the actuality. Arcomano explained:

The activity of this movement is based on the exchange of experiences done by each teacher, on the mail exchange between pupils of different schools (each pupil has his or her own pen-friend), on the use of the printing press at school and the school file (which is a valuable tool), on the field investigations, on the glue painting, etc.

Those teachers who follow new methodologies and fight for a renovation of school, take childhood into the right account by interpreting its effective needs, and children are enabled to participate actively to their education (Arcomano, «Situazione scuola e nascita MCE», Notes).

¹² *La scuola vista dagli alunni (1956-1976)*, in APAA, S. IV, f. 95, f. 138.

The correspondence kept in Arcomano's archives documents the enthusiasm with which the teacher kept his relationship of cooperation with other Italian teachers who shared the same ideas between the years 1953 and 1959. In November 1952, the teacher Anna Fantini from Fano wrote:

Dear Colleague, I was happy to receive your letter and I am convinced that together we can do a good job. The letters written by your pupils prove that we are going along the same path, so I guess that, even though we are far from each other, in both our classrooms we breathe the same air. My children have written a short self-presentation; I will send you some. As you can read these children are hit by poverty, they come from very modest environments. Do not worry, they will get along very well with your pupils¹³.

At the start of the new year Tamagnini sent him a letter from Fano where he invited him to spread among the other colleagues the enthusiasm for the new work of educational cooperation:

Fano 14/2/1953

Dear Arcomano, a few days ago I sent the limograph to Mrs. Maramarco by postal package (L. 4.500 for the limograph and L. 400 for the shipment costs, for a total cost of L. 4.900), after your request. I couldn't include the coloured ink for you, though, because I haven't bottled it yet; as soon as I do that, I will send a bottle to you. The bulletin with your correspondence is being printed: it will be issued around the 20th of this month; in the meantime, please, prepare something else [...]. Let our younger colleagues know about our work, tie them to you, make them read your bulletin¹⁴, and get a subscription, possibly: there is nothing like this in Italy, nothing that witness a work based on the concrete experience of each of us, on the daily exchange. I will read you soon. Yours, Tamagnini¹⁵.

In those years, the collaboration with the Italian delegate of «The save the children fund» of London, Mrs. Giovanna Thompson, was just as relevant and emblematic of the network of international contacts that Arcomano had been waiving¹⁶. About the school issue in Italy, Arcomano claims that «in order to have a living school, effective and connected to the nation's life»¹⁷, it is essential that all children are granted the

¹³ *Corrispondenza tra maestri (1953-1959)*, in APAA, S. I, f. A1, f. 4.

¹⁴ The bulletin of «Cooperazione educativa (*Educational Cooperation*)» was run by Tamagnini from 1961 to 1968 and mainly addressed to primary school teachers. Tamagnini himself, with Aldo Pettini and Anna Fantini, after getting in touch with Freinet, started the project of a cooperative movement with the aim of experiencing new teaching techniques based on the use of the «printing press at school». On these facts and on the role of the review in the innovation of educational «techniques» see Bergomi (2018).

¹⁵ *Corrispondenza tra maestri (1953-1959)*, in APAA, S. I, f. A1, f. 4.

¹⁶ *Corrispondenza e documentazione legata alla collaborazione con la Sig.ra Thompson e alle attività della Save The Children Fund*, in APAA, S. I, f. A1, f. 6.

¹⁷ *Situazione scuola e nascita MCE, Appunti*, in CPAA.

right to attend, that school buildings are suitable, and that pedagogical methods are modernized, by insisting on the role and preparation of teachers themselves. Like this «along with the improvement of life conditions, better prospects can be opened in Italy for education»¹⁸.

3. «Educating in other ways»: the transition to a new educational season in mid-twentieth century Basilicata

In the democratic Italy of the after-war, an important change is represented by the direction of the «new school» at the start of the Republic. In those years, Mr. Arcomano was wondering about the possibility of a new school in the South that could break the bonds of tradition:

On the other hand, going down a new teaching pathway means to break with tradition: the school itself will react against this. We can say that our colleagues do not encourage new operations, which are in fact laughed at, humiliated, deemed useless [...]. The traditional way of thinking is to do the bare minimum just to have the records prove that the programme has been accomplished, and that it is wise not to wrap their minds in search of new «wizardries» that may disrupt the normal balance in the school life (Arcomano, 1960a, p. 267).

And yet, in spite of this, Arcomano reminds that in the past few years «Here and there in the South are showing up new educators who are working towards the implementation of a new school in Southern Italy. At first they were isolated educators, working on their own, in need of an exchange of experiences and practices» (Arcomano, 1960a, p. 267)

These educators would later flow into the Movement of Educational Cooperation (MCE) who would offer them the «possibility to perfect their work as educators» (Arcomano 1960a, p. 267).

Elsewhere Arcomano laments that, with reference to the general complaints concerning the backwardness of Italian school, the Southern school with «its children, teachers, quiet industriousness» (Arcomano, 1960c, p. 3) remains rather unknown to the school journalism. In many other occasions, between 1955 and 1960, Arcomano would speak against the reluctance to welcome new initiatives aiming at disrupt the old schemes of traditional teaching; instead, he often appears on the school reviews of that time with reports and information on the experimentations that were being carried out in the South, where «a certain skepticism [...] looms over the concrete possibility of modernizing the school, with regard to the methodologies and the relationships teacher/pupils, families/school, school/environment» (Arcomano, 1960c, p. 4). Many, in fact, in the South kept regarding school simply as the place where children learn how to «read, write and count» and should not open to new methods and techniques, though successfully experienced elsewhere. In spite of all these resistances and delays, instead, an innovation is possible, and maybe even more so in Southern districts. This is the thinking of some educators who «work

¹⁸ *Situazione scuola e nascita MCE, Appunti*, in CPAA.

quietly» against the reprimands of their very seniors who underline the importance to work, for example, on the «pupils' handwriting».

The experiment of the «new school» in Roccanova is due precisely to these silent educators. But what was the situation like in Basilicata at that time?

In 1951, although decreased from 46% to 29%, illiteracy was still an open wound in Basilicata (Arcomano, 1955). It counted an «army of over 157.023 units» dealing with a shortage of schools and supplies persisting until mid-1950s. (Arcomano, 1956b, p. 9). In the province of Potenza, the illiteracy rate was 29,2%, whereas in Matera was 28,8%, which reflected all the «deficiencies of the society». The fundamental problems of southern Italy's society were closely connected to the causes of illiteracy in the region; they involved «the peasants' quality of life, the Land Reform, the mountain dwelling, the suitability of school buildings and equipment, the road conditions, the children labour» (Arcomano, 1956b, pp. 13-14) and so on. In order to face the difficult situation of education especially in Southern Italy, the so called «plan P» was developed, which included initially the province of Matera and later Potenza's. The surveys revealed all the «persistent» causes of the failure: poverty, diseases, early employment, the remoteness of schools, the parents' indifference. The main causes of failure were, in fact, these poor conditions and a «stagnation condemned by history» where, as Rocco Scotellato observed in the Svimez's survey on the review «Nord e Sud (*North and South*)» in 1954, «the factors of non-compliance were mutually influencing each other, in such a way that the educational and economical aspects of illiteracy were closely entangled» (Scotellaro, 1954, p. 76). Especially in Basilicata, illiteracy remains a «rural thing», mainly persisting among not recovered adults. Along with the childhood conditions and the financial state of the people, the school system itself kept showing some dysfunctions, such as early school-leaving, environmental resistances, some major deficiencies in terms of building and equipment. Scotellaro closed the survey by quoting Pierre Bovet who, at a conference in 1950 where he was lamenting the lack of means in some school, claimed: «A poor school is always the sign of a poor democracy» (Scotellaro, 1954, p. 92).

If from many sides, it was claimed that Basilicata had stayed out of the renovation process coming from «a new sensibility, new human, social and political values» (Arcomano, 1956b, p. 19) and the old habits were persisting, particularly significant appears the attempt by Arturo Arcomano to promote an educational and didactic renovation in Basilicata. He was the author of a new experiment of cooperative teaching in Basilicata which remained an exception, together with the one practiced in the Martella borough in Matera in the same years (G.G., 1955)¹⁹, which qualifies him as an innovator, not adequately acknowledged, till now, both in his value as a teacher and educator, and as a scholar of education phenomena in Basilicata and southern Italy. Arcomano is well aware of the necessity of an efficient primary school that «above all, is able to understand the reality where it operates and make the environment needs its own, in order to satisfy them» (Arcomano, 1956b, p. 19).

¹⁹ Arcomano underlines how the renewal of Martella school was part of the initiatives of the Land Reform with the relocation of the Rocks' inhabitants into the new borough; the experiment of the teacher Mrs. Continanza, instead, arose from a true personal concern.

He said: «The time when the school's task was merely to teach reading, writing and arithmetic is now gone; school has to look forward to a new mankind, free and independent» (Arcomano, 1956b, p. 19).

4. «A breath of fresh air»: the small printing press at school in Southern Italy

In a poor context, as to education and material assets like Southern Italy was «except for rare exceptions, classrooms are mostly slums, especially in rural areas and small hamlets, without air or light, next to stables and pigsties, so figure what the sanitary conditions could be like» (Arcomano, 1956a, p. X).

In the small town of Roccanova, the teacher Ester Continanza-Mango started a didactic experiment that responded to the school's new duties in mid-twentieth century, namely «to be able to transform the reality where it operates, rather than being detached from it» (Arcomano, 1955a, p. 19).

The experiment started into a difficult setting:

The classroom was narrow and wet inside. There was a horrible smell, coming from nearby stables and pigsties. The two-seater desks were rickety and uncomfortable [...]. To complement the furniture (?) there was a big table with a platform and a chair. In wintertime the only source of heating was a fire-pan filled up at the very teacher's house. In a corner, like an object of desire, stood an old heater which nobody could ever work due to the blinding smoke coming out of it (Arcomano, 1960a, p. 8).

The new working environment was influenced by an atmosphere of pedagogic activism that contributed to «leave memories of a useful school life for all the generations that had passed through it». By her own initiative, which would bring effects un hoped-for, the teacher purchased a small printing equipment for the school newspaper, which, according to Freinet's experiment, was written and printed by the pupils themselves; the newspaper was called «la Lucerna (*The lamp*)» by the girls and «Stelle d'oro (*Golden stars*)» by the boys (Bergomi & Scaglia, 2018). We learn from the words of a girl – appearing on one of those newspapers - how this was made:

We make the newspaper ourselves. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays we bring the free writings; these are put to the vote and chosen, and we correct them all together. The chosen text is printed and sometimes illustrated. After being printed, the sheets are piled and topped by a cover; the newspaper is thus made, and then mailed (Arcomano, 1955a, p. 23).

The genuineness and maturity of the printed articles was such to raise doubts on their very authenticity, but the pupils themselves casted them off with their words.

The whole teaching activity was complemented by Freinet's small printing press that «brought a breath of fresh air in school: it was the very heart of the school» (Arcomano, 1955a, p. 20). Arcomano specifies that these innovative teachers were

not actually aware of Freinet's techniques on a theoretical level; on the other hand, this proves once more how significant was the practical value of the printing press system; this was promoted in Italy by the CTS, born in 1951, where many teachers gathered and would later give life to that Movement that would soon become a place of cultural dynamism (Pettini, 1980).

The printing equipment first appeared in 1952 and brought a «sound revolution in the school work» (Arcomano, 1960c, p. 9). It was a pedagogic instrument of many advantages, which, in the first place, allowed to get out of the isolation, and allowed to keep relationships outside the village, through the inter-school correspondence. The small printing press techniques, like the school newspaper printing, as well as the use of the free writing, offered the possibility to work in team and cultivate a spirit of collaboration and sociality, especially useful in Southern villages where individualism was often exasperated.

In fact, «the team who did the printing job after the composition and correction of the drafts, was composed by at least 4 children: the first inked the typefaces, the second put the blank sheet on the clichè; the third pressed; and the last removed the printed papers and put them on the floor to dry» (Arcomano, 1960c, p. 10).

From this team work came the educational value of procedures which were only apparently mechanical but in fact implied an action of control of one's own work and the others'.

Also, this operation implied having to choose the very contents of the newspaper, entirely dependent on their own genuineness, on the practice of the «free writing» that was the product of spontaneous thinking. This brought to the death of the traditional writing and dictation, in such a way that the adoption of the free writing technique clearly demonstrates that the renovation of the teaching techniques is not purely instrumental but substantial (Arcomano, 1960a).

The new teaching system allowed pupils to get acquainted with the surrounding environment, the school, the customs and traditions of their region. The most interesting work was about a historical-geographical study on the town, the province and the Region, accomplished according to Cousinet's directions on the team work methodology.

In the study carried out by Roccanova pupils called «My town (*Il mio paese*)», the connection to the environment – responding to an innovative aspect of the Ermini programs of 1955 – was the starting point of a teaching activity that moved from the pupils' direct experience to reach the borders of the Nation and the World itself. To know the movement meant to live and improve it, whereas ignoring it meant having passive experience of it. The study presents the world of children, their immediate, concrete, direct experience that is the active container where to put all those notions that would form their cultural world. Hence a sound activism and a personalized form of teaching whose aim was guiding the pupils towards a form of sociability put at the very heart of a transformative school.

The printing press at school was particularly valuable in the south of the country because «it became more and more clear that this was a valid contribution to the problems of the South» (Arcomano, 1963, p. 163).

In fact, «the printing press at school is pivotal for the school life, because all activities will revolve around it» (Arcomano, 1963, p. 163).

The bulk of documents gathered during the several field investigations imposed the use of a mobile collection system, always at hand, hence the use of the *school files*, destined to be constantly increased. In the school year 1953-54 was created a Freinet-like filing register whereupon it could be possible to write or glue the most interesting news, cut from books, reviews of newspapers. The school manual soon became obsolete, and its contents were transferred onto such files, which were being incremented from time to time.

5. The new educator: the teacher's observations, reflections and writings

Arcomano's distinctive feature, as revealed by the pages of his journals, lies in a natural inclination to self-reflection and writing on life events, documented by his first journals on the board school days in Gorizia, where he received his initial education: «7 November – Saturday / Today after lunch, in our uniforms, we went to the house of G.I.L. (Italian Youth of the Lictor) and there we stood still»²⁰.

These first pages give an idea, already, of what the problematic reflection on his deeds would be like. The teacher would always show a critical approach towards what he was teaching and the modalities to interpret the real educational needs of his pupils, in accordance with the background and environment. Hence the awareness of the social problems in Basilicata by mid-twentieth century: a scenario of underdevelopment and illiteracy, caused by poverty, disease, early child labour, unsuitability of the school buildings, families' indifference towards education. The teacher's reflections shift constantly between the social and personal dimension, by revealing his beliefs on the duty and value of the pedagogical intervention, especially in such a context as Southern Italy, where «life always flows with the same pace, dominated by the laws of necessity»²¹.

It is therefore possible to follow Arcomano's steps through the universe of children's education. With the usual attitude to recording life events, he tells:

I teach in a rural school where I walk every morning. It is not too far from Roccanova – good half an hour – and yet how different the folks of that district are. The school stands on a thousand-metre-high plateau, into a two-storey little house. There is a very nice view from there [...] And yet, folks do not appreciate, in fact, «don't even look at» this beautiful scenery, that would rapture a rich, fat, bespectacled middle-class man.

He shows awareness towards the folks' needs; they are said to be «pressured by the constant need of securing the bare living necessities. [...] Their stare is vacant, unexpressive. This is probably because they have worked since they were children, and that pest of our districts, called pastoralism, has accustomed them to a slow, inactive life».

In fact, ever since they were little, the children of Basilicata rural districts:

²⁰ *Diario 1942*, in CPAA.

²¹ *Diario 1948 Scuola di Spadarea – Castronuovo*, in CPAA.

have led flocks to pasture, which caused them to stand still for ours, and this inertia has made their look vacant. The timetable is always the same and the countryside is never animated by songs that make work more tolerable. They are quiet, and when they meet new people they get shy and barely say hello.

About his little pupils, in that «poor school house» with no liveliness, he says:

Most of them are in poor health because they are not properly fed. Some of them suffer from rickets, and the only cure that doctors suggest to their parents is cod liver oil. The mother of one of those children, to whom I was expressing my sympathy, told me: «besides the oil that the doctor prescribed, we give a fresh egg to our child occasionally». A fresh egg occasionally! They are so not used to eat eggs, because they have to bring them to their master or sell them to buy salt.

These reports witness not only an acute sense of observation but also a sound historic and social attention, which appear in many others of his writings. From a 1948 journal the teacher observes that «it is important to know the traditional customs and habits of the peasants, who send their children to school only when there is not so much work in the fields».

Arcomano says that «life here flows slow and uneventful just like it was back in the patriarchal days. Poor and damp little houses made of clay and caves carved into the rock are dwelt by the peasants, who are dominated by a strange fatalism». He writes: «egoism prevails and material and moral poverty rule». Hence, the awareness that «school performs its duty right where it becomes part of the environment and transforms it by bringing new life models». School will be able to carry out its action of regeneration in those rural contexts when the «educational problem [...]» is solved, and this will be only possible if «a sound reformation intervenes to improve the life conditions of the folks, so that it becomes “a duty” for children to attend classes»²².

6. A democratic teaching practice: close to children, close to the society of Southern Italy

The teacher is committed to develop an authentic and flexible methodology, so that it can be adjusted to the educational needs and skills of Roccanova pupils: these pupils must be «liberated» from the old educational approach, where school was mostly perceived as a «prison». It is quite clear that the entire school life was affected by the environment, therefore, it appeared essential to understand and interpret it. Given this perspective, it seemed quite unsuitable to adopt an obsolete teaching methodology which was based on mnemonic or induced learning, and which Arcomano was fiercely opposing: «I never imposed anything coming from the past: never a dictation taken from reviews, nor a traditional composition, not even the tables that, by rule, are repeated over again mechanically» (Arcomano, 1956a).

²² All quotations from *Diario 1948, Scuola di Spadarea - Castronuovo*, in CPAA.

In «Esperienze di un maestro (*A teacher's experiences*)», which appeared in November 1959 on the column «Scuola viva (*Living school*)» of the review «Riforma della scuola (*School's reformation*)», he said: «It is not easy, not even nowadays, to find one's way to a sound, concrete, teaching; [...] the teacher has an aim [...]: the liberation of the child» (Arcomano, 1959, p. 24).

This is the crucial aim: «The child must be liberated from the shackles of an obsolete culture, coming from that ignorance that is typical of the peasants' world: made of superstition, ghosts, apocalyptic visions, terror, violence, point of honour, narrow-mindedness» (Arcomano, 1959, p. 24).

Arcomano will later confess: «We didn't know all of these things. We didn't know how hard it could be to set up a "new school" in Southern Italy: it is not impossible, though, to find the right way, if we want it» (Arcomano, 1959, p. 24).

The journals' pages reveal Arcomano's sharp look on things, dynamics and behaviour of his pupils, always supported by a retrospective critical reflection. The teacher's voice is always present, in different ways and places: letters, articles, journals, hand-written notes talk about him, his personal attitude, his becoming teacher through the experience and the analysis of his pupils' reaction to his teaching methods.

From a 1956 journal we read²³:

For a few days now I have been thinking about my teaching job, since I got into school: it's been 10 years now. There has been a lot of water under the bridge. So many children I've seen and known. I overcame so many difficulties! So many disappointments, perhaps compensated by the awareness of having done good. I don't have clear memories of when I was nominated, in 1946. I remember it was November. In fact, I think the first time I got into school was on 14 November, in Castronuovo.

He goes through the state of anticipation that he lived when he first got into school:

On my first day at school I know I was teaching a first grade. When I remained alone with my pupils, I didn't know what to do. Luckily, they were not so many. After I learned their names, by calling them several times, I thought it was time to start the «lesson». I did not know where to start. I searched my memory and it came to mind that, by rule, the first thing to teach was how to hold the pencil – at least this is what we did as pupils. A big operation in which a diligent teacher put great energies! And then drawing sticks, over and over. [...] But children got tired soon (Arcomano, Retrospective reflections: from a 22 July 1956 journal)²⁴.

The lessons' journals kept in Arcomano's personal fund cover a timeframe from 1951 to 1956, which is precisely the most crucial one to retrace his professional and

²³ *Riflessioni a posteriori: da un diario del 22 luglio 1956*, in CPAA.

²⁴ *Riflessioni a posteriori: da un diario del 22 luglio 1956*, in CPAA.

biographic profile thanks to the writings of a «fledgling» teacher, soon to be the author of an educational turn that would go well beyond his own experience. The journals witness the approach to Freinet's techniques. In fact, besides the narration of the school day, they contain the teacher's observation on the fresh air that pervaded the school and especially the pupils who, all of a sudden, learned how to overcome the isolation, the idleness and boredom of the peasants' world, by unleashing their best energies, desires and skills. In a writing that contains «a brief social portrait of a Southern Italy class», the teacher observes:

It is not easy to trace the social portrait of a Southern Italy class. As a rule, when you talk about it starts the whining on the «predominant» poverty (that everybody got used to, now), whereas it lacks – I think – an in-depth analysis of the ideas that the kid brings to school and their adherence with the environment. What also is missing is a reflection on the action to perform to transform these ideas towards a more concrete, scientific and realistic vision of things²⁵.

Every new educational project had to consider the specificity of the educational dimension on a local level. By Arcomano's words:

The class of a town in Basilicata does not show up in its uniform and white collar: it is the expression of the environment the children come from.

Who never saw the children of a first grade entering the school cannot understand the pain that a poor teacher – provided that he has some sensitivity – feels every morning. First of all, the school is considered a prison where a teacher can mercilessly beat pupils to «bend» the most «terrible». [...]. The classroom is packed. (5,47 X 5,10 X 3) You can barely walk through the desks. The air is soon unbreathable: we are too many. And yet we must go on. Pupils are so afraid to be beaten. A form of punishment, is to go behind the blackboard²⁶.

The teacher eventually succeeds in breaking their silence:

There is a way to keep them calm, within certain time limits: let them talk. It is not easy. Not even adults are able to speak one at a time, nor are they able to listen. Traditionally, it is the teacher that speaks, and the pupil listen, and listen, until he is convinced he has nothing to say, or even that what he has to say is not important. [...] God forbid pupils do not express themselves for fear to make mistakes or saying something without importance; they would become hopelessly shy, passive, will shut themselves in with all the psychological consequences²⁷.

The teacher's notes in the nine school journals written between 1951 and 1961 tell about his work with the pupils, stimulated into new leaning activities, according

²⁵ *La vita scolastica, manoscritto*, in CPAA.

²⁶ *La vita scolastica, manoscritto*, in CPAA.

²⁷ *La vita scolastica, manoscritto* in CPAA.

to a collaborative spirit like the one that can be found in those assemblies where pupils were democratically entitled to choose a topic of interest among a number of suggestions²⁸.

1952 - 1953

class journal

31/10/52

Comments: Today the first class assembly was held, from 12,30 to 1pm. The discussion has been interesting beyond expectations. All the participants had something to say. All interventions have revealed a quite shocking sensibility. S. – one of the lowest achievers – was the first to speak, and with much confidence. The topic was: – suggestions for the school paper; – choice of the executives; – improvements, innovations. It is important to give the assembly a certain tone. We drew an outline for the assembly's records.

Arcomano records the correspondence between his pupils and the ones from other schools, in Ortona, Florence, Rome.

5/11/1952

Comments: My pupils today have read their first letters from Pesaro. Every pupil talks and will write his/her letter at home; they will be read to other class mates, etc.

7/11/1952

Comments: D.P. went to mail his letter. He brought the stamp, the envelop, the sheet himself. To do so he had to elaborate something, had to talk with others, most probably his parents, who gave him the money [....] The correspondence is the focal point, and from there, all other activities.

The spirit of absolute freedom that the pupils breathed emerges from other notes on the preparation of school papers.

13/5/1953

After so much time=Absolute freedom. Watercolour painting. Preparation of the «Lucerna» cover. Preparation of the first printed sheet. A writing contest on swallows, followed by drawings and watercolour painting. Teacher's comments: the contest is won by D.P.'s team by vote. The contest is replicated for Basilicata.

1955 - '56

Class journal, 2nd grade, 1955/56

5/12/55

Program: today, letters to Arezzo. Centre of interest for pedagogic-didactic use. School paper reading. Comments: Every time we read a letter there is a flesh a joy in the eyes of the addressee.

²⁸ *Diari delle lezioni (1951-1961)*, in APAA, S. I, f. A1, f. 10.

The lessons are not about the traditional study of grammar or geography, but are carried out through activities coming from a «different school atmosphere»:

18/1/56

Program: order in deeds. Sending letters to Arezzo.

Reading of the text «A Carnevale (*At Carnival*)» according to the traditional method, and record of the class reactions in relation to the different class atmosphere. Choice of free writings to analyse. Correction. Illustration and dictation. Use of the limograph. Various arrangements.

Comments: After reading the same page 4/5 times, L. says: «Do we still have to read this?» The uselessness of an old system of mortifying reading emerges, and this needs to change. According to the old system everybody reads in half an hour, but it is useless to the purpose of understanding the words rather than exercising mechanically. Particular: was the uncle's shotgun double-barrelled? Did he have a dog? Was it sunny? etc.²⁹.

About the organization of the new school life, Arcomano says: «All this is not measurable with grades, nor with red or blue marks: you can't just measure spelling mistakes» (Arcomano, 1960a, p. 284).

The results of that hard didactic work seemed to be finally able to «pierce the narrow horizon of a small world, poor in relationships, perpetually closed in itself, fading in myth and superstition, trapped by something medieval that freezes the circulation of ideas and the opening of minds» (Arcomano, 1960a, p. 284).

7. Conclusions

Arturo Arcomano's journals are the first testimonies of his own experiences and reflections; moreover, they provide a much more concrete information on the educational dimension than any textbook or inspection visit records would do. The journals give an overview of the cultural and educational contents of that small Southern school of the 1950s; also, they give a sense of the changes that school was undergoing thanks to the educational projects sharing and collaboration between Arcomano and other members of the innovation movements on a national level. The importance of such documentary sources lies in their being the testimonies of a past that reveal the social and cultural transformation that school life was undergoing at that time. The journal pages give a real-time overview on lessons, learning pathways, classroom dynamics, thus providing not only a sort of memoir, but especially a simultaneous report and observation of the facts in their unfolding.

In these pages «life memory» and real life meet, and what matters is the truth told by the teachers about their teaching work. Hence, the more specifically didactic heritage, represented by the methodologies, the contents, the results of the teaching action carried out in the classrooms of various territorial contexts.

Arcomano's hand-written pages, more than any other printed contribution, show a slice of life in a 1956 classroom of Roccanova countryside, and it almost feels

²⁹ All quotations from *Diari delle lezioni (1951-1961)*, in APAA, S. I, f. A1, f. 10.

like being into that classroom: we hear the voice of the «directing» teacher, feel the enthusiasm of the young minds involved in the choice of the topic to deal with in the school paper or in the mail exchange. We get to know the past in a knowledge level where the personal teaching memories meet the social dimension.

Arcomano's writing – from the hand-notes to the personal and classroom journals give, at first, a report of his educational and teaching practices as a beginner, mostly individual and intuitive, to get to the activities of an educational movement whose aim was to innovate the Italian school of the second after-war.

The journals witness the pedagogic impulse of many teachers towards bringing a change to Italian school in the 1950s, shortly before the proclamation of the Republic, even in Southern Italy: the cultural and physical isolation could be defeated thanks to the dialogue, the pedagogical debate, the will of starting relationships and keeping contacts with the promoters of the school renovation, intended as a process to carry out through active experimentation.

After 10 years from his death, the importance of Arcomano's documentation is multifold, as it allows to:

- Getting acquainted with the activity of enthusiastic renovation carried out by Arcomano at the dawn of his teaching career.
- Retracing the relations between Arcomano and the promoters of CTS and MCE, thanks to the correspondence with other Italian teachers, where a new vision of school and teaching is shared, and where it is underlined how teaching methodologies cannot disregard experimentation and confrontation.
- Analyzing first-hand, right from the source, the ways through which new teaching techniques were planned and experienced, thus breathing the atmosphere of renovation and pedagogic faith of that time.
- Knowing the topics dealt with in the school paper, written and printed by the pupils.
- Reconstructing the correspondence between Arcomano's pupils and those coming from other Italian schools, in its value of mutual exchange between kids belonging to different social and educational contexts.
- Reading some of the most innovative pages written into a framework of backwardness and conservatism as Southern Italy was, during the middle of twentieth century.

Hence the need to give a systematic order to the fund of Roccanova and its main actors, within the framework of the CTS and MCE activities, and to recognize its historiographical value, which until now has been neglected, in Southern Italy and specifically in Basilicata.

It is important to understand the value of that renovating action, not only for the territory at that specific time, but also on the generations of pupils educated to those new principles, in the perspective of an «investment» on future citizens. The atmosphere of joy and enthusiasm that pervaded the school of Roccanova, where that small community of students was looking forward to gather every day, can be read in the enthusiasm with which Arcomano's pupils even today recall the first

filed trip to Metaponto, the democratic choice of the topic to deal with in the school paper, the several stages of the work at the printing press, the pen-friends from Northern Italy, the participation to conferences where they were the living evidence of the innovative adoption of Freinet's techniques (Bandini, 2013), the realization of the small monography on the territory «Il mio paese (*My town*)», the drawings, the science experiments. With a view on «a pedagogic ideal that looks to the future», Arcomano underlines the duty that the teacher of the new Republican school was called to:

It is clear that the duty of the school, or, at least, that part of school that looks ahead, it is something else: to operate within a democratic society where every child, in the future, may have their place, the role of active citizens who are able to exercise their rights and respect the others' at the same time, and to critically interpret reality (Arcomano, 1960b, p. 825).

Thanks to the sources found we can outline the features of Arcomano not only as an intellectual but also as the interpreter of the new school, from a human and professional point of view. Also, they allow to know and study the results obtained by the process of pedagogical innovation that brought school really close to the children's world, in the far districts of Southern Italy, thus opening to a truly democratic educational practice.

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