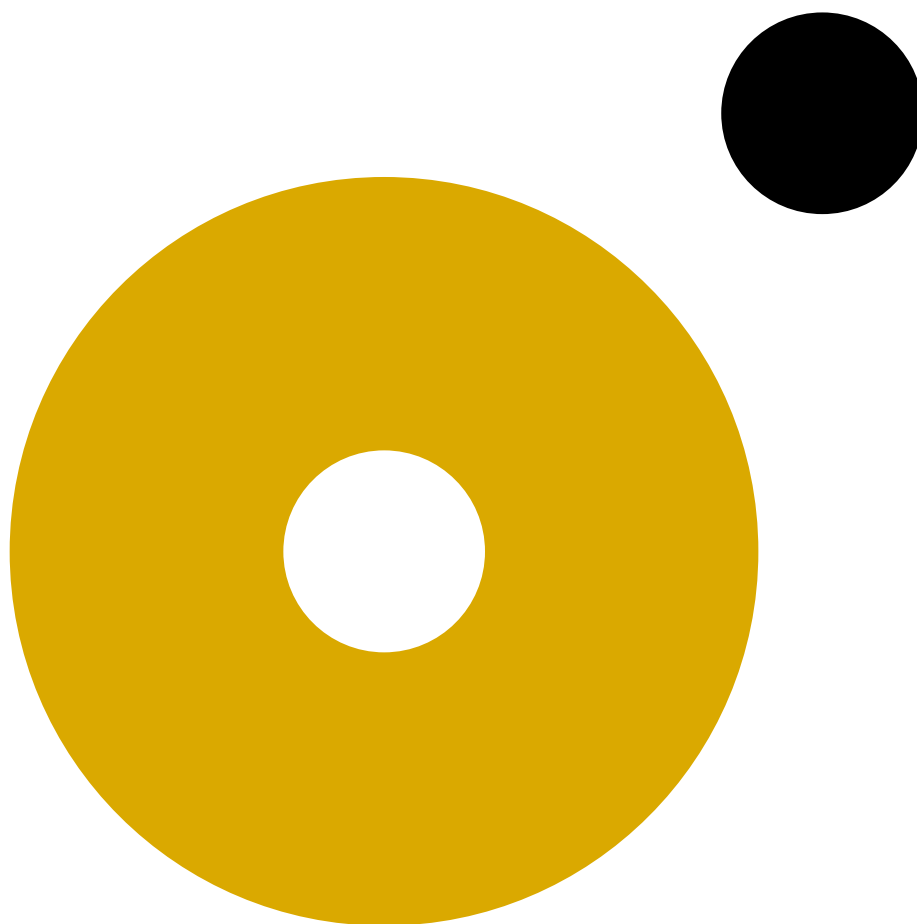


MEMORIA **SCOLASTICA**



# **The School and Its Many Pasts**

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani



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# Studying to Survive: the Representation of the Waldensian School through the Beckwith Museums

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At a distance of a few kilometers from each other in the three Piedmonts valleys called Val Pellice, Val Chisone and Val Germanasca there are five school museums (in Malzat, Pramollo, Angrogna, Rodoretto and Didiero). To add to these, one classroom has also been reconstructed and is located inside the Torre Pellice Museum. It is natural to ask why this concentration is so important. The answer is closely linked to the fact that, these Valleys about 50 km from Turin represent the territory in which people of Waldensian religion, after the persecution for having joined the Calvinist Reformation, with the peace of Cavour obtained from the Savoys in 1561 the right to live in the valleys and to profess their worship, albeit with restrictions<sup>1</sup>. Almost three hundred years later, in 1848, with the letters patent signed by King Charles Albert of Savoy the Waldensian population living in these valleys obtained full rights, finally being able to leave the ghetto territory. It is evident – given this concentration of school museums – how the concept of school is perceived by the Waldensian together with a personal identity: in other words, education and the ability to read and write form an integral and fundamental part of the “Waldensian existence”.

To understand the motivation of such a close bond it is sufficient to refer to the very roots of the Waldensian religion and the history of the population: on the one hand one of the fundamental requirements of the religion's principles is the free reading and free analysis of the Sacred Scriptures and, consequently, only knowing how to read was possible to access the biblical text without the intervention of other people<sup>2</sup>. On the

<sup>1</sup> About Waldensian's history: E. Comba e L. Santini, *Storia dei valdesi*, Torino, Claudiana, 1973; A. Armand-Hugon, *Storia dei Valesi 2. Dal Sinodo di Chanforan all'Emancipazione*, Torino, Claudiana, 1974; A. Molnar, *Storia dei Valdesi. Dalle origini all'adesione alla Riforma (1176-1532)*, Torino Claudiana Editrice, 1974; G. Tourn, *I Valdesi*, Torino, Claudiana, 1981; G. Tourn, *I valdesi: la singolare vicenda di un popolo-chiesa: 1170-1999*, Torino, Claudiana, 1999; M. Gilibert, A. Magaddino (edd.), *I Valdesi: cinque secoli di storia del popolo e delle valli*, Torino, Gilibert, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For this reason the travelling preachers (known as *barba*, the Waldensian word for uncle) were trained from the Middle Ages in a *Schola* located in what is now the Pellice valley. As early as the sixteenth century, every church was obliged to have a sufficient number of schools in which to teach the basis of religion. The plague of 1630 caused the death of many Pastors and Teachers, so it was necessary to bring in French-speaking Swiss teachers and Swiss pastors, and the French language soon replaced Italian in official teaching. Despite peace



Fig. 1. Angrogna schoolmuseum (Historical Archive of the Waldensian Table in Torre Pellice)



Fig. 2. Beckwith classroom in Rodoretto's Museum (Historical Archive of the Waldensian Table in Torre Pellice)

other hand, the ability to communicate in writing through exchanges of letters was a necessity, a tool that allowed the people of these Piedmonts valleys to keep in touch with the various committees that had arisen abroad (Holland, England...) to also support economically the Waldensian population of this territory<sup>3</sup>. Given the fundamental importance of education in this cultural and religious context, it is significant to question what representation of the school is offered through these Waldensian School Museums. From the study of these museums, it is clear how the Waldensians chose to represent specifically their school of the nineteenth century. In fact, a unique phenomenon is seen and an out of the ordinary growth. These are the schools created by Charles Beckwith, a colonel sent by the Foreign Committees to support the Waldensians of the Piedmonts valleys who arrived in Torre Pellice in 1828 and immediately set to work to improve the school system (remember, however, that until the Letters Patent of 1848 the Waldensians could not attend the schools of the Kingdom of Savoy)<sup>4</sup>. There was in fact since 1700 a Waldensian school system in the valleys but they were lessons in dilapidated premises,

agreements, the persecutions suffered by the Waldensians in Piedmont during the seventeenth century did not interrupt the efforts made in the field of education, which the 1692 Synod reiterated as a primary necessity. This is reflected in the organization of the educational system into *Grandes écoles* in the main towns and *Petites écoles*, small neighborhood schools, scattered throughout the mountain villages. Cf.: G. Ballesio, G. Ceriana Mayneri, S. Pasquet, «*Universités des chèvres*»: *l'istruzione primaria tra i Valdesi delle Valli Pellice, Chisone e Germanasca*, in M. Piseri (a cura di), *L'alfabeto in montagna. Scuola e alfabetismo nell'area alpina tra età moderna e XIX secolo*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012, pp. 194-202; A. Armand-Hugon, G. Peyrot, *Origine e sviluppo degli Istituti Valdesi di Istruzione nelle valli del Pinerolese*, «*Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi*», n. 117, June 1965, pp. 9-17; M. Battistoni, *Il sistema scolastico valdese e la rinascita della Scuola Latina nel secolo XVIII*, «*Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi*», n. 191, 2002, pp. 27-63.

<sup>3</sup> Interview given by Pastor Marchetti to the author on August 2019.

<sup>4</sup> For a Beckwith biography: J.P. Meille, *Le Général Beckwith. Sa vie et ses travaux parmi les Vaudois du Piémont*, Lausanne, Bridel, 1872; D. Jahier, *Per una nuova biografia del Generale Carlo Beckwith*, «*Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Vaudoise*» n. 38, 1917; J. Jalla, *Le Général Beckwith*, Torre Pellice, Società di Studi Valdesi, 1927; G. Ashdown, *The General with a Wooden Leg*, London, The Protestant Alliance, 1980; G. Giampiccoli, *J. Charles Beckwith. Il generale dei valdesi (1789-1862)*, Torino, Claudiana, 2012.



mostly stables, in which the pupils were given the basics of reading, sacred hymns and a small amount of mathematics. The operation promoted by Beckwith is all-rounded and widespread, starting from the belief that the school must be present in every small village, to allow everyone to attend without having to travel great distances. He then developed a specific school architecture, very simple, consisting of a single classroom (sometimes with the accommodation for the teacher above the premises) that replicates in every small village. The number of these schools grows at an impressive rate: in 1840 we have in the three valleys 89 new schools built and 13 restored; in 1846 the school buildings rise to 120 (and these neighborhood schools, as they were then called begin to be somehow identified with Colonel Beckwith himself, calling them *écoles du Colonel* (Colonel's schools); in the school year 1848-49 there are 169 schools with their own building; in 1898 Beckwith schools in the three valleys become 182<sup>5</sup>. These numbers appear even more significant when compared to the rest of the territory: for example, Piedmont – which already had a high literacy rate and had had before the Unification of Italy, with the Boncompagni Law gave great importance to education – there was 54.2% illiteracy<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary, in the small mountainous territory populated by the Waldensians, a scholastic statistic of the year 1848-1849 (year of the emancipation of the Waldensians) shows how out of a population of about 20,000 inhabitants, 4,779 went to school<sup>7</sup>. This is a quarter of the total population.

Returning to the consideration of the current Waldensian School Museums, it is of great interest to investigate whether and how they manage to represent, and consequently to convey to the public, this significant uniqueness of the local school. Visiting such museums shows how attention has been paid to showing some central points of the experience such as the diffusion of the school in every small village, the construction of a building designed specifically to accommodate the school, the classroom furniture that was regarded as essential by Beckwith and that saw him personally involved in the renovation (such as the stove, the blackboards but also the first teaching aids such as the globe or the abacus) the expositive fulcrum represented by the Bible in French<sup>8</sup>.

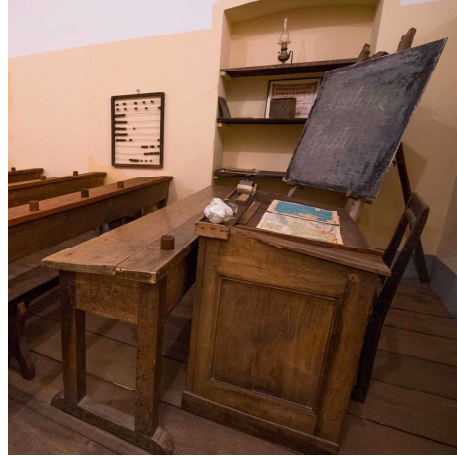


Fig. 3. Salsil's Museum in Didiero (Historical Archive of the Waldensian Table in Torre Pellice)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Coisson, *Monographie sur le developpement intellectuel dans nos Vallées pendant les dernières 50 années. Instruction primaire*, Torre Pellice, Typographie Besson, 1898.

<sup>6</sup> C.G. Laicata, *Istruzione e sviluppo industriale in Italia 1859-1914*, Firenze, Giunti, 1973, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Coisson, *Monographie sur le developpement intellectuel dans nos Vallées pendant les dernières 50 années*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> On the materials present in the school representations made within the Beckwith Museums see E.D. Pizzigoni, *The Beckwith school-museums as a place of memory*, «History of Education and Children's Literature»,

In reality, however, if we turn to other sources of study, such as the documentary funds of the Waldensian Archive of the Table and memories shared orally by former teachers or ex pupils of the Waldensian schools, we easily see that the history of the Waldensian school and its uniqueness are also constituted by many other aspects of great interest, both for the study of the local school and for considerations related to the relationship with the national school history. We will mention here only the main macro-themes, due to the lack of space, without going into the depth of which they deserve. Among the themes that emerge from the study of other sources and that do not seem to find full representation in the Beckwith Museums, are:

1. The specific subdivision of the Waldensian school system and the focus on all levels of education, both male and female.
2. The aspects of school life that characterised the “making of school” in this reality: multi-class, teaching methods, programs and schedules.
3. Teacher training.
4. The relationship between the rules and programmers of Waldensian and Ministerial schools at national level.
5. The history of Beckwith schools in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The schools opened by Beckwith, also called as we have seen *Colonel's school* or *neighborhood school*, coincided with *les petites écoles* (small schools) and corresponded indicatively to the first years of elementary school and were mixed, for boys and girls. To complete the elementary cycle, there were *les grandes écoles* (great schools), also called “parochial schools” that were based in the larger towns and not in the individual villages<sup>9</sup>. They were intended for pupils between the ages of ten and sixteen and there were 13 schools<sup>10</sup>. To allow the girls to continue their education, between the ages of 10 and 16 there were also the *écoles des filles* (girls' schools), in which they taught reading, arithmetic, grammar, sewing and other women's jobs. The offer of higher studies in the area was articulated and allowed the choice between the Latin School which was opened in the 1830s with courses in Latin and French, the College built in Torre Pellice from 1835 and the high school that opened in 1888, as well as courses to become teachers to which we will refer to later<sup>11</sup>.

With regards to the subjects taught within the Beckwith elementary schools, the documents of the Archive show us how the Synod of 1848 had introduced the Italian language at school, along with that of French<sup>12</sup>. In the neighborhood schools religion,

vol. XIV, n. 1, 2019, pp. 91-107.

<sup>9</sup> This subdivision into *Petites écoles* and *Grandes écoles* had already been regulated by the chapter *De l'instruction publique* of Ecclesiastical Discipline adopted at the Synod of 1833: cf. G. Ballesio, G. Ceriana Mayneri, S. Pasquet, «*Universités des chèvres*»: *l'istruzione primaria tra i Valdesi delle Valli Pellice, Chisone e Germanasca*, in M. Piseri (ed.), *L'alfabeto in montagna. Scuola e alfabetismo nell'area alpina tra età moderna e XIX secolo*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> G. Ballesio, S. Rivoira, *Leggere, scrivere e cucire. L'istruzione femminile nelle Valli valdesi nell'Ottocento*, Torre Pellice, Claudiana, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> L. Micol, *Le scuole dei valdesi ieri e oggi*, Torre Pellice, Società degli Studi Valdesi, 1965.

<sup>12</sup> T.J. Pons (ed.), *Actes des synodes des Églises Vaudoises*, Torre Pellice, Società di Studi Valdesi, 1948, p. 229.





Fig. 5. Martel's school in Angrogna (Waldensian Photographic Archive in Torre Pellice, fond «David Peyrot»)

Certificate of Eligibility was awarded directly by the Waldensian Table still in the late nineteenth century.

This aspect was in contrast with what was established at the national level, which referred to the Royal Decree of 24 June 1860 and in particular to an examination specifically regulated in Chapter XVIII to obtain the qualifications recognized for teaching. In fact, even the teachers appointed by the Table had their own specific training but provided by local institutions represented first by what was called the “General School for teacher training” created in 1827 in the hamlet of Pomaretto, and then from 1852 to 1883 from a course of study at the Waldensian College of Torre Pellice<sup>16</sup>.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the problem of the training of Waldensian teachers emerged with greater force in the face of the risk of seeing them replaced by non Waldensian teachers. To resolve the situation in 1913 Beckwith opened a Normal School to ensure that the Waldensian teachers could achieve the correct degree achieved by national laws<sup>17</sup>. Another aspect not treated as a specific theme within the Museums of the Beckwith school, but of great interest is the history of these *écoles du colonel* during the twentieth century. Excluding the events linked to the progressive depopulation of the mountainous areas of the Valleys, which leads to a progressive closure of the “Beckwith school”, the history of *petites écoles* in the twentieth century sees the school building remaining the property of the Waldensian Church but teachers being paid by the State and sometimes by the City, becoming subsidised schools.

To study this situation we are helped by the archives of the Waldensian Table, through donations of notebooks and materials from the families of teachers, and the memorabilia

<sup>16</sup> A. Mannucci, *Educazione e scuole protestante: dall'Unità all'età giolittiana*, Pian di San Bartolo, Luciano Manzuoli editore, 1898, pp. 64-65.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

of former teachers who still until the 1970s taught in the Beckwith schools. With respect to the first typology of twentieth century sources, we note in particular the collections of unpublished diaries by Eithen Bonnet and Enrico Gay referring to the 1950s, 60s and 70s (which were also used for the cards of the database of Diaries unpublished within the project “School Memory”<sup>18</sup>). These have the ability to vividly and comprehensively portray the life of this school organized in multi-classes, bringing out excellent planning, returning the annual income as well as the great organisational and teaching capacity of the teachers. Among the didactic choices, for example, diaries highlight the work in classes that are also grouped among different multi-classes, the use of lessons based on conversations that, starting from the same centre of interest, develop according to the age of the students. Compared to the training of teachers in recent years, the diaries report on the topics and modalities of the monthly updates that were held in Pinerolo through pedagogical conferences to which each teacher was called to actively participate by presenting theme-based reports. The school hours in the second half of the twentieth century were from 9 am to 12 am and from 2 pm to 4 pm, including Wednesday classes of Catholic religion and Saturday Waldensian religion. As of the setup of the classroom, it is from the inspectors comments in these diaries that help us understand that it was actually not very different from how it looked in the nineteenth century: «poor classroom, blackened walls [...] two unreadable maps due to being overused»<sup>19</sup>, «the furniture consists of benches of antiquated workmanship, in a very poor state of conservation»<sup>20</sup>. Teachers brought personal materials from home to decorate the classroom and equip it with teaching aids, while parents contributed to the purchase of the indispensable new heater for the school<sup>21</sup>. There are also other sources, those drawn from the oral memories of former teachers of the Beckwith school<sup>22</sup>, that allow the full reconstruction of what the Beckwith school was really like in the twentieth century. As an example, the memoirs of Raimondo Genre, who began his activity as a teacher in 1951 at the age of 21, he gives us an idea of the reality of a Beckwith school with all the classes together, from the first year to the sixth. At the end of the afternoon lessons, the students stayed for the optional French course: the lessons were in Italian, but the local council gave the teachers a supplementary sum for the French lessons taught outside of their schedule. Since Beckwith schools were now attended by Waldensian and Catholic students, religious lessons were also held outside school hours. The memoirs of the teacher Genre continue retracing the reality of subsidised schools: «It was a school recognized by the State, it was

<sup>18</sup> The Memoria Scolastica website was born as a design result of the PRIN “School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861-2001)” project and offers different databases related to the collective, individual and public memory linked to the school: [www.memoriascolastica.it](http://www.memoriascolastica.it) (last access: 08.02.2023).

<sup>19</sup> Diary of Ethel Anna Bonnet, s.y. 1951-1952, in *Archivio storico della Tavola Valdese* (Historical Archives of the Waldensian Table) in Torre Pellice, fond «Bonnet».

<sup>20</sup> Diary of Ethel Anna Bonnet, s.y. 1956-1957, in *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Interviewed by the writer in relation to the project “*Memorie magistrali*” (Teachers’ memories) of INDIRE: P. Giorgi, F.D. Pizzigoni, *Memorie di scuola: percorsi dell’Archivio storico INDIRE*, Firenze, INDIRE, 2022.

head of a teaching direction of a larger school, but our opening period was shorter and at the end of the year there was the examination at the capital. As a salary I remember that I received a part from the State through the City (all year 75,000 lire) and the families had contributed collecting another 5,000 lire. The families also helped by bringing wood for the class stove and inviting us home whenever there was a family party». The memories of master Genre confirm the appearance of the Beckwith school remained unchanged over the years: «we had wooden benches and a single bench for each row. The chair was of the high ones, on a predella. There was the slate board and an abacus that in reality we did not use anymore».

### *Conclusions*

Analysing the representation of the school promoted through the Waldensian school museums, it is possible to capture very clearly some specific aspects that the promoters of these museums intend to highlight. First of all, one can clearly comprehend the desire to emphasise the importance of education for the Waldensian community and the importance it has had in the history of this population. Unquestionably, the school is considered a symbol of an entire culture, that of the Waldensian community itself and recognized as one of the foundational values. Another aspect that the Waldensian museums succeed in highlighting well is the distinctive feature of the school in this specific area of the valleys, with its widespread distribution of school buildings and a high rate of attending citizens. Lastly, the figure of Beckwith is emphasised, whose fields of action with respect to the local school are well explained: the dedicated school building, the presence in all the villages and decent furniture more appropriate to the needs of the school. In the same way, however, it emerges that the representation of the school that the Waldensian Museums intend to convey coincides with that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That is, with the unique and particular phase stimulated by Beckwith. Many other aspects such as the themes we mentioned in the previous paragraph are not addressed or at least not in an evident way in these museums. We can certainly say that the Waldensian school museums offer a “representation” of the Waldensian school and not the real and complete history of the Waldensian school. This is a deliberate and considered choice on the part of the community, which clearly recognises in Beckwith its own school history. It is therefore to all intents and purposes a symbolic representation, a kind of synecdoche. It allows us to say that the Beckwith school museums can be regarded as part of that phenomenon recognised as “reconstruction of memory”<sup>23</sup>. The school has come to assume a collective

<sup>23</sup> We refer here to the reflections developed from the International Conference “School Memories. New trends in Historical Research into Education: Heuristic Perspectives and Methodological Issues” (Seville, 22-23 September 2015) and from C. Yanes-Cabrera, J. Meda, A. Viñao Frago (edd.), *School Memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, Cham, Springer, 2017, without neglecting the previous work: A. Viñao Frago, *La memoria escolar: restos y huellas, recuerdos y olvidos*, «Annali di Storia dell’Educazione e delle Istituzioni Scolastiche», n. 12, 2005, pp. 19-33.

value and, beyond how it really was, has taken on an important identity for the entire community of Waldensian religion of the Piedmonts Valleys<sup>24</sup>.

It is therefore in all respects a significant ideal representation and for this reason, by force of things, partial. This is not, however, a pedagogical reconstruction. The exhibition proposed by the Waldensian museums is intended to convey an idea of school, its ideal value and a part of its history that has now taken on a value that goes beyond the merely instructive and didactic. But it is not intended to offer elements of in-depth knowledge of educational history or educational history. You have to be aware of this when visiting a museum of the Beckwith school, however on the other hand are perfectly aware of the very promoters of these representations: «Opening and showing a Beckwith school is a way to maintain our roots, our culture, our religion»<sup>25</sup>, the chairman of the Waldensian Historical Places Committee stresses. If on the one hand, therefore, the study of the museums of the Beckwith school, in the light of other sources dedicated to the history of the local school, makes us confirm that it is necessary to remember that the museums of the school do not necessarily coincide with pedagogical museums<sup>26</sup>, on the other hand they underline how the value of memory is capable of “building” (creating representations, selecting a part of history, identifying an ideal, etc.) and at the same time allows individuals or groups of individuals to “recognize” and to feel that we are part of a community, a phenomenon and its history. In other words, with the study of the museums of the Waldensian school we can say that memory, in this case especially school memory contributes to reconstruct history but it is not history.

<sup>24</sup> J. Meda, *The «Sites of School Memory» in Italy between Memory and Oblivion: a First Approach*, «History of Education & Children's Literature», XIV, n. 1, 2019, pp. 25-47. Cf. also: S. Ramos Zamora, *Debates on Memory and the History of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, «HSE Social and Education History», vol. X, n. 1, 2021, pp. 22-46.

<sup>25</sup> Statements to the author given on 8 August 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Cf.: J.R. Berrio, *Pasado, presente i porvenir de los museos de educación*, in A. Escolano Benito, J.M. Hernández Díaz (edd.), *La memoria y el deseo. Cultura de la escuela y educación deseada*, Valencia, Tirant lo Blanch, 2002, pp. 43-65; J. Meda, *Musei della scuola e dell'educazione. Ipotesi progettuale per una sistematizzazione delle iniziative di raccolta, conservazione e valorizzazione dei beni culturali delle scuole*, «History of Education & Children's Literature», vol. V, n. 2, 2010, pp. 489-501; M. Brunelli, *Alle origini del museo scolastico. Storia di un dispositivo didattico al servizio della scuola primaria e popolare tra Otto e Novecento*, Macerata, cum, 2020.

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#### ABSTRACTS

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## The School and Its Many Pasts

History is not memory; both, however, affect the way we perceive the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on memory in order to critically analyze shared narratives of the past and their implications. Memory studies not only allow us to expand our knowledge about the past, but also help us to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or re-interpret it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense. These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analyzed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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