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## **Gli Insegnanti in Italia. Radiografia di una Professione**

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## Reviews

Colombo, M. (2017). *Gli insegnanti in Italia. Radiografia di una professione*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero

Is it the school that makes teachers or are the teachers that make the school? There is some truth in both statements, as we know. Numerous variables contribute to forging the complex school system. Closed between contradictory conditions, constraints, and mandates, an exiguous space seems to remain to teachers' autonomy. On the other hand, it is the teacher, whether he/she is aware or not, who embodies the institution within the classroom, exercising the power of the didactic relationship: in this sense, they determine – with their own body, one would say – school policies translating pedagogies and rules into the field.

An honest and informed discourse gains a lot in clarity when it declares from which perspectives the role of the teacher is framed. *Insegnanti in Italia* (Teachers in Italy. Radiography of a profession) starts from the premise that are teachers themselves who make the difference. The Author, Maddalena Colombo, is professor of Sociology of Education at the Università Cattolica del Sacro cuore, Milano.

First of all, Colombo's diagnostic image offers a reasoned framework of issues that concern the definition of teaching as a professional art: teachers are employees, under certain aspects, but they also have freedom to teach and must have specialized knowledge and skills; teaching is an art, whose features are defined by more or less formalized regulations. Teaching as an activity takes place, according to K.E. Weick's formula, in "loosely coupled organizations" – a condition which must be taken into account when questioning aspirations and limits of scholastic reformism – and that is affected by some peculiarities in recruitment, career and training, especially in Italy.

The second chapter reviews some quantitative information in order to identify the object of the study; the third focuses on the decline of teachers' social recognition; the fourth identifies some fields of tension that test the teacher's ability to adopt appropriate didactical choices. These "great dilemmas" are markers of criticality, but they can also open spaces for

professional self-determination: socialisation vs. selective function of the school, universalistic approach vs. attention to differences, innovation vs. tradition.

The last chapter proposes four levers, which one can base on, in order to exercise the control and to preserve the school's vitality, starting from the enhancement of teachers: the quality of teaching as a horizon of investment and self-determination of the category, rather than external control of its work; the credibility of the teacher in front of pupils and families; the enhancement of intergenerational dynamics in the classroom environment; a training model *for* teachers but also *with* teacher, discussed and implemented with them.

From the point of view of someone who, like I do, studies education from a historical perspective, there are some elements, in this rich and synthetic catalogue of issues, soliciting more immediate resonances. One of the most interesting points concerns the hypothesis, which finds some echoes from the very first pages, that the consume of information technologies have dug a gap between yesterday and today in the function and reputation of the teacher. This assumption, if one reads the relationship between school, market and technologies over longer periods, could be relativized in my opinion.

However, the Author's calibrated writing remains anchored to solid elements and does not lend itself to projective inferences on the "school of the past" that seem to imprison the discourse on education nowadays, often starting from the evaluation of the role of ICTs.

Another issue calling for further possible developments concerns the prestige and reputation of teachers and professors; in diachronic terms, since the difficult social affirmation of the role of teachers is intertwined in a very complex way with the processes of mass education, but not only. The economy of such a clear book on such a complex subject also holds the choice to take note of the segmentation of teachers according to school orders (page 15) without then being able to explore it too much, keeping the objective to show the teachers' body as a unitary subject.

Without this determination, many further implications would have added to complicate things: for example, the way in which the school system has been shaped, over time, on the social differences, by establishing structured hierarchies between teachers too; or the consequences of the different mandates assigned to the various branches of education (basic school, high

school, VET and university, etc.); or, moreover, the link between destination to this or that articulation of the school system, recruitment basin and the training and professionalization paths of teachers. Finally, what in the last times stands out perhaps more within the Italian debate upon schooling, the clear separation among the professional cultures of those who access the school job with or without a psycho-pedagogical background.

More than the experience of the primary school teachers (as the Author used to be during the Eighties), this book seems to have in mind the high school professors' profile; however, the unity of the painting holds. One of the most appreciable characteristics of this work, and the last pages confirm it more explicitly, is that it is probably the result of a vigilant, sympathetic and committed attendance in the world of teachers. Their experience is taken as an object of analysis without acquiescence but with rigor and, at the same time, with respect for the cultural patterns with which they tell and reformulate themselves. A painstaking care on the lexicon testify the Author's consciousness about the implicit beliefs that who are "school-minded" have in common. Despite of this attention, some traces of her personal posture towards the research object emerge. But the Author plays with open cards: in this case, the opportunities for lexical mimesis are allowed but also productive: a fruitful consequence of a dive in the less known depths of teachers' world. In such a way the book answers to the need of scientific contributions to enrich the debate about school, from the dual point of view of a skilled scholar and a sympathetic observer.

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