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# Teachers' Mobility as a Lens to Investigate Their Occupational Conditions

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## Teachers' Mobility as a Lens to Investigate Their Occupational Conditions

Gianluca Argentin\*

[Review of the book: *In cattedra con la valigia. Gli insegnanti tra stabilizzazione e mobilità*, by M. Colucci and S. Gallo, Roma, Donzelli Editore, 2017. ISBN: 978 88 6843 686 5]

This volume adopts an unusual perspective to analyze Italian teachers. The book focuses on teachers' geographical mobility and their occupational instability, but it goes far beyond this: it aims to show that teachers' mobility is not a new phenomenon, it is massive and deeply institutionalised in the Italian education system; in addition, its consequences are deep at an individual level, affecting teacher's life choices, daily-life quality and their future perspectives.

The book supports this thesis benefiting from the authors' different disciplinary backgrounds. The volume moves from a historical analysis of teachers' geographical mobility (chapters 1 and 2), then passes through a demographic analysis of large scale administrative data regarding the phenomenon (chapter 3) and a sociological analysis of the mechanisms governing teachers' mobility in our educational system (chapter 4); finally, five case studies are presented, each one focusing on different aspects of teachers' geographical mobility and occupational instability in different local contexts: Rome, Emilia-Romagna, Bergamo and Piedmont (chapters 5 to 9).

Reading the book title or the cover, one may expect that it focuses on a too narrow topic and that it might be boring or interesting only for specialists. This is not the case at all. Indeed, stimulating evidence emerges in several chapters of the book, providing the reader with tasteful insights. For example, chapter 2 gives historical evidence deriving from biographies of primary school teachers and supports the idea that being geographically mobile has been a way to improve women's emancipation in Italy. Reading pieces of the

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lives written by these primary school teachers is extremely pleasant. Also chapter 3, despite presenting a wide amount of data and tables, it succeeds in giving a concise view of the phenomenon: this is extremely clear looking at the two maps that sum up, at a glance, teachers' mobility across provinces in Italy. Chapter 5 investigates the routes and daily routines of primary teachers working in Rome but living in Campania; the description of these women's lives, spent on trains or in cafeterias located in Rome and awaiting a call from a school substitution, deserves to be read. The writing is so vivid and the narrative so powerful that it reminded me of Italo Calvino's novel "The adventure of two spouses" (1976).

Page after page, the reader's feeling is of collecting pieces of a puzzle in order to get a broader and more comprehensive view of teachers' mobility and occupational instability, ending up by a deeper understanding of what it means to work as a teacher. Indeed, the mix of mobility and instability is used by the authors in order to provide a wider vision of teachers' lives in Italy nowadays. Some classic topics in the field (Cesareo 1969; Barbagli and Dei 1969; Cavalli 1992) emerge directly from the teachers' interviews. For example, teachers' feminisation and the related need to balance work load and family needs is one of the issues connecting several chapters in the volume. Also the lack of defined pathways and initial training for teachers entering the profession is discussed in several passages, enlightening all the uncertainty associated with this professional choice, especially for young people starting their career. The rich qualitative evidence presented in the second part of the book helps in understanding these processes deeply than the usual statistic. More precisely, a positive aspect of the last five chapters of this book relies on the fact that they contribute to remind us that teachers are individuals (mostly women, often meaning wives and mothers) with a life apart from school hours and teaching tasks. Thanks to the adoption of non-standard research methods (applied more or less rigorously and successfully, depending on the chapter considered), this section of the book shows the implications on individuals deriving from the huge bureaucratic education system and its functioning mechanisms.

Clearly a review also requires some criticism towards a book. In my opinion, two weaknesses affect this volume and, in some pages, may even irritate the reader. First, in some passages the critical claims against the education system are combined with a lack of rigorous research methods and the attempt to over-interpret and stretch the empirical evidence collected by the authors. For example, despite the interviewed teachers show positive integration in the region they have moved to and there are no signs of lacking passion for their work, in some passages the authors choose to highlight that there might be a risk of negative emerging effects in the future. At the same time, the lack of representativeness for some findings is not adequately

stated. Especially some claims directed towards the reform 107/2015 do not seem to be fully supported by the collected evidence and give the impression that the historical chapters of the book were not entirely assimilated by all the book's contributors. At the same time, there is few attention to all the reform's components: the book focuses on mobility, due to the choice to hire all teachers with temporary contracts from the GAE (the list of temporary teachers), but not on the pathway designed for beginning teachers, despite it is something clearly connected to their mobility.

Second, and connected to this aspect, policy implications are almost entirely missing in the volume. Hence, the reader is doubtful as to whether it would be realistic to reduce teachers' mobility in our country or whether the phenomenon is the inevitable consequence of labor market and demographic imbalances characterizing Italy. A chapter adopting a comparative perspective, focusing on what happens in other countries and exploring the existence of interventions and policies facing teachers' mobility, would have completed the overall picture. In addition, this enrichment would have shown a way to policy makers willing to face the issue of teachers' mobility.

Despite these weaknesses, this book deserves to be read not only by experts in the field of research about teachers, but also from people interested in understanding more deeply how the Italian school system works. Indeed, it provides a relevant opportunity to reflect about the efforts and costs necessary to make schools functioning day by day, something that we tend to take for granted.

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