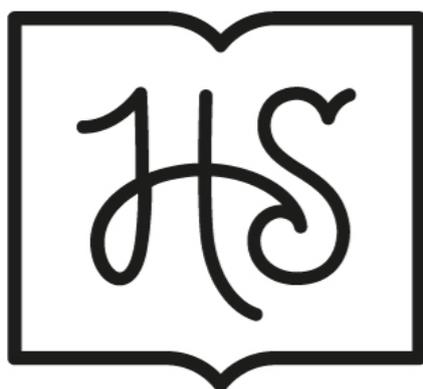


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REPORT:

4th Anglo-Spanish Meeting on History of Education: Biography, History and Education.

Luana SALVARANI^a

^a Dipartimento di Discipline Umanistiche, Sociali e delle Imprese Culturali, Università degli studi di Parma

The 4th Anglo-Spanish Meeting on History of Education has taken place at Universidad La Laguna (Spain), in Tenerife, 29th-30th June. This precious occasion of cultural exchange has been organized from its very foundation like a seminar-roundtable, drawing around a subject a small number of scholars, allowing ample time for presentations and fruitful debate. From this year for the first time, also Italian scholars were invited to join the event, making it indeed a three-nation meeting. The scientific coordination of Antonio Francisco Canales Serrano ensured the high quality of the seminar and its pleasant and informal atmosphere.

This year the subject of the meeting was *Biography, History and Education*, a theme examined under several different perspectives: presentations of ongoing biographical studies on great educators or educational reformers and activists; in-depth analyses on some methodologies and potentialities inherent in the use of biographies in historical-educational research; analysis of cultural lines and patterns in the biographies of educators as a genre in different contexts and eras.

Gary McCulloch opened the seminar with the presentation *Brian Simon, education, history and politics: a documentary history*, giving some deep insights on his ongoing research on one of the most relevant educational reformers of his time. He compared the autobiographical account given by Brian Simon himself in *A Life in Education* with the rich contribution of documentary and archival material. A committed Marxist, Simon exemplifies the challenges in following both the thread of the public biography of a politically active historian of education and the secret biography of a possible member of the Communist Party. Going beyond the official positions and statements, as made clear by McCulloch's analysis, is indeed crucial for a full understanding of the activity and thought of great figures in education and politics.

Focusing on another sort of "secret" biographies, the presentation of María del Mar del Pozo Andrés (*Biographies of educators: demystifying the heros, visibilizing the 'zeros'*) drew on the lesson of microhistory and the suggestion of Philippe Artières to give voice to underprivileged, silent men and especially women in education, whose activities have been

long forgotten but were often as important as the one of the “winners”, the outstanding and renowned protagonists of educational thought. Reconstructing the life and deeds of the schoolteacher Justa Freire, del Pozo Andrés was able to inspire the audience with the thrill of discovery and express her passionate commitment to women’s hidden history.

The first day of the seminar was closed by my presentation (*Biographies of educators in Italian history of education: from the paradigm of exemplarity (“perfectus magister”) to the challenge of diverse historical narratives*), whose lengthy title tries to trace a line from the Antiquity to contemporary times, following the steps of a noteworthy Classical paradigm, i.e. the *perfectus magister*, still active in Italian culture but dating back to the myth of Chiron as Achilles’ educator. The paradigm, especially relevant in the Renaissance and Early Modern educational history, acts in my opinion both as a hindrance to rigorous historical reconstruction and as an advantageous heritage of dignity and responsibility in performing the role of educator.

The second day of the seminar opens with Tom Woodin’s presentation, *A journey through education, politics and co-operation: the case of Joseph Reeves*, in which the biography of Reeves has been the key to unlock a geography of the co-operative movement in early 20th-century England: a movement often silent but very significant in terms of educational ideas and practices. At the crossroads between the heritage of Owenism and the self-help culture, cooperative education in Reeves’ experience was based on the ideal of a natural altruistic drive in humankind, but had to face the tension towards individualism and to resist the easy solution to give the control of education to the State. Joseph Reeves’ biography is also crucial to understand some of the critical points of the educational debate inside the Labour Party and its relationship with continental forms and cultures of socialism.

The conference continues with Mirella D’Ascenzo’s presentation *Teachers’ biographies as a resource for the history of education*. After an outline of the main historiographical currents and methods that shaped Italian history of education in the last century, D’Ascenzo focuses on the crucial role of teachers’ biographies for a deep knowledge of didactic practices and material culture of education. Explaining her research procedures on the biography of Alberto Calderara, schoolteacher in Bologna at the beginning of 20th century and during Fascism, D’Ascenzo exemplified how in-depth research on personal records can give account of the real value of educators whose position in history was peripheral or “on the wrong side”: despite his long-life fidelity to Fascism, Calderara was a precursor of many progressive ideas and practices. Concluding on another case study, the kindergarten teacher Virginia Predieri, D’Ascenzo brings forward a strong statement in support of microhistory.

With *Education and social purpose: personality and adult education in interwar England*, Mark Freeman traces three “parallel lives” around the Quaker-Socialist Educational Settlement Association, whose aim was to bring adult education to the most disadvantaged citizens and neighbourhoods. Arthur Le Mare, Charles Simpson and Arnold Freeman, as wardens of the settlements, shared a common ideal but their biographies show notable differences in their social aim and educational ideas, outlining the internal debate between an approach “from below” focused on citizen’s will and an approach “from above” based on a



deep religious commitment. The choice between democracy (“citizen first”) and a more authoritarian style exemplifies the debate on how to maximise the social impact of education whilst preserving human freedom, a debate which represents in itself one of the stronger educational dilemmas of all time.

After every presentation, ample time has been left for debate, allowing not only mutual knowledge of respective research interests among the participants, but also exchange of historiographical perspective, comparison between methods and techniques, and general reflections on the role of biographies in educational history.

The final remarks of Gary McCulloch prompted all participants to reflect more deeply about the themes of the seminar, going back especially to the duality of “public” and “secret” history, and powerfully inspired everybody to further research.