

SCHOOL IN BLACK AND WHITE

Photographic images of education in Italy, between reality and metaphor

Escola em preto e branco:
Imagens fotográficas da educação na Itália, entre a realidade e a metáfora

Escuela en blanco y negro:
Imágenes fotográficas de la educación en Italia, entre la realidad y la metáfora

SILVIA PACELLI*, VALENTINA VALECCHI

Università di Roma Tre, Rome, Italy. *Corresponding author. E-mail: silvia.pacelli@uniroma3.it.

Abstract: This contribution explores the role of photography as a historical-educational source and a powerful tool for investigating the history of education. It focuses specifically on the analysis of the Italian historical-educational context, by comparing a selection of images from three significant Italian archives: Photographic Archive for the History of Schools and Education, the *Biblioteca di Lavoro*, and Manacorda's *Storia illustrata dell'educazione*. This comparison uncovers valuable insights into the historical and social contexts of education, particularly by highlighting the complex evolution of educational practices in Italy, as well as the shift from traditional, authoritarian models to more innovative and progressive approaches. The study also delves into the peculiarities of photography as a historical source, as well as the non-neutral nature of photography as visual documentation and its role in shaping public perceptions of education.

Keywords: photography; history of education; visual sources.

Resumo: Este trabalho explora o papel da fotografia como fonte histórico-educacional e uma ferramenta poderosa para investigar a história da educação. Foca-se especificamente na análise do contexto histórico-educacional italiano, comparando uma seleção de imagens de três arquivos italianos significativos: o Arquivo Fotográfico para a História das Escolas e da Educação, a *Biblioteca di Lavoro* e a *Storia illustrata dell'educazione de Manacorda*. Esta comparação revela valiosos insights sobre os contextos históricos e sociais da educação, particularmente ao destacar a complexa evolução das práticas educacionais na Itália, bem como a transição de modelos tradicionais e autoritários para abordagens mais inovadoras e progressistas. O estudo também explora as peculiaridades da fotografia enquanto fonte histórica, bem como a natureza não neutra da fotografia como documentação visual e seu papel na formação das percepções públicas sobre a educação.

Palavras-chave: fotografia; história da educação; fontes visuais.

Resumen: Esta contribución explora el papel de la fotografía como fuente histórico-educativa y una herramienta poderosa para investigar la historia de la educación. Se centra específicamente en el análisis del contexto histórico-educativo italiano, comparando una selección de imágenes de tres archivos italianos significativos: el Archivo Fotográfico para la Historia de las Escuelas y la Educación, la *Biblioteca di Lavoro* y la *Storia illustrata dell'educazione de Manacorda*. Esta comparación revela valiosas perspectivas sobre los contextos históricos y sociales de la educación, especialmente al destacar la compleja evolución de las prácticas educativas en Italia, así como el cambio de modelos tradicionales y autoritarios hacia enfoques más innovadores y progresistas. El estudio también profundiza en las peculiaridades de la fotografía como fuente histórica, así como en la naturaleza no neutral de la fotografía como documentación visual y su papel en la formación de las percepciones públicas sobre la educación.

Palabras clave: fotografía; historia de la educación; fuentes visuales.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the reservations of some scholars in the past, since the 1990s, photographs have been increasingly recognized as valuable sources in history studies, on par with written ones (De Luna et al., 1983). Photographs – fragments of collective memory – provide unique insights into specific historical and social contexts, capturing moments that might otherwise be lost to time. This concept has been further emphasized following the advent of the *Visual Turn* in historiographical studies, which underscores the importance of visual sources in shaping our understanding of the past. When carefully analyzed, photography not only enriches historical narratives but also offers a new lens through which to explore the complexities of memory, identity, and social change (Burke, 2001; D'Autilia, 2005; Fischman, 2001; Mignemi, 2003).

As Peter Burke (2001) defines them, photographs are 'traces' of the past in the present (p. 13). Not mere representations, they are instead imprints of reality, documents that, even without explicit narrative, capture appearances and meanings, contributing to a 'living memory'. Photography's dual nature – objective testimony and subjective trace – gives it a unique quality that blends personal experiences with public and historical dimensions. Beyond its material aspect, whether as a tangible object or a digital file, photography has an immaterial essence, residing in the emotional, symbolic, and cultural connections it can evoke. Although seemingly objective, photographs convey values, meanings, and worldviews that reflect both photographer intention and viewer perceptions. Photographs thus not only preserve moments but also act as a conduit between past and present, linking individuals with the collective memory.

An inquiry into photography as a source must account for the inherent peculiarities of photography itself. It is ambiguous and requires interpretation on both the informational and representational levels. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, describes photography as "a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time" (Barthes, 1981, p. 115). According to Barthes, the photographic message is defined by a triangular relationship among the photographer, viewer, and photograph itself. Barthes further distinguishes two elements in photography: the *studium* (the content, what the photo represents) and the *punctum* (that which visually strikes us). Photography's objectivity is a construct; its reality depends on how both photographer and viewer engage with it. "Reading a photograph is an action in which it is not only the reader who interacts with the image. To what extent is the photographer present?" (Cecotti, 2016, p. 55).

On the selective nature of photography, John Berger (1972), known for his theoretical work on images, notes: "every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer

selecting that sight: his sight was selected from an infinity of other possible sights” (p. 10). Similarly, Susan Sontag argues,

It was once thought that the ‘photographer’ was an acute, but impartial observer; a scribe, not a poet. But when people discovered, and it didn’t take long, that no one photographs the same thing in the same way, the idea that machines provided an impersonal and objective image had to yield to the fact that photographs do not just testify to what is, but also to what the individual sees, that they are not only documents, but also evaluations of the world (Sontag, 1978/2004, p. 77).

When analyzing photography as a historical source, it is crucial to consider the photographer’s subjectivity; their personal perspective, biases, equipment, expertise, and the historical context in which the photo was taken. Additionally, one must consider the motivations behind the photographer’s work, the client’s needs, and the choices of the subjects being photographed. On the one hand, photographs may seem unreliable, or even deceptive, but on the other, they can offer valuable testimony, revealing significant aspects of reality. This ambivalence is what makes images particularly fascinating. As Burke (2001) suggests, photographs have the power to tell stories from the bottom up, capturing the everyday lives of ordinary people, an aspect that enriches our understanding of history and society.

PHOTOGRAPHS AS A DATA SOURCE IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION

Susan Sontag (1978/2004) writes, “Every photograph has a multiplicity of meanings; indeed, seeing something in the form of a photograph is like encountering a potential object of fascination. The supreme wisdom of the photographic image lies in saying: “This is the surface. Now think – or rather, intuit – what lies beyond it, what reality must be if this is its appearance” (pp. 21-22). In the context of the history of education, school photographs invite us to reflect on not only the event captured but also what lies “beyond” that moment: the pedagogical intentions, cultural norms, and underlying atmospheres within the frame. They encourage us to reconstruct not only the educational project itself but also the “multiplicity of meanings” Sontag refers to, or more precisely, the implicit narratives behind the schooling experience that these images convey.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the selected photographs as documents of the history of education, it is essential to remember the photographer’s non-neutrality in the choice of subject. This aspect is particularly evident in the educational context, where the photographer has specific intentions, aiming to

elucidate who the subjects are, what they are doing, what the surrounding environment is, and what action or lesson is being highlighted. As such, photographs are never mere recordings of events; they are conscious choices that reflect specific educational visions and objectives. The lens through which school events are captured inevitably reflects particular's view on childhood, schooling, and the educational experience. While the black-and-white photographs in certain archives may appear spontaneous in contrast to more staged school portraits, they still contain intentional choices that reveal the photographer's perspective. School photographs, as such, are invaluable because they offer direct, visual testimony, providing clues about the intentions and biases of those who took them.

In analyzing school photographs, our focus can shift toward both the educational spaces and the bodies within them. The educational space – often perceived as private and inaccessible – reveals not only the physical architecture of the classroom but also its social architecture, which highlights hierarchies and relationships between teachers and students.

The body, often overlooked or forgotten in the school context, through posture and gestures, becomes a privileged lens for observing educational models and cultural norms. The positioning of students, organization of groups, facial expressions, and arrangement of teachers tell a story of power dynamics, implicit rules, and an order often constructed to be represented.

As Roberto Farné (2021) observes, images of schools that are not pre-planned or transformed into rituals are rare. Educational phenomena are often hidden from public view, and the school building can seem like an 'impenetrable fortress':

Although children are the most photographed subjects, it is not easy to find them in photographic collections documenting the active and everyday functioning of schools. The most common image is that of ritualistic class photos or special school events that 'deserved' to be immortalized and preserved for personal or institutional memory. In such cases, photography takes on an official role, serving the school as a means of documentation and, possibly, display (Farné 2021, p. 62).

Building on Farné's ideas on *visual pedagogy*, which aims to make learning contexts and processes visible, we can assert that photography not only provides insights into perceptions of childhood and the history of education but also shapes the vision of educators. The photographer's perspective reveals not just the learning experience as a testimony or memory but also what is intended to be transmitted to future educators and adults – the distinctiveness and originality of that educational experience, which in turn becomes a model or an example.

Recognizing that photography never fully captures reality but rather offers a personal interpretation of it, the analysis of photographic sources as historical documents shifts the focus from mere representation to the educational experiences the photographers intended to convey. Behind each school photograph lies a series of choices: who is included in the image, and who is left out? How are the subjects positioned? Which aspects of the school environment are emphasized? These choices reveal ideologies, values, and cultural intentions. School photography, therefore, is never an 'objective' document; it is instead an artifact imbued with symbolic, cultural, and political meanings. It should be analyzed as not only a visual image but also a layered testimony, where material and immaterial dimensions, public and private, spontaneous and constructed, intersect. These photographs serve as windows into the world of the school and era in which they were created, while also acting as mirrors that reflect the intentions of those who captured them and the values of the society that produced them.

TESTIMONIES FROM ITALIAN SCHOOLS

During the history of Italian education, three primary examples of the use of the photographic medium for different purposes and functions have occurred. In all three, the photographs provide an insight into education and the ideas of the respective schools. However, the collected photographs also invite us to reflect on the peculiarities of and precautions employed in the use of photography as a historical-educational source, as described in the previous section.

The school photographs from the various repositories are selected and examined, with a primary focus on the following aspects: the environment of the image, from the perspective of material school culture (Meda & Badanelli, 2013; Meda, 2016; Targhetta, 2018); the space and setting; the type of activity taking place; the relationship shown between teacher and students and among peers; the proxemics and gestures represented; and the focus of the image, seen as a *punctum* (Barthes, 1981). Furthermore, the aim is to highlight how photographic images convey different ideas and collective imagery of school and education, while also revealing implicit messages through photographic choice (Mitchell, 2005).

Photographic Archive for the History of Schools and Education

The first image sample belongs to the Photographic Archive for the History of Schools and Education (FOTOEDU).¹ The project enhances the photographic collection of the National Institute for Documentation Innovation and Educational

¹ <https://fotoedu.indire.it/index.php>

Research (INDIRE)² and is realized under the scientific supervision of the Italian Society for the Study of Photography (SISF). The digital archive, freely accessible online, contains over 14,000 images, the original nucleus of which dates back to the 1925 National Educational Exhibition.

FOTOEDU is undoubtedly one of the most important photographic collections relating to the history of schools and educational systems in Italy: unique in its kind, it encompasses both a wide chronological range (from the late 19th century to 1960) and an extensive geographical coverage of the entire national territory (Giorgi & Franchi, 2012).

The extraordinary vastness of the archive and the length of this paper do not allow a thorough examination of the entire repertoire, which, however, undoubtedly requires further study; it represents a valuable source for the study of the history of schools, education, and teaching methods. We present a preliminary study of a sample of 68 photographs showing educational activities related to the teaching of geography.

Of particular interest is the classification of the images into three main categories: group photos, school life, and laboratories proposed by the FOTOEDU site itself³. The first category includes images, mostly taken in school courtyards, depicting students displaying projects created during geography lessons. In these images, the teacher is not always present, but the students' poses are always extremely formal and choreographed: they wear their best aprons with bows and are arranged in a studied, collective pose. These purposefully staged photographs, with little left to the spontaneity of children, nonetheless still provide interesting glimpses into past educational practices.

In particular, a comparison of two photographs from the 1950s, taken at the same primary school in Northern Italy, clearly reveals a strong distinction in educational activities based on gender. In the first photo, the boys (Figure 1) are showing a large map of Italy realized using the technique of perforated wood, while holding replicas of road signs. Meanwhile, in the second photo (Figure 2), the girls are displaying a large canvas on which they have embroidered Italy using a "stem stitch with hemstitching", as noted on the back of the image. In fact, until the 1970s, the Italian school system provided separate teaching for technical education (carpentry,

² Indire was established in 1925 in Florence as a national educational exhibition on the products of the 'new' schools, those that embodied Giuseppe Lombardo Radice's idea of education as an 'active' experience. Today, the Institute continues to support schools by promoting didactic innovation and supporting learning processes and the improvement of the national education system.

³ The search was conducted using a string search on the web platform with the word 'Geography'. The search initially yielded 72 images, from which 4 photographs depicting school buildings and geographical maps were then eliminated, as they did not show educational activities. The "school life" category is undoubtedly the largest (with 52 photos depicting activities taking place in classrooms during geography lessons). The "group photos" category (7 images) shows some classes posing in common areas, such as the courtyard, displaying artefacts produced by the pupils during geography lessons. Finally, the "Laboratories" category (9 photos) includes some shots of classes engaged in laboratory activities related to geographical research outside the school environment.

mechanics, technical drawing for boys and home economics, sewing, cooking and childcare for girls).

Figure 1. *Male students showing their geography products.*



Note. Source: FOTOEDU online photo archive.

Figure 2. *Female students in primary school in S. Antonio di Novi (Modena).*



Note. Source: FOTOEDU online photo archive.

The examination of the collected photographs also highlights significant differences in teaching approaches in the various depicted situations. One notable example is the spatial organization of the classroom.

Some images show traditional classrooms: wooden desks with integrated benches, which restrict the students' movement, arranged in rows, facing the teacher's desk and the blackboard. In these images, the teacher is the real focal point of the photograph, as well as the focus of the educational process, which appears primarily transmissive. Other classrooms depict a 'new' way of learning: the desks are oriented toward the window to maximize natural light for the activity and are arranged in a semicircle; the children work actively in groups.

The two images below (Figure 3, Figure 4), taken within a few years of each other, reveal a long-standing primary geographical difference in Italy between South and North and between smaller rural areas and larger urban agglomerations. This social problem, relevant for a long time, also influences the present: while the North, more technologically advanced and economically wealthy, appeared more sensitive to foreign influences and educational renewal, the South remained more traditionalist.

Figure 3. Primary school in Ispica (a small village in Sicily).



Note. Source: FOTOEDU online photo archive.

Figure 4. Primary school in Belluno, Veneto.



Note. Source: FOTOEDU online photo archive.

Overall, however, the collected images mostly depict progressive, active activities, group workshops, and outdoor lessons (Figure 5). In the photographs, the students are engaged, focused, and autonomous. The teacher rarely appears in these images; when present, they assume more of a supportive, supervisory role than a directive one (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Primary school in Bagnacavallo (Ravenna, Emilia-Romagna).



Note. Source: FOTOEDU online photo archive.

Figure 6. Primary school in Belluno (Veneto).



Note. Source: FOTOEDU online photo archive.

Of the 68 photos collected, 28 depict both traditional lessons, and workshop activities, respectively, and 12 are set in outdoor lessons. This significant presence of images depicting schools with a less transmissive-mnemonic approach and more active methods can be partially attributed to the creation of the original collection linked to the 'new' school concept of Giuseppe Lombardo Radice and other educators involved in the renewal of Italian education in the early 20th century. The archive shows a new teaching approach that's part of a wider European reform movement: instead of the traditional school – authoritarian, focused on facts, passive – schools should see kids as active learners who need to experiment, act, and explore to learn. However, this element is also closely tied to the peculiarities of the photographic medium as a historical source: teachers tend to document moments they deem important, thus unintentionally creating a selection of activities considered 'special' and worth remembering. Some of the photos were submitted to photography contests about school life or clearly show a deliberate choice in the study of setting and poses; defining a clear boundary between spontaneous and staged shots is thus difficult. Moreover, an important limitation in using this archive in more structured research is the absence, in many cases, of precise dating of the images. As such, the repertoire of photographs collected, rather than reflecting a real, quotidian school life, shows what was considered important to document and pass down.

The *Biblioteca di Lavoro* dossier series

Biblioteca di Lavoro was an innovative editorial project directed by the teacher Mario Lodi with a group of avant-garde educators, members of Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa (MCE)⁴. The editorial dossier series was published in Italy between 1971 and 1979 by Luciano Manzuoli, a Florentine printer. The series comprises 130-, 16-, or 32- page dossiers printed in an easy-to-handle size of 15x20-cm, including black-and-white photographs depicting various moments of school life as visual documentation.

The photographic images collected show the educational practices and didactic methods used in MCE classrooms in a key historical period of school renovation in Italy and reveal the pedagogical and social climate of the time. Following the student protests of 1968, the 1970s in Italy saw greater democratization of education, the expansion of mass schooling thanks to important institutional reforms, and the emergence of new pedagogical models, such as the MCE inspired by Freinet's educational ideas. The photographs are thus historical evidence of a collective imagery of school (Meda, 2020)⁵. *Biblioteca di Lavoro* was born from a profound debate on traditional schooling: many MCE teachers had contested fascism and actively contributed to the Italian liberation for the construction of an Italian Republic; their vision of education was strongly connected to ideals of freedom and the building of critical consciences (Masala, 2022). To form future critical and free citizens, however, it was necessary to renew the teaching methods used, and in this process, they found inspiration in the ideas of Freinet (1969; Ciari, 1961). The single textbook⁶, the dominant role of teachers in class, student passivity, and a competitive and standardizing model of school were among the aspects that needed renewal, as advocated by Mario Lodi and Bruno Ciari, along with many other teachers.

The ultimate purposes of *Biblioteca di Lavoro* were consequently to replace the single textbook with a plurality of material, stimulate critical thinking and cooperation with new experiments and activities in class, and to inspire other teachers

⁴ Founded in 1951, MCE is an Italian association of teachers connected to the Federation Internationale des Mouvements d'Ecole Moderne. Pettini (1980) and Catarsi (1999) provide a more in-depth study of MCE's origins.

⁵ The seventies were a great social and political transformation which also involved school. The publication of Don Milani's book *Lettera a una professoressa* (1967) had a profound influence on public opinion and became a benchmark for the school renovation process and in the student protests in 1968. Education was considered key to social emancipation and school was central to the political and social debate (Galfrè, 2017).

⁶ During the Fascist regime, the use of a single, state-mandated textbook was introduced to ensure ideological control over school curricula and promote uniform, nationalist education aligned with the regime's values. After the fall of Fascism and the Liberation, Italy gradually moved away from centralized textbook control: teachers were allowed to choose among approved textbooks published by private publishers, however, the MCE highlights the critical issues involved in choosing a single textbook around which to base the entire teaching programme, rather than a variety of methods and sources.

(Di Santo, 2022). This collection, one of the most structured alternatives to the school textbook in Italy, has not yet been sufficiently studied (Meda, 2022).

Contemporary social and political problems were present in many dossiers further justification for *Biblioteca di Lavoro*'s significance as a source in the historical and educational field. The volumes testify to and clearly express the profound social changes of the time. An examination of the collection also confirms that the dossiers constitute a visual summary of the pedagogical ideas expressed by Lodi in his books and diaries (1963; 1970), and the school photos illustrate the MCE's 'deconstruction techniques': collective conversations, group activities, outdoor trips, the unusual classroom arrangement, and the use of new materials.

Two aspects in particular capture the observer's attention: the large number of activities depicted, reflecting the idea of an 'active' school, and the centrality of democratic participation within the educational context. With regard to the first category, the photos portray children intent on cultivating an outdoor vegetable garden, painting large posters on the ground, or intent in creative experimentation and working in groups. All the children appear independent and involved in interesting activities. Many photos depict them outside the school building (Figure 7, Figure 10), in the open air, in the MCE belief that it is the social context which generates thinking and enquiry insights.

Figure 7. *Image from the dossier Cooperative a scuola (Cooperatives at school)*.



Note. The children are part of a school cooperative for the cultivation of vegetable gardens. Source: Foschi Pini (1976).

Figure 8. *Image from the dossier Prima dell'ABC (Before the ABC).*



Note. Drawing lesson at school with children painting while sitting on the floor. Source: Tonucci & De Mauro, 1976.

The concept of childhood that emerges from the photographs, in line with the pedagogical ideas of the MCE, is of not a fragile age to be defended and controlled but rather one characterized by great interests, curiosity, and creativity to be unleashed, accompanied by a strong sense of self-control and responsibility. The childhood depicted, under the expert guidance of the teacher, can address any topic and work with any material: classroom become an atelier, functional to painting, text printing with limograph, cooking, and much more (Figure 8, Figure 9).

Figure 9. *From the dossier Dall'alfabeto al libro (From the alphabet to the book)*.



Note. Children are printing the class newspaper with a technological tool. Source: Lodi, 1979.

Figure 10. *From the dossier Una grande scuola: la città (A great school: the city)*.



Note. The students show a cartridge found on the ground during one of the outdoor explorations
Source: Alfieri, 1978.

The democratic vision of school life is central in the photographs collected: children raise their hands to vote on collective class decisions, and the class is

organized like a self-managed community, founding cooperatives, discussing social problems, and finding solutions and strategies (Figure 11). Teachers are almost always absent from the images. In the dossier *Il tempo pieno* (1973, p. 8), an image caption reads, “It is not the teacher who decides what to do. When a decision needs to be taken a class assembly is called and it is discussed. One child is chairperson and anyone raising their hand can speak”.

Figure 11. *From the dossier L'unione fa la forza (Unity is strength)*.



Note. The pupils are shown deciding together to set aside part of their school kitty to support striking workers. Source: Collective work, 1971.

Starting from the assumption that photography never entirely corresponds with reality but is rather a personal representation of it (Farné, 2021), the *Biblioteca di Lavoro* images do not correspond to a widespread school in Italy in those years, but rather to a minority of experiments carried out by the MCE.

None of the files show images of ‘traditional’ teaching or conventional classroom settings. The aim of the series, as already highlighted, was to disseminate the new teaching methods experimented by pioneering teachers and to encourage their adoption by emphasizing their feasibility and the significant results achieved. As such, it is not surprising that the programmatic intent of the images was to make these aspects highly visible, emphasizing the elements of innovation. In this case as well, rather than faithfully depicting everyday school life, the images convey an idea of school and serve as valuable visual testimonies.

Storia illustrata dell'educazione by Mario Alighiero Manacorda

In 1992, Mario Alighiero Manacorda, a university professor and distinguished scholar of the history of Italian pedagogy and education, published an important volume entitled *Storia illustrata dell'educazione. Dall'antico Egitto ai giorni nostri* (Illustrated History of Education: From Ancient Egypt to the Present Day). As Silvestri (2024a, p. 205) highlights, "Never before had such an extensive project been undertaken in Italy, one capable of covering more than three thousand years of educational history while placing iconographic sources at the center of both the narrative and the research".

The work was conceived with the aim of dissemination, assigning a central role to images. Manacorda is aware of the key function that iconographic sources can play in conveying the history of education in a compelling way, even to a non-specialist audience, serving as a historical cognitive tool, with a 'heuristic' purpose. Manacorda himself stated in an interview that images possess a powerful cognitive value (Semeraro, 2001).

In the preface to the volume (1992), the author emphasizes that, until then, traditional historiography had used images solely as aesthetic tools or secondary sources in relation to written texts. In *Storia illustrata*, he proposes using images as testimonies of equal dignity to the narrative: in fact, "They allow you to see firsthand what words tell you indirectly. They are a primary tool. With images, you 'read' many things that words do not communicate" (Semeraro, 2001, p. 347).

This historical approach, in the context of Italy's history of education in the early 1990s, was highly innovative and would only gain traction later, in part due to Burke's observation: images tend to be used by historians primarily to validate the conclusions they have already reached rather than to pose new questions. However, they allow for a more vivid 'imagination' of the past (2001).⁷

The work is not without its criticisms. Certainly, better image quality would have been preferable. All the photographs are in black and white, likely to keep the costs of the volume down. Furthermore, Manacorda often loses focus on the objective data of the images, especially in the case of photographs: the captions lack a consistent format, and the source or dating of the images is frequently omitted. Instead, there is an emphasis on the description and commentary of the images, reflecting a more informative approach to the work rather than one rooted in scientific research. Nevertheless, the significant aspects of this unprecedented approach are numerous: first, even from a graphic perspective, images are placed centrally in the structure of the volume (rather than as an appendix). Moreover, the iconographic apparatus is extensive, with more than 530 images. Another key element is

⁷ An important exception to this trend is the work of Philippe Ariès (1960) with his study of paintings as historical sources.

Manacorda's choice to use a wide variety of iconographic sources, such as periodicals, sculpture and architecture, paintings, illustrations, and photographs. In particular, photos are the main category of the images particularly from the early 20th century onward in the book. Through photographs, he begins with the microhistory of each image to reach the macro-history of the history of education. This appears evident in some of the photo choices. For example, on one page, he uses a personal image of himself and his primary school class in the school courtyard: each one's microhistory is important as part of an educational and social process.

Again, Manacorda's role in selecting the images is not random but reflects his specific programmatic choices. For example, on the page introducing the early 20th century, entitled "The Century of the Child" in reference to Ellen Key's influential volume (1900), he juxtaposes two photographs with contrasting messages to highlight the differing tensions in education. Below is an image (Figure 12) set in a Catholic kindergarten: the focus of the photograph is the nun seated at the center, under the religious icon positioned prominently in the classroom. The sense of rigid stillness and severity is accentuated by the horizontal line of the wall parallel to the children sitting orderly beside the nun in an authoritative pose and by the austere wooden furnishings.

Figure 12. *Catholic kindergarten*.



Note. Source: Manacorda (1992).

A bit further down the same page is a photograph of a Montessori kindergarten (Figure 13); children are seen playing with "materials designed according to their age and psychological development" (Manacorda, 1992, p. 211). Some students look at the

camera, while others continue to play seemingly undisturbed, with one yawning. The distance between these two images is unquestionably vast.

Figure 13. *Montessori kindergarten*.



Note. Source: Manacorda (1992).

On the following page, Manacorda focuses on reconstructing some of the social changes that affected women throughout the 20th century, highlighting their social exclusion. In fact, in his work, Manacorda frames education as a long-life process and does not focus only on the history and images of children; his attention is also captured by the adult educational process. Women were often allowed to engage in certain professions deemed more 'feminine', which, while representing progress, also led to a form of ghettoization, such as the roles of kindergarten or elementary school teachers.

The photograph (Figure 14) shows a teacher in front of the blackboard, holding the traditional pointer to indicate what is written. As the caption emphasizes, rather than portraying an individual image, the photograph presents a symbol, an archetype: "the female teacher who teaches".

Figure 14. *A female teacher in class.*

Note. Source: Manacorda (1992).

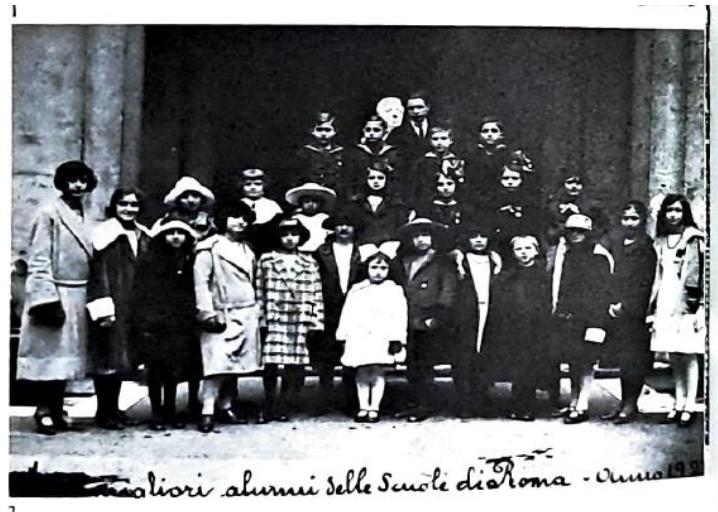
Manacorda continues his work of reconstruction by addressing the early stages of regulatory development in schools, aimed at ensuring greater literacy and the wider dissemination of the educational institution. The next photograph shows several girls climbing on a gymnasium pole, highlighting the centrality of physical education in the 'new' education.

The analysis then moves to the Gentile Reform of 1923, during the fascist era⁸. Manacorda, whose deeply antifascist views have been repeatedly expressed (Silvestri, 2024b), does not shy away from harshly criticizing this reform: the school system

⁸ In 1923, Italy implemented a major reform of its education system, led by philosopher Giovanni Gentile under the Fascist regime. Inspired by an idealist and elitist vision of education, the reform placed strong emphasis on the humanities as the pathway reserved for the cultural and political elite. It reinforced both state and religious control over schools. While the reform provided a structured and centralized education system, it also deepened social inequalities by limiting access to higher education and reducing mobility between academic and vocational tracks. Its legacy – both positive and controversial – can still be seen in aspects of the Italian school system today.

sought to select only the best, thereby excluding a large number of students from higher levels of education (Figure 15).

Figure 15. The 24 best students from Rome in 1924.



Note. By choosing this image, Manacorda emphasizes the selective intent of the Gentile Reform. The children and adolescents are arranged in a carefully staged pose, with a girl in the center wearing a coat and a large white bow. Source: Manacorda (1992).

In Manacorda's photographic selection, the differentiation of educational and professional paths based on gender is also clearly evident: on the same page, he presents young men in a technical drawing classroom and in a carpentry workshop, while young women are depicted in a typing school and during a domestic science lesson.

This is followed by a few pages dedicated to the moments of 'new pedagogy' that followed the establishment of the Republic in Italy, which led to significant educational innovations. Following the images showing children rigidly and ideologically framed on the previous pages, these photographs appear as a true form of liberation: children outdoors engaged in cultural explorations, playing in costumes during a summer camp in 1955, involved in creative work at the "Scuola-città Pestalozzi", or with the teacher Albino Bernardini in a school in a working-class neighborhood of Rome. The photographs, which strongly resemble those examined in the *Biblioteca di Lavoro* series, aim to highlight the innovation of the educational experiments conducted in Italy during these years.

Manacorda's work can be classified with full rights as a form of visual pedagogy it conducts research on visual production, considering it, in its various forms, as a social and cultural phenomenon (Farné, 2021). Despite some limitations, the volume remains an important attempt at bridging dissemination and scientific research, one still worth consulting today for the future of historical-educational research focused on iconographic sources (Silvestri, 2024a, p. 215).

FINAL REMARKS

The black-and-white photographs of school scenes presented in this article can offer vital insights into social and educational changes in Italy, contributing to the recognition of the ideologies and values that guided these transformations. Thus, photographs are not merely visual testimonies but also vehicles for deeper meanings, expressing cultural and pedagogical changes that are sometimes not immediately visible through other sources. To fully comprehend their significance, it is essential to treat photographs as not objective documents, but partial interpretations of school life, often influenced by the choices of moments to capture. In this sense, what is presented becomes a symbol of what is intended to be communicated. To gain a more organic and coherent vision of school, the visual sources – even photographs, with their apparent objectivity must be confronted and integrated with other types of sources, such as narratives, pedagogical texts, diaries, direct stories, and video documentary.

In particular, the analysis and comparison of photographs from various archives, such as FOTOEDU, the *Biblioteca di Lavoro*, and the images in Manacorda's work, highlights the following aspects:

- a) the variety and complexity of changes in educational practices, particularly in the shift from traditional to more innovative and progressive models;
- b) the transition from a more authoritarian and rigid education system to one that is more democratic, participatory, and student centered;
- c) the evolution of teaching methods;
- d) the impact of gender roles and expectations on educational practices, as seen in the differentiation of tasks and activities for boys and girls;
- e) the growing emphasis on active, hands-on learning, with a focus on group work, outdoor activities, and practical experiments;
- f) the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than a central authority figure in the classroom;
- g) the influence of social and political movements on educational reforms, particularly in the post-war period;
- h) the representation of children as active participants in their education, capable of critical thinking and self-directed learning;
- i) the role of visual documentation in shaping public perceptions of education and promoting educational reforms;
- j) the representation of education as a tool for social change, reflecting broader societal transformations, such as the move toward greater inclusivity and democratization;

- k) the contrast between idealized depictions of education and the reality of everyday school life;
- l) collective visions and ideologies that have shaped the Italian educational system over time.

Through the careful examination of these photographs, we gain a richer understanding of how the evolving landscape of education in Italy has been influenced by not only pedagogical shifts but also broader societal changes. As a visual historical source, photography allows us to explore these transformations in ways that transcend traditional narratives, offering new perspectives on both the educational system itself and its role within the wider cultural and political context.

REFERENCES

Alfieri, F. (Ed.). (1978). *Una grande scuola: La città*. Biblioteca di Lavoro, VII(88).

Ariès, P. (1960). *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*. Seuil.

Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin Books.

Burke, P. (2001). *Eyewitnessing: The use of images as historical evidence*. Reaktion Books.

Catarsi, E. (Ed.). (1999). *Freinet e la pedagogia popolare in Italia*. La Nuova Italia.

Cecotti, M. (2016). *Fotoeducando*. Edizioni Junior.

Ciari, B. (1961). *Le nuove tecniche didattiche*. Editori Riuniti.

Collective work. (1971). *L'unione fa la forza*. Biblioteca di Lavoro, 1(16).

Colleldemont, E. (2010). La memoria visual de la escuela. *Educatio Siglo XXI*, 28(2), 133–156.

D'Autilia, G. (2005). *L'indizio e la prova: La storia nella fotografia*. Mondadori.

De Luna, G., Ortoleva, P., Revelli, M., & Tranfaglia, N. (1983). *Il mondo contemporaneo. Gli strumenti della ricerca: Questioni di metodo. La fotografia*. La Nuova Italia.

Di Santo, M. R. (2022). *Mario Lodi e la “Biblioteca di Lavoro”: Una proposta didattica alternativa ancora attuale*. Edizioni Junior.

Farné, R. (2021). *Pedagogia visuale*. Raffaello Cortina.

Fischman, G. E. (2001). Reflections about images, visual culture, and educational research. *Educational Researcher*, 30(8), 28–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3594347>

Foschi Pini, C. (Ed.). (1976). *Cooperative a scuola*. Biblioteca di Lavoro, V(60–61).

Freinet, C. (1969). *Le mie tecniche*. La Nuova Italia.

Giorgi, P., & Franchi, E. (Eds.). (2012). *L'obiettivo sulla scuola: Immagini dall'archivio fotografico INDIRE*. Giunti.

Key, E. (2019). *Il secolo del bambino* (Nuova ed.; T. Pironi & L. Ceccarelli, Eds.). Edizioni Junior. (Original work published 1900)

Lodi, M. (1963). *C'è speranza se questo accade al Vho*. Einaudi.

Lodi, M. (1970). *Il paese sbagliato*. Einaudi.

Lodi, M. (Ed.). (1979). *Dall'alfabeto al libro*. Biblioteca di Lavoro, VIII(94).

Manacorda, M. A. (1992). *Storia illustrata dell'educazione: Dall'antico Egitto ai giorni nostri*. Giunti.

Masala, A. (2022). *Mario Lodi maestro della Costituzione*. Asterios.

Meda, J. (2016). *Mezzi di educazione di massa: Saggi di storia della cultura materiale della scuola tra XIX e XX secolo*. FrancoAngeli.

Meda, J. (2020). Memoria magistra: La memoria della scuola tra rappresentazione collettiva e uso pubblico del passato. In G. Zago, S. Polenghi, & L. Agostinetto (Eds.), *Memorie ed educazione: Identità, narrazione, diversità* (pp. 25–35). Pensa MultiMedia Editore.

Meda, J. (2022). Prefazione. La Biblioteca di Lavoro di Mario Lodi tra ortodossia freinetiana, indipendenza intellettuale e specificità culturale. In M. R. Di Santo, *Mario Lodi e la “Biblioteca di Lavoro”: Una proposta didattica alternativa ancora attuale* (pp. xi–xvi). Edizioni Junior.

Meda, J., & Badanelli, A. (Eds.). (2013). *La historia de la cultura escolar en Italia y en España: Balance y perspectivas*. EUM.

Mignemi, A. (2003). *La visual history: Lo sguardo e l'immagine. La fotografia come documento storico*. Bollati Boringhieri.

Milani, D. (1967). *Lettera a una professoressa*. Libreria Editrice Fiorentina.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*. University of Chicago Press.

Pettini, A. (1980). *Origini e sviluppo della cooperazione educativa in Italia: Dalla CTS al MCE (1952–1958)*. Emme Edizioni.

Semeraro, A. (2001). L'intervista. In A. Semeraro (Ed.), *L'educazione dell'uomo completo: Scritti in onore di Mario Alighiero Manacorda* (pp. 346–347). La Nuova Italia.

Silvestri, L. (2024a). La *Storia illustrata dell'educazione* di Mario Alighiero Manacorda tra divulgazione e ricerca scientifica: Limiti e novità. *Studi sulla Formazione*, 27, 205–215.

Silvestri, L. (2024b). *Una vita onnilaterale: La riflessione pedagogica di Mario Alighiero Manacorda (1914–2013)*. Unicopli.

Sontag, S. (2004). *Sulla fotografia: Realtà e immagine nella nostra società*. Einaudi. (Original work published 1978)

Targhetta, F. (2018). Tra produzione industriale e alfabetizzazione diffusa: Nuovi approdi per la storia della cultura materiale della scuola. *History of Education & Children's Literature*, XIII(1), 587–592.

Tonucci, F., & De Mauro, T. (1976). *Prima dell'ABC*. Biblioteca di Lavoro, V(56).

SILVIA PACELLI: Postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Educational Science of the University of Roma Tre and contract lecturer in “History of Pedagogy and Educational Institution” at the University of Milano Bicocca. She holds a PhD in “Theory and history of pedagogy, education, children's literature” in Roma Tre University. Her research interests primarily focus on the historical study of children's literature and the use of iconographic sources for the reconstruction of the history of education.

E-mail: silvia.pacelli@uniroma3.it
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9124-9213>

VALENTINA VALECCHI: She holds a degree in Art History from the University of Perugia and a PhD in Theory and History of Pedagogy, Education, and Children's Literature from Roma Tre University. She also holds a Master's degree in Children's Literature and a Master's degree in Art Education and Didactics. At Roma Tre University, she serves as subject expert in History of Education and Communication Processes, and in Children's Literature.

E-mail: valentina.valecchi@uniroma3.it
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1589-0758>

Received: 2025.01.31

Approved on: 2025.11.16

Published on: 2025.12.31

NOTE:

This article is part of the dossier “Photography as a Source for Research in the History of Education”. The set of texts was jointly evaluated by the associate editor responsible, within the scope of the RBHE Editorial Board, as well as by the dossier proponents.

RESPONSIBLE ASSOCIATE EDITOR:

Olivia Morais de Medeiros Neta (UFRN)
E-mail: olivia.neta@ufrn.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4217-2914>

DOSSIER PROPONENTS:

Maria Ciavatta (UFF)
E-mail: maria.ciavatta@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5854-6063>

Maria Augusta Martiarena (IFRS)
E-mail: augusta.martiarena@osorio.ifrs.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1118-3573>

PEER REVIEW ROUNDS:

R1: two invitations; two reports received.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pacelli, S., & Valecchi, V. School in black and white: Photographic images of education in Italy, between reality and metaphor. *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação*, 25, e392. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/rbhe.v25.2025.e392>

FUNDING:

The RBHE has financial support from the Brazilian Society of History of Education (SBHE) and the Editorial Program (Call No. 30/2023) of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

LICENSING:

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY 4) license.

DATA AVAILABILITY:

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.