

STORIES OF SCHOOL AND CHILDHOOD: VIDEO TESTIMONIES FOR A BOTTOM-UP NARRATIVE

Relatos de la escuela y de la infancia: videotestimonios para una narrativa desde abajo

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Abstract. This paper provides an initial report on research, still in progress, aimed at the creation and archiving of video testimonies on the memories of childhood and school among Italians born in the 1940s and 1950s. During this critical period, Italian schools were still based on pedagogical models as well as on teaching practices from previous decades; however, they were also making the first tentative experiments with innovation and launching significant processes of democratisation. Oral testimonies of the experiences of pupils are therefore an undoubtedly valuable source for researchers involved in the complex process of creating the collective memory of school. Archived collections contain a wealth of written and audio-visual documents in which these life stories can be found. Normally, however, at least in the Italian setting, these are ego-documents collected and organised according to other research categories, to which the scholastic experience only serves as background. Memories of the time spent at the school desk were not considered central to the account and often remain part of a much broader context, from which it normally emerges only incidentally. Thus, school years were not the focus of the research. This contribution is therefore an attempt to make an initial presentation of a project involving the creation and collection of numerous video interviews in which memories of school and childhood were the main topic right from the interview planning stage. The ultimate goal of the research is to create a digital video archive of memories about school and education.

Keywords: Childhood memories; School memories; Video testimonies; Youth; Economic miracle.

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Resumen. *Este artículo ofrece un informe inicial de la investigación, todavía en curso de realización, dirigida a la creación y archivo de videotestimonios sobre los recuerdos de la infancia y la escuela de los italianos nacidos en los años cuarenta y cincuenta. Durante este periodo crítico, las escuelas italianas estaban todavía basadas en modelos pedagógicos y prácticas de enseñanza de décadas previas; sin embargo, se estaban produciendo los primeros experimentos innovadores y significativos procesos de democratización. Los testimonios orales de las experiencias de los alumnos constituyen, por tanto, una fuente de indudable valor para los investigadores implicados en el complejo proceso de creación de una memoria colectiva de la escuela. Los fondos archivísticos son ricos en documentos escritos y audio-visuales en los que pueden encontrarse estas historias de vida. Normalmente, sin embargo, al menos en el ámbito italiano, se trata de ego-documentos recogidos y organizados en función de otras categorías de investigación, para las que la experiencia escolar constituye simplemente un telón de fondo. Los recuerdos del tiempo pasado en el pupitre no se consideraban centrales para el relato principal y a menudo formaban parte de un contexto mucho más amplio, desde el cual normalmente solo emergían de manera incidental. Los años escolares no constituían, pues, el centro de atención de la investigación. En consecuencia, esta contribución es un intento de realizar una primera presentación de un proyecto que implica la creación y recopilación de numerosas entrevistas de vídeo en las que los recuerdos de la escuela y la infancia sean el tema principal ya desde la fase del diseño de la entrevista. El objetivo último de la investigación es crear un archivo digital en vídeo de recuerdos de la escuela y la educación.*

Palabras clave: *Recuerdos de la infancia; Recuerdos de la escuela; Videotestimonios; Juventud; Milagro económico.*

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

The project acquired its final form in September 2013, after a phase of development that began a few months earlier as part of the scientific activities coordinated by the «Childhood Studies» Research Unit of the Department of Education and Psychology at the University of Florence. The initial idea came from the need to dispense with the rigid approach normally found in academic circles, which tends to view teaching as a stage subsequent to a period spent conducting research. We saw the need to link the two processes in a more organic way and attempt to launch a proposal that could achieve a more meaningful coherence, rather than the mere formalisation and communication of research results through their presentation in a series of traditional lectures based exclusively on

content. We were convinced at the time, and are even more so now, that innovative forms of workshop teaching are a path that should be pursued with greater emphasis in university education. In particular, workshops and interactive methods are extremely effective in encouraging participatory teaching, which can facilitate: knowledge creation, rather than the mere transmission of notions and content; the development of critical thinking and soft skills, through the use of reflective, interpersonal and cooperative skills; and the connection between university and the outside world of careers and work.

We therefore based our approach on the planning of courses in «Early childhood Education», given by Emiliano Macinai, and the «History of Educational Processes», given by Stefano Oliviero, both in the first year of the three-year degree course in «Early childhood Studies». The same group of students attend the lectures for both courses, which meant that we could organise the weekly timetable with back-to-back lectures on at least two days each week. We were able to arrange a day with four hours of combined lectures on which we set up an experimental methodological workshop on historical and educational research, entitled «Childhood Studies and Research».

This approach allowed us to focus on our main teaching and research objectives. On the one hand, we were able to re-examine traditional teaching and combine it with extracurricular field research activities that could help a large group of students personally familiarise themselves and experiment with qualitative research tools. On the other hand, we were able to combine a common interest in the bottom-up reconstruction of a social history of school, based mainly on the childhood memories of selected witnesses, with an educational proposal that would appear consistent and complete, rather than abstract and fragmented, from the student's perspective. This second point proved to be extremely important for us during the planning of the project. The workshop experimentation, if properly conducted, would have allowed us to create a synergy between the two courses, not only in terms of their topic. It would give the students a clearer perspective of unified research, which could overcome the divisions that the didactic partition of subjects, courses and programmes creates in the student's perception and that often become established within fields of research. In addition, a specifically operational workshop

would give the students an experience as budding researchers, so to speak, and enhance the formal aspect of university attendance with that of practical group research conducted in the field. This would be educationally valuable on a scientific level, in terms of experience and, not least, as an introduction to the use of methodology at an early stage of their university education, which can then be refined when working on their final theses.

To date, the project has been conducted over three semesters, during which a total of 322 students were directly involved in the research:

Semester	Period	Participants
First semester 2013-2014	October-December 2013	100 students
First semester 2014-2015	October-December 2014	119 students
Second semester 2014-2015	March-May 2015	103 students

Although the research activity, presented as optional, formed an integral part of the total number of hours allocated to the two courses. We may therefore reasonably assume that those who took part did so through their own motivation and interest. Participation in the workshop and completion of the planned research task was evaluated positively in the final examination for both of the set courses.

The basic objective that we set for the project, as previously indicated, was the creation of an archive of memories, collected through autobiographical video interviews. To date, student participation has been more than satisfactory and the materials collected have already allowed us to begin the compilation of the digital archive and to consolidate it with a significant number of sources. The direct involvement of students in the activity of collecting video testimonies allowed us to interview a wide range of individuals, all of similar age and geographical origin. Moreover, we were able to draw on students' own family members, relatives and acquaintances, selecting individuals born between 1945 and 1955. With the exception of certain cases, geographical origin has been limited to the region of Tuscany. The three-year degree course in «Early childhood Studies» has a regional focus and the student intake is mainly from Tuscany. Nevertheless, we also decided to accept the testimonies of people from other areas, as their recollections may provide

supplementary details for a clearer understanding of the specific features and continuity of the local reality compared to other regional contexts. We did not accept video interviews of people born in periods other than 1945-1955.

Each of the two courses had a teaching load of 60 hours of classroom lectures. About a quarter of this time was dedicated to the experimental methodological workshops, in which we first examined some basic theoretical points and then technical, organisational and operational aspects, in order to create a frame of reference for the research with a sound epistemological base and methodology.

More specifically, in the initial workshop sessions, due attention was given to examining qualitative research methods, particularly semi-structured autobiographical interviews. We have provided and analysed some basic research literature, and we have presented and discussed a series of examples of digital memory archives, with time allocated for viewing content and interviews, analysis and group comments. We have also provided references for the open access digital repositories presented during the course of the workshop. We have placed attention on the reconstruction of the meaning and significance of memory as a potential historical source, i.e. we presented the research proposal within the context of epistemological reflection on social history and introduced the historiographical issues underlying the debate on oral sources, memories and recollections, with particular use of the contributions listed in the bibliography.

We decided to involve the students directly in the discussion of the research goals. In the preliminary discussions during the initial stages of the workshop, we have discussed and agreed the decision to focus on collecting testimonies of school memories. Having established this shared premise, we were then able to identify and define the field of enquiry with the students and discuss specific topics that could be covered during the interviews. The first phase involved extensive brainstorming, during which we simply noted down all the proposals made by students. We then filtered the long list of ideas that had emerged from the general discussion in order to prepare a working grid with a defined number of topics on which to base the interviews.

Finally, we dedicated a special workshop session to clarify the technical and operational details of the research: the choice of equipment and its proper use in relation to the research goals; procedures for the collection of data and video recordings; and the filing and preservation of the memories. In this phase, the final point was resolved through the use and submission of DVDs by the students, for contingent practical reasons. The implementation of the project includes the transition of the video interviews to non-material forms of production and storage. We shall come back to this point later on.

The last phase of the workshop included the screening of a part of the video interview collection. Each student was required to produce a clip with significant excerpts from the full interview, with a maximum running time of ten minutes. This provided an opportunity to complete the teaching side of the process: through viewing and group discussion, the students gained direct awareness of the amount of sources they had produced and were able to discuss how to improve the way the interviews were conducted and any technical or methodological aspects that may have affected the quality of the product.

CREATION OF THE ARCHIVE

As mentioned, the work of training the students/interviewers, defining the method and collecting the interviews lasted three semesters and involved about 500 students, with a total of 322 open interviews. However, after an initial analysis of the material produced by the students, we have made a not-excessively strict selection, with the removal of 23 interviews, or 7.14% of those collected, due to very poor technical quality or failure to meet the basic research criteria. For example, we deleted interviews in which the quality of the audio or video excluded any use of the material, or in which the respondent turned out to be not from the required age group.

We have developed collectively the tool for conducting the interviews through various discussions and reflections, i.e. with the active participation of the students. Their contribution was essential, even at this stage, to further expose them to some of the key themes and issues of the research, which had also been discussed in our courses of Early Childhood and the

History of Educational Processes. The students' suggestions regarding the topics to be covered in the interviews were gradually formulated during the discussion and were then reviewed and corrected, if necessary, through our intervention as facilitators. The purpose of the interviews, in any case, was to examine childhood memories of the so-called «first generation»,¹ and the people interviewed were Italian men and women, mostly from Tuscany, born between 1945 and 1955.

The decision to focus our investigation on this age bracket was due to the unique characteristics of the generation born in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the extraordinary changes that affected Italy at that time, from the efforts of reconstruction to the achievement of the economic miracle. Observers from that time have written thousands of pages describing and analysing the first generation, in ways that vary in terms of suitability, along with various social research initiatives aimed at shedding light on one phenomenon: the definition of a recognisable juvenile world, whose surprising novelty made it seem quite mysterious at times. Historiographical production, as is noted and not difficult to imagine, has been equally prolific.² Here it is sufficient to note that post-war Italy was a predominantly rural country that had been deeply affected by the world-wide conflict; it was therefore poor and going through great hardship. Over a relatively short space of time, however, it gradually became one of the most developed and industrialised nations in the world.³ Thus, the style and patterns of life in Italy changed rapidly, particularly the private and public life of the new generation, which was affected by processes of modernisation and the rising consumer revolution. It is no coincidence that this also included generational aspects (music, fashion

¹ Simonetta Piccone Stella, *La prima generazione. Ragazze e ragazzi nel miracolo economico italiano* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1983).

² Paolo Capuzzo, «Youth and Consumption», in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 601-617. Franco Crespi (ed.), *Le rappresentazioni sociali dei giovani in Italia* (Roma: Carocci, 2002), Paolo Capuzzo (ed.), *Genere, generazioni e consumi. L'Italia degli anni Sessanta* (Roma: Carocci, 2003). See also Ugo Gregoretti (dir.), *I nuovi angeli* [Motion Picture] (Italia: Arcogalatea Titanus, 1961).

³ Guido Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano. Culture, identità, trasformazioni fra anni cinquanta e sessanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2005), Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy* (London: Penguin, 1990). For a summary of the data of the Italian Miracle, see Stefano Oliviero, «I giovani e il lavoro negli anni sessanta: appunti per una ricerca storico-educativa», in *La ricerca storico-educativa oggi. Un confronto di Metodi, Modelli e Programmi di ricerca, II tomo*, ed. Hervé A. Cavallera (Lecce-Brescia: Pensa MultiMedia 2013), 159-175.

and mobility). Basically, the new generation embodied the freedoms, hopes and dreams of the boom. It saw itself as a coherent social group, despite class differences and various distinctive facets, from the youth aspiring to the «three Ms» («macchina, marito/moglie e mestiere», i.e. car, spouse and trade) described in the well-known research by Alfassio Grimaldi and Bertoni,⁴ to the anti-authoritarianism often expressed in families and the public arena.

School played a key role in this process of modernisation and generational self-awareness. School attendance had already grown exponentially in the 1950s, driven mainly by hope in the future as well as real and perceived change, and later by the secondary education reform of 31st December 1962.⁵ For the first time in Italy, school became a mass phenomenon and significantly delayed the entry of many (but not all) young people into the world of work and adulthood. School for all extended the period of youth, thereby contributing to new forms of consumption, both material and intangible (fashion, travel, music, cinema, etc.), that expressed the world of the new generation.

In addition to triggering unprecedented processes of socialisation, school was an exceptional experience for most Italian youth in the 1950s and 1960s. They were often the first members of their families to have an education or prolong their studies, and therefore had access to knowledge and worlds that were unknown to rural youth just a few years earlier. For young Italians in those years, school was often, or usually, a driving force for social, economic, cultural and even political emancipation, in line with the scope of Articles 3 and 4 of our then newly formed Republican Constitution.⁶

In the accounts of those interviewed, as we had supposed and then confirmed, school could hardly fail to play a central role, beyond their awareness of the processes intrinsic to mass education.

⁴ Ugoberto Alfassio Grimaldi and Italo Bertoni, *I giovani degli anni sessanta* (Bari: Laterza, 1964), 377 et seq.

⁵ Stefano Oliviero, *La scuola media unica. Un accidentato iter legislativo* (Firenze: CET, 2007). ISTAT, «Times Series. Italian historical statistical repository», ISTAT. http://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=7&user_100ind_pi1%5Bid_pagina%5D=10&cHash=312cd5eab9667f5ab0868b1c6bcf7c21 (accessed December 30, 2015).

⁶ *Constitution of the Italian Republic*. https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf (accessed December 30, 2015).

Their memories of school are intertwined with accounts of family and daily life in those days. Material aspects dominate the stories, in particular; most of the witnesses spend time describing the school buildings and classrooms, or items of furniture such as tables, chairs, blackboards and the teachers' desks. Their recollections of school also seem inseparable from the description of the clothing they wore, namely an apron decorated with a large bow, a classic image of a school child that is firmly rooted in the collective imagination of Italians.⁷

Some of the interviews indicated the potential educational heritage possessed by citizens: notebooks, report cards, inkwells... that many witnesses showed in the video to provide a more accurate description. There are also frequent recollections of teachers from primary school, «I still remember her name, she was called...», and memories linked to teachers' educational and relational skills as well as the almost everyday punishments. In fact, it would be worth conducting a specific study on school punishments in the 1950s and 1960s using our archive of video testimonies. Some interviewees, for example, described punishments without stigmatising them, simply including them in their descriptions of a teacher's educational method or as a normal part of daily life at school. It is therefore a passage that gives us a collective as well as individual memory of school. Memories linked to classmates or friendships, however, are much rarer.

Thus, as already mentioned, for that generation school is one of the central experiences of their childhood memory. It is an experience that could be defined as an «initiation» and was part of the changes/permanent features that characterised the social, economic and cultural history of those years in Italy. It is probably not far-fetched to state that childhood memories, for that generation at least, are dominated or at least guided by memories of school. Having created this audio-visual source, we can say that this topic enables memories of family, relationships with parents, teachers and work (formal or otherwise), and daily reality to acquire a coherent and unified autobiographical perspective that allows the witness to organise a meaningful personal story and the researcher to explore an essentially new and original research perspective.

⁷ Juri Meda and Ana Maria Badanelli (eds.), *La historia de la cultura escolar en Italia y en España: balance y perspectivas* (Macerata: Centro Edizioni Università di Macerata – EUM, 2013).

Over the coming months we will work on organising and extending the archive in order to improve the preservation of these audio-visual sources and allow free access to them. We will first dematerialise all the sources and convert them into online resources, and then organise them on a portal that is also linked to YouTube.

We shall continue our workshop during the second half of the 2015-16 school year (March-May 2016) to increase the database and, for the first time, in addition to conducting video interviews, we shall venture along the path of memory sharing, encouraging the collection of audio-visual materials connected with the memories of the witnesses interviewed (photos, VHS, Super8, etc.). This can then be published digitally on the portal and shared both virtually and in a series of events, or so-called «Childhood and School Memory Days», open to all citizens to reflect on individual and collective memory.

The sources collected can also be used to provide training and educational courses for students, teachers and educators.⁸

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