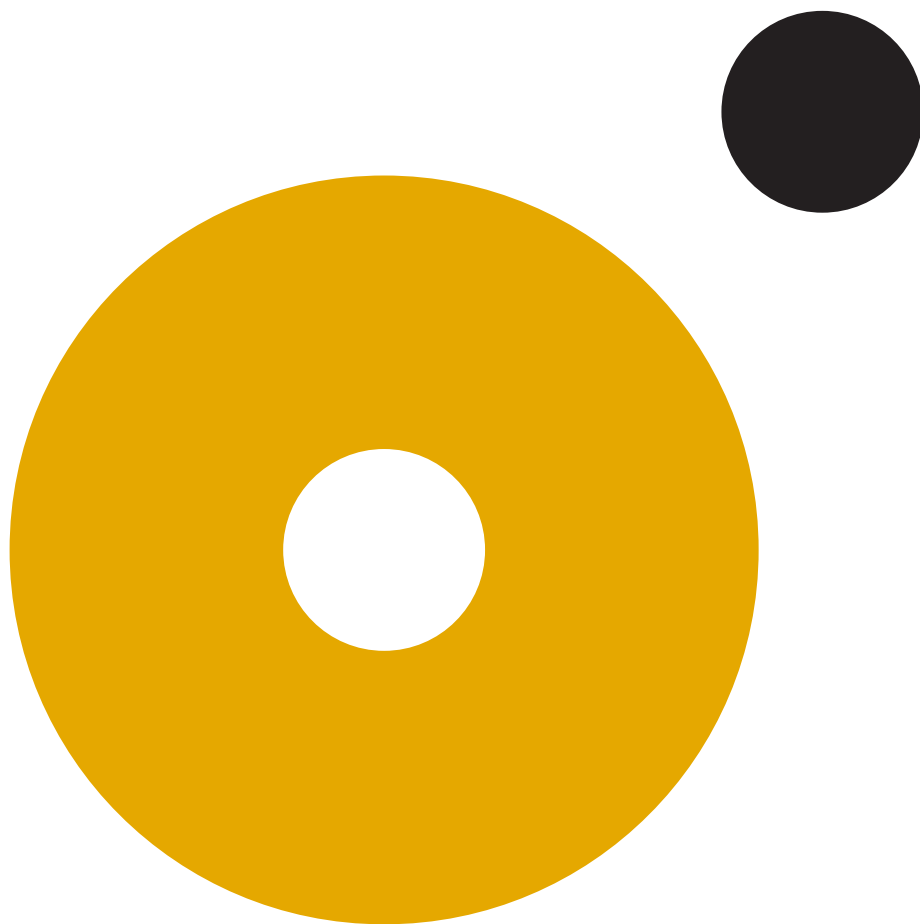


MEMORIA **SCOLASTICA**



# **The School and Its Many Pasts**

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani



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# Introduction to the Study of School Memory

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In his introduction to these volumes, Roberto Sani framed them within the research project “School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861-2001)”, presenting its key features. In this introduction, moreover, I will try to frame them instead within a historiographical process developed over the past twenty years, which offered a significant contribution to the redefinition of the heuristic horizon of the history of education.

The taking into account of school memory as a historical object by the historiography of education matured during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, driven by a deep renewal of the epistemological foundations and heuristic goals of this field of study, as well as the growing attention paid by generalist historians to the policies of memory and public use of the past made in modern and contemporary times<sup>1</sup>.

In a seminal work published in 2000, António Nóvoa – who concluded the international conference “The School and Its Many Pasts” with his keynote address – indicated the possibility of using images to study the evolution of the public image of teachers between the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries<sup>2</sup>. Nóvoa noted in this regard:

In underlining the idea of public images, I intend to understand the game of social mirrors that marks the teaching profession in an epoch of strong social beliefs and convictions on the idea of school as a central institution for progress and citizenship. Here the conflict between opposing images of teachers and the relationships they provoke both inside and outside the profession becomes more obvious<sup>3</sup>.

The statement of Nóvoa contributed to widening the heuristic spectrum of our discipline, as it invited historians of education not to analyze the school of the past only “from within” (that is, how the school really was or at least how it represented itself), but also “from outside” (that is, how it was perceived by a given social group or society as a whole), in order to get a more general view of this historical phenomenon.

Nóvoa – it is true – intended to demonstrate the heuristic potential of visual sources, but his discourse could be extended to a wider and more composite set of sources.

<sup>1</sup> E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (edd.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; P. Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984-1992; R. Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, London, Cornell University Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> A. Nóvoa, *Ways of Saying, Ways of Seeing: Public Images of Teachers (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century)*. «Paedagogica Historica», XXXVI, n. 1, 2000, pp. 20-52.

<sup>3</sup> Nóvoa, *Ways of Saying, Ways of Seeing*, cit., p. 16.

The school was therefore not only an institution and a place of teaching practice and educational experimentation, but also became a category of collective imaginary, whose imaginative representations did not necessarily correspond to how the school really was in a given period, but rather reflected the perception of it within a given social group or society as a whole.

Nóvoa also came to notice how the historical relevance of images was testified «by this traffic between individual and collective beliefs, social and cultural representations, memoirs and imagination»<sup>4</sup>.

It is this complex traffic that defines the social meaning of the school, which transcends the literal one, the result of a cognitive definition that attributes to an expression the mental image of the features of the denoted object, formed in the consciousness of the speakers on the basis of their perceptual and cultural experiences. What, then, is school? On the basis of which criteria is school experience classified by each of us and which abstract idea derives from it? Only on the basis of information of educational nature or on the basis of more complex elaborations? Paraphrasing Philippe Ariès, is there a *sentiment de l'école*<sup>5</sup>, that is the attribution of a specific social meaning to the school, understood not as an institution but as a cultural elaboration? How has it evolved over time?

A push in this direction was already given by Dominique Julia, when in 1995 he put the «school culture» at the center of the historical-educational debate, defining its forms and structures<sup>6</sup>. The debate that followed, in fact, produced a quickly evolving within the international scientific community of history of education.

That same year Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon – taking up an expression already used by sociologist Colin Lacey in 1970<sup>7</sup> – indicated the «black box of schooling» as goal of the historical research in education, focusing attention on the classrooms as places of «evaporated educational relations» from which it was essential to recover every single trace of the educational practices – orthodox or revolutionary, licit or illicit – that had been held there<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, more and more historians of education began to study the school memory as a useful device to explore the content of this “black box”, since – being founded on an empirical school culture – it was able to testify what had really happened within the classrooms. This especially with regard to issues – such as corporal punishment, prohibited teaching practices and other educational taboos – not documented in the official reports, although historically attested. Hence, the flourishing of historical studies in education that widely used diaries, memoirs and autobiographies, as well as oral sources.

<sup>4</sup> Nóvoa, *Ways of Saying, Ways of Seeing*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> On this historiographical category, see P. Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Plon, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> D. Julia, *La culture scolaire comme objet historique*, in A. Nóvoa, M. Depaepe, E.W. Johanningmeier (edd.), *The Colonial Experience in Education: Historical Issues and Perspectives*, Ghent, Universiteit Gent, 1995, pp. 353-382.

<sup>7</sup> C. Lacey, *Hightown Grammar: the school as a social system*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> M. Depaepe, F. Simon, *Is there any place for the history of “education” in the “history of education”? A plea for the history of everyday reality in and outside schools*, «Paedagogica Historica», XXXI, n. 1, 1995, pp. 9-16.

In the following years, the Spanish and French scientific communities were the protagonists of the troubled historiographical process that led to devote more and more attention to school memories, thanks – for example – to the seminal studies of Agustín Escolano, Antonio Viñao and Pierre Caspard<sup>9</sup>.

The use of individual memories as sources for the history of education slowly increased in some scholars the awareness that there was a collective dimension of school memory that could itself become the object of historical research, according to the interpretative categories proposed by Nóvoa.

The memory of the past school, thus, ceased to be only a tool of historical reconstruction and became its object. New interesting researches were started, such as those promoted by the American scholars Pamela Bolotin Joseph and Gail E. Burnaford, that in their pioneering work investigated the evolution of the “public image of the school” and the social perception of the teaching profession, that is the archetypes that pervade society and determine the public status of education<sup>10</sup>.

In some way, it is possible to affirm that there are three main types of school: the “legal school”, codified by laws, programs and educational theories; the “real school”, shaped by the real educational practices carried out in the classroom and the material living conditions within the school; and the “ideal school”, shaped by common sense, imagined and represented by the cultural industry and subject to the distortions of individual remembering and collective memory.

Not surprisingly – during the International Symposium “School Memories. New Trends in Historical Research into Education: Heuristic Perspectives and Methodological Issues”, organized in Seville in 2015 with Antonio Viñao and Cristina Yanes – we defined the school memory as the individual, collective and public practice of remembering a common school past, indispensable to give us back the overall cultural dimension of this historical phenomenon, and we tried to study the modes of symbolic representation of school, schooling and teachers over time<sup>11</sup>.

If personal memories can be studied individually or compared as sources, collective memory can instead be studied only as a process, since it consists in a social reconstruction of the past, which derives from the fusion between the “lived school past” (of which those who remember were actors) and the “imagined school past” (of which often those who remember were listeners, readers and spectators, namely cultural consumers)<sup>12</sup>. In

<sup>9</sup> See A. Escolano, *Memoria de la educación y cultura de la escuela*, in J.M. Hernández Díaz, A. Escolano (edd.), *La memoria y el deseo: cultura de la escuela y educación deseada*, Valencia, Tirant lo Blanch, 2002, pp. 19-42; A. Viñao, *La memoria escolar: restos y huellas, recuerdos y olvidos*, «Annali di Storia dell’Educazione e delle Istituzioni Scolastiche», n. 12, 2005, pp. 19-33.; P. Caspard, *L’historiographie de l’éducation dans un contexte mémoriel. Réflexion sur quelques évolutions problématiques*, «Histoire de l’Éducation», n. 121, 2009, pp. 67-82.

<sup>10</sup> J.P. Bolotin, G.E. Burnaford (edd.), *Images of Schoolteachers in America*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> J. Meda, A. Viñao, *School Memory: Historiographical Balance and Heuristics Perspectives*, in C. Yanes-Cabrera, J. Meda, A. Viñao (edd.), *School Memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, Cham, Springer, 2017, pp. 1-9.

<sup>12</sup> On this concept and the risks associated with its use in historiography: C. Shaw, M. Chase (edd.), *The Imagined Past. History and Nostalgia*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989.

this sense, collective memory descends genetically from the collective imaginary, whose symbolic materials can derive as much from the cultural heritage of a given community as from the new elaborations promoted by the cultural or information industry.

The study of this type of memory allows, in particular, to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or re-interpret it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense.

These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analyzed in its historical dimension, thanks to the large number of contributions here collected, that will help us to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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## The School and Its Many Pasts

History is not memory; both, however, affect the way we perceive the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on memory in order to critically analyze shared narratives of the past and their implications. Memory studies not only allow us to expand our knowledge about the past, but also help us to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or re-interpret it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense. These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analyzed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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