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## **An Inquiry into the Social Prestige of Teachers in Italy**

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## **An Inquiry into the Social Prestige of Teachers in Italy**

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*Abstract:* Recent surveys of teachers' attitudes show that teachers believe that their social prestige is dramatically falling. The same was shown by surveys carried out fifty years ago. Besides, intellectuals all over the world share the same opinion. However, this contrasts with the evidence provided by studies on the ranks of occupations, and their trend over time. The reasons of the inconsistency between opinions and data are not well known and worthwhile investigating with further research

*Keywords:* teachers, social prestige, public opinion, media

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### **Commonplaces and representations**

The times are hard for schools and teachers, not only in Italy and in the countries most affected by the economic crisis. All public educational systems are doing badly, and therefore teaching as a profession, both in the material terms of pay and contractual conditions, and in the symbolic terms of social recognition. And it is this issue that will be examined in the following pages.

The belief that “in recent years” the social prestige of teachers has greatly decreased is so widespread and deeply rooted as to appear a certainty, a commonplace that bounces from teachers’ staff rooms to the analyses of experts on schools and education. Let’s look at some examples. In the essay *Salary and social prestige: Looking at Europe* (Andreozzi, 2013, p. 43), we read:

“International surveys show that in the last thirty years, school systems have gradually shown increasing signs of a long-term crisis in regard to their sustainability and effectiveness. From this especially problematic perspective it is the position of teachers that has suffered a relative loss of social prestige”.

In 2002, the second IARD [Identificazione e Assistenza Ragazzi Dotati - Identification and Aid to Gifted Kids] research report on Italian teachers stated that “The drop in the prestige of teachers is now a commonplace of social science research: teachers seem increasingly aware of this real fact of contemporary society.” (IARD cited in Fischer, 2000, p. 19).

For its part, the European agency for information and analysis of education *Eurydice* warns: “the idea that the job of a teacher is little appreciated by society in general has become a cliché touted by numerous publications and shared by many teachers. The media give voice increasingly to disenchanted teachers who express a desire to abandon their jobs if the opportunity presents itself, thus adding credence to this image of a professional category in crisis, which is suffering from a discontent whose causes are at times diverse and complex to explain. This phenomenon develops in a political context in which education is assigned priority targets and the expectations placed on teachers have never been so strong.” (Euridice, 2004, p. 8).

Lastly, the editorial of an influential periodical dedicated to public education argues that “The loss of prestige of the role of teachers and in

general of all educational roles is a widespread perception” (Rubinacci, 2014, p. 3).

### **The reasons for the decline**

The declarations about the decline in teachers’ prestige – whether in essays, articles, interviews, dialogues, debates or friendly conversations – do not fail to cite the alleged causes of the phenomenon. The factors identified to explain the drop in social prestige are a variegated host. The most numerous are specific and concrete in character, while others offer broader conceptual and interpretive frameworks. Among the first we find modest salary, dull career, difficult working conditions, vast size of category, and mass tenuring of teachers. What stands out among the broader social factors indicated as prestige-depressant are the feminization and aging of teachers, but other subtler explanations also crop up, such as “the current social condition, characterized by a well-established basic literacy and a polycentric training, weakens the perception of the centrality of the school and teachers as repositories of knowledge and representatives of a culture.” (Rubinacci, 2014, p. 2).

The fear of competitive extracurricular knowledge sources is an evergreen that ranges from TV (in the 60’s female teachers felt delegitimized by TV) to the media, the internet and the social networks. The repertoire is enriched with new entries. As for example *standardization* of teaching, which in Italy is taking its first steps toward assessing students, while in other countries (especially the US) this has rooted itself pervasively, attracting widespread criticism on account of its consequences, judged reductionist and distorting as concerns knowledge and depressive as concerns prestige<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In speeches and commentaries on the social status of teachers and the conditioning factors they are considered in realistic terms, namely rigid unique elements in their effects. Feminization is considered a deskilling factor, regardless of the fact that it depends on the position women have in society. Likewise, the standardization of the school system disqualified teaching and teachers in the here and now, regardless of the fact that there is no absolute finding, but it depends on the type of cultural orientation within which it is realized. In the mass schools of communist countries teachers enjoyed a high level of prestige in correlation with the high value that was

The weakening of the principle of authority, the unruliness of students and the disrespect for rules are recurring topics even in common conversation, which not seldom lead to attempts to reach back to a higher cause. It is said, for example, that rude, demotivated students and their lax (out of self-defense or complicity) teachers are the result of a loss of “values”, the advent of consumerism, the prevalence of money over culture, of matter over spirit . It is true that today not many traces of idealism are left, but resorting to this duo is understandable, since after all the stock-in-trade of the teaching profession is culture, just as merchandise is for a shopkeeper.

Starting from similar conclusions about the state of “values”, the diagnosis of the decline in prestige follows etiological pathways other than those of an idealistic kind. The “culture of consumerism” calls into question the socio-economic structure, globalization and neo-liberal policies.

Says a high school teacher: “In my twenty years in the classroom I’ve never seen kids behave as they do today. The world is shrinking and my students are becoming global citizens and have more power. This doesn’t mean they can treat me like garbage.” (Marantz Cohen, 2013).

These words, which project the problem onto a global scale, were uttered by a Brazilian teacher interviewed as part of an international survey on the attitudes of upper secondary school teachers about their profession. The researcher who conducted the survey wrote: “Listening to teachers from 28 countries produced a fascinating revelation: just like fast food joints and reality television, it seems that the American concept of status and prestige of teachers has been exported worldwide, infecting the field on a global scale [...]. The work thesis I’m doing is based on the idea that all countries are becoming more Western in their orientation, economies, vision and values, and that as a result the prestige of the teaching profession is declining.” She continues: “... when in various countries increasingly capitalist orientations are prevailing, parents see the teaching profession as less prestigious and less worthy of respect. Their children emulate their parents’ attitudes by misbehaving” (Marantz Cohen, 2013).

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assigned to education and science.

### How much social prestige do teachers have today?

One of the editors of the *Report on schools in Italy 2011*, Stefano Molina (2011), wonders whether the pessimism of teachers towards their social reputation is in line with reality. Undoubtedly, it is a commonplace that circulates especially among people who are engaged in an intellectual activity. Talk to any teacher and you realize that if the conversation touches upon the topic of social prestige, it often triggers in her/him a sort of automatic response: sighs, smiles, frowns, accompanied by grim words (*erosion, decline*) or by catastrophic images, (*abyss, fall, collapse, chasm*). But is the social prestige of teachers truly very low and in decline? Or is it teachers who have got it wrong and society that reveres them, today as yesterday, ranking them with a stable respect, higher than they think? In economically developed countries, the measurement of the social prestige of professions and occupations<sup>2</sup> is certainly infrequent, but not unknown. As for teachers, the neuralgic importance of education for a country means that the category is subject to periodic measurements that do not fail to concern themselves with professional prestige<sup>3</sup>. The three IARD surveys on Italy's teacher corps carried out over nearly two decades have dealt with this subject; Table 1 shows the distribution of teachers' answers to the questions on the progress of their prestige (see: Cavalli, 1990, 1992, 1999, 2000; Cavalli & Argentin, 2008).

Table 1. Teachers' social prestige according to teachers (percentage values)

	Prestige has decreased			Prestige will decrease		
	1990	1999	2008	1990	1999	2008
Primary	70	72	84	41	33	57
Level I secondary	68	72	81	39	45	56
Level II secondary	65	75	80	35	48	54
Total	67%	73%	82%	38%	42%	56%

Source: Based on data from IARD surveys.

<sup>2</sup> We use the two terms interchangeably since the differences in this text are negligible.

<sup>3</sup> In the surveys taken into consideration, the questions hinge on three aspects: the prestige they *think* they have at the moment of the interview (the place they *believe* they have in the ratings); the *perception* of the trend that prestige has had in recent years, and the *perception* of prestige they foresee it having in the future.

In 1990, two out of three teachers (67%) stated that their social prestige had diminished recently, in 1999 the percentage grew to 73% and in 2008 to 82%. A similar growth of pessimism that was recorded in forecasts for the future. A decrease in prestige over the next decade was expected by 38% of the sample in 1990, by 42% in 1999 and by 56% in 2008.

If we consider the perception of prestige in static terms, without reference to the trend of recent years, it is always pessimism that prevails. The third IARD survey report studied the satisfaction level of high school teachers for recognition of their work and found that 59.5% of those interviewed say they are dissatisfied with *society's* recognition of their role. Within the scholastic microclimate things get reversed: satisfaction prevails; 71.6% declare themselves satisfied with *parents'* recognition of their work, 82.2% with that of *students*, and 76.3% with that of *colleagues* (IARD cited in Farinelli & Barbieri, 2010).

The results of other investigations are on the same wavelength. A 1999 MPI survey shows that prestige diminished for 70.9% of primary school teachers, 71.5% of first-level secondary school teachers, and 74.2% of second-level secondary school teachers. More recently CIDI (2011) found that the assertion *My work is not recognized adequately by society* has won the consensus of 69.4% of Italian teaching personnel (66.7% kindergarten, 68.4% primary school; 65.5% secondary level; 71.3% second level of secondary school). The perception of prestige by teachers varies according to professional sector, type of instruction, geographical area, legal status and subject taught (which weighs more than all), though the assessment is always heavily negative<sup>4</sup>.

According to Eurydice (2004, p. 41): "teachers do not seem to perceive the level of recognition the population has of them. On the contrary, the impression they have is that society hardly appreciates their profession."

From the IARD Foundation's analyses (1999) we learn that in Italy about two-thirds of the teachers surveyed say that they do not feel that society

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<sup>4</sup> Social prestige is not the same for all teachers, whose position in the pyramid of prestige is usually influenced by the subject taught, the educational level in which they teach, their legal status (tenured or not). In the more detailed ratings there are two occupational categories, one for first and second level high school teachers, and another for elementary and nursery school teachers.

appreciates them, that 72% of secondary school teachers believe their profession has lost prestige in the last ten years, and finally that 45% think that this loss will increase in the future.

Actually the feeling teachers have of occupying a modest and declining position in *society's* ranking of occupational prestige is not “authentic”, in the sense that society has not underwritten it “in person” through a survey of a representative sample of the Italian population. A professional group has underwritten it, the category of teachers themselves, which scrutinizes what its ranking is in the list drawn by a representative sample of the Italian population. And it has a higher place in this ranking than what most teachers would think.

### **Social assessment of occupations**

The social prestige of an occupation indicates the relative social position it occupies in a classification made according to the assessment of a sample of the population<sup>5</sup>. We observe in table 2 the ranking of the *Sides05 Survey*<sup>6</sup>. The occupations are sorted vertically according to the scores given by a representative sample.

One glance at the data leaves no doubt, “the teaching professions are placed in the central portion of the scale: secondary school teachers are located tentatively in the second quartile, with scores close to those of middle-level entrepreneurs, industry managers, personnel heads of middle-sized companies ; primary and nursery school teachers occupy the higher positions of the third

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<sup>5</sup> The common assessment parameters of the rating of an occupation are made up, according to some studies, of symbolic and material advantages and disadvantages that the occupation offers, others instead are referred to the admiration, respect and dignity it elicits, and to the ideals of social justice that inspire it.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah De Luca, *Working Paper 05/09 La nuova scala di prestigio italiana: analisi delle differenze individuali*, www.socpol.it. The survey *La valutazione sociale delle occupazioni in Italia e nei contesti territoriali locali* (Cofin 2003/2005), on which the table is based was carried out with the intention of updating the preceding rating used in Italy by de Lillo and Schizzerotto, and of testing the hypothesis of the fixity of the occupational order with respect both to the characteristics of the interviewees and the era.

quartile, i.e. the area of the scale which hosts clothing store owners, workers of the private business sector, but also musicians and theater actors” (Molina, 2011, p. 11).

*Table 2. Evaluation of the social prestige of professions (mean average on a scale from 1 to 100)*

Magistrate	92,9
Businessman with 30 employees	83,2
Supermarket manager	66,6
Upper middle schoolteacher	66,9
Chief accountant	61,9
Auto electrician with 2 employees	49,6
Metal shop worker	30,0
Shop assistant	23,7
Janitor	20,2
Errand boy	5,7

*Source: De Luca, 2009.*

A Demos-COOP survey<sup>7</sup> (table 3) indicates that “doctors, magistrates and university professors are considered by the sample studied the most prestigious professions, but elementary and high school teachers too are considered highly respected occupations. The table also shows that the changes that took place between 2009 and 2013 were moderate and still indicating growth.” (Diamanti, 2015).

A subsequent Demos-Coop survey shows that in the period 2007-2015 the social status of teachers increased on all educational levels, with annual peaks for elementary school<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The survey reveals an interesting trend. *Self-employment* and *freelancing* are no longer the prevalent myth of the past twenty years. In 2004 – considered together – they constituted the primary point of reference for over half of the Italian population (53%), while today they are so for less than 40%. In contrast, employment holds a renewed allure, especially in the *public sector*, which today is preferred by most Italians (31%), 5% more than in 2004. (“La Repubblica”, February 2nd, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> The Demos-COOP surveys indicate that it is the elementary school teachers who stand out, followed in order by high school teachers and middle school teachers (*XLIII Rapporto*

Let's take a wider look beyond our borders. In the United States, in NORC's (*National Opinion Research Center*) top 20 ranking of social prestige, out of more than 800 occupations teachers took 16th place, right after doctors and college teachers, and ahead of psychologists, clergy, lawyers and judges. Well-paid jobs, such as business brokers, actors, bankers, got a lower score.

*Table 3. The social prestige of professions (2013). Could you tell me, on a scale from 1 to 10, how prestigious you consider each of the following professions? Average values*

	2009	2013
Doctor	8,3	8,5
Magistrate	7,8	7,8
University professor	7,5	7,8
CEO	7,2	7,6
Elementary school teacher	7,1	7,6
Upper middle school teacher	7,2	7,6
Buesinessman	7,4	7,5
Laborer	7,2	7,5
Journalist	6,6	7,0
Merchant	6,6	6,8
Office worker	6,6	6,8
Public sector manager	6,7	6,7
Politician	5,7	4,4

Source: "La Repubblica" February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013

A few years earlier *Harris Poll # 77* of August 1, 2007 noted that "Firefighters, scientists and teachers are at the top of the prestige list, while bankers, actors and real-estate agents are at the bottom." In the last quarter century, the percentage of people who have given teachers a "very high" prestige rating has grown from 29% to 54%, while that of lawyers has dropped from 36% to 22% and that of scientists from 66% to 54% .

The teaching profession, like many others, is subdivided into a number of career paths that determine different positions on the scale of social prestige. The prestige of a secondary school teacher is higher than that of a primary

*Osservatorio sul Capitale Sociale degli Italiani. Gli italiani e la riforma della scuola del governo Renzi, ottobre 2014).*

school teacher<sup>9</sup>. A recent study shows, however, that “the prestige of secondary school teachers depends not so much on the level of the school where they teach, but rather on the subject taught (Math and Italian teachers always get higher prestige ratings than their colleagues of other subjects), and for being tenured or substitutes.” (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, *Sul prestigio della professione docente*. FGA Working Papers, 2011, p. 34). In popular assessments of prestige, what counts is being tenured and teaching a subject considered essential.

### Going back in time: the ‘60s and ‘70s

What were things like half a century ago and in the twenty years that followed? The thirty-year period 1960-90 was full of decisive events. In the ‘60s schools were in a turmoil over the middle school reform, the *protests of 1968* were a historic jolt, epic or reviled, with a final tail lash in *1977*. In the 1970’s the social pressures to loosen the grip of school selection became acute, and with the scholastic decrees of 1974 came the *joint authorities*, while a harsh debate flared up over the *social management of schools*. In the 1970’s teachers had a palpable fear of intrusion in their profession by parents as a group force, and in the following decade this fear took on a different form: individual parents assumed the role, the claims and the power of clients. How could the prestige of teachers have remained unscathed?

To shed light on this issue we have reconsidered the results of some older surveys – four to be exact, done in the 1960’s and 1970’s<sup>10</sup> – in interviews where all teachers were asked identical questions, which would be framed alike also in subsequent IARD surveys.

- What place do you think public opinion gives to the job of an elementary

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<sup>9</sup> The Demos-COOP surveys indicate that it is the elementary school teachers who stand out, followed in order by high school teachers and middle school teachers (*XLIII Rapporto Osservatorio sul Capitale Sociale degli Italiani. Gli italiani e la riforma della scuola del governo Renzi*, ottobre 2014).

<sup>10</sup> The surveys we refer to from now on are cited with the *indication of the year the empirical material was gathered, not that of the survey’s publication*.

- school teacher/ a middle school teacher/ a high school teacher?
- Public opinion aside, in your own mind what would be a just place for it to occupy?
  - Do you think that in recent years the professional prestige of teachers has increased, decreased or remained the same?
  - Do you think that in the future it will increase, decrease or remain the same?
- Let's read the results that appear in table 4.
- In 1967, 68.3% of middle school teachers thought they had less prestige than they actually had. While Italian public opinion placed teachers fifth in the scale considered, three out of four thought that public opinion placed teaching lower than fifth, 32% indicated even eighth place, on a par with craftsmen or even less. And about two out of three teachers maintained that in recent years the prestige of the profession had fallen.
  - 60% of primary school teachers surveyed in 1971 said that in recent years their social prestige had diminished.
  - Among the secondary school teachers surveyed, also in 1971, the idea that the credit of the profession had diminished reached the record level of 87% (Cobalti & Dei, 1979), one percent higher than what it would be thirty-seven years later.
  - Finally, the *upper secondary school* teachers interviewed in 1976 yielded almost identical results.

Table 4. Perception of the trend in teachers' prestige surveyed in the years 1967, 1971, 1976 (percentage values)

Surveys		Increased	The same	Decreased	No reply
Lower high school	1967	13	13	63	7
Elementary	1971	18	18	60	4
Upper high school	1971	3	8	88	1
Upper high school	1976	3	9	87	1

When people are asked to make a prediction about the future (next decade) of the social prestige of their profession, the answers tend to be uncertain, elusive, ambiguous. Inasmuch as the interviewees try to be realistic, their prediction of the future of their profession contains a bit of wishful thinking,

sentiments that overlap with feelings of frustration and resentment and generate a vagueness which is poles apart from any neat and clear judgment flowing from their lips when they are asked to evaluate the trend of their prestige over the past decade.

In any case, even here the expectations of teachers in those years were certainly not rosy. Roughly one out of three teachers saw in the future signs of a comeback of social recognition for teachers, with the exception of the 1971 survey on teachers, where the optimistic forecasts were 16% and the pessimistic ones 54%.

*Table 5. Forecasts for the trend in prestige in the coming years (percentage values)*

		Will increase	Will stay the same	Will decrease	No reply
Lower high school	1967	33	40	20	7
Elementary	1971	36	29	32	3
Upper high school	1971	16	16	54	14
Upper high school	1976	37	28	27	8

It shows no clear trend. The surge of pessimism of high school teachers in 1971 (54%) could be explained by the turbulence going on in the educational world that year, but this does not square with the sharp downturn in the essentially stable school climate of four years later (27%).

Let us turn now to the other side of the assessment, society's, the population that establishes "unappealably" the prestige ranking of occupations in Italy.

Fifty years ago the stratifications of occupational ratings were unusual, and they also "suffered from considerable limitations, especially in relation to the number of occupations taken into consideration" (Pagani, 1960). In 1960 Angelo Pagani produced a rating, the only one in Italy at that time, which ranked the social prestige of a small group of professions (table 6).

The public ranked the average teacher fifth in the ratings, preceded by lawyer, architect, general practitioner and engineer, and followed by average industrialist, bank teller and merchant.

IREF's 1971 survey used Pagani's scale. *Teacher* was removed from the list, and interviewees had to indicate the location where, in their opinion, public

opinion placed it. 28.7% of the interviewees placed teacher within the first five positions, that is, the “right” place, what public opinion really assigned it. A strong majority (68.3%) placed it lower.

*Table 6. Scale of social prestige of professions*

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1	university professor
2	lawyer
3	architect
4	general practitioner
5	average teacher
6	engineer
7	average industrialist
8	bank teller
9	merchant
10	craftsman with employees
11	bar owner
12	tax clerk
13	travelling salesman

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*Source: Pagani, 1960.*

It took several years for a broad and complex occupational ranking like De Lillo and Schizzerotto’s (1985) to appear, which determined the location and resulting score of 590 occupations chosen to represent the world of employment in contemporary Italy (de Lillo & Schizzerotto, 1985)<sup>11</sup> and which even today remains a benchmark for photographing the framework of prestige in Italy. In its shortened version by groupings, secondary school teachers take twelfth position, preceded by executives, freelance professionals, middle-level state managers, and followed by average entrepreneurs, artistic occupations, clerks, technical staff, small business owners, and here (in twentieth place) rank elementary school and kindergarten teachers, followed by executive clerical workers, foremen and supervisors, craftsmen and thirteen other

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<sup>11</sup> The authors found that “in the twenty-year period 1960-1983 there do not appear to have been substantial changes in the in-depth structure of the ratings. The high values of the correlation coefficients seem to reveal a remarkable degree of stability over time of our country’s occupational stratification” (de Lillo & Schizzerotto, 1985, p. 165).

occupational groupings<sup>12</sup>.

### **Attempting an explanation**

The 1967 survey was the first that, in addition to highlighting the phenomenon of self-underestimation of teachers' prestige, the source of the category's status insecurity was pinpointed. The basis of the argument was the contradiction between the *conception* and the *perception* of prestige among the public. To put it simply, the ideal image of the educator's role leads teachers to overestimate their job and claim an exalted public esteem, while their interpretation of the reality leads them instead, disconsolately, to underestimate it<sup>13</sup>.

“This imbalance between aspirations and expectations, between the conception and the perception of one's professional prestige, was observed in 80% of the interviewees” (Barbagli & Dei, p. 63). The interviews of *middle school teachers* highlighted that the underestimation in the perception of their prestige was accompanied by the tendency to overestimate their own professional status. The 1971 survey confirmed this trend, ascertaining that primary school teachers on the one hand underestimated the esteem in which the public held them, and on the other claimed one of the top positions in the hierarchy. More than 40% of the interviewees thought that their work deserved to take first or second place, while only 20% placed it seventh, that is the position it actually has, or lower.

The 1976 survey revealed that *upper secondary school teachers* had feelings similar to those of their middle and elementary school colleagues who had been interviewed, respectively, ten and five years earlier. They underestimated the social reputation which they actually enjoyed, and claimed a much higher position in the hierarchy of prestige (one in three indicated first or second

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<sup>12</sup> In the complete ratings by occupational categories and academic degrees, middle school teachers occupy 22nd place out of a total of 93, and elementary school teachers 55th (who at that time did not have an undergraduate university degree).

<sup>13</sup> The interviewees involved elementary and middle school teachers in the underestimation. Only 40% thought that their high school colleagues had the social consideration they actually obtained.

place), certainly higher than the public assessment.

The 1976 survey also made the distinction between the conception and the perception of prestige, and likewise argued that the contrast between the two was the root cause of teachers' status insecurity. And the higher their conception (as among teachers in southern Italy), the stronger was the claim for a higher employment status. "The gap between aspiration and perception makes these teachers feel more dissatisfied than the others because of the social reputation of the profession, but this should not make us lose sight of the fact that the phenomenon is general. The imbalance between conception and perception of prestige is shared by almost two out of three" (Cobalti & Dei, p. 76).

The 1976 survey did something more, it attempted a comparative temporal analysis of the data on the perception and conception of prestige by comparing its results with those of the 1967 and 1971 surveys. It turned out that teachers of the '76 one thought that the prestige of their profession was lower than that of their lower middle-school colleagues of 1967 and 1971. "As for conception, the curve that refers to the present survey remains below the other two ... then, while the others decline, that of the 1976 teachers rises. This means that they have a lower conception of prestige and probably the social role of their profession than teachers of five and ten years earlier." If the lowering of perception accompanies the lowering of conception, the imbalance remains almost constant. The authors of the survey cite the events and the *Zeitgeist*, "a tangle of factors that seem to converge on one point: the credibility and legitimacy of the traditional school crumble to their foundations, dragging teachers' occupational status down to the ground. At least that is what the vast majority of the interviewees think and fear." (Cobalti & Dei, p. 77 and p. 80). It comes naturally to think that today's teachers, forty years later, regard it the same way.

It is about time the old and recent surveys were lined up to see if in the 1967-2008 period any "historical" tendencies show up. (table 7).

*Table 7 Perception of prestige between 1967 and 2008 (percentage values)*

	1967	1971	1976	1990	1999	2008
Elementary/Primary		60		70	72	84
Middle/High school level I	63			68	72	81
II level high school		88	87	65	75	80
Total	63	88	87	67	73	82

Let's read the data by school type. Between 1971 and 2008, pessimism grew linearly among primary school teachers. The same happened among lower secondary school teachers, namely that it increased linearly from 1967 to 2008, confirming the theory of linear growth over a long period. Of quite a different kind is the situation among high school teachers. Here the trend is discontinuous. In 1971 pessimism was sky high (88%), and four/five years later, in 1976, it remained stable (87%). Then it plunged to 67% in 1990 and since then has grown linearly up to 2008. This last figure, which influences much of the total of teachers, does not confirm the historical trend of the growth of teachers' pessimism about their social prestige. It is quite likely that the peak of teachers' self-flagellation during the 1970's was also linked to the turbulent events of that period, and it is unfortunate that there is no evidence of other types of schools that could substantiate this hypothesis. The high rate of pessimism prompted the researchers of the 1976 survey to take this hypothesis into account. "Let's admit that a certain decline may have occurred, but we must take care not to exaggerate. The events that may have reduced teachers' prestige invested the whole of society, shaking the prestige of many institutions and many traditionally "solid" occupations and professions (think of the controversy involving the medical profession), so it seems rash to think that an upheaval was involved in the occupational assessment, or to actually take as a certainty – as many interviewees have done – the collapse of the reputation of teaching."

### **The pessimism of teachers back then**

The interviews conducted during the 1967, 1971 and 1976 surveys gathered

a wealth of statements in which interviewees sought to explain the reason for the decline in the social credit of their profession<sup>14</sup>. Some pointed to a specific event, for example the uniform middle school reform law of 1962, which aroused sharp criticism and the lockstep resistance of many teachers, primarily those directly involved in the uniform schools. It took many years for the reform to be digested, probably more because of generational change than because of any awareness of its value as a step toward social progress. The reform profoundly changed the meaning of the middle school and the role of teachers, but many of them, not being adequately trained to deal with the innovation, and endowed with a strong conservative, traditionalist social conscience, saw only reasons to downgrade the profession without understanding the objectives of the change.

“The prestige of lower middle school teachers has decreased because middle school is open to everyone, having become debased in the wake of the reform. Even before there was a drop in quality. Now the schools are crowded with kids not cut out for study.” (MI293, 1967).

“Our social prestige has deteriorated because with the reform the new middle school has become a continuation of elementary school and so teachers no longer teach Latin, giving this term the value of culture.” (MI347, 1967).

“With these provisions we teachers have to be at the service of parents and pupils, It’s all well and good to treat the kids democratically and affectionately, but they take advantage. It doesn’t seem right to receive parents outside of office hours just because a mother has to do her shopping.” (MI230, 1967).

“The prestige of lower middle school teachers has decreased first of all because middle school has become compulsory and so teachers don’t count much, we’re seen as educational hacks.” (MI192, 1967).

“Teaching has been declassified, it’s gone downhill. Even the way we express ourselves has become simplistic. This is why our prestige has diminished.” (MI87, 1967).

“Our prestige has declined for social reasons. With the reform the middle school has opened its doors to kids whose families are unable to appreciate the work of teachers. The reform has become the talk of the town and teachers

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<sup>14</sup> Details on the respondents are presented in the appendix (indicated with EL, MI, and MS).

themselves have become an object of conversation for people who aren't part of the school environment and are therefore are unable to judge the work of teachers." (MI320, 1967).

Of a similar nature, but less frequent, were the criticisms levelled against the 1974 Reform Decrees:

"Prestige has declined because teachers have been deprived of their authority they can't impose their method, their teaching without being criticized. Their demotion has increased with the decrees, especially because of the presence of parents in the schools. So that at any given time even teachers with the best intentions end up giving in so as not to have trouble with the parental component; they let themselves go." (MS413, 1976).

Among the unfortunate events regarding social consideration the contestation of the late sixties is often cited.

"Prestige has declined since 1968. The big crisis came in 1968 with the student movement." (MS606, 1976).

"Given the level of contestation, teachers have become puppets." (MS608, 1976).

"Our function has no longer been respected after '68 -69. And the role of the school system has degenerated. Our role now is to watch over the kids like prison guards. Teachers no longer have the function of training and educating." (MS329, 1976).

"Prestige has declined from the overall way the school system is going, which means to the dogs, because of the immaturity of the kids, who let themselves be guided by a handful of revolutionary extremists." (MS367, 1976).

While in the 60's-70's schooling grew as never before in Italy, numerous responses were inspired by the quantitative paradigm as by a dogma: the more they are the worse they are (Dei & Rossi, p. 34)<sup>15</sup>. For the interviewees, whether middle school, elementary school or high school teachers, there were

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<sup>15</sup> Even I was sure that mass education would lead to a fall in prestige. "The immediate effect of the great increase in the number of teachers has been the devaluation and depreciation of their performance, giving way to a marked loss of social esteem, that is of prestige: a harsh blow struck against the middle-class image of what an occupation should have in order to be a profession" (Dei & Rossi, 1978, p. 134).

too many teachers and too many students, too much culture:

“There is a certain inflation of teachers due to the increase in the number of graduates, as has happened for accountants.” (MI65, 1967).

“Today there are teachers around every bend. Also people, especially the most ignorant, don’t understand our function.” (EL093, 1971).

“It has decreased because there are many more teachers; and actually, given this large number and the ease with which they get tenure today, the profession has deteriorated.” (MS387, 1976).

“There is chaos, too many kids are entering school and so there is no longer any respect for teachers.” (MS535, 1976).

“It’s decreased because today there is, relatively speaking, a higher level of general culture, and when a person knows a little something he now thinks he knows everything, and this has led to a lot of criticism of teachers.” (MI206, 1967).

“It has greatly declined. I don’t know why, but it has declined. I remember that once parents and students put teachers on a pedestal. Not any more. Maybe because at one time we were a rarer commodity.” (MI144, 1967).

In the 60’s -70’s school selection was more severe in all grades of education. Severity, strictness (and the practice of flunking) were indeed cause for personal prestige for many teachers, even at the elementary school level. At that time new social pressures and new pedagogical guidelines were going in the opposite direction, rousing a lot of criticism, among which the alleged loss of prestige:

“Today it isn’t like it used to be. We were respected more. Today parents expect too much. We’re even told not to flunk kids anymore.” (EL008, 1971).

“It has decreased because school has become easier for kids, they no longer have to face even the danger of the so-called “mass flunkings” as in the past, and this has led to seeing teachers as no longer selective, in the sense that your future depends entirely on them, but they’re there, just teaching because the kids will get promoted in any case.” (MS354, 1976).

“It has decreased perhaps because schools no longer serve the function it was once thought they did, that is they have become schools which, rightly, anyone can have access to. It seems to me that people see them in a state of decline. Before they were an instrument, an elite school, so they had greater

prestige. It isn't a question of scholastic quality, which is another matter, but it seems to me that that's what people think." (MS458, 1976).

It is a short step from the downfall of severity and authority to the rise of laxity:

"There is a laxity, an extreme permissiveness currently prevailing among the young, and more generally in society; there is no longer any respect for teachers, who are considered nobodies." (MS558, 1976).

"Prestige has declined on account of the ease with which academic degrees are handed out." (MS554, 1976).

A classic cause for regret is the pay level projected onto the comparison between culture and money:

"The prestige of teachers has diminished because in the eyes of the public the most important values are not intelligence and culture, and we as part of that world are a bit isolated." (MI365, 1967).

But sometimes the comparison goes to the heart of the issue:

"Our prestige has declined because of the leveling of the social classes, so that a street sweeper earns more than a teacher." (EL118, 1971).

"It's clear (that prestige has decreased), a bus driver earns three times what I earn." (M.S.544, 1976).

"We're the category that earns the least. The other categories, including crafts enterprises and merchants, earn more." (EL489, 1971).

What also emerges from the interviews are other, different, but often intertwined targets of criticism: politics that enters schools, trade unions, lack of reforms or the wrong ones, the crisis of the family, the slackness and absenteeism of teachers, the crisis of authority, the training of teachers. It's a morass of factors that converge on "a single point, the crumbling or weakening of the traditional legitimacy of the school system and the drop in occupational status of teachers. At least that is what the vast majority of the interviewees fear and think" (Cobalti & Dei, p. 80).

Among the many reasons for regret, the interviewees cited the inquietude of students in the 1970s, as well as the intrusion of parent reps in schools, but the pedagogical relationship held up. These were just the first signs of the transformation that would become full-fledged a decade later, when the indifference and rudeness of kids and the strident tones of parents would reveal

their new power as clients. The shoe of the pedagogical relationship was now on the other foot.

### **Conclusions. An imaginary fall?**

The older and more recent surveys yield a conclusion. Teachers imagine they have a lower social prestige than what they have in reality, and even more what they would like to have, but their self-devaluation is not exaggerated, in their eyes teaching ranks among middle-class occupations, yet in a lower position than it actually has. Their perception turns rather pessimistic when assessing the *trend* of social prestige in the recent past.

The reasons given to explain the alleged decline are serious, concrete, realistic. Some characteristic features, such as the modest salary or the numerical growth of teaching personnel help to define the boundaries of social prestige, but they are stable, not subject to upheavals over time. The same applies for feminization, which can produce variations in the social reputation of the category, but only in the long period. And yet, it is not even thinkable that cultural changes, political developments, economic trends and technological innovations have no disruptive effect, or that they do not leave any noticeable mark.

On the other hand, in the rating and ranking of the occupational stratification public opinion, "society", insists on giving teachers no lower a ranking than that of any other intellectual profession, whether freelance or employed. Not only in Italy. To what then do we owe the discrepancy between them and the perception of teachers?

Intuitively, we can indicate several reasons. The grip of institutional rhetoric about the school system, from Edmondo De Amicis, to human capital, the shared awareness that education is the ingredient and premise of growth, progress and civilization. The *imprinting* left by schoolmarm in the depths of the entire population. Precocious professional adaptation, resignation from the very start, awareness that teaching is a public occupation, *modest but secure salary*, and right to complain.

We cannot maintain on an empirical basis that the disheartening perception

that teachers have of their professional reputation does not feel the effects of the conditions of the school system, of Italian society, and of the world at large. Child of an overt or covert insecurity of status, the image that teachers have – today as half a century ago – about their prestige has become a kind of congenital, hereditary, historical pessimism that pervades the entire category, an anthropological and cultural fact. Among the second IARD survey findings A. Cavalli writes: “the suspicion arises that this pessimism reflects a kind of stereotypical attitude whereby one feels ill at ease in his/her relations with relatives, friends and colleagues unless he/she is complaining about things that don’t work” (Cavalli, 2000, p. 371).

Who knows if the syndrome of lost social prestige afflicts only teachers or also other professions. Or if maybe it affects them all indiscriminately. We don’t know, we lack sufficient evidence. We must bear in mind that few occupations attract the attention of surveys as much as teaching does.

## **Appendix**

EL: scuola elementare – primary school – 1971

MI: media inferiore – lower middle school – 1967

MS: media superiore – higher middle school – 1976

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