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A New Picture of Italian Teachers

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A New Picture of Italian Teachers

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[Review of the book: *Gli insegnanti nella scuola italiana. Ricerche e prospettive di intervento*, by G. Argentin, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018. ISBN: 9788815375493].

If you think about a teacher, you can have in mind a specific picture, for example, a woman with glasses and a book in her hands. This thought is stereotypical, but often reality is different. How are teachers really? In particular, who are Italian teachers? Gianluca Argentin tries to provide a sociological answer throughout this book, which is a sort of collection of his large previous work on the topic, adding empirical findings, elements for theoretical discussion and points for implementation.

The text starts with an introduction about teachers and teaching nowadays: a subject for research in several areas. Sociology, in particular Sociology of education, started to study education and schooling in the 1960's, across two important areas of interest: stratification sociology (education as a factor of inequality) and economic sociology (the school-work link). A lot of scholars have studied education and teachers in these areas. So Argentin analyses their inquiries retrospectively and argues that today the idea of "crisis" in the Italian school is outdated, with a short outlook. Then it is necessary to overcome old cliché and prejudices to understand what kind of teachers is provided, prepared and needed by the school system and the society as a whole. In this way it's possible to develop new skills for future professionals.

According to author, the attention about teachers recently increased, because – despite any cultural and social crisis – they still have an important role in socialization and evaluation in school. Teaching is a job in the welfare system that interacts with several dynamics of wider social and economic processes: thus sociology can't pretend to analyse a disciplinary sector only. Argentin recommends to change the points of view, and to avoid self-refer-

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ence in the investigation work; he decides himself to adopt a multiple analytical lens. In the first chapter the role of the teacher is described by thesis and information drawn from sociological past studies. This is not a historical excursus, rather an interdisciplinary analysis, by which the outcomes of many sociological researches about teachers and school are shown critically. In the second chapter, the teacher is defined as an important member of educational process in scholastic system, but also as a fundamental part of job market, as economics of education does. Moreover Argentin considers the contribution that each teacher gives for each student's learning. So studying teacher's quality and effectiveness means to take all dimensions into account: organisational, economic, and pedagogical: he starts with the awareness that this is a problematic point for research, multifaceted and controversial. In Italy, for example, as sociology of education has no tradition in measuring teacher and school effectiveness, it becomes important integrating quantitative methods and theoretical concepts with other kinds of measurement, such as those coming from inclusive didactics (Gaspari e Sandri, 2010; Bochicchio, 2017) and special pedagogy (Ricci e Resico, 2007; Portera, Albertini e Lamberti 2015), that give us further interesting patterns to consider effectiveness in a systemic way (not only what teacher does on every single student but what he/she creates as a systemic effect into the group of students, given its heterogeneity). Each class is made up of a group of children, often with multiple difficulties and vulnerabilities that should be considered interconnected, in a transversal way. (Armani, 2018).

In the third and fourth chapters there is a clear and deep description of Italian teachers and their work at school. Analysis is based on data drawn from Istat, Miur, IADR and OECD, which converge on this picture: teachers have middle age, they are women and they have been precarious worker for many years before reaching a stable position. Argentin tells their working conditions are very peculiar: teachers are free to choose the didactic method individually and they can prepare lessons as they like, but have strict duties in classroom, because the school organization is highly bureaucratized. So teachers can use a lot of hours freely (that are often not quantifiable) to be trained and develop their professional habitus rather creatively, but they must follow rules and routines of school that risk hindering this creative potential. For example, time for lessons is strictly scheduled and a short delay of teacher can compromise a lesson; the same can occur with space organisation.

In Italy workload is the same as compared to other developed countries. Although the majority of Italian teachers declare to be satisfied of work, a great amount of them suffer low recognition of their professional role by society (and the decline of their economic and cultural prestige since the 80s).

Author proposes some ideas to improve teacher effectiveness and their wellness. Firstly he describes recruitment of “fitting” teachers for specific level of school (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary). Additionally, he suggests to guide and support new workers more than is actually done, without forgetting to train them (and to coach them) during all career, especially the critical steps. He also agrees with teachers’ work evaluation, of course on the basis of a good system on merit pay, that rewards teachers deserving, because they have worked hard to improve pedagogy, education and work in school.

Finally, the author suggests three devices for school policies: to employ value for career progression; to adopt agreements between schools to contrast turnover of teachers (for example, to award their stability in case they work in institutes with high proportions of disadvantaged students); to guarantee quality of training.

On the whole this is an interesting work, made with clearness and scientific precision. It makes understanding complexity and versatility of this profession, and of its problematic situation at the moment, across a multi-perspective analysis and wide conclusions. To me as a teacher, it rises a point of scepticism as regards teacher’s satisfaction: the author, based on data from empirical study, argues that teachers are quite happy with their work; this could fit the profile of a young teacher, but I’m not sure about people with experience. In Italy many teachers suffer some distress, both psychological (burn out) and physical, for example disorder to vocal cords, and scare the moment when they must “go into the classroom” (Colombo, 2014). In fact, consider that teacher is almost always alone in the classroom. He/she must take fundamental educational choices on methods and didactics, without having many real opportunities for dialogue with other professionals and he/she suffers loneliness. Often, in specific and problematic situations, teacher hasn’t resources for effective answers apart from him/herself. Along their career, teachers lack of professional support, like a counsellor, supervisor or mentor, which instead is fundamental in any “developing” profession by definition. This should be a good point to start a public discussion, in order to “take care” of teachers as a school policy to increase teacher’s effectiveness.

Argentin’s analysis allows the reader to re-think about the picture of a “good teacher”: different perspectives can help to design a professional with a lot of competence, knowledge, and motivation, well embedded in his school and social environment, and engaged in a permanent development of his/her own effectiveness. In this book the reader will find the same ideas suggested by Miur: Schleicher (2016), for example, claimed for good practices to increase professionalism of teachers, such as: “To improve the perception of the status on the teaching profession, to recruit candidates best, to recognize to paths of professional development effective professional, to support the

teachers in their training and to develop the teaching how profession”. The challenge is still the same: although much has been said about teachers, the discourse is open, the text gives us new matter for debate and comparison.

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