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Addressing social inequalities in education : A project of the  
University of Florence

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## **Addressing social inequalities in education: A project of the University of Florence**

### **1 Memory and the history of education**

In the field of the history of education, it was difficult for memory to establish as a topic and subject of historiography. Only in recent times has it become a central topic for scholars. The pioneering research which was launched especially in Spain over twenty years ago has inaugurated multiple research initiatives whose growing maturity is undoubtedly demonstrated by the recent work *The School and Its Many Pasts* – a 4-volume open access box set – edited by Roberto Sani, Juri Meda and Lucia Paciaroni in 2024.

Over the past half century, Memory Studies have grown exponentially. First, they consolidated their presence in those fields of research in which they took their first steps: psychological studies, from which they essentially started out at the end of the nineteenth century, then social and historical studies, which grew especially after the Second World War, and then they expanded into ever new scientific-disciplinary fields. More recently, Memory Studies seem to be moving beyond the boundaries of individual disciplinary fields in order to share approaches, objects of study and applications. Such a process is characterised by a slow hybridization, as it shares perspectives, which is perhaps destined, more generally and in the long run, to the entire scientific research.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Memory studies currently cover multiple geographical contexts and a variety of they cover stimulating topics.

It must also be said that in recent years the role of memory in the public debate has become so increasingly relevant that nowadays the topic is competing with history for the task of interpreting the past. In this competition, however, memory has often prevailed over historical research, and sometimes the former completely and inappropriately replaces the latter; thus, such a process creates quite a few problems linked to the simplification, distortion or

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<sup>1</sup> Di Pasquale 2019.

trivialisation of historical events. Instead, the latter can be interpreted properly only by applying a rigorous scientific historiographical method.

In everyday conversation, the terms "history" and "memory" are often used as if they meant the same concept, although it is widely acknowledged that they differ in fundamental ways. History creates narratives grounded in information gathered from various sources that are critically examined, interwoven, and contextualised. Memory is based on a subjective perspective and collective representations which are not always substantiated by reliable sources. As a result, memory can sometimes generalise or simplify its subject—the past—which is profoundly complex. Nonetheless, the line between history and memory often blurs in the public discourse. In fact, society frequently relies on memory to interpret and recount the past, as it is considered more relatable and accessible than history which is often viewed as being detached or impersonal. Even though this approach is scientifically inadequate, it often prevails over the historical method.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, memory has taken a fundamental role in the progress and reorganisation of modern societies, and it has become a key element for building national, religious and cultural identities as well as sustaining political choices. Cultivating memory has almost become an essential necessity for human beings; therefore, it is possible to say that human beings are progressively recognizing the central value of memory. In fact, phenomena related to memory have grown considerably. The succession of numerous public commemorations goes hand in hand with the creation of museums dedicated to specific events, and it requires the involvement of cultural and commercial industries which re-propose objects from the past, thus exploiting the appeal of nostalgia.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 The scope of the database "Memorie educative in video"

In this regard, a great heuristic value can be claimed by oral history and its methods of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Even if Italian historiographic practices have included oral history since the 1970s, the latter has been and is still met with scepticism and fear among the academic community. What is contested regards mainly its epistemological validity: unlike written documents, oral memories seem to bear a structural subjectivity that is difficult to eradicate, and therefore it is problematic for planning historical work. However, we can retort by sharing Paul Ricouer's statements:<sup>4</sup> "every historical document, as it is written by a

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2 Violi 2014; Di Pasquale 2019; Trentmann 2017.

3 Bonomo 2013; de Luna 2001, p. 138.

4 Wierling 2003, p. 138; Ricoeur 2000, pp. 37–38; Plato 2000, p. 8.

subject, is subjective: however, subjectiveness in historical sources is more pervasive if its presence is not acknowledged." This consideration does not, of course, imply that historical processes could not be recorded in a scientific way; rather, it reminds scholars to analyse all historical sources wisely, acknowledging both the problems and the advantages that lie behind the structural subjectivity of historical documents.

Based on these assumptions, the PRIN (Project of Significant National Interest) carried out by several research units in History of Education in the years 2017–2020 inquired into the nuances subsumed by school and its educational memory.<sup>5</sup> The results are available online, at this link: [memoriascolastica.it](https://memoriascolastica.it). In the course of the project the unit coordinated by the University of Florence set up a database which records the individual memories of Italian teachers and former students. These memories have been collected in the course of interviews; and the events narrated dealt mainly with the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The interviews were conducted by researchers and MA-students from 2020 to 2023. Before planning the interviews, students attended modules on oral history. Video interviews are characterized by variable length: although the main part lasts between forty-five minutes and one hour, some of them exceed two hours. Currently, the University of Florence portal, which can be accessed under <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/memoria-individuale/video-testimonianze>, shows 269 interviews. As the research unit decided that the university students should retain the intellectual property of their products, it may be that some of them withdraw their videos from Youtube. Notwithstanding, the presence of a 500-word commenting paper allows for examining what a source revealed even if it has been removed. The interviewers were students enrolled in the Master of Primary Education Science who attended the second-year course in History of Education during the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. Their exams required interviewing a person to contextualize their childhood and educational experiences within the broader framework of Italian historical-educational events. Examples of interviews had been provided during course lessons; preparatory workshops on oral history and interview techniques were organized to ensure that the students could carry out their assignments effectively.

The students' role elicited further discussion. Some people might criticize the decision of involving students, as they are characterised by a limited field of experience. Others might focus their criticism on the use of non-professional recording tools. However, their involvement plays a pivotal role, as they have the possibility to develop essential skills. Among these skills, flexibility, em-

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5 Sani/Meda/Paciaroni 2024.

6 Oliviero 2024.

pathy, the ability to listen to people are most important, as well as the ability to make the other person feel comfortable: all these are essential qualities for conducting an interview but also fundamental for every future primary school teacher. Previous interviews conducted by Primary Education Sciences students at other universities have already demonstrated the potential of this tool both for historiographical analysis and for the interviewers themselves. Formulating questions requires another in-depth analysis. Even though the students could access a list with several question samples, they were not supposed to be forced to follow a predetermined questionnaire. The suggested questions included:

1. Please, introduce yourself briefly. When and where were you born? What was your background?
2. How long was your school career? Which schools did you attend?
3. How did you get to school?
4. How do you remember your teachers and classmates?
5. What were the teaching methods used?
6. Did the teacher consider all the pupils in the same manner?
7. Were social differences evident among your classmates?
8. What was your parents' attitude toward school? Did they encourage you to study?
9. Do you recall any political or social events that affected your years at school?
10. Can you remember your classroom? Can you describe it?
11. What were the materials required for school activities? Did you buy them?
12. How did your school experience affect your life?

Material and iconic memory played a significant role during the interviews: the students were encouraged to collect former students' photographs, notebooks and school artifacts. These objects, when they are presented to the interviewees, could elicit memories beyond merely verbal recollection.

### **3 The innovative character of the project**

The relevance of oral history and stories of teachers' lives for fostering awareness and identity perception with prospective teachers has been already demonstrated by some previous projects.<sup>7</sup> However, the innovative character

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Bandini/Oliviero 2019, pp. 197–210.

of this one lies in the possibility to interview former students who came from all over Italy. Uncontrolled heterogeneity could have been the main disadvantage of such an approach; however, this choice allows for covering a wide historical period – i.e., the one coinciding with Republican Italy. Indeed, during the course we suggested to students the age-cohorts from which they could choose their interviewee. Challenges related to the Covid-19 lockdown suggested a flexible approach. Originally, the interviews were supposed to deal only with people born between 1945 and 1961; however, throughout the development of the project we decided to also accept interviews with people born between 1935 and 1989.

The following step concerns the uploading of videos on YouTube. Each video-product was indexed with the hashtags #Memoriedinfanzia and #Memoriediscuola. Such a stratagem was elaborated in order to facilitate the consultation of each source. Furthermore, the Public History Education Workshop at the University of Florence examined the interviews. The best ones are analysed in a 500-word paper. Eventually, they are uploaded to the portal memoriaeascolastica.it. The site was created by the University of Macerata, the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, the Third University in Rome, the University of Florence and the University Gabriele d'Annunzio in Chieti (Abruzzi), and it was inaugurated on October 30, 2021.

Some data can show the consistency and the explanatory potential of these sources. The interviewees' age differs significantly. The oldest one is Marcella Dei, born in 1931; the youngest one is Giulia Freni, born in 1996. However, the interviewees were born mainly between 1945 and the early 1960s. The disaggregation of interviews by decade is another element that is required for a proper analysis: while only two interviews can be contextualized in the 1930s, twenty-two deal with education in the 1940s, and fifty-six tackle education in the 1950s. Then, eighty-six interviews deal with education in the 1960s; moreover, one hundred and eighteen interviews can be contextualised in the 1970s, eighty-one in the 1980s, thirty-three in the 1990s. Finally, twenty-one interviews tackle educational memories from the 2000s. It should be noticed that an interview usually covers two or more decades. However, only two interviews concerning the 2000s were conducted with former students: the other nineteen interviews concern the professional memories of teachers and educators. Hence, among the decades covered by interviews, the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1960s are most represented. There is also a strong presence of memories tackling the 1950s. Such a situation makes our analysis address some pivotal turning points in Italian social and cultural history: for instance, we dispose of several memories of the Italian economic boom (1956–1963) and the 1968 students' movement. Furthermore, interviews allow us to further examine the 1970s which are considered a benchmark in Italian political and

social history; indeed, such a decade was characterized by a huge reform movement, yet it was marked by an unsettling upsurge of post-fascism and communist terrorism.

The geographical origin of the interviewees is more uniform than their age: since the interviewers attend the University of Florence, 87% of interviewees come from Tuscany. The remaining 13 per cent are equally distributed across the other regions. The predominance of Tuscan interviewees allows for a good coverage of regional historical events. Among them, the most significant one is the Florence flood of 1966 which submerged the entire city and endangered its priceless historical and artistic heritage. The flood is unanimously mentioned by all interviewees who attended school between the 1950s and the early 1960s. The extent of the disaster is evident from the repercussions that affected both school facilities and the interviewees' private lives. Some of them experienced limited damage: for instance, we may cite Rosanna Perferi's situation (Montevarchi, b. 1949). In 1966 she was completing her studies in San Giovanni Valdarno, and in her life story, the consequences of the flood were limited to a one-day school evacuation.<sup>8</sup> The effects were much more dramatic for people living near the epicentre of the disaster: for example, the flood destroyed the grocery store owned by Franco Tozzi's father (Ponte a Signa, Florence, b. 1956), causing damage worth some million lira.<sup>9</sup>

Another quantitative note concerns gender representation. Students of the Primary Education Sciences course were predominantly women, and they preferred to interview female subjects: 188 interviewees explored the educational experiences of women. This tendency was a result of the students' free choice, but it can be interpreted in various ways. Educational memory primarily concerns childhood and youth, so it relates to intimate times and spaces. Since cultural horizons tend to change more slowly than economic and social dimensions, students may have unconsciously associated more women than men to the intimate sphere of private life.

#### 4 Some glances at the historical topics of the database

Interview recordings allow for investigating several historical topics which relate to Italian XXth century history. This article will refer only to a few of them. Firstly, educational experiences from the 1940s to the 1960s evidenced a striking contrast between rural and urban areas. Students in rural areas were used to a more fragmentary education than students in urban areas. Even the acquisition of basic skills was not guaranteed at rural schools: in this regard,

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<sup>8</sup> Bandini/Oliviero 2022, pp. 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> Bandini/Oliviero 2022, p. 108.

we may cite Antonella Bruni (San Gimignano, b. 1962) who claimed not to have known the entire alphabet at the end of her second year at primary school.<sup>10</sup> According to her, only when she moved to an urban school she received a proper education. The interviewers stated that the roots of this contrast should be retraced to the multi-age classrooms rural schools were forced to run. Nineteen interviews tackled this topic. Among them, only three were in support of multi-age classrooms. Significantly, the positive accounts came from people who attended such schools in the late 1960s, when multi-age rural classrooms were composed of a limited number of students (roughly ten). Secondly, the interviews highlighted that before 1968 the Italian school system did not promote social inclusion. Few people continued their studies after finishing elementary school. Which factors convinced parents to interrupt their children's education? Firstly, logistic factors played a key role in determining whether a child would have the chance to continue schooling or not. People who grew up in a rural context often lived too far from any secondary school. Furthermore, until the late 1960s public transportation was not available everywhere. Economic factors also played a great role in determining whether students completed their education. Enrolling at a secondary school meant delayed participation in the labour market. Moreover, it required families to buy books, appropriate clothing and stationery. Finally, gender also played a key role, as lower class families preferred to concentrate their resources on their sons rather than on their daughters.

The interviews were in line with these previous statements. Only three students in Franca Tondini's class (Lucca, b. 1940) continued their studies after having completed elementary school.<sup>11</sup> "Were they smarter than the other students?" the interviewer asks. "No, they were richer," Tondini replies. No one among Graziella Bartolini's (Florence, b. 1947) classmates pursued higher education after their elementary graduation.<sup>12</sup> Nine out of the thirty-seven female students in Simonetta Soldani's (Florence, b. 1942) class were able to continue their studies.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, the interviews can help us with capturing the subjectiveness which marked educational experiences. For example, when Alberto Melani (b. 1949) saw the picture the photographer had made of him and his primary schoolmates, he recalled the huge economic inequalities which characterised Italian postwar society. Such a social process he interpreted with deep regret; indeed, as he was raised into an affluent family, he used to mock his schoolmates for

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10 Bandini/Oliviero 2022, pp. 218-219.

11 Bandini/Oliviero 2022, p. 66.

12 Bandini/Oliviero 2022, pp. 83-84.

13 Bandini/Oliviero 2022, p. 276.

their poverty: "I was cruel because I was rich [...]. Then I changed my mind and I understood my mistakes, but I did so only after a while."<sup>14</sup>

Fourthly, the interviews highlight the relevance the 1968 students' movement and the political and cultural reforms of the 1970s had for shaping a different school system.<sup>15</sup> The interviewees who attended school during those years perceived educational institutions in very different ways than the older ones. Furthermore, the consequences of the students' movement also affected students who could be part of it because of their age. In their interviews, people born between 1959 and 1970 highlighted the role the students' movement played for their intellectual horizons, as it fostered their self-determination against institutional and societal attempts to control their lives;<sup>16</sup> as an example we may cite Anna Auzzi's experience. As she was born in 1961, she was in fact too young to be part of the 1968 students' movement. However, by her own admission, she was strongly influenced by this event, as it represented "a revolt against a world too small for us" because "my generation grew up with these ideas: that a person could be free, the State could be more flexible [...] and traditions could be not followed".<sup>17</sup>

To conclude, this essay shows that educative oral memories can be employed in a fruitful way for enriching historical analysis. Firstly, they can highlight the relevance subjective interpretation and emotions played in historical experience. Secondly, they widen our comprehension of bygone events, as they explore the outcomes generated by social and cultural processes of the past.<sup>18</sup>

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14 Bandini/Oliviero 2022, p. 141.

15 de Giorgi 2020, p. 51-53.

16 Socrate 2018, pp. 45-61.

17 Bandini/Oliviero 2022, p. 36.

18 Even though the article is written collectively, individual responsibility for each paragraph should be accounted in the following way: Stefano Oliviero is responsible for paragraph 1; Marianna di Rosa for paragraph 2; Luca Bravi for paragraph 3; Chiara Martinelli for paragraph 4.

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