

Zago, Giuseppe

The professor of pedagogy and Italian textbooks between the 19th and the 20th centuries

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Kulturen der Lehrerbildung in der Sekundarstufe in Italien und Deutschland

Nationale Formate und ‚cross culture‘

Casale / Windheuser / Ferrari / Morandi

Kulturen der Lehrerbildung in der Sekundarstufe in Italien und Deutschland

Historische Bildungsforschung

herausgegeben von

Rita Casale, Ingrid Lohmann und Eva Matthes

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The Professor of Pedagogy and Italian Textbooks between the 19th and 20th Centuries

by *Giuseppe Zago*

After the Italian unification, the country's educational system was regulated by the Casati law of 1859, which established that pedagogy was to be taught at male and female colleges (called *Scuole Normali*) in the cities, at rural teacher-training schools, and at universities. In 1881, Pietro Siciliani wrote: 'the benefits of teaching pedagogy at these colleges were virtually nil, partly because of their academic programmes and the spirit intrinsic in all those textbooks, big and small, that inundated the lower schools, and partly due to the lack of appropriate preparation of either the young people entering the colleges or their appointed teachers'.¹ According to Siciliani (a lecturer at Bologna University), the poor quality education in pedagogy provided by the colleges responsible for training primary school teachers was due to an inadequate preparation of the professors (and their students) and to the poor quality of the textbooks they used. It is hardly surprising that Siciliani should draw a connection between teachers and textbooks: the teaching method very often employed by professors simply involved repeating and commenting on the content of a text book, which came to be the focus of the teaching activity. It was often the only tool available to professors, and such texts thus served as the primary source of material for their lessons. For the students, the content of such books was meant to be committed to memory and repeated (like a catechism); it was the main (or possibly sole) source of information, methods and behaviour to adopt in their future teaching practice. The purpose of the textbook was not only informative, but also to provide moral and professional guidance, transmitting values and codes of behaviour to apply to pupils, their families, school authorities, and even in the future school teacher's private life. The textbook was a fundamental training tool for promoting not only learning and expertise, but also a sense of belonging, a lifestyle, and a world view.

The aim of the present contribution is to chart the history of how pedagogy was taught in Italy by analysing the professional figure and teaching activities of the professors of pedagogy, as well as the textbooks they used in their work.² Two periods are considered separately: one from the early 1880s up until 1897, during which the Italian positivist culture made a serious effort to renew its teaching programmes and methods; the other from the turn of the century until just before the Great War, when the positivistic cultural and professional model began to lose ground, partly due to a new, radically different – even opposite – way of thinking. The lively debate that developed in the years before the war led to a severe criticism of the outcomes of the previously implemented innovations, paving the way to new proposals founded

1 Siciliani 1882/1999, p. 173. The Casati law envisaged professors of pedagogy as one of the three principal teaching positions (along with professors who taught Italian or mathematics and the natural sciences); nine subjects were taught in all. Teacher-training colleges for girls added lessons on 'women's work', and those for boys included a basic course on agriculture, general notions of civil rights and duties, electoral law, and public administration. Teacher-training colleges remained separate by gender up until 1909. The age of admission differed as well: 16 years for boys and 15 for girls.

2 On pedagogical textbooks, see Betti 2003, pp. CXXV-CXLIII; for those of historical-pedagogical type, see Zago 2010.

on the philosophical and pedagogical thinking of neo-idealism. This took concrete shape in the reform of the educational system that, even today, remains associated with the name of Giovanni Gentile (Minister for Public Education in Mussolini's government), who launched the reform.

1 A teaching lacking in prestige and based on poor quality textbooks

In the early 1880s, there was a strong consensus among the political and cultural forces regarding the problems afflicting Italy's education system. It was generally agreed that the traditional system for training primary school teachers should be abandoned. There was an urgent need for reform, which was bound to find its pedagogical foundations in the new positivist culture that had by now also taken hold in Italy.

Representatives of this approach involved in matters of education deplored both the lack of importance attributed to pedagogical science and the way in which pedagogy was taught. Pasquale Villari was a highly-respected figure, partly because of the important positions he had occupied (as minister, parliamentarian, school inspector, and university lecturer), but especially because of his vast experience in the field of education. He went before the Scialoja Commission appointed to study the state of male and female secondary education in Italy and stated: 'There is such a general contempt for pedagogy that, if anyone says they study pedagogy, they raise a laugh. In fact, we have no publications concerning the science on which pedagogy is founded, or even facts relating thereto'. He went on to add: 'Here in Italy, the more schools are founded, the less we wish to hear talk of pedagogy – to such a degree that I believe few men in Italy wish to study it'.³ Despite his moderate, prudent nature, averse to being argumentative or exaggerating, Villari denounced the lack of consideration for pedagogical science in no uncertain terms. Around the same time, even a well-known man of letters like Ildebrando Bencivenni – actively involved in spreading the ideas of positivism, director of teacher-training journals, and author of numerous papers on matters of education (as well as textbooks for teacher-training colleges and primary schools) – pointed out how little importance was attributed to the teaching of pedagogy, and the mediocre professional quality of those who did so:

'in the proportion of two thirds of the whole, professors of pedagogy at teacher-training colleges are hardly normal people, and by no means suited to delivering colour and intonation at a pedagogical seminar. We have elderly priests who have abandoned the cloth, or continue to be members of the clergy, who have taken pedagogy for a bundle of rules, an application just as mechanical as some of their religious dogmas [...]. When the teacher-training colleges were first established [...], pedagogy was necessarily taught by priests because the pedagogy of the time was bound to be somewhat uncertain, launched into the clouds, reliant on the theology and abstract philosophy of Catholicism'.⁴

³ Villari 1995, pp. 382-383.

⁴ Bencivenni 1882, p. 46. For several years, pedagogy was taught together with religion (though the latter was not explicitly required under the Casati law), and often by priests. According to Gentili, 'rather than a deliberate choice, this was a necessity justified by the fact that it was not easy to find laypeople with some experience in the field of education, which in the past had been reserved more or less exclusively for the clergy [...]. For the same reason, in Italy at least, the most significant pedagogical reflections, methodological recommendations, teaching guidelines, and school books came largely from clergymen' (Gentili 1984).

After Italy's unification, adequately trained primary and secondary-school teachers were in very short supply.⁵ They were consequently recruited according to a 'flexible' approach that systematically eluded Casati's legal requirement that professors be appointed exclusively on the strength of *concorsi* based on qualifications and examinations.⁶ This general difficulty naturally affected the teacher-training colleges too. Posts for professors of pedagogy were awarded to applicants who were – or had been – primary school teachers or priests and who, in most cases, had never specifically studied pedagogy.⁷ Those who had a university education were extremely rare.⁸ It is easy to imagine what type of lessons such improvised professors could deliver in their classrooms. In the oft-cited opinion of Bencivenni, as many as two out of every three of them were unfit for the job.

Some literary sources can help us reconstruct the personal stories (motives, attitudes, life choices...) and social image of the professor of pedagogy at the time. An extraordinary, realistic picture was painted by Matilde Serao in a short story appearing in a review in 1885 (and in a volume together with other stories a year later). In the early 1870s, the author had attended a teacher-training college for girls in Naples, and her pages are alive with recollections of this experience (though she does not mention it explicitly). She concentrates mainly on the effects of that training – described as unsatisfactory, even harmful – and on the lives and different personal destinies of the young students. Her portrait of Professor Estrada, who taught pedagogy, seems particularly interesting. He is described as:

'a superior spirit, more versatile than profound, a brilliant speaker: obliged by necessity to teach pedagogy to young girls in the third year, he clearly despised his job, and himself for serving in it. Already, from the first lesson in the school year, he had shocked his students by explaining the pointlessness of pedagogy, and his amiable scepticism persisted in all his lessons [...]'.⁹

This literary portrait may be set in a particular social environment, but it is certainly typical of the condition of many professors for whom teaching was by no means their chosen career, and

5 In 1877, to speed up the training and recruitment of teachers for the country's schools, Minister Coppino established rural teacher-training schools (with a different organisation and programme from those of the teacher-training colleges in the cities), where courses could last from 10 to 24 months. In 1883, these schools were converted into lower-level colleges.

6 This requirement, long ignored due to the shortage of candidates with suitable qualifications, was to become legally binding in 1896, when a law established that professors at teacher-training colleges had to be appointed exclusively on the strength of official *concorsi* based on qualifications or examinations. The regulations subsequently published by the Italian Ministry for Public Education specified that preference should go to applicants with a university degree.

7 As Siciliani also noted: 'those who begin to profess pedagogy, where do they come from? Some come from university faculties of philology, natural sciences and mathematics, while we know nothing of the origin of others. We do know that some college pedagogists have no diploma from a *liceo* (according to some malicious tongues), or even one from a lower secondary school!' A great many 'lack the culture of a scientific pedagogy' (Siciliani 1882/1999, p. 173).

8 The regulations issued by the Minister Coppino in 1877 only intended courses in pedagogy to be for students of philosophy, with approximately 60 lectures per academic year. However, these courses were attended by very few – if any – students. At the University of Bologna, for instance, from 1877 to 1885, just three students signed up to study pedagogy, while those enrolled at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy ranged in number from 16 to 35.

9 Serao 1885. This story was published first in episodes (n. 1, 1 January 1885, pp. 118-127; n. 2, 16 January 1885, pp. 282-293; n. 3, 1 February 1885, pp. 475-487), then collected in *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, Milan, Treves, 1886.

who were often ill-prepared for this line of work as well as lacking in motivation.¹⁰ The post of professor of pedagogy seemed particularly unappealing, partly because it remained anchored to well-established models of educational hierarchy. Teacher-training colleges were seen as the least qualified of all higher education institutions, almost an extension of primary school, lacking in any independent identity. Significantly, Casati's legislation had placed them on the same level (*Titolo V*) as primary schools. The professors' salaries were also low: they earned less than teachers at a *liceo*, who also enjoyed greater professional prestige and could usually boast higher social origins.¹¹ As a subject of study, pedagogy thus represented the 'last choice', and was avoided by anyone with sufficient qualifications to aspire to more highly-respected teaching posts.¹²

We can also get an idea of the teaching methods actually used in the classroom thanks to another witness on the scene, this time a professor of pedagogy. Signing only with his initials, he complained in the journal *La Rassegna settimanale* in 1879 that lessons on pedagogy at teacher-training colleges involved:

'repeating two or three concepts from the textbook for two or three years, i.e.: that teaching methods may be descriptive, dialogical or both; that there is an analytical and a synthetic method in intellectual operations; and that only moral means are allowable to ensure discipline at school, while caning or slapping have been abolished. And it could hardly be otherwise – the author concluded – if the teaching of pedagogy is entrusted to the first teacher of letters, history, or morals who happen to show some interest; and I would be prepared to bet that pedagogy is taught by the PE teacher at some teacher-training colleges'.¹³

In short, the young students were asked to learn and repeat classifications, definitions, diagrams, and abstract distinctions. The textbook became a 'second teacher' that had to make up for the professor's inadequacy and lack of preparation. The 'prototype' pedagogy textbook (much imitated, albeit with poor results) was written by a priest, Giovanni Antonio Rayneri, professor of ethodology at the University of Turin from 1847 (a chair previously occupied by Aporti). His *Primi principii di metodica* was drawn from his lectures on a course of methodology for infantry officers. It systematically examined teaching methods, analysed in relation to the teacher, the student, and the school environment. It distinguished the laws and forms of didactics, as well as proposed memory training exercises, school homework, textbooks, study subjects, and so on. Published for the first time in 1850, the book was extremely well received. Already in its

10 The figure of Professor Estrada might correspond to that of the typical southern Italian professor, described by Broccoli as a 'pseudo-intellectual who has failed in other areas, and – if not exactly nostalgic for the old regime – is certainly not enthusiastic about the new one' (Broccoli 1978, p. 37). According to Anna Ascenzi, as well, Professor Estrada 'looks like one of the many 'displaced persons' populating the classrooms of Italy after its unification. One of those characters not lacking in a degree of acumen and intellectual qualities (a 'spirit more versatile than profound, a brilliant speaker'), but entirely unsuited to the role of teacher and, one might add, so selfishly focused on themselves as to be unaware of even the bare minimum of responsibility deriving from their positions' (Ascenzi 2010, p. 110).

11 It wasn't until the legislation of July 1896, pushed forward by the Minister Gianturco, that this disparity was finally addressed: in addition to the provision increasing the total members of staff at teacher-training colleges, it also raised the level of their salaries to match those paid to *licei*.

12 Recalling the academic life of the period after unification, Bencivenni also wrote: 'There was a time when, if you wanted to send someone to a teacher-training college and you did not know what subject to have them teach, you would choose pedagogy' (Bencivenni 1906, p. 41).

13 G.R. 1879, pp. 347f.

fifth edition by 1867, just four years later (1881), the eleventh edition was in print. It became a model for Rayneri's pupils as well as many other authors of textbooks of the time. Among the latter, it is worth mentioning Paolo Vecchia, who was initially a follower of Rayneri with a spiritualist view that leaned towards liberalism, and later a determined supporter of a Spencerian-style lay positivism. After leaving the clergy, Vecchia worked in various capacities: as a professor of pedagogy and morals, director of a teacher-training college, school inspector, and a university lecturer. He wrote numerous textbooks, which were promptly revised (sometimes only changing the wording on the front cover) to comply with the frequent changes made to the programmes for teacher-training colleges. The books intended for these colleges were often produced 'in-house', unavoidably reiterating their own teaching practices. The case of Vecchia is a good example: when he was teaching pedagogy at the Normal School, 'before every lesson, he would attach a little summary table to the blackboard, and then broadly explain its content to his students'. Drawing on all the summary tables of the lessons, he obtained the *Pedagogia per i maestri di grado inferiore*, published by Paravia in 1864, and then the *Pedagogia per i maestri di grado superiore*, published in 1865.¹⁴

With Italian unification, the output of pedagogical textbooks rapidly increased in quantity, but (as previously mentioned) not always in quality. Rayneri seemed to remain firmly and inescapably the established model. Even Siciliani (who could hardly be suspected of having any sympathy for the spiritualists) had words of appreciation for Rayneri's text. He defined it as a 'classic', a *vademecum* for generations of school teachers, even though it was not without its major weaknesses. Among these, he particularly mentioned: 'the moral approach, founded in the most dogmatically *positive* religion'; 'the airy physiology'; and 'the half-baked psychology, based on Rosminian theory',¹⁵ and consequently lacking in scientific grounds. Bencivenni also judged the textbooks that imitated Rayneri's works very poorly, but because their resemblance to the original was 'much like that of the wren to the eagle'.¹⁶

2 The renewal of teacher-training and of the teaching of pedagogy

The new political and cultural systems that were established in Italy between the 1870s and 1880s embarked on a determined renewal of teacher-training, placing pedagogy and a new method of teaching it at the heart of this project. From 1880 to 1897, the regulations and programmes for teacher-training colleges changed as many as six times (after 1880, in 1883, 1890, 1892, 1895, and 1897) in an effort to better adapt and calibrate the cultural and professional model to the concepts of positivism, and definitively oust the spiritualist tradition that had continued to inspire teachers and textbooks after Italy's unification. The positivists relaunched pedagogy as an 'independent science', no longer subordinated to philosophy and theology, but connected with the principles, methods, and conquests of sciences such as physiology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. On the Italian cultural stage, people were using a whole new vocabulary and new expressions emerged, such as: scientific and experimental pedagogy; intuitive, inductive, and objective methods; *lezioni di cose* (lessons on things); psychological observation; and so on. The first programmes of positivist inspiration for teacher-training colleges were signed in 1880 by Francesco De Sanctis, when he returned for the third and last

¹⁴ Cf. Marinelli 1899/1908, p. 620.

¹⁵ Siciliani 1882/1999, p. 169.

¹⁶ Bencivenni 1882, p. 96.

time to direct the Ministry for Public Education. The new programmes assigned pedagogy (and professors of pedagogy) a central role, relaunched trainee teacher placements in primary schools, and imposed an approach to teaching based on the experimental method, and thus on experience, observation, and intuition.¹⁷ The professional and moral role of the professor of pedagogy was awarded much more respect. This figure was to serve as an example of moderation and virtue, capable of preparing future primary school teachers to have the 'industrious acceptance' and 'dignified patience' needed in a difficult career that demands a spirit of sacrifice. It was important to train primary school teachers to serve as educators of the people, patriots, dispensers of knowledge and lay virtues, and promoters of a moral and (even more importantly) social redemption.

Pedagogy was to be taught using a 'strictly experimental method', with practical exercises not only for the 'basics', but also for their further development. The 'general maxims and methodological norms' had to be 'the product of particular observations and experience'. According to the latest ministerial recommendations, students 'can neither understand nor judge their efficacy as educators' unless they have already been actively teaching for a while. Their professors were explicitly asked to abandon the dogmatic and authoritarian style of the past, founding their teaching on exercises and psychological observation instead. All the teacher-training college programmes of this period put great faith in the professors' commitment and capabilities, and in the educational role of a scientific and experimental pedagogy far removed from the old abstract approaches. In presenting his programme for teaching pedagogy (issued in 1883), Minister Baccelli made the point that: 'pedagogy has so far aroused little interest in the country due to an abuse made in the past of formulas and theories'. He optimistically added: 'for some years now, there has been a healthy upheaval in these studies that, little by little, should lead them towards a more rational approach, better suited to the purpose'. That is why the Baccelli confidently concluded: 'I really hope professors will focus on this goal'.¹⁸

Another literary source bears witness to this climate of trust in the figure of the professors of pedagogy, and in their ability to change the traditional image of the discipline, making it genuinely formative. Edmondo De Amicis wrote *Il romanzo d'un maestro* around the same time as his better-known *Cuore* (*Heart*), publishing it a few years later. His story could be defined as a 'documentary novel', given its very realistic descriptions that leave little space for rhetoric. It is the outcome of an effort to accurately document characters, events, and episodes of day-to-day school life, and the scenarios, situations, and human types are depicted with great realism. The teacher-training journals of the time were full of articles and letters describing school teachers' working conditions, the abuse of power and injustices they suffered (especially female teachers) despite their dedication, the limited training they received, and their very low salaries. The protagonist of De Amicis's novel is Emilio Ratti, a young school teacher who came into contact with both the subject of pedagogy and a remarkable professor while attending a teacher-training college:

17 A Royal Decree of 30 September 1880 introduced new regulations and new teaching programmes to the teacher-training colleges. Lessons on religion and morals were replaced by ones treating civil rights and duties (even though religion continued to be taught in many places, just as before).

18 With a decree of November 1883, Minister Baccelli (who had replaced De Sanctis) introduced new programmes, albeit with only minimal changes to the previous ones. The only important difference was that the teaching of pedagogy was brought forward to the first year of the course, whereas before it had only been offered in the second and third years. The aim was clearly to reinforce the 'pedagogical' focus of the teacher-training colleges.

'What amazed him from the start was the study of pedagogy, which he found abstruse and arid. His intelligence was ill prepared for such abstract concepts, and his memory rebelled against them. But the excellent method of his professor, who avoided any excessive use of dogmatic precepts, and dealt at length with the elementary notions, founding all reasoning on precise observations and common facts, with great clarity in his choice of words, soon made even this subject appeal to him'.¹⁹

Professor Megari, who lectured on pedagogy, as well as on civil rights and duties, knew how to make the topic useful and pleasant to Emilio, who felt nothing but gratitude and admiration for the man. He considered him a professional and moral model – a role model, if you will. Leaving aside its consolatory tone, an aspect of the novel worth emphasising concerns the importance attributed to the professor's 'excellent method'. He avoided dogmatic precepts and the unquestioning rote recall of notions; he identified and explained the elementary concepts; he always started from precise observations of concrete facts; he focused on reasoning; and the language of his explanations was clear and precise. Essentially, what De Amicis describes is similar to what the positivist pedagogues were seeking to achieve. By the end of the novel, Emilio shows that he has learned this method, which will always serve him well in his future as a teacher. An exemplary description of the method is provided in a final lecture he attends, given by his ex-professor of pedagogy in Turin, after Emilio has brilliantly qualified to become a teacher in the city's schools. The professor's words also acknowledge the fundamental mission of all school teachers, which is to educate their country's children or, in other words, its hopes for the future.

Over time, this optimism seemed to fade and difficulties started to emerge. The last of the programmes signed by Minister Codronchi in 1897, and which lasted only 25 years (right up until Gentile's reform), were peremptory: 'We repeat the recommendation – since it has borne little fruit at many schools in the five years since it was first stated – that the formulas of theoretical philosophy be banned'.²⁰ These words seem to be a rather bitter acknowledgement that the much-desired change had not come about, or at least not to the degree expected. The text realistically recommends not doing 'more than may suffice to provide the basics of pedagogy in its strict sense, and of teaching theory'. Speaking again to teachers, the same text makes another significant recommendation: 'Great care should be taken over the choice of textbooks, to avoid pupils being faced from the start with nebulous and abstruse generalities, going against the very precepts of pedagogy'. This insistence on the importance of choosing the right book, consistent with the new pedagogical approach, is of considerable interest: once again, we see the textbook as a necessary 'prop' for supporting the teachers' actions and improving the students' education.

3 Old and new textbooks between the 19th and 20th centuries

The season of renewal that began in the 1880s saw greater attention being paid to the textbooks in use. In 1881, Minister Baccelli appointed a commission to study their revision on

¹⁹ De Amicis 1900, p. 3.

²⁰ The ministerial text also contained a strong recommendation that trainees 'report and discuss their observations at special weekly conferences, directed by the professor of pedagogy'. Right from the start, the teacher-training colleges had organized placements in primary school classes to ensure their students became accustomed to applying the rules typical of the various teaching methods.

a national scale.²¹ The goal was to provide more effective guidelines regarding the textbooks to adopt, and to ensure greater uniformity in the choices made by teachers by exerting a centralised control over the publication of such books, which was expanding more and more.²² There were as many as 414 textbooks intended for teacher-training colleges on the market in 1881,²³ and this caused more concern than pleasure among the experts because their quality appeared to vary considerably. For the teaching of pedagogy, there were editions that had been 'revised' (often rather superficially, as mentioned earlier) to reflect the new national teaching programmes, and more new texts were being published too. Some were of spiritualist inspiration, but the majority now took a positivist approach. Alongside the re-editions of textbooks dating back to the first 20 years after Italy's unification (such as those by Uttini²⁴ and Vecchia), there were some that relaunched the tradition initiated by Rayneri. One of the most significant was published by Giuseppe Allievo in 1881. Although the pedagogue from Piedmont explicitly distanced himself from the new national programme, his textbook was widely adopted – a sure sign that it met with the favour of many religious and lay professors of pedagogy coming from a spiritualist background. In presenting his work, Allievo wrote: 'In dictating [...] the present little treatise, my aim was to shape it around the concept of science, rather than along the lines of the ministerial programme, in which I believe I see several considerable flaws'. First and foremost among them, he mentioned the recommendation that the experimental method be used for the 'basics' and the 'further development' of the whole teaching programme, including pedagogy. The scholar claimed that experience is certainly necessary but not sufficient 'to reveal these unchangeable, universal principles that are precisely the constitutive elements of the science'.²⁵

Most of the new textbooks adopted a positivist approach, and their authors were professors of pedagogy at teacher-training colleges or university lecturers. Among the books in most widespread use at the time, there were those produced by Marcello Zaglia, Paolo Vecchia, and especially Saverio Faustino De Dominicis. Zaglia was first a teacher, then school director, and later a school inspector. His *Compendio di pedagogia teoretica*²⁶ was published in 1881 and widely used in the last two decades of the 19th century, alongside many other works by the same author. The textbook is a knowledgeable work that balances spiritualist and positivist views, bringing together writings by Catholic and lay thinkers, ancient and modern, Italian and foreign (Zaglia also translated some German works on pedagogy). Though not originally a positivist, Zaglia actively disseminated positivist thought. Moreover, he was appreciated for his efforts connecting academic with militant pedagogy, and for the balanced pedagogical and ideological approach behind his writings, whether textbooks or scientific publications. Vecchia²⁷ was one of the most prolific and fortunate authors of textbooks who, after convert-

21 Before 1881, ministerial circulars demanded that schools provide lists of the textbooks they adopted, but this did not apply to teacher-training colleges (see Bertilotti 1997).

22 The commission concluded its work with a report published in 1883. On the provisions of the Ministry for Public Education relating to textbooks, see Barausse 2008 and Miceli 2015.

23 The Italian output of textbooks (according to the ministerial investigation of 1881) amounted to a total of 3922 works (see Porciani 1987, p. 61).

24 Uttini 1866.

25 Allievo 1882, pp. 3f. In subsequent years, Allievo wrote other books, including: Allievo 1893a, 1893b and 1897.

26 Zaglia 1881; 1891/1898; 1894; 1897/1898; 1898. Zaglia was also the author of primary school books.

27 Vecchia 1882/1886; 1894. This last work, which saw various revised editions, was particularly explicit at the end of the third volume (dedicated to the history of pedagogy), where the author claimed that the quality of pedagogical studies was quite possibly higher in Italy than in other countries: 'the reason being that here, and

ing to positivism, became a staunch supporter of the new pedagogy (that he felt could now be seen as the national pedagogy). De Dominicis was a lecturer at the University of Pavia. His textbooks were defined as the ‘prayer book and even almost the gospel of generations of schoolteachers’ by Ernesto Codignola (who could certainly not be suspected of being too sympathetic towards the positivist approach). In 1896, De Dominicis published a textbook intended for the teacher-training colleges (as well as numerous other schoolbooks) that by 1919 was already in the 20th edition.²⁸ His works remained securely anchored to a biological and sociological stance, but they presented pedagogy not as a philosophical and abstract knowledge, but as practical and professional know-how, closely related to the sciences. At the heart of his thinking there was a constant attention to the practical reality in which school teachers had to operate.

Among the other new textbooks that emerged during the same period, it is worth mentioning those by Sante Giuffrida,²⁹ Laura Ciulli Paratore,³⁰ and Giovanni Marchesini,³¹ a pupil of Ardigò who lectured at the University of Padova and wrote numerous textbooks for teacher-training colleges and other types of school.

4 The decline of positivism as a cultural and professional model, and the emergence of new proposals

After the turn of the century, the parabola of Italian positivism – and of the cultural and professional model that it had struggled to develop for teacher-training – was rapidly and inexorably in decline. A new generation of scholars was replacing the pedagogues who had previously occupied the stage, and new cultural orientations were emerging. The most adamant and severe critics of positivism were the neo-idealists, led by Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, but neo-Kantians like Giovanni Vidari and representatives of other lesser

not elsewhere, pedagogy was first claimed to be founded *exclusively* on psychology, biology, sociology; and here, and not elsewhere, there has been a type of education *entirely human* education, both in its foundations and in its goals. Thus, at the pedagogical banquet of nations, Italy has obtained a good place, and will retain it, despite the attempts of some muddy forces to return to somewhat old-fashioned educational methods, disregarding their scientific foundations. But there are still, and there will be for some time, the followers of Angiulli who will always fight alongside De Dominicis, Ardigò, and Sergi in favour of the scientific pedagogy that can now be said to be Italian pedagogy’ (Vecchia 1894, pp. 235f.).

28 De Dominicis 1896/1907³. This work was arranged in three parts (coinciding with the three years of teacher-training college): *La scuola e lo scolaro* (dedicated to F. Veniali, Director of Education in Ancona); the same title for the second volume (dedicated to V. Bacci, Director of Education in Rome); and *Storia della scuola e antologia storica della pedagogia*, (dedicated to P. Pratesi, Director of Education in Alessandria).

29 Giuffrida 1911. The author (a teacher-training college professor in Catania) produced the third volume on the history of pedagogy in several parts, published over a period of years (from 1900 to 1918). The part on contemporary Italian pedagogy covers the period up to 1901. The other parts concern French, German, English, and North American pedagogy. On the figure of Giuffrida, see Todaro 2014.

30 Ciulli Paratore 1912. Derived from lectures the author held at the teacher-training college in Chieti, this work – inspired by a positivist pedagogy – always seems to be informative and up-to-date. There is also an interesting work by Rossi 1891, in two volumes, the second of which provides a historical account, presenting the ‘best pedagogical doctrines expounded by the most distinguished men, to elucidate their strengths and weaknesses, and draw from them norms for use in education’ (p. 1).

31 Marchesini 1911, 1922 and 1913, a valuable work that underwent various re-editions and revisions. On the figure of Marchesini, see Zago 2014.

orientations also voiced their serious reservations. Pedagogy textbooks were among the first targets of their accusations, although there were contrasting theoretical premises at the root of the confrontation. While a reconstruction of the complex and lively debate on pedagogy and the Italian school system in the years before the Great War goes beyond the scope of this contribution, it is worth commenting briefly on the discussions concerning the figure of the professor of pedagogy and the textbooks on the subject. One scathing judgement comes from Alfredo Galletti and Gaetano Salvemini:

'The pedagogist, at least five times out of ten, is a poor wretch who knows nothing about anything, and claims to teach everyone how to teach everything. And then the pedagogy textbooks explain how children have two eyes, a nose and a mouth; and the teacher must have a warm heart, a cool head, and so-so hands [...]. He must speak neither too much nor too little, neither too quickly nor too slowly, in a voice neither too loud nor too quiet, and other such nonsense and novelties'.³²

Disregarding his tone and expressions, the words of Galletti and Salvemini (university lecturers active in the professional association of secondary school teachers), bear witness to a broad-based and variegated opposition to the education system implemented by the positivists. Once again, teachers and textbooks were lumped together in an unforgiving judgement of all the weaknesses of a teacher-training system that – despite its good intentions – continued to give priority to passive learning of methods and techniques. The teaching of pedagogy at teacher-training colleges, and the dubious figure of the professors, inadequately prepared and often scarcely motivated to teach the subject, were naturally the focus of such criticism. This general climate of distrust and intolerance was also evident in a more limited adoption of the textbooks of positivist inspiration. So there was some change underway, but it was still coming up against a tenacious resistance and strong echoes of the past.³³

In this setting, the critical voices unavoidably came to bear primarily on the author of the most often used pedagogical textbooks. In 1910, in Benedetto Croce's journal *La Critica*, Gentile placed De Dominicis among the 'lance corporals of Italian positivism' because, after being appointed professor at the University of Pavia, he limited himself to: publishing and republishing 'old and new papers on practical pedagogy'; writing and rewriting 'school textbooks, to which he owed his fortune, for various reasons [...] and not entirely without merit'; to organising 'pedagogical periodicals and collections'; to writing 'a broad compilation of *Scienza comparata dell' educazione*', becoming 'almost popular as a writer on pedagogical topics', while no longer taking an 'active and noteworthy part [...] in the philosophical movement'.³⁴ The portrait of De Dominicis drawn a little later by Lombardo Radice was much more colourful, and critical:

'De Dominicis, undisputed lord of that respectable audience of semi-intellectuals, whose books discuss with superior ease the use of enemas for babies and the death of metaphysics, marsupials and school hours, distortions of the spine, and religious teaching, solar energy and the family'.³⁵

32 Galletti/Salvemini 1908, p. 406.

33 Between 1908 and 1914, the journal *Rivista pedagogica*, founded and animated by Credaro, contained numerous contributions on the teaching of pedagogy, written largely by professors at teacher-training colleges. In almost all their articles, there prevails the old view of pedagogy as a science based on physiology and psychology, and governed by moral principles. There seems to be no sign of any clear awareness of the new theoretical and practical approaches that had emerged in the field of pedagogy since the turn of the century (see Zago 2005).

34 Gentile 1910, pp. 192f.

35 Lombardo Radice 1911, p. 74.

Lombardo Radice's sarcastic comments were not aimed only at the figure of De Dominicis. They also intended to condemn the positivist textbooks, which were accused of being tools that reduced education to the rote recall of a set of minute and pedantic teaching rules with no practical foundations. An accentuated professionalism – or technicism – came at the expense of speculations and principles, and underestimating the theoretical and historical dimension ultimately (according to this critical view) reduced the training of future school teachers to as narrow-minded empiricism. There was no lack of concrete proposals in this animated cultural climate, some of which tended to innovate and integrate the positivist textbooks available, while others went beyond them to create alternative proposals. Among the former, there were those developed by Giovanni Vidari and Giovanni Calò.

Respect for the ministerial programmes coexisted with a new pedagogical and didactic approach in Calò's *L'educazione degli educatori*,³⁶ which he wrote at a time when he supported a spiritualist realism in philosophy and a renewed Herbartism in pedagogy. Going against the empiricism and the oversimplification of traditional pedagogical teaching, he claimed that future school teachers needed a more solid and profoundly cultural education. The space reserved for the typical topics of scientific psychology (attention, apperception, association, memory, thought, language, as well as imagination and play, and so on) was inseparable from a formative goal of ethical-religious type. Calò thus tried to show that the indispensable theoretical foundations could be reconciled with the practical applications. Vidari, a lecturer at the University of Pavia, took a different stance. In the *Preface* to the first volume of his pedagogy textbook, he emphasised how his work differed from others on the market, deliberately moving away 'not only from the current official programmes for teaching pedagogy, but also from the way in which it is most often perceived'. Explaining his position vis-à-vis the positivist one, he wrote that pedagogy should not be 'the humble (and scarcely tolerated) science of children's education, but should be considered and appreciated as one of the most noble disciplines of the spirit, as the *Filosofia dell'educazione dell'uomo*'.³⁷ In his view, the aim of education was to promote people's development of their spiritual energies, and certainly to be seen in relation to the environment and to the action of the multiple external factors the positivists gave priority to.

An explicitly 'alternative' text was published by Giovanni Gentile between 1913 and 1914. Its conception was due, as the author himself wrote, to 'a longstanding repugnance for pedagogy as it is commonly intended, and expressed in the official programmes'. His work was not, nor had he meant it to be, a 'school book' in the usual sense of the term, even though the first edition was included in the publisher Laterza's newly created *Collezione scolastica*. Intended initially for teacher-training colleges, the work consisted of two volumes: one dedicated to general pedagogy and the other to teaching methods. Already in the *Preface*, Gentile wrote that his work was neither 'along the lines of the ministerial programme', nor 'in the service of pedants', partly because he was of the opinion that no science can teach the art of schooling. The work was intended for future school teachers, but it was also meant for all men of culture because (again according to the Sicilian philosopher) the authentic lecturer is a man of learning who, instead of repeating himself and what he knows, can construct and reconstruct himself continually in the educational process. Gentile was therefore against a 'pedagogism' of formulas

³⁶ Calò 1914.

³⁷ Vidari 1916, 1918, 1920 (the quotation comes from Vol. 1, pp. IXf.). The publication of this work in the prestigious Hoepli collection (which contained 1800 titles in 1919) certainly facilitated its dissemination (for a discussion of the action taken to spread this collection in Italy, see Giovannini 1980).

and diagrams and in favour of pedagogy as a 'philosophical science'.³⁸ He denied the value of methods, techniques, didactics, and norms. His work was not easy to read, especially for college students of the time, and it was removed from the *Collezione scolastica* already in its second edition (which appeared in 1920), partly because very few colleges had adopted it. Although it met with little success as a textbook, Gentile's work exerted a huge cultural influence. By systematically outlining the neo-idealist approach, it went on to become the dominant force in the world of pedagogy and education in Italy for several decades. Within the context of the new model of education, the professor of pedagogy was no longer seen as an expert who taught teaching norms and rules, but as a man steeped in culture, capable of creating a spiritual atmosphere in his classes, and making it resonate in the souls of his students.³⁹

The new textbooks published during this fervent season represent just one aspect of the more general debate underway between positivists and neo-idealists at the start of the century. Strategies and developments already being shaped would lead, after the war, to a new type of teacher-training with more cultural than technical-professional leanings, to a profoundly changed figure of the professor of pedagogy, and to a very different content in their textbooks, though the latter continued to serve as the former's main teaching tool.

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38 Gentile 1913-1914/1954, pp. VIII f.

39 Based on his own experience as a professor of pedagogy at teacher-training colleges, and especially on the strength of Gentile's ideas, a young Ernesto Codignola wrote that: 'instead of the pretentious and inconclusive little formulas of psychology, and official teaching theory, and the silly little moralizing sermons of the traditional ethics and history of pedagogy', we should opt for a 'serious and rigorous philosophical teaching'. That is why 'today's school with its professional pretensions should be replaced with an institute of intermediate level, humanistic culture, capable of delivering a serious, solid knowledge, culminating in an adequate philosophical understanding of the spirit and of the fundamental problems of life' (Codignola 1917, p. 38 and p. 131).

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