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## **Rural school in Sicily as laboratory of social inclusion for an active citizenship**

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### **Abstract**

*The project underlines the role of rural schools in Sicily, from 1923 to 2008, in spreading (perfusing) education for a wider promotion of the culture of citizenship. A lot of rural schools have been closed for economic and social reasons, but they have for years pursued the pivotal and delicate role of bringing knowledge among the children of the farmers, limiting the scholastic dispersion and favouring the processes of social inclusion. Rural schools are civic garrisons to revalue in a prospective of permanent learning through different uses.*

### **Introduction**

The concept of citizenship has always had an important role in studying the modes of transmission of social identity of all nations that in the school individualize the main driver of their material and spiritual growth. Beyond criticism to a real danger of civic indoctrination (markedly more detectable when the power took the interventionist if not dictatorial form), what appears indisputable, in any case, is the constant need to have a modern and capillary educational system so as to reach people in every corner of its territory to educate and teach a certain idea of being a citizen.

There are many different angles from which observing and analysing the ways in which, over time, we have committed ourselves to think citizenship in a pedagogical way, and, more importantly, to experience it through educational activity. Among these is particularly relevant the fair and meritorious activities conducted by many teachers in schools located in rural and mountain areas. This survey, therefore, is part of this thematic context with the aim of bringing to light the experience of rural schools in Sicily, where the word 'rural' is referred, beyond the official statements, to those places where formal education was directed primarily to children of farmers, located and operating within the Sicilian countryside, whose action has ensured to a large segment of citizens an education that also aims at a broader perspective of social inclusion.

This study started between the end of 2008 and February 2009. The first results of surveys in the territory have been exposed during the congress in Rome March 16, 2009, at a conference held at the University Roma Tre. From November 2009 till March 2010 the research has continued at both regional and national levels. In this paper, however, it is possible to see mentioned only some of the results attributable to Sicily. The state of the investigation provides a series of contacts with the territory, during which outcomes of research conducted so far will be shown publicly. In this perspective the current international meeting and a series of lectures in various Italian cities (Enna, Cagliari,

Monreale, etc.) are within the goals of the research. During the last year of doctorate studies, I'll finally apply a comparative analysis with two other Italian regions, such as Lazio and Friuli – Venezia Giulia.

As regards the theoretical background reference, this research is placed mainly along an epistemological border between an hermeneutic model and an existential-phenomenological one, in the belief that the empirical-experimental model is not the only one, absolute and general. In fact, it is not always revealed as a tool to capture the subjective element always present in any educational event, with this paradigm, moreover, pedagogy limits the potentialities of its research, relying on the horizon of scientific method, it is likely to construct false and ephemeral identities.

Pedagogy cannot simply study the formation and education of man following the criteria of science because its object of study, the person, escapes the taxonomies. For this reason, pedagogy must be aimed not to explain but to understand and interpret the educational dimension, through a method which highlights people, sites, dating, relational spaces, experiences, emotions, narratives (micro-pedagogy). Interpretation, therefore, as the heuristic paradigm and the equal partner to support the typical quantitative model of experimental science.

### **Methodology**

Analyzing instructional contents, teaching methods, practices and personal biographies that have made the daily work of teachers meaningful and rewarding, allow the research to bring out stories and moments of professional and experiential life, in the recent past as useful to the forthcoming. This is a contribute to a 'pedagogy of memory' to bring to light pieces of practice, therefore, not to exalt what has been done in the illusion of a past that maybe recorded numerous flaws, but to offer to the community, not only scientific, ideas and opportunities for reflection for greater awareness of models and trajectories that underlie the work of teachers.

It is through the study of a lot of books, reviews and above all a series of interviews aimed at thirty teachers of these rural schools that the research conducted so far has got consistent. Their memories are a synthesis that places the human person at the center of all care education, the crucible of efforts to make children responsible men and good citizens. Among the sources consulted, with particular importance there are also personal registers of teachers. In them is reflected above all the love for teaching, the quality of human relationships and a sense of duty, but in some cases also a certain discomfort for the location and the lack of stimulation and participation of some students and their families together with some moments of bleak loneliness.

To visit these rural schools, to observe what is left (because the structures are almost all in ruins) and to go with the tools of research in the classrooms allows to reconstruct a significant insight on how the school has over the years done much to spread the education, contain non-attendance and increase the sense of belonging to the local, national and, more broadly, human, letting small pupils understand the existence 'over

the hedge' of an universe that needs to be known and made compatible with their world, in an exchange of culture / cultivation with many possible and enriching outcomes.

The research has been conducted using a qualitative approach, relying primarily on interviews with teachers and alumni, supported by an extensive consultation of the archives of rural schools identified. This heuristic is the preferred choice over other angles of investigation because it was considered of paramount importance to give thickness to a perspective of interpretation, drawing on a significant group of memories and educational practices that have shown a narrative fabric useful for pedagogical reflection. The study was conducted through interviews (free and semi-structured) to persons who, for various reasons, have had this formative experience in rural schools and analysis of approximately one hundred teachers' personal registers. The considered schools were those located in rural villages in almost all provinces of Sicily, which together constitute a significant split of many other institutions in the entire Island.

## Results

1. These schools existed since the Unification of Italy;
2. Fascism broadens the number, continuing the struggle against illiteracy and the spread of certain diseases, pursuing policies of social peace and introducing markedly its ideology on a nationalization of the peasant masses;
3. The specific role of rural schools in Sicily is coupled in the late 1930s, with the so called project *Assalto al latifondo*, through was given substance to the foundation from scratch of more villages and sub-villages where the rural school would take a leading role in the design of social engineering intended by the regime;
4. Following the events of World War II, especially after the Allied landing in the summer of 1943, these schools undergo a radical change in most parts of the programs and especially with regard to teaching in a new democratic perspective;
5. During the Republican era, the rural schools continue to exist, with programs identical to those held in the cities, until the '80s, when the changed national scenario (increasing urbanization, diffusion of new technologies, increased traffic and mobility) determines the depopulation and the abandonment of rural areas where these schools were built, which in turn gradually closed being considered unnecessary spending;
6. The law of 22 December 2008 n. 200, expressly repealed the sort of 'rural schools', formally putting an end to this experience;
7. A common thread has been found throughout the teaching history in these schools as the attempt to bring even in the most remote countryside, moral and civic education (sometimes ideological), through which transforming children in hardworking men and good citizens;
8. Damages to residents in the countryside and mountain areas because of the increased logistic difficulties to be addressed;
9. Loss of a more authentic and direct contact with nature, mostly forgotten in the city;
10. Abandonment of public building to the carelessness and, therefore, possible proposals for reuse of schools in different key.

## Conclusion

In this phase of the research some results showed that the school, wherever it operates, performs not only an informative task but also an educational one. In this case, schools in rural site in Sicily over the years have certainly contributed to reducing the existing social and cultural gap between city and countryside, among the peasants promoting a spirit of greater involvement in civic life and enhancing the level of awareness of their contribution to economic and agricultural wealth of the nation. These institutions have valued the land and local culture by harmonizing the regional dimension with the national one.

The interviews gathered have highlighted the harmonious relationship between nature-culture of such as laboratory of social inclusion so pervasive on an island often marked up until a few years ago, by large sections of illiteracy.

If the statistics of most international organizations today maintain that the urban population has now surpassed the rural and conditions of our cities are increasingly characterized by a strange form of 'crowded loneliness' where they all converge severing all ties of belonging, reinstatement or restoration of these schools in certain areas could help stem the continuing dangerous depopulation in the countryside and fight scholastic dispersion of those children whose families still live in rural and mountainous areas.

As a demonstration of the fact that these schools in the countryside can survive with a different identity, but always an educational key skills of active citizenship, are some examples such as the Borgo Gattuso-Petilia (Caltanissetta) transformed into a history museum and the peasant village of Rizza (Siracusa), where the European Union and the City of Carlentini have invested substantial funds for a cultural and recreational reuse.

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