

Teaching of History Emigration: An Experience in Italian Schools (2015 – 2018)

Stefano Agnoletto

**Fondazione ISEC (Institute for the History of Contemporary Age) (Milano, Italy)
BI Norwegian Business School (Oslo, Norway)**

Introduction

The relevance of a theme such as the teaching of migration history has important significance if we think about the impact of migratory issues in public debate and the public use of history that is typical in these debates. The history of migration is a paradigmatic example of how past events may play a strategic role in the processes of production of meaning and can be used to create a collective feeling about both history and our own identity.

This is true especially in countries like Italy, which has an important historical heritage in terms of emigration, and now the impact of immigration is a dominating issue in public discourse. Between 1876 and 1976 about 24 million Italians emigrated abroad.¹ Mass emigration represents a milestone in the formation of Italian national identity in the contemporary age. This context creates the demand for new and innovative approaches to the teaching of the history of migrations as part of curricula, which should aim to educate the citizens of the twenty-first century.

At the same time it is interesting to note that the history of Italian emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is given very little space in textbooks commonly adopted in Italian schools. Although mass emigration has been one of the fundamental factors affecting contemporary Italian history, it is often, if not omitted altogether, presented as a minor detail in the curriculum taught at school.. Often the issue of the history of Italian emigration is treated in the school textbooks as an

¹ The publications in Italian on the history of Italian emigration in the world are innumerable. For a general overview, I mention the following two volumes: Rosoli, 1978; Bevilacqua, De Clementi and Franzina (ed.), 2009. In English, a good picture is provided by Choate, 2008.

appendix to the great history, and not an element that has profoundly marked the national economic and social history and the definition of the national identity itself.

Moreover, although the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian emigration has been widely investigated, issues related to how these important matters in national history are taught in Italian schools have been partially neglected. Migration historians rarely refer to the educational and didactic transmission of their research. In particular, little consideration has been paid to theoretical and methodological discussion about the role that this issue should/must play in the school vertical curricula. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the design of teaching strategies capable of integrating the national history of emigration into global frameworks.

Starting from a reflection on this evident discrepancy between the importance of an historical phenomenon and its marginalization in school curricula and pedagogical debates, within the Didactics Department I was leading at the ISEC Foundation (Institute for the History of Contemporary Age), a project of workshops on the history of Italian emigration abroad was devised and planned. Between September 2015 and June 2018 twenty-four workshops were held on this issue in Italian schools (from primary schools to high schools) located in the area of Milan with the participation of more than 1500 pupils and students coming from 16 schools.² In the same period, training courses and seminars, recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), for schoolteachers on the topic of educational strategies for teaching the history of Italian emigration were also held at the ISEC Foundation with the participation of more than 300 teachers.

These workshops were part of the large number of cultural activities proposed by the ISEC Foundation.

This institution, based in the city of Sesto San Giovanni, close to Milan, was created in 1973 to collect,

²List of schools in the Milan area that participated in the workshops on the history of Italian emigration organized by the Didactic Section of the ISEC Foundation between September 2015 and June 2018: IIS Bertarelli Ferraris, Milan ; IIS Claudio Varalli, Milan ; IIS De Nicola, Sesto San Giovanni; IIS Severi Correnti, Milan ; Liceo Statale Virgilio, Milan ; Cfp Cnos-Fap, Arese (Mi); Liceo Einstein, Milan ; IC Tommaseo, Milan ; IC Borsi, Milan ; IC Pastor Angelicus, Milan ; IC Puercher, Milan ; IC Graf, Milan ; IC Console Marcello, Milan ; IC Confalonieri, Sesto San Giovanni; IC "A. Frank," Sesto San Giovanni; IC Pascoli, Sesto San Giovanni.

conserve, and enhance sources and documents of local and national history. Through the years, the ISEC Foundation has become a national reference point for those interested in the political, economic, and social history of contemporary Italy.³ Moreover, at the ISEC Foundation there is also a Didactic Department, which I had the opportunity to lead between 2015 and 2018.⁴ This department has many tasks but in particular it is devoted to supervising and training schoolteachers, implementing interactive workshops for pupils and students (from elementary schools to high schools), and planning new high-quality curriculums and innovative teaching methods in history education.⁵

Theoretical and methodological challenges

Planning workshops for school students on the history of Italian emigration meant dealing with both theoretical and methodological challenges typical of all the history education's projects. First of all it meant identifying a vision of history education which is supposed to draw on a philosophy of history, different learning theories, the conceptual and empirical works on history education, and the realities of actual social studies or history classrooms (Kaya Yilmaz, 2008–2009, 37).

From this perspective, this project was not an impromptu or casual attempt, but it was designed in the context of a consolidated vision of history teaching that characterised the activity of the Didactics Department of the ISEC Foundation in those years. Our basic idea was that we were not “training future historians” (at least this was not our first purpose), although a positive outcome of learning history would be the acquisition of the skills required to study it. The point is that we aimed to teach history in order to prepare pupils and students to be citizens, and in this regard the acquisition of the historical

³ Over the years, many archives have been added to the early corpus of documents. Today ISEC conserves an impressive archival and book heritage: more than 2 km of documents, 170,000 photographs, 100,000 technical drawings, 1,500 political manifestos, 500 hours of interviews, more than 100,000 books, and 4,000 newspapers. In 2008 the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MIBACT) conferred on the ISEC Foundation the recognition of important economic and territorial archive.

⁴ The activities of the Didactic Department of the ISEC Foundation are officially recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR).

⁵ Here you can find the annual reports (in Italian) of the Didactic Department of the ISEC Foundation in the period 2015–2018: <https://www.fondazioneisec.it/Didactic/relazioni-finali-sezione-didattca-isec-per-la-scuola>

method was an important step: it trains students in critical thinking, in a “conscious” approach to sources.

The basic idea is that historical thinking is based on the question, ‘How do we know what we know about the past?’ (Seixas and Morton, 2013). In this perspective, we agreed that historical thinking skills consist of an ability to assess historical significance and how to analyse different kinds of sources, then to make valid interpretations based on them (Rautiainen, Räikkönen, Veijola, and Mikkonen, 2019, 292).

We were aware that our elaborations matured in the context of a wider debate. As Arie Wilschut (2019, 131) has recently highlighted, in documents describing standards for history teaching in Western countries, connecting the past to the present and the future is frequently being regarded as a means to prepare students for their future role as citizens in society-

The point was to define the “relevance of history” as a tool for preparing “future citizens”, and I think that a good definition has been provided by Wilschut, van Straaten, and van Riessen (2013, 36) when they maintain that History allows students to recognize and experience “what history has to do with themselves, with today’s society and their general understanding of human existence”.

In this perspective, it is worth constantly asking the question what kinds of people do we want to help produce with history education. Rob Phillips looks like convincing when he has highlighted that we should help students to develop the following characteristics: to think independently, to present substantiated arguments, to communicate effectively, to co-operate and learn from each other, to be curious, to interrogate evidence and to appreciate more than one point of view and a range of different interpretations (Rob Phillips, 2002 and 2003).

In this regard an important and difficult issue that has remained is how to connect, in a laboratory for school students, historical method and citizenship. Carley Dalvarez (2001) suggested that in order to

achieve a critical outlook, children need the skills of questioning, interpreting, reflecting and forming conclusions, which are the key skills of historical enquiry.

In planning our workshop on the history of Italian emigration, our goal was therefore also to set a teaching style capable of enhancing what was described by Nichol and Cooper (2017):

History Education empowers children through its procedural, syntactic ‘know-how’ knowledge to ask historical questions; to interact with sources that they interrogate, evaluate and extract evidence from; to test the validity of historical ‘facts’, arguments, narratives and claims in their sources; to organise, collate and colligate their evidential data to find answers to their questions; to use their findings to create and test hypotheses and finally to construct and report their own interpretations – histories.

In this perspective, with our laboratories we wanted to teach students to examine a controversial issue such as migration history through looking at primary and secondary sources, to consider the validity of historical evidence, to discuss the causes of some historical processes and to understand why there are different interpretations of the past (Hourdakis, Calogiannakis, and Chiang, 2018, 328). ‘

In particular, these workshops for students and pupils aimed to historicize the migratory phenomenon and, at the same time, enable students to understand its complexity. It offered a reading of the reality to make students understand how migrations, distinguishing the whole history of humanity, characterize contemporary society and therefore their world, both inside and outside school. The point was to teach the history of Italian migrants as a complex story, full of contradictory aspects, and often simplified with superficial narratives that bear a very partial vision of reality and are distorted by stereotypes and generalizations.

At the same time, it is important to be aware of all the implications. In particular, we were conscious that “students do not enter the classroom as *blank slates* or as *empty hands*” (Drake, 2008, 77). We also knew that if history education is always influenced by the dominant political and cultural hegemony, this is especially true when teaching has to deal with controversial issues such as migration. In particular, the political use of migration history is something Italian students are exposed to on a daily

basis, both in traditional media and above all in social media. Moreover, the absence of an adequate focus on this issue in scholar curricula, despite its importance in Italian history, make many schoolteachers of history themselves “victims” of the same paradox: a lack of expertise in a central issue of their field, combined with beliefs based on non-verified sources.

This means that when dealing with this issue in classrooms, an Italian schoolteacher faces the following paradox: a widespread lack of historical knowledge due to its absence in curricula and textbooks, and at the same time a sedimented belief structure based on a mass of fake / real information that students (and colleagues) have collected through extra-scholastic channels.

When my colleagues at the ISEC Foundation and I thought about how to plan the workshop, we realized that we needed to take into account this reality. So we identified it as necessary to face the widespread common beliefs and the dominant representations of the history of Italian emigration as our starting point in order to make students not only interested and attracted but above of all in order that they be understood by them. Practically, we needed to begin with words, concepts (mis-) representations taken by the dominant public discourse on emigration and the history of emigration that our students and pupils are experiencing daily and to disassemble them so that our listeners could follow us in our time travel to the past.

The structure of the workshops

There were two different patterns of workshops on the history of Italian emigration that the ISEC Foundation proposed to the teachers for their classes for the school years 2015–2016/2016–2017/2017–2018 (September 2015 – June 2018). Every teacher (or group of teachers) could choose between “one-day format” or “two-days format,” which meant a path organized in two or four different steps:

Day One

- Step 1: An interactive lesson/conference (3–4 hours)
- Step 2: Guided discussion in small groups and then sharing in plenary assembly (2 hours)

Day Two

- Step 3: Guided “work in team” (in small groups) on archival sources (3 hours)
- Step 4: Sharing in plenary assembly (1–2 hours)

Both the formats included a final moment of a feedback evaluation of the workshop: this usually took the form of an open final discussion.

The workshops were proposed to schools from primary to high-school level. Obviously the organization of the activities was rebalanced based on the age level of the class. When dealing with pupils attending elementary or junior high schools the focus was, generally speaking, more about exemplary life stories of people, while more attention was paid to macro-history when the students came from high schools.

Moreover, the number of students/classes attending the workshops was different and this issue was also taken into account: when it was one class- experience (20–25 students/pupils) the interactive approach was dominant, while in case of four/six classes or more attending (up to 250 students/pupils) some of the steps (step 1, in particular) had more “one-man conference” characteristics.

We thought the beginning of the first meeting with the students/pupils (Step 1) should have a sort of shocking and provocative impact. I went into a class of students, who did not know me, screaming: “*murderers, terrorists, thieves, rapists, illegal immigrants!*”. I meant to express anger, hate, fear. Then

suddenly I was silent; I smiled and asked, “*Who am I talking about?*”, and I waited for the students’ replies. We can summarize the more common answers as follows⁶

You are speaking about the Africans...the Arabs....the Muslims...the illegal immigrants....[etcetera] who are coming/invading Italy now....

I did not evaluate their answers, but I simply told them this kind of thoughts:

“No, you are making a mistake, you have misunderstood, I am speaking about Italians. I am speaking about tens of millions of Italians who emigrated abroad. Have you ever heard about them? Have you ever studied it at school?”

In all of the workshops, most of the students answered “yes” to the first question, and in almost all, with the exception of four, they answered “no” to the second⁷.

Then, I asked students/pupils: “*Do any of you who know me? Can you trust me?*” Usually none of them knew me, and for many of them, the only reason they felt that I could be trusted was the fact that their teachers had invited me to speak to them. . So I supported their perplexity by saying something like:

“I am not asking you to trust me: I am asking you to follow me, to listen to me, and later to verify, alone or with your teachers, my ideas and my sources. More importantly, I do not want you to support my ideas, to agree with me. I want you to see my interpretation of history, my sources, verify them, look for others and make your own ideas. And please, speak out if you do not agree with me. Probably many of you will disagree.”. .

After these unsettling affirmations I began to address the issue of Italian emigration.

In merely three or four hours, with the support of slides and showing data, videos, photos, and archival documents, as well as listening to songs and interviews, I led the students through 70 years of Italian emigration history, from the end of the nineteenth century until the seventies of the twentieth century.

I have structured this part of the workshop organizing the speech into 12 thematic steps:

⁶ When, after my shouting, I saw this kind of reaction during the first workshop, I decided to try to evaluate in how many schools/classrooms these answers represented the majority reaction: at the end of the three years, I have concluded that only on three occasions was the majority reaction different, and it included Italians (I am aware that this was a subjective, unstructured evaluation).

⁷ Obviously this second answer is a sign of how much the students remembered, and it does not represent a realistic statistical data related to what their teachers had possibly explained in class.

- **Nicknames and generalizations:** I called the students “*babis*” (“toad”, in Piedmontese dialect): this is what Italian immigrants were called in France between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. I also used expressions such as: *bats* (widespread in certain areas of the United States in the late nineteenth century and used by the magazine *Harper’s Weekly* to explain how many Americans saw Italians: half-white and half-black); *dago*: this comes from dagger, knife, stabber, in line with one of the most common stereotypes in the USA about the Italian “stiletto people”; *reaseball*: greasy ball or greasy head, typically used in the USA to define Italians; *mafia-mann*, which implied that all Italians are “mafiosi” (used in Germany); WOP (WithOut Papers): i.e. Italian = clandestine, and many others.⁸

Then I asked students/pupils two simple and clearly provocative /rhetoric questions: “Do you like what I am calling you?” and “Were all the Italian emigrants *mafiosi* or *stiletto people*?” I also presented posters and books, which described the “Italian invasion.” A short discussion on prejudices and generalizations followed.

My didactic aim was to create a link between when “we” were the victims, and now, when “they” are the victims of such generalisations. In doing this, I was aware of the theoretical challenges these kinds of comparisons imply. It is about the meaning of “historical analogies” and how to support students to manage and elaborate upon them without being “indoctrinated” by the speaker (in this case, myself). In my opinion, the point was to help students to discern categories or criteria for the comparisons (Wilschut 2019, 138) by forcing them to deal with the sources.

- **Numbers:** I made pupils/students aware of the data about the Italian emigration abroad between 1876 and 1976. I also specified the most important national destinations in Europe, North and South America and Australia. To make the numbers more understandable I compared data

⁸ A list of the nicknames I quoted during the workshops can be found at:
<http://www.orda.it/rizzoli/stella/nomignoli/nomignoli.spm>

about Italian emigration with those related to today's immigration to Italy, showing the differences (Italian emigration was much greater in number)

- ***Why did “we” emigrate?*** In this part the focus was on the reason for the mass-Italian emigration abroad. In particular, I highlighted the fact that most Italian emigrants were “economic refugees” fleeing from poverty in search of a better life and job opportunities. They were not escaping from wars or dictatorship: I underlined how, paradoxically, during the Fascist regime the emigration from Italy recorded a significant reduction in numbers. I supported this approach by showing data, photos and numbers regarding the economic situation in Italy from the beginning of the twentieth century to the sixties.⁹ Moreover, we listened to some famous Italian songs about Italian mass-emigration,¹⁰ in which the link between poverty and the need to leave Italy and go far away is always present. This focus on the “*emigration–poverty*” relation aimed to propose an interpretative category applied to the case study of Italian mass-emigration, but was presented to the students/pupils as a keyword useful in approaching and understanding the mass-migration phenomenon in general.
- ***Racism and lynchings:*** I presented histories of how Italians were described in the countries of destination. For example, we looked at posters used to describe Italian immigrants such as “rats” (USA),¹¹ or others that prohibited the entry of Italians in some places, such as pubs or bars (Germany).¹² Moreover I related some histories of lynchings and killings of Italian emigrants, such as the case of Aigues Mortes, a place in France where in 1893 many Italians who worked in a saline were killed because they “were stealing the job” from the French workers (Barnabà, 2015).
- ***The jobs:*** By showing photos of Italian emigrants at work, I tried to propose the basis for a de-ethnicized approach to the migrant job experience, in order to focus on economic and social

⁹ For example, I quoted the data from the “*Inchiesta sulla miseria in Italia*” (1978), which is the report of a research on poverty in Italy commissioned by the Italian Parliament in 1951.

¹⁰ For example, I referred to the popular song of the fifties “*Tutti vanno in Francia*” [Everyone goes to France] .

¹¹ See: <http://www.orda.it/rizzoli/stella/immagini/vignette/ziosam.htm>

¹² See: <http://www.orda.it/rizzoli/stella/immagini/foto/popup/cartello.htm>

explanations. So I provided photos of Italian emigrants in the streets selling goods or singing and playing instruments at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe and North America, or working in outdoor markets, or as hairdressers or waiters in the fifties and sixties, and then I wanted students/pupils to think about these questions: why did they do such a jobs? What were (are) the reasons at the origins of ethnic/business niches in the labour market? Why did/do first-generation (Italian) emigrants specialize in certain jobs? I tried to put on the table of debate both “ethnic/racial”/cultural” explanations, as well as economic reasons. The attempt was to push students/pupils to look more at the opportunities they had/have as poor immigrants in the countries of destination, more than to ethnic-oriented explanations (Agnoletto, 2014 and 2017).

- ***The illegality (clandestinity) and Italian “smugglers”***:. This part of the meeting began with telling the story of a boy from Florence, Mario Trambusti, who died on the night of December 31, 1962, falling from a cliff in the mountains behind Ventimiglia, while trying to enter France illegally. Then I made the students/pupils discover that in the same place, on the same cliff, dozens of Italian illegal emigrants died in the fifties and the sixties trying to reach France. Later I provided a larger representation, with photos, pages of newspapers, short films, documents, which told many similar stories. Finally, I gave data on Italian illegal emigration after World War II, which involved hundreds of thousands of people (Rinaudo, 2009). I described the condition of clandestinity as an aspect typical of many migratory experiences, in the past as well as in the present, and not as the “unique” characteristic of the so-called “illegal invasion” that Italy could be subjected to today.

I also spoke about the Italian smugglers, who were the Italian people paid to help their compatriots who emigrated illegally across the borders. In particular, I told some stories about how these people often abandoned the emigrants on the Alps in wintertime, causing the death of many. With the telling of these stories, I aimed to highlight the evident discrepancy between the dominant public discourse on the “Italians as good people” and the historical reality with

its contradictions that characterised the Italian mass emigration in the twentieth century. Moreover, I explicitly tried to force the students to realise how similar these stories are to the dramas that feature daily in immigration to Italy in recent years, with the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean and the “bad” role played by African/Asian/ et cetera smugglers who are getting paid to transport their compatriots to Italy. It was another example of facing historical analogies

- ***The travels and the dead:*** Using the case of the shipwreck of *Sirio*, on August 4 1906 (Stella, 2004), with hundreds of Italian emigrants dying while trying to reach South America, I introduced the histories of the many tragedies that occurred during Italian emigration across the oceans. With photos, articles, and songs, I tried to give names and faces to the dead. For example, I told the history of the Serafini family from Arzignano in Veneto, made up of a father, a mother and eight children, plus another baby due. They left from Genoa on the *Sirio* heading for Brazil: only the father and two sons survived the shipwreck. During the seminars I showed the photo of this family taken a few days before departure (as well as photos of dead bodies placed on the beaches after the shipwreck): in this way I tried to make the tragedies of emigration, both of yesterday and of today, more “real” for the students. The issue of the historical analogies emerged again
- ***Terrorism:*** During the workshops I also told the history of the terrorist attack of September 16, 1920 at Wall Street, which killed 33 people and injured more than 200. An Italian anarchist, Mario Buda, was condemned for this attack, which was the most disastrous in the history of New York, until the attack on the Twin Towers (Gage, 2009). I also explained that the year before, in 1919 between April and June, dozens of bomb attacks were carried out against managers, politicians, and other establishment figures. Also, in this case, groups of Italian anarchists were held responsible. The consequence was the explosion of widespread anti-Italian rage, with the demand for mass expulsions and police raids in the American Little Italies.

During the workshops, from the perspective of “historical analogies, I highlighted how the equation *Italians=Terrorists* is similar to typical stereotypes commonly connected to other “ethnic” emigrations. In particular, I used the reading of the titles of some articles of American newspapers in the years of the terrorist attacks marked as “Italians” in order to explicitly provoke an unsettling reaction among the students who could identify themselves in the role of those who are dangerous, the role of the “others.”

- **Prostitution:** This part of the seminar was introduced by reporting a message by the Italian ambassador in Egypt at the end of the 19th century. The Italian ambassador denounced the ever-increasing number of Italian men and women who lived with prostitution and reported that some “women exploiters,” taking advantage of the disastrous earthquake of 1894 in Calabria and the “consequent misery of those places,” induced young women and girls from Calabria (a region in the south of Italy) to emigrate to Egypt with the hope of working with wealthy families, but in reality to be exploited as prostitutes. (Stella, 2002). The purpose of telling this story was to explicitly challenge a dominant issue in public discourse that is the ethnicization of prostitution and the equation “prostitute=foreign immigrant” based on the alleged existence of hypothetical cultural typicalities of some migrant populations who are today often represented as more prone to prostitution. The history of Italian prostitution connected to emigration exposes these ethnical interpretations to discussion, and offers Italian students interpretations based on economic and social motivations rather than presumed cultural/ethnic reasons.
- **Child labor:** I showed a picture by Lewis W. Hine from 1908, in which we see a mother and four small children sitting around a table while making plastic flowers. This is a family of Italian immigrants in the East Side; they made these flowers and the children then sold them on the streets of New York. Through this photo I accompanied the students in discovering the world of child labor, which characterized Italian emigration. This representation challenges a widespread concept in Italy, whereby child labor is linked to backward cultural realities. Once

again, the most important educational purpose was the de-ethnicization of the phenomenon of child labor. From an ethnic phenomenon, as students are often led to see it, it becomes the result of economic–social processes, and in general, the correlation with poverty as an original source emerges.

- ***Emigration as the engine of Italian economic growth:*** In the seminars I also presented some data and interpretations concerning monetary flows created by Italian immigrants to their country of origin and I highlighted their importance to the economic growth of Italy in the twentieth century. I did not deny the disastrous socio-economic distortion effects of mass migrations (abandonment of entire areas of the country, destruction of local social communities and networks, loss of human capital, enormous suffering, tragedy, etc.) but I highlighted that once emigration has occurred, the economic success of the migrants has positive effects on the country of origin and contributes to the reduction of the migratory wave. In other words, I proposed to the students this interpretative approach: Italian history says that facilitating the integration and success of the migrants is a tool to reduce migratory waves and to help those at home.
- ***Stories of success:*** During the seminars, before the conclusions, I provided some stories of successful Italian emigrants. For example, I told the story of Emilio, who arrived in Toronto in the fifties, illiterate and without any capital, and in a few years became a successful building contractor. Or the story of another Italian emigrant, who reached Toronto in the late sixties and in five years became a member of the Ontario Parliament (Agnoletto, 2015). I told these and other stories for two reasons. First of all, I wanted to present a dynamic representation of the Italian migrant, not to lock him/her up in the tragedies and difficulties of the first years of the migratory experience. Secondly, I wanted to make students think about the mechanisms that can help or slow down the social mobility processes for migrants, yesterday and today.

The interactive seminar focused on 12 points described above was often followed by Step 2 of the workshop, which was a guided discussion in small groups and then sharing in plenary assembly. In a sort of “focus group”, the students/pupils were asked to discuss what I had told them. In particular, they were asked to compare my ideas and interpretations with their own beliefs and sources regarding the history of Italian emigration. In many cases, students/pupils went directly online to show their “sources,” or to check mines. Then, in a sort of plenary assembly, the groups’ spokesmen made explicit their doubts and their opposition to my interpretations, showed their sources and their knowledge and I interacted with them.

In the schools where teachers had chosen a “two days” pattern of workshop, the second day was opened with “Step 3,” which was a guided “work in a team” (in small groups) on the sources. We gave students/pupils 4/5 sources, linked to the theme of the history of Italian emigration abroad. We usually mixed original sources available in paper format at the ISEC Foundation or published, with at least one source found online. The latter was often a fake or manipulated source, or a non-original document but an “interpretation” that provided a description of reality that was the opposite to what had been explained in the seminar (a typical example was on the topic of clandestinity). The students/pupils were asked to address a sort of basic “source criticism” path, starting with answering, as a group, six questions related to each source available to them. The questions obviously differed according to the age of the students, but the basic scheme was as follows:

- 1) What kind of source is it? (photograph, letter, poster ...etc.)
- 2) In which year, or historical period, was it produced?
- 3) Who produced it? (person or institution)
- 4) For what purpose was it conceived?
- 5) Who is it for?
- 6) Which strategy does it use to reach and convince those who read it? (irony, emotion, identification ...)

- 7) Identify at least four keywords that describe the content of the source
- 8) What do you discover or learn from the source that you did not know before?
- 9) Is its content consistent with other sources that you know?
- 10) If you answer “no” to the previous question, which source seems more convincing and why?

Step 4 of the workshop consisted of sharing in a sort of plenary assembly the answers to the questions. Each source was screened and the groups proposed their answers and then a brief discussion followed. Through the discussion of the proposed sources, a sort of final debate developed on the theme of the history of Italian emigration. The students could explain their doubts, their questions and their opinions.

The last part was dedicated to a critical discussion with respect to the workshop, during which the students/pupils were asked to provide feedback on the path taken together. Finally, I gave a brief “final speech,” in which I gave some suggestions about how to find the sources I had used and I explained “what I wanted to leave” by proposing three focuses:

- The memory of a fundamental phenomenon in Italian history
- An experience of the critical approach method to historical sources and storytelling (“*you do not have to believe me, but check everything I told you!*”)
- A way of digging to the roots of the migratory phenomenon of yesterday and today that overcomes the us / them dichotomy and rejects ethnical interpretations.

Aims and strategies of the workshops and their impacts in terms of students’ and teachers’ reactions and feedback

At the beginning of the workshops, the students/pupils usually had some vague knowledge of the issue of the history of Italian emigration abroad, but, as I have already highlighted, most of the time they

did not remember lessons or other school activities on it. It was also the case that some teachers tried to tell the students/pupils: “*Don’t you remember? I spoke about it that time...*” in a sort of embarrassed attempt to cover what they thought was their mistakes. But, as I said, the absence of this issue in school curricula and in the textbooks as well as in the training paths for teachers is a basic feature of the Italian school system.

Moreover, Italian students and pupils, as I explained above, are often bearers of presumed extra-curricular skills and knowledge on the topic, deriving from sources usually gathered online. It is interesting to note how these sources are often not produced by actors involved in historical research, but they are the product of an explicit public and political use of history. In particular, they are often messages that are part of propagandist universes related to the debate on the migratory waves that in recent years have been affecting Italy as a destination country. The memory of Italian emigration thus becomes a battlefield for the construction of interpretative apparatus of current phenomenon, which is described by analogy or by contrast. Narratives based on concepts such as “*we were like them*” are challenged with others based on the clear contrast of “*us vs them*” (i.e., *our emigrants were different*). The first approach typically exalts the similarities between our emigrants of yesterday and the immigrants who arrive in Italy today: we were the poor who were emigrating, today they are; we were victims of racism, today they are; and so on.¹³ The second approach is decidedly the most common and is based on other elementary dualisms such as: ours were regular, they are illegal immigrants; ours worked, they steal or do not want to do anything; our people went where they needed work, they come to us where there are already so many poor people; our people respected the cultures and traditions of the destination countries, they act as if it were their home ... and so on.¹⁴

¹³ An interesting and popular example of this approach is represented by the website “Siamo tutti emigranti” [All of us are emigrants]: <http://www.orda.it/rizzoli/stella/home.htm>

¹⁴ An example of this approach is the website “Italia chiama Italia” [Italy call Itaòy]: <https://www.italiachiamaitalia.it/non-osate-paragonare-gli-italiani-emigrati-allestero-con-clandestini-africani-e-asiatici/>

In this context it is not a surprise that at the beginning it happened that some group of students did not appreciate the workshop's approach, which proposed a narration not coherent with their beliefs. As I have already mentioned, I chose to react to these situations, not by challenging them, but, on the contrary, by giving them the recognition that they too were carriers of knowledge. I only asked to be listened to and then they could check my statements. I aimed to be followed, and not to be seen as an opponent of their beliefs.

I think that my question at the beginning of the workshop (*can you trust me?*) was certainly unsettling because it was a "questioning" of the sacredness of the role of the teacher, but at the same time it was a necessary way to get in touch with the students/pupils. The message was: *I did not question your beliefs by telling you that you don't know anything, I just want to give you my suggestions and ideas and you can think about them.*

I believe that at a time when the Internet is a major (and winning) competitor of the school as a training institution for students/pupils, it is necessary not to snub this container of information, but to challenge it, by recognizing its importance and, if necessary addressing it with alternative narratives, particularly, when we are confronting "hot" issues in public debate. From this perspective, the teaching of the history of emigration is a paradigmatic example, in particular in countries like Italy, where emigration/immigration is a major issue in the political/public use of history.

The strategy of using many "life stories" to introduce the explanation of a mass phenomenon, aimed to make the approach less conflictual, even when dealing with particularly "hot" issues, such as illegal emigration, racism, terrorism, and so on. It was interesting to see how rapidly many students/pupils spontaneously, in their questions and interventions, correlated the stories of "our" emigrants of yesterday with the stories of today's immigrants about whom Italian public debate is rife

A further step in a sort of self-recognition process was the comparison, proposed by the students and pupils themselves, with their own family stories, often characterized by experiences of internal

migration, especially from southern Italy to the north part of the country, another important phenomenon that affected modern Italian history. From this perspective, we suggested teachers follow our workshops with another that had the purpose of recovering family memories, looking for sources at home that narrate the past and present migratory experiences of relatives.

A different kind of reaction to our workshops came from students and pupils who had themselves experienced a history of emigration to Italy from other countries: students with foreign roots and backgrounds who reached Italy as their country of destination. In many of the schools where we held our workshops, the presence of “first- or second-generation” immigrant students/pupils was significant, and this fact is consistent with the fact that the area of Milan is one of the places with the highest migratory presence in Italy.¹⁵ On many occasions it has been interesting to note how these workshops have become an opportunity for them to “claim” their migrants’ identity: the history, sometimes dramatic, of Italian emigration in a certain sense restored dignity to their personal stories, often hidden because of a sense of shame. The discovery of the migratory background as an integral and fundamental part of the history of the destination country, partly worked as an instrument to overcome the wall between “us” and “them” that the public narration often had also imposed in the classrooms. This was an interesting, and partly unexpected, positive and collateral consequence of our workshops in many schools. It was interesting, and perhaps not that paradoxical, to notice how often students with non-Italian backgrounds easily recognized themselves in the stories I told about the Italian emigrants of the past. In the discussions at the end of the workshops, these students often became the most eager to tell their stories, in many cases for the first time, to their classmates and to the teachers.

¹⁵ In 2017 the number of immigrants from abroad represented about 20% of the total population in Milan (see data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics, the ISTAT).

It is important to underline how, from our perspective, to overcome the wall between “us” and “them” did not mean to “*Italianize*” the students/pupils with foreigner roots. The approach we proposed has been well summarized by Kaya Yılmaz (2008, 40):

History should not be used as a means to socialize students of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds into the mainstream or the dominant group’s world view and culture by transmitting that privileged group’s cultural norms and values to students (i.e., history as a tool for cultural transmission). Rather, history should be used to help students not only recognize their own cultural roots, identity, and heritage, but also gain insight into other people’s cultures and world views. School history should instill in students a recognition of cultural pluralism and tolerant attitudes toward different ethnic groups.

In relation to the teachers’ reaction to the workshops it is necessary to distinguish between the teachers who had invited us and had organized our presence at their school, and other teachers who were found by chance to have to follow the workshops because these occurred during their class hours. The first group was often formed by teachers who had previously attended our training courses on the same issue. In the introduction I have already mentioned the courses and seminars for teachers, which, as the ISEC Foundation, we organized between 2015 and 2018 under my direction on the theme of the history of Italian emigration, and that flanked the workshops in schools. During these short courses or seminars (lasting about four hours) I introduced to the teachers all the issues that I would then present to the students, but I also explained their educational value and pedagogical objectives and their meaning in terms of citizenship education that underlay the proposed path.

The starting point of the seminars with the teachers was the clarification of the intellectual context in which the dissemination of the history of Italian emigration fits. In particular, I highlighted the issue I have already described above, of the evident discrepancy between the centrality of the theme in itself in national history, its near absence from the school curricula and the centrality in the debate and in the public use of history. I also highlighted the didactic difficulty of facing the beliefs and knowledge on the topic of which students believe they are carriers. In the seminars with the teachers, I then addressed the same 12 thematic steps that I proposed in the workshops at schools, combining content and methodological reflections. Sharing both pedagogical and content objectives, as well as the working

method, was a priority objective in order to make teachers aware of, and agree with, the kind of workshop we were going to conduct with their students/pupils.

However, before doing the workshops with the students, often there was a specific meeting with every group of teachers who invited us to their school for a two-way exchange of information. The teachers described the type of school and students. Based on their descriptions and requests, we proposed how to articulate the path with the students of that school.

This made the teachers who had invited us to the schools fully aware of the work we were going to conduct with their students. Instead, the teachers who were chosen by chance to follow the workshops found themselves in a different situation. Some of them taught different topics than history, and they often had little competence in the subject. Many of them were suspicious at the beginning because they feared a “political” approach to the topic and its impact in public debate, and sometimes these teachers openly expressed their distrust. In two workshops we were explicitly asked to stop by teachers who had not met us earlier. It needed the intervention of other teachers in one case and of the Dean of the school in the other.

. During the final moment of the feedback evaluation of the workshop, which usually took the form of an open final discussion, both students/pupils and teachers were able to express their feelings about the workshop itself. In particular, it is interesting to note that the recriminations as well as the doubts and initial perplexities of both some students and some professors usually disappeared during the final discussion. As for the students, those who at first contested what they interpreted as an unacceptable linking of the history of Italian emigration to stereotypes and narratives often used in public discourse to describe other migrations, usually accepted the challenge of confronting the sources and to verify my stories. Only in one case a group of four students refused to follow the workshop and maintained a conflictual attitude. At the end of the workshop I asked them to talk about it and they accepted to stay, but they didn't agree to interact with my sources.

I think that the teaching method applied during the workshop, based on the continuous clarification of the need for a critique of the sources and of my own narration of facts too, reduced or eliminated the emergence of a priori conflicts. In addition, with regard to the initial fears expressed by some teachers about a “political” approach to the topic, the dialogical didactic method meant that on no occasion at the end of the workshop was there expressed an explicit recrimination or criticism of the whole of the work performed.

To the explicit request made by me and my collaborators to highlight critical issues and shortcomings picked up on during the workshop, or to give suggestions, the issues that emerged most frequently were the following¹⁶:

- Give more space to “success stories” (suggestion coming from both students and teachers) [indicated in about the 30% of the workshops]
- Propose, in addition, a gender history approach (from teachers)) [indicated in about the 20% of the workshops]
- Also talk about the “Mafia” (from students)) [indicated in about the 50% of the workshops]
- Also talk about the characteristics of the new Italian emigration of the last ten years (from both students and teachers)) [indicated in about the 50% of the workshops]

In general, the requests were in the direction of telling more, while the subject itself (the history of Italian emigration) and the teaching method appeared to have been appreciated. It is interesting to highlight that in all the workshops (100%), the majority of the students and teachers expressed a positive evaluation of the workshop as a whole. In fact, if there was a common point in almost all the workshops, it was that the students expressed their disappointment that it was the first time they had had the opportunity to address this topic at school.

¹⁶ The issues were indicated with different words during the various final discussions and are merged here on the basis of our notes for descriptive purposes and to allow their statistical evaluation. The evaluation cannot therefore be considered systematic but has an indicative value.

In this context, the teachers were all invited to continue the work started with the ISEC Foundation workshop. In particular, in the training seminars for teachers, the suggestion was to continue in the period following our intervention with a sort of Step 5 that consisted of building a project with the students, such as an exhibition, a written text, a research on family history, and so on. As far as we know, these kinds of class projects have been developed in at least five schools.

Concluding remarks on effectiveness, assessment, and other critical issues

An important goal of this ISEC project was to implement innovative methods and didactical experiences that can propose a wider and multidimensional description of the cultural, social, and economic relationships, internal contradictions, ethnic and class as well as gender struggles, or other various factors that affect migration history. With regard to the innovative significance of this experience in comparison with the state of the art in both the literature and educational practices, it is, above all, the result of a multidisciplinary approach, and, in particular, of the attempt to combine migration history and experimental didactics. By combining various approaches, the workshops aimed to provide students/pupils and teachers with new and innovative educational experiences.

The multidisciplinary approach provides the opportunity to think about how to propose an inclusive analysis of all these processes in the classrooms and present it in a global perspective. In particular, multidisciplinary consisted of proposing different combinations of sectoral approaches: from political history, to economic and social history, from sociological readings to economic approaches, from recall to cultural studies to the presentation to students of a very varied typology of primary sources.

As already explained, a fundamental starting point of this educational project of the ISEC Foundation was the conviction of the uselessness of addressing the issue of migration in the classroom, ignoring the stereotypes regarding them. These “preconceptions,” it is perhaps superfluous to repeat, are based largely on clichés, stereotypes, prejudices, present in students’ minds just as they are in society as a whole. These prejudices represent an interpretative frame of which many Italian students are carriers,

and which must be taken into consideration if one wants to be understood and followed.

In proposing the didactical path on the history of Italian emigration abroad, my collaborators and I maintained the utility (which, in my opinion, also becomes a deontological duty for a history teacher) of addressing the issue of migration, and the stereotypes linked to it, through the use of historical sources and more generally the history research method, although from a multidisciplinary perspective, A central point was to highlight the diachronic depth and the perspective of historical comparison to a phenomenon often presented as an “emergency”..

From this perspective, this workshop set itself some educational objectives that went beyond the specific topic. From the methodological point of view, the proposed activity was also thought of as a moment of training in the historiographical method, in the criticism of primary sources, of training in the recognition of the differences between the types of sources considered. The aim was to encourage the practice of an analytical and critical approach to sources. A central issue addressed concerned the complexity of social phenomena and the understanding of the nature and structure of stereotypes, in particular through the breakdown of the identifying mechanisms “us versus them”

The point is to understand whether these educational aims have been achieved. From this perspective, the most important question concerns the actual results of our workshop in terms of increasing competency, skills, awareness, curiosity, and knowledge among students, pupils, and also teachers. In other words, it would be interesting to evaluate the effectiveness of this experience. This issue has received much attention in the literature. For example, an interesting summary was proposed by Lumpkin and Multon (2013, 292–293) who described effective teachers as those who

(a) use a variety of instructional approaches, (b) engage in professional endeavors and developmental activities to enhance their teaching, (c) seek feedback from students and make changes in instruction in response to this feedback, and (d) value the interrelationship between teaching and research.

In this regard, a central point concerns feedback and the formal evaluation of the workshop. We made an explicit choice by not introducing a formal quantitative test or evaluation: it has been a methodological decision that I made. We discussed this, and I made the decision not to use a formal evaluation for the process because I thought it was not congruous with a workshop which aimed to train students in the historical method, and, at the same time, deal with a “hot” issue. I thought that open discussion or brainstorming were more suitable for interacting with the students, although it made the experience formally less assessable.

The point is that an evaluation is a valuable formative tool to the extent that it is congruous with the structure, methods, and objectives of the workshop in which it is employed (Ardizzone & Pippolo, 2003, 48). In my opinion, a contradiction would have emerged in this case between a "closed" and merely quantitative evaluation and a path based on interaction, and the continuous questioning of the sources and the role of the teacher him-/herself. A formalized and excessively quantitative evaluation methods would seem to me to be inconsistent.

On the other hand, though, there are some “data” that are the elaboration of our (of my collaborators and my own) notes about students’ and teachers’ interventions (some of these data are already quoted in section 4 of this article). These data can help us to provide information and sources for a sort of assessment. For example, an interesting indicator is that during the three years of the project, requests to the ISEC Foundation to carry out new workshops continued to arrive, and thirteen out of the sixteen schools engaged in the project asked to go back to work with other groups of students. Often, it is students who ask their teachers to bring the ISEC Foundation back to their school, and this is perhaps a small sign that our workshops are not experienced as an impromptu intervention but as something permanent.

It is interesting to note that the workshop is still proposed by the Isec Foundation for the years after I quit as head of the Didactic Department. In fact, even for the school years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020,

under the direction of the new head of the Department Professor Monica Di Barbora, many schools have requested it. In addition, in April 2020 I was asked to prepare a video lesson on the same topic as a distance teaching tool during schools' lockdown due to Covid-19. This video lesson is now available on the ISEC Foundation's You Tube channel¹⁷.

If these indicators seem to tell us that we were successful in increasing curiosity among our partners, what remains more difficult to assess are the actual results of our workshop in terms of increasing competency and knowledge among students and teachers. The point is the effectiveness.

Recently, Gideon Boadu (2015) has proposed this synthesis on how to achieve effectiveness in history teaching:

... the core of effective teaching of History is the possession of a firm knowledge base in History and the skill to convey this knowledge in ways that are meaningful to students. Other dimensions include creating an atmosphere to enforce students' learning; using a variety of student-centered methods; use of appropriate instructional materials (films, filmstrips, audio-visuals); use of appropriate assessment procedures; use of technology tools; provision of feedback; efficient classroom management; instructional clarity; active engagement of students; catering for students' varying needs; supporting students' progress; building on students' prior knowledge or personal experiences; building a healthy relationship with students; enhancing students' imaginative abilities; having a sense of humor; and being at par with knowledge growth.

I think that our pattern of workshop fits within the view indicated by Boadu as well as by Lumpkin and Multon (2013). In this view, the entire process, including the preparation work carried out with the teachers, the four steps and the ideas for work to do in class with the students after our intervention, represents an example of an effective model of teaching history at school and in particular when you have to deal with a controversial issue such as the history of emigration. At the same time, I am aware that the positive feedback from students and teachers we have usually received at the end of the workshops is not enough to evaluate the impact of this experience in the middle and long term.

¹⁷This is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw5CabWXXQ>

In order to address this issue and spurred by some critical notations of colleagues on the lack of formalised tools of evaluation for the project described in the article, I tried to think about whether I had sources available that could give me some indication about the workshops' effectiveness in the medium and long term. I realized that a possible indirect indicator is given by the information obtained from my notes relating to other workshops organised during the same period by the Didactic Department of the ISEC Foundation under my direction.

For example, in the same years under consideration, I organised workshops on the principles of the Italian Constitution and on the history of Italian labour and business. On many occasions, I held these workshops with the same classes with which I had previously worked on the history of Italian emigration. During these laboratories, I tried to recall to the students' memory, through guided discussions and informal questionnaires, the information provided in previous workshops. On the basis of my notes, in six cases out of seven for which I have kept specific records on these issues, I could maintain that the greater part of the students were able to make good connections to the issues investigated in the previous workshops on the history of Italian emigrations.

I am fully aware of the obvious approximation and volatility of these kind of tools of assessment. In conclusion, I believe it was a successful project, but a weak point was the lability of the assessment procedure concerning the effectiveness of the workshops. I think that this experience confirms that it is somewhat complicated to identify the judgment parameters and detection methods suitable for the evaluation of History Education workshops like this, attended by students of different ages (from primary school to high school) and which concerns a controversial topic such as of the history of emigration.

References

Agnoletto, Stefano (2014), *Ethnicity versus structural factors in North American history. The case study of the Italian economic niches*, "Studia Migracyjne - Przegląd Polonijny", n. 1, pp. 161-181

- Agnoletto, Stefano (2015), *The Italians Who Built Toronto. Italian Workers and Contractors in the City's Housebuilding Industry, 1950-1980*, Oxford: Peter Lang
- Agnoletto, Stefano (2017), *Entrepreneurship and ethnic specialization. The Italian niche of the Toronto construction industry (1950s-1960s)*, in "Archives of Italian Economic and Business History", edited by Franco Amatori, Volume 1, pp. 66-96
- Ardizzone, Paolo and Pippolo, Lorena (2003), *Il Laboratorio di Didattica generale e il Sistema di Valutazione della SSIS dell'Università Cattolica*, "TD29", number 2, 48-54.
- Barnabà, Enzo (2015), *Aigues-Mortes, il massacro degli italiani*, Modena: Infinito Edizioni
- Bevilacqua, Piero, De Clementi, Andreina, and Franzina, Emilio (ed.) (2009), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, Roma: Donzelli
- Boadu, Gideon (2015), *Effective Teaching in History: The Perspectives of History Student-Teachers*, in "International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences", Vol.3, n. 1, pp. 38-51
- Choate, Mark (2008), *Emigrant Nation. The Making of Italy Abroad*, Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press
- Dalvarez, Carley(2001), *The Contribution of History to Citizenship Education*, "History Education Research Journal", Volume 1, Number 2, June, pp. 20-25
- Drake, Frederick D. (2008), *The Swing of the Pendulum: From Social Studies Education to History Education at Illinois State University*. in Warren, Wilson J. and Cantu, D. Antonio, "History Education 101: The Past, Present, and Future of Teacher Preparation", Vharlotte, NC : IAP, Information Age Pub.
- Gage, Beverly (2009) *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in its First Age of Terror*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Hourdakis, A., Calogiannakis, P. and Chiang, T.-H. (2018) 'Teaching history in a global age', in *History Education Research Journal*,15 (2), 328–41
- Inchiesta sulla miseria in Italia* (1978), Roma: Donzelli
- Lumpkin, Angela and Multon, Karen D. (2013), *Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness*, in "The Educational Forum", Vol. 77, Issue 3, pp. 288-299
- Nichol, Jon and Cooper, Hilary (2017), *Addressing Sensitive, Contentious and Controversial Issues:Past And Present*, "International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Rese arch" [IJHLTR], Volume 14, Number 2 – Spring/Summer
- Phillips, Robert. (2002) 'Historical significance – the forgotten key element?', in *Teaching History* 106, pp.14-19.
- Phillips, Robert (2003) 'History, Citizenship and Identity', in *Past Forward* (HistoricalAssociation) p. 37-41.

- Rautiainen, Matti; Räikkönen, Eija; Veijola, Anna and Mikkonen, Simo (2019). *History teaching in Finnish general upper secondary schools : Objectives and practices*, in “History Education Research Journal”, 16 (2), 291-305
- Rinaudo, Sandro (2009), *Il cammino della speranza. L'emigrazione clandestina degli italiani nel secondo dopoguerra*, Torino: Einaudi
- Rosoli, Gianfausto (1978), *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana 1876-1976*, Roma: Cser
- Seixas, Peter and Tom Morton. (2013). *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson College Indigenous
- Stella, Gian Antonio (2002), *L'orda. Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi*, Milano: Rizzoli
- Stella, Gian Antonio (2004), *Odissee. Italiani sulle rotte del sogno e del dolore*, Milano: Rizzoli
- Wilschut, Arie (2019) *The relevance of History to students: How to improve it?*, in “Prospettive per la Didattica della Storia in Italia e in Europa”, edited by Enrico Valseriati, Palermo: Digital Frontiers, pp. 131-154
- Wilschut, Arie., van Straaten, D., van Riessen, M. (2013). *Geschiedenisdidactiek: handboek voor de vakdocent*. [History Teaching: Handbook for the History Teacher]. Bussum (NL): Coutinho
- Ylmaz , Kaya (2008), *A Vision of History Teaching and Learning: Thoughts on History Education in Secondary Schools*, in “The High School Journal”, Vol. 92, No. 2 (Dec., 2008 - Jan., 2009), pp. 37-46