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School books exhibition. The historical collection of the G. Leopardi boarding school library in Macerata***

Abstract: This contribution aims to retrace the phases of the conception and realization of a Public History of Education project which involved the historical collection of an important school library in Macerata, that of the G. Leopardi boarding school. The collection has been chosen as an example of a historical-educational heritage of great importance, not only for the value of the books it contains (mostly textbooks and children's literature representative of the pedagogical canons of the Italian school between the 19th century and 20th century), but also for the countless traces of individual and collective memory it preserves (many examples are rich in extra-textual notes). This precious book collection has been the subject of a virtual exhibition, created by students and designed to stimulate knowledge and reflection on school libraries as treasures of inestimable value for the purposes of reconstructing the identity and the memory of a place and of the community that inhabits it.

Keywords: schoolbooks, school library, historical-educational heritage, history of education, Public History

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1. *Introduction*

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the planning and implementation phases of a recently concluded educational experience, arising from the desire to identify new interpretative keys to investigate and describe a field of study that is not always highly valued in the field of historical-educational research, such as that of school libraries. School libraries, especially if equipped with a historical collection, can reveal a field of investigation particularly rich in stimuli for historians of education, especially if it is explored through the dual interpretative key of the historical-educational heritage and school memories. This is because, as has been demonstrated in some recent studies[1], school libraries are certainly the fruit and therefore custodians of educational paradigms, which can be reconstructed through the analysis of library catalogues, but they are also 'collectors' of concrete scholastic experiences, of individual and collective memories, which can emerge from a careful analysis of the individual specimens, perhaps focused on dedications and extra-textual elements.

But, then, how can we convey the value and strength of this potential to a wider audience than that limited to the usual "insiders"? This was the question from which we started and to which we tried to answer by applying the Public History approach to the topic of school libraries. As is known, it is not easy to define Public History, this is clear even to the experts of the sector, who consider it easier to practice it than to circumscribe it with unique and pre-established labels. However, we believe that the definition provided in 2007 by the National Council of Public History (NCPH) brings together many of the proposals advanced over the years, starting from that of the founder Robert Kelly up to those offered by national and international associations. According to the NCPH, Public History is: «a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practice of history; its practitioners embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible and useful to the public»[2]. The participatory element certainly represents the strength of Public History. «The main objective of the discipline – Monica Dati writes – is to put into practice a dialogue between different interlocutors in order to establish

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[1] A. Ascenzi, E. Patrizi, *"Lector in fabula". Las obras de viaje de Edomondo De Amicis a través de los ojos de los estudiantes*, in E. Ortiz García, J.A. González de la Torre, J.M. Saiz Gómez, L.M. Naya Garmendia, P. Dávila Balsera (eds.), *Nuevas miradas sobre el patrimonio histórico-educativo. Audiencias, narrativas y objetos educativos (Santander, 22-24 marzo 2023). X Jornadas SEPHE*, Cantabria, Santander y Polanco, Centro de Recursos, Interpretación y Estudios de la Escuela, 2023, pp. 424-448; Eaed., *Between School Memory and Historical-Educational Heritage: the Library of the "Giacomo Leopardi" National Boarding School in Macerata*, in L. Paciaroni, J. Meda, R. Sani (eds.), *The School and Its Many Pasts*, Macerata, eum, 2024, vol. II: *Official and Public Memories of School*, pp. 487-503.

[2] T. Cauvin, *Public History. A Texbook of Practise*, New York-London, Routledge, 2022, p. 11.

a widespread and shared knowledge of the past, to enhance history and the importance of "thinking historically", "considered a useful way of thinking for the whole community"»[3].

We are not faced with something completely new, for a long time Public History has been practiced in an unconscious way. What has been changing in recent years, since this approach crossed the borders of the US motherland to take root even in the most reluctant countries to the innovation of historical studies (among which Italy should also be included)[4], lies precisely in the increasingly widespread awareness among academic circles that history can no longer afford the luxury of being just a matter for a select few, but that it must make the weight of its place in society felt, dialoguing with diversified audiences. Of course, this applies also to the history of education, whose mission in terms of Public History has been theorized in a very effective way in two recent manifestos[5], which propose two different visions of Public History of Education, but converge on several aspects, first of all that of encouraging the development of a history of education at the service of society[6].

From these considerations comes the idea of developing a project which, through the Public History approach, allows us to look at school libraries with new eyes. This is because Public History practices can offer countless opportunities to overturn the usual *clichés* about school libraries, often associated with dusty shelves and locked cases, full of untouched or difficult to access books. These realities have certainly existed and still exist, it is useless to deny it, but there are also past and present experiences of the opposite sign, which testify to very different situations, in some cases extremely virtuous, where the

[3] M. Dati, *Progettare attività di Public History: criteri orientativi ed indicazioni operative*, in G. Bandini, P. Bianchini, F. Borruso, M. Brunelli, S. Oliviero (a cura di), *La Public History tra scuola, università e territorio. Una introduzione operativa*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2022, p. 9.

[4] In this direction a significant leap forward was made through the foundation in 2016 of the Italian Association of Public History (AIPH), whose aims are illustrated in the Manifesto of Italian Public History, of which an updated version has recently been proposed: <https://aiph. hypotheses.org/3193> [last accessed: 30/09/2024].

[5] Cfr. G. Bandini, *Manifesto della Public History of Education. Una proposta per connettere ricerca accademica, didattica e memoria sociale*, in G. Bandini, S. Oliviero (a cura di), *Public History of Education: riflessioni, testimonianze, esperienze*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019, pp. 41-53; F. Herman, S. Braster, M.M. del Pozo Andrés, *A Public History of Education Manifesto: Looking back and forward*, in Iid., *Exhibiting the Past. Public History of Education*, Oldenbourg, De Gruyter, 2022, pp. 14-24.

[6] For an overview of the specificities and points of contact between the two manifestos, see: A. Ascenzi, G. Bandini, C. Ghizzoni, *Introduzione*, in Iid., *Il patrimonio storico-educativo come fonte per la Public History of Education. Tra buone pratiche e nuove prospettive / The Historical-Educational Heritage as a Source for the Public History of Education. Between Good Practices and New Perspectives. Book of abstracts del III Congresso della Società Italiana per lo Studio del Patrimonio StoricoEducativo (Milano, 14-15 dicembre 2023) / Book of abstracts of III Congress of Società Italiana per lo Studio del Patrimonio Storico-Educativo (Milan, 14th-15th December 2023)*, Macerata, eum, 2023, pp. 9-10.

school library becomes a place to activate reading education practices, which can range from simple initiatives to encourage recreational or elective reading to more structured projects conceived as an integral part of the school curriculum[7].

The possibilities for the declination of Public History with respect to the theme of school libraries could be numerous and potentially endless. Here we have chosen to present the project of a virtual exhibition dedicated to the historical collection of the school library of the Giacomo Leopardi boarding school in Macerata. We would like to anticipate that the novelty of the experience we are presenting lies in the fact that the students have been protagonists of the entire process which, from the analysis and interpretation of historical sources, leads to the development of communication and valorization proposals directed at different audiences. The proposed teaching model aimed to physically create the conditions to allow university students to complete the entire experiential arc that goes from historical research to the dissemination of results. Therefore, it was intended to go beyond the models and teaching practices prevalent in the traditional laboratory logic, to experiment with a path capable of activating more complex levels of competence, which would offer students the opportunity to grapple with a plurality of challenges: from those of scientific-disciplinary nature, to planning, teaching and communication, in order to make them responsible and protagonists of the entire content construction process. This is a further occasion in which we wanted to explore the resources offered by the historical-educational heritage for the innovation of teaching, a theme to which a SIPSE Congress was recently dedicated and which we believe represents one of the most fertile fields among those inherent to studies on the historical-educational heritage, which still has wide margins for investigation and exploration[8].

2. *The project of virtual exhibition: why, when and how*

The historical collection of the school library of the Convitto G. Leopardi of Macerata is a significant book collection both for its consistency (the library consists of over 2000 book units) and for the history of the institution that hosted it (which was opened in 1862 and continues to this day). But that is not

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[7] On these aspects, for a synthesis on the Italian and European situation see: D. Lombello Soffiato, *La biblioteca scolastica*, in Ead., *Fare ricerca nella biblioteca scolastica*, Padova, CLUEP, 2007, pp. 9-63.

[8] Cfr. A. Ascenzi, C. Covato, G. Zago (eds.), *Il patrimonio storico-educativo come risorsa per il rinnovamento della didattica scolastica e universitaria: esperienze e prospettive*, Macerata, eum, 2021.

all. The library of the Macerata institute was designed above all for students and not only has a large percentage of texts intended exactly for recreational reading (22%), but also preserves numerous specimens bearing dedications, ex libris and extra-textual notes, all elements from which interesting data can be obtained on the use and provenance of the works[9].

This important book collection, which mostly includes volumes published between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, is currently housed at the Center of Documentation and Research on the history of school books and children's literature of Macerata University (Cesco) and was the subject of a cataloging work by the writers[10], which was fundamental in being able to fully appreciate the richness of this heritage and the countless levels of reading and interpretation at which it lends itself to. Various dissemination actions followed[11], which in a first phase were addressed only to the academic public and which, at a later stage, were oriented towards the Public History approach precisely through the creation of a virtual exhibition designed by students and aimed at students.

The reason we arrived at this idea depends on the desire to merge different issues into a single product. The exhibition was initially conceived as a project for an upcoming museum transposition, in which the virtual version will also act as a companion and in-depth analysis of the analogue one. Furthermore, we wanted to identify a communication channel that would favor a wider (beyond Macerata and its territory) and lasting (beyond the exhibition time) dissemination of the book heritage presented. Then there was the need to offer the students involved an experience that would allow them to take on the role of *influencer public historian* and to create, at the same time, a concrete opportunity to realize a public history of education project[12]. Last but not least,

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[9] Cfr. Ascenzi, Patrizi, *Between scholastic memory and historical-educational heritage*, cit., § 2.

[10] On the origins, the outcomes and the activities of Cesco, see: M. Brunelli, *The «Centre for the Documentation and Research on the History of Textbooks and Children's Literature»* in the University of Macerata, «History of Education & Children's Literature», 4, 2, 2009, pp. 441-452.

[11] In particular, we would like to remind the participation to the 43rd Annual Conference of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education – ISCHE on the topic *Histories of Educational Technologies, Cultural and Social Dimensions of Pedagogical Objects* (Milan, 31 Agust-6 September 2022), through the presentation of the report *The School Library as an Educational Device. The Case of the Giacomo Leopardi National Boarding School Library in Macerata* e quella al Congresso internazionale *The School and Its Many Pasts. School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation* (Macerata University, 12-15 December 2022) with the communication *Le biblioteche scolastiche come luoghi pubblici della memoria: il patrimonio storico-educativo della biblioteca del Convitto Nazionale "Giacomo Leopardi" di Macerata.*

[12] On this regard, in the book *Exhibiting the past* (cit., p. 20) we can read: «The influencer public historian is an academic or non-academic that tries to make visible and public what normally remains invisible and private, engages in political, social, and economic activities to

there was a clear idea of testing a first experimentation of innovation in teaching practice, capable of going beyond frontal lessons and laboratory practices (without canceling them), to put students in the condition of becoming content creators, capable of comparing the sources and working in a team to prepare presentations and in-depth paths of the analyzed heritage.

Regarding the concrete implementation of the project, it should be noted that it involved 19 students belonging to different degree courses (Img. 1)[13], who attended the classes on the history of schools and educational institutions, held at the Department of Education Sciences, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of Macerata University. The course was divided into 11 meetings and was conducted under our supervision. The first five meetings had a preparatory function and served to train the students on some transversal concepts and categories, such as: school library, public history, public history of education, historical-educational heritage[14]. They were conducted according to a mixed approach, which combined frontal lessons with exercises, conducted in small groups and followed by moments of collective discussion. The other six meetings had as protagonists the students who worked together, even beyond class hours, to define the exhibition project. The underlying perspective that animated their activities was inspired to the one that the two above mentioned Public History of Education manifestos have in common, that is, encouraging a dialogical and constructive approach with the past among different actors. In our case the students who took care of the exhibition (mostly intended for educational professions) and the users who will visit it. The main purpose of this perspective was that to offer a contribution to a more complex and aware interpretation of that piece of history that is told on both sides, that of the "builders of contents" and that of the "users of contents".

In creating the exhibition, we tried to put into practice the indications offered in the *Exhibiting History* chapter of the book *Public History. A Textbook of Practice* by Thomas Cauvin[15]. We thought of an *object-driven* exhibition, built on a systematic analysis of the book collection, to be implemented

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achieve that goal, and takes an ethical position with respect to concepts about right and wrong in individual and social conduct».

[13] Specifically, the group included two students from the three-year course in Philosophy, five from the three-year course in Education and Training Sciences, four from the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences and the remainder from the degree course in Primary Education Sciences.

[14] To this purpose, illustrated essays were provided and commented on in class. Specifically, the students prepared on the following contributions: D. Lombello Soffiato, *Dalle «bibliotechine di classe» alla biblioteca scolastica nella rete nazionale*, «History of Education & Children's Literature», 1, 2, 2006, pp. 249-281; Ead., *La biblioteca scolastica*, cit., Ascenzi, Patrizi, *Between scholastic memory and historical-educational heritage*, cit., S. Noiret, *La Public History, una disciplina fantasma?*, «Memoria e Ricerca», 37, 2011, pp. 9-35, Dati, *Progettare attività di Public History*, cit., Bandini, *Manifesto della Public History of Education*, Herman, Braster, del Pozo Andrés, *A Public History of Education Manifesto*, cit.

[15] Cauvin, *Public History. A texbook of Practise*, cit., pp. 182-197.

through a careful reading of the afore-mentioned catalog of the collection. Two macro-objectives to pursue have been identified or, if we want, according to the scheme offered by Cauvin, two key ideas on which to base the work: on the one hand, revealing the "stories" and "memories" kept in the books of the historical collection of the school library of the G. Leopardi boarding school and, on the other, to convey the idea that school books are living objects that are custodians of individual and collective memories.

Img. 1. The students attending the classes on history of schools and educational institutions (Macerata University)

At a later time, the *storytelling* of the exhibition was traced, that is, we thought about the internal articulation of the project. The result was a work plan structured into four sections. The first section, entitled *The history*, was designed to briefly present the history of the G. Leopardi boarding school in Macerata and to learn about the main "evolutionary phases of the library", since its foundation (end of the 19th century) to the new inventory (during the 20th century) up to the establishment of class libraries after the Second World War. The second section was dedicated to *The authors and the works*, to learn about the genres most represented in the library (children's literature and history) and some of the most important authors. The third section focused on *The dedications and the donations*, to delve into the history of some specific specimens in the library, donated by people linked to the boarding school (professors and rectors) or by family members of the boarders or even by boarders to other boarders. Finally, a last section focused on *The readers*, to find out who picked up the library books and left traces of their "passage" (extra textual notes, drawings, part of notebooks, postcards, class assignments, etc.).

In the first instance, the target audience of the exhibition was also identified and it was chosen to address it to the university and upper secondary school students. In terms of usability of the product created, it was decided to link it to the Cesco website and to the YouTube channel of the adjacent «Paolo and Ornella Ricca» school museum in Macerata[16], thinking about its future

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[16] For a brief reconstruction of the story and the first projects promoted by «Paolo e Ornella Ricca» school museum in Macerata, see: A. Ascenzi, E. Patrizi, *I Musei della scuola e dell'educazione e il patrimonio storico-educativo. Una discussione a partire dall'esperienza del Museo della scuola «Paolo e Ornella Ricca» dell'Università degli Studi di Macerata*, «History of Education & Children's Literature», 10, 2, 2014, pp. 685-714.

usability also through the interactive whiteboard present in the spaces of the Macerata school museum intended for laboratory and exhibition activities.

The operational phases of the project first passed through a subdivision of the class into four working groups and the subsequent sharing of common (inventory and fund catalogue) and specific (articles and bibliography) materials through a Google Drive folder. A discussion phase followed which led to the choice of the exhibition logo, elected by vote among the proposals put forward by each group (Img. 2-5). Then we moved on to think about the support tools for the project, establishing: the need for a common container that would act as a basis for the presentation of the exhibition and its various sections and a tool with a greater level of interactivity that would allow to offer specific exploration paths. The choice respectively fell on Google site and Prezi.

The students subsequently concentrated on the most delicate and decisive step of the project, that relating to the selection of sources, having a clear understanding of the purposes of the various sections entrusted to them. Following the canonical phases of the historian's work, once the sources had been collected, in this case through digitalisation of images, we moved on to the phase of interpreting them and writing the texts (presentation of the exhibition, presentation of the section, accompaniment of the sources) which in various ways had to accompany the exhibition. The last phase is concise with what we could define as the "setup" of the exhibition, for which each group produced one or more videos in Prezi, capable of representing the assigned sections, working on the basis of common criteria (established with respect to: font of the texts, font size, colors of the sections, length of the texts, weight of the images), so as not to affect the readability of the product as a whole (Img. 6-11 [all URLs were last accessed on 30/09/2024]). The final result can now be consulted on the Cesco website and the videos of the sections are also visible through the YouTube channel of the Macerata School Museum (Img. 12)[17].

Img. 2-5: Logos developed by the working groups that participated in the virtual exhibition project

Img. 6: Cover of the video realized for the section *The history* <https://prezi.com/view/f6QRfhY8tF3l18ZAhacw/>
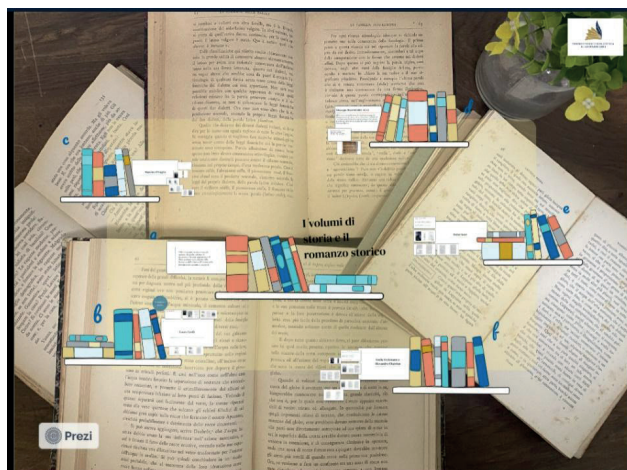
Img. 7-8: Covers of the videos realized for the section *The authors and the works* <https://prezi.com/view/AElB050fYGw7qa1geWE4/>, <https://prezi.com/view/n4ipPg4ceBRYAncI16jT/>

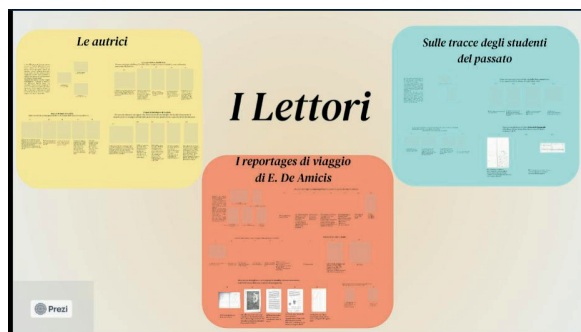Img. 9-10: Covers of the videos realized for the section *The dedications and the do-nations* <https://prezi.com/view/WUugxLOCcJAtVBNZcNqd/>, <https://prezi.com/view/2KlpfzeaPGwi5ViVVgKZ/>

Fig. 11: Cover of the video realized for the section *The readers* < https://prezi.com/view/PwExpfXah5HV9wcwB2PL/>

Img. 12: Home page of the website which hosts the virtual exhibition on the historical collection of the library of G. Leopardi boarding school in Macerata <https://sites.google.com/view/fondostoricoconvittomacerata/home> [last accessed: 30/09/2024]

3. *Some final considerations*

We are aware of the fact that it is not sufficient to publish content on the web for a project to become "Public". In fact, the "Public" content of this exhibition lies precisely in its design, animated by the philosophy of *learning by doing*. On this point, we can agree with what Mills Kelly noted in a recent essay very effectively entitled *Learning Public History by Doing Public History*, where the scholar states:

They (i.e. the students) are very interested in the content of history, but they also want to make, to create history. In short, they want to be able to look back from vantage point of being done with a project and see something tangible that they have accomplished – some-

thing more than a well-crafted essay or a successfully completed examination. […] Public history, especially digital public history, gives our students the opportunity to create those kinds of works products[18].

The students who participated in the creation of the virtual exhibition described here had the opportunity to try their hand at a concrete Public History project. They directly dealt with various problems, such as the selection of sources and their presentation/accessibility to a wider audience than the usual experts. This led them to think about how to convey the complexity of the proposed thematic itineraries without losing effectiveness, immediacy and truthfulness. They put their digital skills to good use and experimented with the historical skills acquired during the theoretical lessons of the course and in the field, while constructing the thematic itineraries of the exhibition, all trying to combine communicative needs with the essential need to remain faithful to the authenticity of the message transmitted.

In addition, this project was also born with the ambition of applying the language of Public History to an exceptional object of investigation, that given by the historical collection of a school library. In fact, the students asked themselves how to present the protagonists of this exhibition, i.e. school books (in the broadest sense of the term), in a new way, proposing them not only and not so much as containers of contents, but as "treasure chests" of school memories, of individual and collective experiences with a high "rate" of identification.

In the era of "homo digitalis" it is increasingly simpler to create so-called User Generated Content and share it online, what makes the difference lies in how this content is created and here the specificity of the historical approach and the «critical method», which we tried to maintain in the implementation of this exhibition[19], comes into play. In this regard, it can be pointed out that, if we wanted to apply the scheme of Cauvin's *Public History Tree* we could say that, in this project: the roots are represented by the research work carried out by the students on the book collection, the trunk can be identified in the work of selection and interpretation of the sources, the branches are made up of the results of this journey collected in the virtual exhibition, while the leaves express the impact of the project, which touches on different dimensions all closely intertwined with each other, i.e. school memories, school heritage, community identity, education and the history of education[20]. This is because school books go far beyond the written text and, if approached appropriately, reveal themselves as an integral part of a highly identifiable common heritage. In this direction we wanted to pursue the perspective of the Public History of

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[18] M. Kelly, *Learning Public History by Doing Public History*, in S. Noiret, M. Tebeau, G. Zaagsma, *Handbook of Digital Public History*, Oldenburg, de Gruyter, 2022, pp. 211-212.

[19] Cfr. S. Noiret, *Sharing Authority in Online Collaborative Public History Practices*, in Noiret, Tebeau, Zaagsma, *Handbook of Digital Public History*, cit., p. 53.

[20] Cauvin, *Public History. A Texbook of Practise*, cit., p. 14.

Education, aware that the participatory element applied to historical-educational themes has infinite, long-lasting potential and a strong social impact.

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