

The teachers of mentally disabled children in Reggio Emilia: the “Antonio Marro” Colony-School across the 1920s and 1930s

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ABSTRACT: The “Antonio Marro” Colony-School, inaugurated in Reggio Emilia in 1921 and overseen by the adjacent “San Lazzaro” Asylum, offered an alternative to the conventional practice of confining children with mental disabilities in asylums. Bringing a holistic approach, the Institute recruited a number of elementary teachers to work alongside its health and welfare staff. In this paper, I outline the history of the Institute, with a particular focus on the teachers employed there during the 1920s and 1930s in terms of their biographical profiles and, more specifically, their educational backgrounds. The aim is to provide additional insights into a historiographical theme that remains largely unexplored: the training of teachers for disabled pupils.

EET KEYWORDS: “Antonio Marro” Colony-School; Teachers of Mentally Disabled Children; Medico-Pedagogical Institutes; Italy; XX Century.

1. *The education of “phrenasthenics”: from mental hospitals to medico-pedagogical institutes*

The setting up of medico-pedagogical institutes for children with mental disabilities in Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a complex process driven by controversial reforms of mental asylums. As is now widely acknowledged, it took a long time for cognitive deficits to be recognized as such. Consequently, so-called “idiots” were confined at the same facilities as the mentally ill, where they were subjected to overcrowding and inhumane

conditions¹. In addition, children and adolescents were often indiscriminately confined together with adults².

While the seventeenth century is remembered for the “great internment” of all those who were seen – for one reason or another – as a threat to society, the first steps towards a more enlightened perspective were taken in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, by the father of psychiatry Philippe Pinel and his student Jean Étienne Dominique Esquirol, who introduced the distinction between disability and mental illness. Shortly afterwards, in Paris, a doctor, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, and his colleague Édouard Séguin, led various projects designed, for the first time, to help individuals with intellectual disabilities by acknowledging their capacity to be educated. Thanks to these pioneering efforts, during the second half of the 1800s, many institutions devoted to the care and education of so-called “idiots” sprang up around Europe³.

In Italy, Andrea Verga is credited with introducing the concept of “phrenasthenia” into the psychiatric discourse of the 1870s. Verga emphasized the need for children with disabilities to undergo «a patient and well-understood education in special institutions», distinct from mental hospitals⁴. Other influential psychiatrists and intellectuals followed his lead and, thanks to their advocacy, the first Italian institutions for mentally disabled children were set up⁵. Despite numerous challenges and minimal support from the State, some of these were residential facilities for children with disabilities of medium-high severity, while others were day schools (either special schools for those with less severe disabilities or “differential” classes for those viewed as only “delayed”

¹ On this topic, regarding the Italian context see V.P. Babini, *La questione dei frenastenici. Alle origini della psicologia scientifica in Italia (1870-1910)*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1996 and M. Schianchi, *Le social derrière le handicap: Étude historique du cas italien (XIX^e-XX^e siècles)*, Torino-Paris, L'Harmattan Italia, 2019. On an international level cf. M.A. Winzer, *The History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration*, Washington DC, Gallaudet University, 1993 and R. Hanes, I. Brown, N.E. Hansen (edd.), *The Routledge History of Disability*, London, Routledge, 2017.

² Regarding the presence of children and adolescents in Italian mental asylums, see the study on Bologna mental hospital conducted by R. Raimondo and C. Gentili: *Bambini e ragazzi negli ospedali psichiatrici tra Otto e Novecento: un'indagine tra le carte dell'Istituzione Gian Franco Minguzzi di Bologna*, «Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione», vol. 7, n. 2, 2020, pp. 109-119.

³ See A. Canevaro, J. Gaudreau, *L'educazione degli handicappati. Dai primi tentativi alla pedagogia moderna*, Roma, Carocci, 2002; F. Bocci, *Una mirabile avventura: storia dell'educazione dei disabili da Jean Itard a Giovanni Bollea*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2011; A.F. Rotatori, F.E. Obiakor, J.P. Bakken (edd.), *History of Special Education*, Bingley, Emerald, 2011; M. Schianchi, *Storia della disabilità. Dal castigo degli dèi alla crisi del welfare*, Roma, Carocci, 2012; H.-J. Stiker, *A history of disability*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2019 (1st ed. 1997).

⁴ A. Verga, *Frenastenici e imbecilli*, «Archivio italiano per le malattie nervose e più particolarmente per le alienazioni mentali», vol. XXIV, 1877, pp. 229-240, in partic. p. 230.

⁵ The interest in the classification of mental deficits accompanied this process, even outside Italy. On this subject cf. the special issue of «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 55, n. 3, 2019, and especially the introduction edited by A.Fco. Canales, S. Polenghi, *Classifying children: a historical perspective on testing and measurement*, pp. 343-352.

or not truly abnormal). In the latter category, one institution that was known for its exemplary medical and pedagogical approach, was a special school launched in Rome in 1899 by psychologist and founder of Italian pediatric neuropsychiatry Sante De Sanctis. In his well-known 1915 work *Educazione dei deficienti* [*Education of feeble-minded children*], in addressing how the mentally disabled should be educated and assisted, De Sanctis provocatively stated: «We must begin by drawing clear distinctions»⁶.

Also in the late 1800s, Clodomiro Bonfigli, an esteemed psychiatrist and member of Parliament, founded the National League for the protection of disabled children, with the primary aim of fostering the opening of institutions for “idiots”. It was not long before this invitation was taken up in various parts of the country. A few months after the foundation of the League, the Emilian Association for the Protection of Disabled Children was set up. In July 1899, this Association sponsored the opening in San Giovanni in Persiceto – near Bologna – of the first Italian medico-pedagogical institute for the disabled, which shortly afterwards was moved to Bertalia. From the outset, the Institute was intended to offer residential care and education to all the “phrenasthenic” children then confined in the nearby large mental asylums, specifically those in Bologna, Imola, Colorno and Reggio Emilia⁷.

However, the school in Bertalia closed in 1917. In its place, the “Antonio Marro” Colony-School was launched in Reggio Emilia in the early 1920s. Again, this Institute’s mission was the care and education of children with intellectual disabilities who continued to be confined in the city’s mental hospital⁸.

⁶ Milano, Vallardi, 1915, p. 200. In this volume, De Sanctis shared his enlightened views on the various forms of support and education that were appropriate for disabled children as a function of the nature and severity of their handicaps. For further background on his persona and his contributions to the field of disability, see S. De Sanctis, *Autobiography*, in C. Murchison (ed.), *History of Psychology in Autobiography*, Worcester, MA, Clark University Press, 1936, pp. 83-120; F. Bianchi di Castelbianco, *Sante De Sanctis. Conoscenza ed esperienza in una prospettiva psicologica*, Roma, Edizioni Scientifiche MaGi, 1998; G. Cimino, G.P. Lombardo, *Sante De Sanctis tra psicologia generale e psicologia applicata*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2004; G.P. Lombardo, *Historiographic categories in the history of Italian psychology: Sante De Sanctis between psychiatry and psychology*, «Rivista di Psicologia Clinica», n. 2, 2007, pp. 132-139; E. Cicciola, R. Foschi, G.P. Lombardo, *Making up intelligence scales: De Sanctis’s and Binet’s tests, 1905 and after*, «History of Psychology», vol. 17, n. 3, 2014, pp. 223-236 and G. Morgese, G.P. Lombardo, *Sante De Sanctis. Le origini della Neuropsichiatria infantile nell’Università di Roma: la dementia praecocissima*, Roma, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2017.

⁷ *Programma dell’Istituto medico-pedagogico per la cura ed educazione dei frenastenici sotto il patrocinio dell’Associazione emiliana per la protezione dei fanciulli deficienti*, Bologna, stab. tip. Zamorani e Albertazzi, 1903. For further background on the history of this institute, see Babini, *La questione dei frenastenici*, cit., pp. 115-174.

⁸ On the history of the Colony-School, see L. Rossi, *Infanzia anormale a Reggio Emilia: l’esperienza della Colonia-Scuola “A. Marro” (1921-1940)*, in G. Genovesi (ed.), *Infanzia in Padania. Condizioni educative e scuola nell’area padana tra ’800 e ’900*, Ferrara, Corso Editore, 1993, pp. 245-265; F. Paolella, *Un esperimento di profilassi sociale. La colonia-scuola “Antonio*

In this paper, I briefly reconstruct the historical and educational trajectory of the Colony-School, thereby adding to the broader and intricate history of Italian therapeutic and educational institutes which have received little scrutiny to date, in relation to either their strengths or their shortcomings⁹. The main focus of my analysis of the Reggio Emilia institution is the teaching staff hired between the 1920s and 1930s, and specifically their training background. This enables us to address another, more specific, historiographical gap surrounding the arduous courses of study and professional credentialing of teachers for the disabled¹⁰. My research is based on material from the archives of the former “San Lazzaro” psychiatric hospital, which today are held at the “Carlo Livi” scientific library in Reggio Emilia, as well as on a vast range of published sources on the history of the local mental hospital and, more generally, of Italian special education¹¹.

2. Brief history of the “Marro” Colony-School in Reggio Emilia

Named after a psychiatrist from Piedmont Antonio Marro¹², the Colony-School for mentally disabled girls and boys between the ages of 5 and 15 was

Marro” di Reggio Emilia, «Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria», vol. 134, n. 3, 2010, pp. 23-34 and L. Romani, *La colonia-scuola “A. Marro” 1921-1936: “al vin dal Marro” ...e la storia viene da lontano*, «Strenna del Pio Istituto Artigianelli in Reggio Emilia», vol. 21, n. 2, 2012, pp. 194-200.

⁹ On the strengths and shortcomings of these institutes, see P. Bianchini in *The “Medico-Pedagogical Institutes” and the failure of the collaboration between psychiatry and pedagogy (1889-1978)*, «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 55, n. 3, 2019, pp. 511-527.

¹⁰ On this theme, see A. Debè, *Maestri “speciali” alla Scuola di padre Gemelli. La formazione degli insegnanti per fanciulli anormali all’Università Cattolica (1926-1978)*, Lecce-Rovato (BS), Pensa Multimedia, 2017. In general, about the progress of the Italian studies in the field of the history of special education cf. also M.C. Morandini, *Studies on the history of special education in Italy: state of the art and paths for future research*, «Espacio, Tiempo y Educación», vol. 3, n. 1, 2016, pp. 235-247. About the international historiography see P. Devlieger, I. Grosvenor, F. Simon, G. Van Hove, B. Vanobbergen, *Visualising disability in the past*, «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 44, n. 6, 2008, pp. 747-760; P. Verstraete, *The politics of activity: emergence and development of educational programs for people with disabilities between 1750 and 1860*, «History of Education Review», vol. 38, n. 1, 2009, pp. 78-90 and S. Barsch, A. Klein, P. Verstraete, *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories In Europe*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2013.

¹¹ My thanks go to Chiara Bombardieri, head of the Archive of the former “San Lazzaro” psychiatric hospital in Reggio Emilia, for her valuable guidance.

¹² After obtaining a degree in medicine, Antonio Marro (1840-1913) practiced for many years as a doctor in the province of Cuneo, his hometown. After moving to Turin in 1882, he first worked as a doctor at the prison and subsequently became assistant to the prominent physician and anthropologist Cesare Lombroso at the university’s department of forensic medicine, where he specialized in psychiatry and conducted research on a variety of topics, with a particular focus on the mentally disabled. In 1885, he was appointed medical head of a division at the city’s mental hospital. In 1890, he was made director of the hospital, a position that he held until his death. In

inaugurated on 15 June 1921 at Villa “Levi-Rodino”, on a large site adjacent to the “San Lazzaro” Asylum in Reggio Emilia. With the opening of the school, a project that had been in the pipeline since 1908 finally came to fruition, under the guidance of the Asylum’s director, the psychiatrist Giuseppe Guicciardi¹³, and with the support of the hospital’s Board of Management¹⁴.

Aware that disabled children resident in mental hospitals only had access to «good material assistance and general moral [assistance]»¹⁵, Guicciardi argued that they lacked a meaningful educational programme of their own, a need that only a facility tailored to their specific requirements could adequately fulfill. At the same time, he believed that institutions for mentally disabled children should be set up «through the work of those same bodies that have the responsibility, directly or indirectly, for psychiatric patients in general» and thus that they should be formally connected with mental asylums, so that the provincial authorities could support them financially under the provisions of Law No. 36 of 14 February 1904, also known as the Giolitti Law¹⁶. This is why the “Marro” Colony was initially placed under the administrative and medical oversight of the “San Lazzaro”¹⁷.

1888, Marro founded and directed «Annali di freniatria e scienze affini» [*Annals of phreniatry and related sciences*], the Turin psychiatric hospital’s journal. On his life story, see G. Marro, *Antonio Marro*, Torino, Tip. Cooperativa, 1913 and R. Sani, *Marro Antonio*, in *Dizionario Biografico dell’Educazione 1800-2000*, edited by G. Chiosso, R. Sani, 2 vols., Milano, Editrice Bibliografica, 2013, Vol. II, p. 116.

¹³ After graduating in medicine from the University of Bologna in 1883, Guicciardi (1859-1946) began his career as a doctor at the Reggio Emilia Asylum, then directed by the psychiatrist Augusto Tamburini. During his early years of practice, he also taught at the university level (obtaining a professorship in psychiatry in 1888) and conducted research in the field of experimental psychology. In 1907, he took over from his mentor as director of “San Lazzaro”, working to reform the institute and expand its activities until his retirement in 1928. See A. Bertolani, *Giuseppe Guicciardi*, «Rivista sperimentale di freniatria», vol. 70, 1946, pp. 5-11 and F. Paoletta, *Guicciardi Giuseppe*, in *Aspi – Archivio storico della psicologia italiana*, <<https://www.aspi.unimib.it/collections/entity/detail/441/>> (last access: 30.01.2024).

¹⁴ Archive of the former San Lazzaro Psychiatric Hospital in Reggio Emilia [henceforth ASLRE], Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Letter from Guicciardi to the President of the Asylum, 19.09.1908.

¹⁵ G. Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali ammesso all’Istituto psichiatrico di S. Lazzaro presso Reggio-Emilia: la Colonia-Scuola “Antonio Marro”*, from the periodical «La Provincia di Reggio», Reggio Emilia, Cooperativa lavoratori Tipografi, 1922, p. 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ In operation since the 1700s, beginning in the 1870s, the “San Lazzaro” underwent major reforms under the direction of the psychiatrist Carlo Livi. Thanks to Livi and his successor Tamburini, the Institute became a recognized model in the study and treatment of mental disorders. On the long and complex history of the Reggio hospital, see F.M. Ferro, R. Boccalon, G. Riefolo, E. Orlandelli, *Analisi di uno sviluppo istituzionale: il San Lazzaro di Reggio Emilia*, in F.M. Ferro *et alii* (edd.), *Passioni della mente e della storia: protagonisti, teorie e vicende della psichiatria italiana tra ’800 e ’900*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1989, pp. 281-287; C. Bombardieri, G. Grassi, F. Paoletta, *L’OPG di Reggio Emilia 1896-2015. Storia di un’istituzione*, «Rivista sperimentale di freniatria: la rivista dei servizi di salute mentale», vol. 146, n. 3, 2022, pp. 159-180 and P. Benassi, *La storia*

The first to access the facility were 18 children, five of whom were girls¹⁸, previously resident on different wards of the mental hospital, where they had been «vegetating and languishing», despite their capacity to be educated¹⁹. Children whose intellectual deficits were so severe that they were deemed untreatable remained at the hospital, where a dedicated pavilion called the “Daquin” would only be designated to them in 1925²⁰. Delivering a combination of medical care and educational work, the Colony-School was intended to spare the young disabled children from «bad influences and all the dangers of the home and the streets» and was therefore run along the lines of a boarding school. With more than a hint of the crude cynicism that was typical of his era, Guicciardi also remarked that: «Young people of abnormal intelligence and character represent a danger and a very serious burden for society», hence the need to render them «not useless, partially productive, and in most cases not dangerous, members»²¹. Hence, the Colony-School was to provide an education that would benefit both the individual recipient and society, whereby the latter would be protected from potential sources of public disorder.

While nearly all the first residents had some kind of cognitive deficit, they were more specifically categorized based on whether their abnormalities predominantly concerned their intelligence, character, sensory perception, or functionality (in terms of motor difficulties), or else were classified as “post-encephalitic bradyphrenics”. At a later stage, this last group was deemed ineligible for the residential centre because they were perceived as not susceptible to improvement. In general, however, more emphasis was placed on the needs of the individual than on the needs of the group, with intervention customized for the individual child: «just one law must guide teachers in their tasks» – wrote Colony director Dr. Maria Del Rio in 1931, namely «to get the pupils to progress by following their inclinations»²².

In keeping with the teachings of Séguin, to educate “improved” children, the educational process was designed to involve the children in their entirety. The students were looked after physically, educated in morals especially through

del famoso manicomio “San Lazzaro” di Reggio Emilia: vicende e protagonisti, Reggio Emilia, Consulta libri e progetti, 2023.

¹⁸ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Notice from Guicciardi to the President of the Asylum, 17.06.1921.

¹⁹ Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., p. 12.

²⁰ In 1885, this same pavilion had been designated by the director Tamburini for the care and education for the male mentally disabled inmates of “San Lazzaro”, the first time that something had been done in recognition of their specific needs. Cf. A. Tamburini, G.C. Ferrari, G. Antonini, *L'assistenza degli alienati in Italia e nelle varie nazioni*, Torino, Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1918, p. 601.

²¹ Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., pp. 18-19.

²² M. Bertolani Del Rio, *Il primo decennio della colonia scuola A. Marro: 1921-1931*, «Rivista sperimentale di Freniatria e medicina legale delle alienazioni mentali», vol. 55, n. 3, 1931, p. 659.

religion teaching, equipped with basic knowledge and trained in an occupation. A certain importance was also attributed, again in keeping with Séguin who had drawn on the philosophical theories of Pierre Leroux, to individual will, viewed as the «minister of all practical life». As such, the will was first to be brought under control and then transformed, elevated and normalised²³.

Ergotherapy held a prominent position at the “Marro”, to the extent that in 1923, all weekday afternoons were dedicated to various occupational workshops, while only three half-days a week were timetabled for elementary schooling. The aim was to ensure that after their time at the Colony, the young people would be prepared to take up employment opportunities suited to their social backgrounds, having also assimilated discipline and rigor as part of their training. Boys were taught to be tailors, shoemakers or basket makers; girls learned the occupations of seamstress, embroiderer or weaver. Residents were also instructed in the care of the Colony’s house and garden²⁴. Over the years, the workshops were expanded to cover still other occupations²⁵.

The large green spaces that surrounded the villa also meant that the children could reap the benefits of spending time and resting outdoors in between their book-learning and manual work. All this took place in a relaxed and maternal atmosphere – at least by Guicciardi’s account – thanks to the rejection of a punishment-based system and the cultivation of an orderly but familial setting, to the extent that the school was described as a «joyful home»²⁶ and a «happy camp»²⁷. Girls and boys sometimes attended lessons or recreation together, based on the institute’s philosophy of supervised co-education.

Given that, at the time, there were no other institutions for the mentally disabled in Reggio Emilia, and that the nearby Bertalia Institute had been shut down in 1917 as earlier documented, the “Marro” Colony-School saw rapid

²³ Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., p. 13.

²⁴ See M. Bertolani Del Rio, *La “Colonia-Scuola Antonio Marro” nell’Istituto Psichiatrico di Reggio Emilia*, «Rivista di Psicologia», vol. 19, n. 3-4, 1923, pp. 154-161.

²⁵ One particularly noteworthy addition in the early 1930s was the so-called *Ars Canusina*, a form of arts and crafts that involved the reproduction of traditional ornamental motifs – associated with the medieval domain of Matilda of Canossa – on a range of materials including fabric, ceramics and wrought iron. It was Maria Del Rio who patented this innovative technique, which was taught to the girls attending the Colony-School, with the initial support of Zaira Boetti, a patient at the asylum and an expert embroiderer. This artwork proved very successful, even outside the Colony, to the extent that Del Rio registered the commercial trademark *Ars Canusina*®, which today is owned by the Municipality of Casina. See M. Bertolani Del Rio, *Lavoro artigianale ed ergoterapia “Ars Canusina”*, «Rivista sperimentale di Freniatria», vol. 57, 1933, pp. 964-972 and R.S. Motti Zambianchi, *L’artigianato artistico Ars Canusina nell’esperienza della Colonia-Scuola “Antonio Marro”: contenuti formativi e culturali*, in P. Benassi (ed.), *Il lavoro e le malattie mentali: storia di due secoli*, S. Sofia di Romagna, Tipografia dei comuni, 2004, pp. 93-103.

²⁶ G. Guicciardi, *La Colonia-Scuola A. Marro*, «Rivista sperimentale di Freniatria e delle alienazioni mentali», vol. 46, n. 3-4, 1922, p. 572.

²⁷ Id., *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., p. 3.

growth in the number of its residents, recording as many as 115 just ten years after its foundation²⁸.

In 1930, the Colony was extended via the construction of an annex to the original villa. However, both villa and annex had to be left behind in 1936, when they were expropriated for military use²⁹. The disabled children were then transferred to the “De Sanctis” pavilion of the “San Lazzaro” hospital, which was purpose-built to accommodate them. Ten years later, on Guicciardi’s death, the Colony was named after him. Its title changed again in 1953 when it became administratively independent of the Reggio mental hospital and was named the “Sante De Sanctis” boarding school. Key reforms followed, within the laborious and controversial process that led to the integration of disabled children into mainstream classrooms in Italy in the 1970s and the consequent closure of special education institutions³⁰. In keeping with this new spirit of inclusion, the school progressively reduced its intake, definitively closing its doors in 1975³¹.

3. *The school’s staff*

Given that the Colony-School was intended to be both therapeutic and educational in nature, it was envisaged from the outset that its staff should include both healthcare and education practitioners. These two groups jointly supervised the children’s overall care, from the moment they were first admitted to the Institute. Doctors and teachers worked synergistically to build an initial profile of the disabled children, who were first subjected to a clinical examination designed to assess their somatic, physiological, organic and neuropsychic functioning. This evaluation was conducted by the Colony’s

²⁸ Bertolani Del Rio, *Il primo decennio della colonia scuola A. Marro: 1921-1931*, cit., pp. 648-670.

²⁹ See Ead., *La Colonia-Scuola “A. Marro”*, «Rivista sperimentale di freniatria e medicina legale delle alienazioni mentali», vol. 62, n. 3, 1938, pp. 737-739.

³⁰ On this topic, see F. Pruneri, *La politica scolastica dell’integrazione nel secondo dopoguerra*, in G.M. Cappai (ed.), *Percorsi dell’integrazione. Per una didattica delle diversità personali*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2003, pp. 55-80; S. D’Alessio, *Inclusive education in Italy a critical analysis of the policy of integrazione scolastica*, Rotterdam ecc., Sense Publishers, 2011 and S. Polenghi, *The History of Educational Inclusion of the Disabled in Italy*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, Last updated: June 28, 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1608>> (last access: 30.01.2024).

³¹ L. Angelini *et alii*, *Deistituzionalizzazione: l’esperienza del De Sanctis di Reggio Emilia*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1977 and C. Bombardieri (ed.), *Una colonia felice? Nascita e superamento degli istituti per l’infanzia. Mostra virtuale sulla pagina web della Biblioteca scientifica Carlo Livi*, 2021, <<https://www.ausl.re.it/la-biblioteca-livi-e-larchivio-dellex-ospedale-psichiatrico-san-lazzaro-partecipano>> (last access: 30.01.2024).

healthcare staff, who during the children's stay at the institution would continue to work on «detecting, monitoring and correcting somatic and psychic manifestations», implementing «psychic, medicinal and physical» therapies that included baths, showers and sun treatments, but also sedative therapies, in keeping with contemporary mental hospital practice³². The teachers on the other hand were required to observe the children from the psychological and educational perspectives, taking an «intellectual snapshot» of the students via an «oral examination» comprising 40 questions³³. While most of the items were designed to elicit the children's personal data, information about their everyday lives («What is your mother's name?», «What job does your father do?») and their grasp of time and space («What year is it?», «Where do you live?», «What place are you in now?»), the closing questions homed in on the respondents' affective attachments and morals («Who do you love most of all?», «What does it mean to be good? And bad?») ³⁴.

It is clear from the nature of the questions and from the instructions provided to the teachers who administered them («The answers must be transcribed faithfully, while taking into account pronunciation, articulation, voice, pauses, repetitions, ecc.»)³⁵, that the oral examination drew heavily on the work of Sante De Sanctis, who in his aforementioned 1915 publication presented a list of questions very similar to that adopted in Reggio Emilia³⁶. Furthermore, again keeping with the recommendations of the De Sanctis, the profiles observed upon admission were to be viewed solely as the starting point in a long and comprehensive developmental journey. The ongoing outcomes of this process were to be documented in a personal Biographical Chart, which was regularly updated from the clinical, pedagogical and educational perspectives.

The Colony-School's education programme was also informed by earlier work with children with mental disabilities in Rome. For example, in 1923 Del Rio noted the use of a reader for slow and disabled learners, the *Sillabario per tardivi e deficienti* [*Reader for slow developers and the mentally impaired*], devised by Gina Mangili at the Orthophrenic Teacher Training School in Rome³⁷, alongside educational materials based on the work of Giuseppe Montesano and Maria Montessori, as well as that of Friedrich Fröbel³⁸.

³² Bertolani Del Rio, *La "Colonia-Scuola Antonio Marro" nell'Istituto Psichiatrico di Reggio Emilia*, cit., pp. 157-158.

³³ Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., p. 16.

³⁴ Records of these oral examinations and, more generally, the biographical records of the students at the "Marro" Colony-School are held in the residents' personal files in the archives of the former "San Lazzaro" psychiatric hospital in Reggio Emilia.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ De Sanctis, *Educazione dei deficienti*, cit., pp. 227-228.

³⁷ See the biographical entry on Gina Mangili by R. Sani in *Dizionario Biografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000*, cit., Vol. II, p. 87.

³⁸ Bertolani Del Rio, *La "Colonia-Scuola Antonio Marro" nell'Istituto Psichiatrico di Reggio*

The amalgamation of healthcare and education pursued by the Colony, and in general by the Italian medico-pedagogical institutes of the day³⁹, signalled a deliberate effort to move away from the exclusively psychiatric and care-oriented approach that had previously been applied with children confined in mental hospitals. Indeed, Guicciardi, in describing the newborn institution in 1922, expressed himself in the following terms: «No longer a section of mental hospital, therefore, but a *colony-school*, no longer sick or hospitalized [patients], but *students*, no longer nurses, but *assistants*, no longer invigilators, but *teachers*. Even words, as we know, bear a philosophy of their own»⁴⁰.

When the Colony-School was first opened in 1921, a teacher-inspector, an assistant teacher-inspector and a housekeeper-teacher of “women’s work” were hired. They were issued one-year contracts, given the experimental nature of the project. These three figures were responsible for the general and educational management of the Institute, with the support of six assistants – all trained nurses – who were to oversee the residents’ health. The nurses, required to be «women over 30, responsible and maternal in spirit and manner», were mainly selected from among the staff of the mental asylum. The remainder of the team at the Colony-School comprised a drawing master and a series of craft workers, both women and men, with expertise in working with fabric, wood or metals and – for this reason – in charge of the children’s vocational training⁴¹.

As noted above, Maria Del Rio was appointed first director of the Colony. She had already begun to work at the “San Lazzaro” Asylum during her medical training, the beginning of a long career marked by the fruitful joining of healthcare practice with scientific research⁴². While Del Rio’s appointment

Emilia, cit., p. 159.

³⁹ In this context, the “San Vincenzo” Institute in Milan stands out as an exemplary model. Founded at the turn of the twentieth century to benefit “slow children”, it was funded by private benefactors. Drawing on the input of medical doctor and psychologist Father Agostino Gemelli, the institute set up its own laboratory of remedial psychology and education and a day clinic, thereby bolstering its educational interventions with scientific rigour. On the history of the “San Vincenzo” Institute see M. Vanin, *Dalla parte degli ultimi. L’Istituto San Vincenzo di Milano-Monza. Un secolo di fedeltà, una storia ambrosiana*, Milano, NED, 2009; A. Debè, *Educare gli anormali nella Milano di inizio Novecento: l’esperienza dell’Istituto San Vincenzo*, «Rivista Formazione, Lavoro, Persona», vol. VII, n. 20, 2017, pp. 149-157 and A. Debè, S. Polenghi, *Agostino Gemelli (1878-1959) and mental disability: science, faith and education in the view of an Italian scientist and friar*, «Paedagogica Historica», vol. 55, n. 3, 2019, 429-450.

⁴⁰ Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., pp. 9-10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴² Del Rio (1892-1978) obtained her degree in medicine from the University of Genoa in 1915. Born in Reggio Emilia, during her medical training, she conducted field research at the “San Lazzaro” mental hospital and soon joined the staff there. In 1921, she was chosen to direct the Colony, a position she held until her retirement in 1952. Married to her colleague Aldo Bertolani, who succeeded Guicciardi in 1929 as director of the hospital, she was also a passionate scholar of local history and hospital history in particular, to the extent that she even published some of her studies on the history of the Reggio Emilia hospitals of “San Lazzaro” and “S. Maria Nuova”.

as director of the “Marro” Colony was undoubtedly in recognition of her competence, it cannot be ruled out that the fact she was a woman, and therefore perceived as naturally more suited to working with children, influenced the decision to choose her above male colleagues. In any case, Guicciardi remained closely involved in overseeing the work of the Colony right up to his retirement in 1928.

a. *The first three teachers*

Although the original intention was to recruit both a male and a female teacher, in the end, the Colony-School only hired women teachers to save on their remuneration. For a gross salary of 458.33 liras per month, the teachers were required to live in at the Colony.

Selecting the first teachers proved challenging. Guicciardi was seeking candidates «of excellent morality, good general education and a lively and heartfelt vocation for the position», who also possessed a specific background «in the methods to be applied to the teaching and moral, intellectual and physical improvements of the [intellectually] abnormal [children] entrusted to them» as well as «a clear understanding of the objectives to be accomplished». On the occasion of the National “Pro Abnormal” Congress in Genoa in 1920, the director of the “San Lazzaro” Asylum had met the earlier-mentioned psychiatrist Giuseppe Montesano, then head of the “Santa Maria della Pietà” mental asylum in Rome and director of the capital city’s orthophrenic teacher training school. During a conversation about specialist training for the teachers of the mentally disabled, Montesano suggested that Guicciardi should send a teacher to train at his school, deeming that around forty days would be sufficient for a «complete course of instruction»⁴³.

However, the candidate who came forward for the first teaching role at the “Marro” Colony had already graduated from the Rome School. This was Gina Avvantaggiato, who was formally hired on 16 April 1921. Montesano certified that she had undertaken both the school’s theoretical training and a period of teaching practice, during which she had demonstrated «enthusiasm for learning the special methods used in these classes and an aptitude for applying them». Avvantaggiato herself made spontaneous contact with Guicciardi, writing that she would be «very happy to be able to make myself useful in the

For further background on Del Rio, see *Una psichiatra fra scienza, storia, arte e solidarietà: Maria Bertolani Del Rio*, Atti del Convegno, Casina, 11 luglio 1998, Reggio Emilia, Centro italiano storia sanitaria ospitaliera, 2000 and G. Caroli, *Maria Bertolani Del Rio: caritas et scientia, elevata dottrina e nobilissimo cuore*, Felina, La Nuova Tipolito, 2018.

⁴³ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Letter from Guicciardi to the Presidente of the Asylum, 30.11.1920.

aforementioned school» and that she was ready to immediately fill the position by moving to Reggio Emilia from Rome, where she lived alone because she was an orphan and, presumably, unmarried. Her self-introduction was followed by a letter from her doctor, who certified that the girl was «of healthy physical constitution, and free from physical imperfections that could diminish the prestige of an educator in fully exercising her duties»⁴⁴.

Despite the young woman's specialized training and the excellent references with which she came, Avvantaggiato did not survive the year-long probationary period. Overturning Montesano's assessment, Guicciardi wrote that «although endowed with a ready and lively intelligence and a good and refined education, she is not at all suited to the position: she lacks, as she herself has sincerely stated at times, the vocation; nor can time, I would add, having done this experiment, serve to form this vocation, which is an intimate inclination of temperament and character»⁴⁵.

In contrast, the teacher Luisa Ferrari was hired only a few months after Avvantaggiato and in April 1922 her contract was extended for a further year because the director of the hospital deemed her to have the qualities needed to work with the mentally impaired, such as «intelligence, knowledge, a very sensitive maternal spirit and a firm and tenacious will». A qualified kindergarten and elementary teacher, Ferrari had first spent a couple of months at the orthophrenic teacher training school in Rome at the expense of the Reggio Emilia hospital⁴⁶.

On Ferrari's recommendation, in January 1922, the "Marro" Colony-School took on the 30-year-old Margherita Bertolotti as a trainee teacher. Lacking in qualifications due to a lengthy illness, she had worked for thirteen years in the post office in the small village of Salsomaggiore and, as she herself reported, had also «attended the *Casa dei bambini* [*Children's House*] in Milan where the Montessori method is practiced»⁴⁷. Bertolotti too, after being taken on as a teacher at the "Marro", went to Montesano's teacher training school to study and do an internship, personally covering the cost of her stay in Rome. Guicciardi, in light of her «excellent qualities of mind and heart, her calm and serene temperament, her spirit of self-sacrifice, her tender and enlightened altruism», proposed her as a replacement for Avvantaggiato⁴⁸.

Bertolotti and Ferrari were therefore the two teacher-inspectors responsible for the educational oversight of the "Marro" Colony from April 1922 to April 1923, enjoying the evident trust of the director of the hospital. They were flanked

⁴⁴ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of G. Avvantaggiato.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Notice from Guicciardi to the President of the Asylum, 14.02.1922.

⁴⁷ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of M. Bertolotti.

⁴⁸ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of G. Avvantaggiato.

by Maria Careghi, who held an elementary school diploma and was single, and thus was not susceptible to being «distracted from her duties»; in her role as housekeeper-teacher of “women’s work”, one of her main responsibilities was to ensure the smooth running of the arts and vocational classes⁴⁹.

However, in January 1923, Guicciardi sent a detailed report on the progress of the Colony to the lawyer Vittorio Belluzzi, who was then the chairman of the Asylum, complaining of intractable disputes with the two teacher-inspectors.

The first issues emerged in September 1922, when Bertolotti and Ferrari asked to be supported by a third teacher. When the Board of Management rejected their proposal, only hiring a piano and singing teacher for a few hours a week, the two reacted with disappointment, apparently becoming less and less cooperative over the following months. Guicciardi claimed that the teachers had displayed unacceptable conduct, failing to implement the agreed educational programme, frequently absenting themselves from the Colony without justification, forcing the assistants to carry out private errands for them, and bringing unauthorized individuals into the school, including a «young lady dressed as a man at four in the morning». Furthermore, the director complained, «the young ladies, who are eminently religious spirits (a quality that is always seen as positive per se, indeed as outright valuable, in the educators of children), intensified [...] their pious practices and based the entire life of the Colony-School on them, to the detriment of all other kinds of pedagogical action»⁵⁰. For these reasons, the two teachers – who a few years later went on to found the religious order of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Incarnate Word – were let go from the Colony in April 1923, as was Maria Careghi, who had allied herself with her colleagues.

b. *From internal to external teachers*

The unfortunate experience with the Colony’s first teachers underpinned the Board’s decision to reorganize the education programme, no longer relying on internal teachers but rather taking on two external ones. The new teaching programme comprised three two-hour lessons per week, to be divided among the various disciplines, including gymnastics. This new policy was defended by Guicciardi on the grounds that the Colony’s mission was not to provide the residents with «a true education», but rather to promote their «mental development...via appropriate pedagogical systems and measures and the orthophrenic methods suited to individual cases»⁵¹.

⁴⁹ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of M. Careghi.

⁵⁰ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Report on the internal progress of the “A. Marro” Colony-School by Guicciardi, 26.01.1923.

⁵¹ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Minutes of the Administrative

As earlier noted, over the following years, the student numbers at the “Marro” grew continuously. For this reason, in 1925, a third external teacher was added to the staff, with the task of assisting her colleagues in the education of all the children and ensuring that the best ones successfully passed exams in public schools. The teachers each worked approximately twenty hours a week, with only one month’s holiday during the summer. Their pay was set at 15 liras per hour of teaching⁵². By the Colony’s tenth anniversary, there were still only three teachers, while the number of assistants had doubled from six to twelve, with additional support from three nuns from the religious order Handmaids of Charity. The staff also included two priests, who also carried out religious duties at the “San Lazzaro” and were in charge of teaching religion, a singing and gymnastics teacher, a drawing and painting teacher, a sewing and tailoring teacher, and various other craft workers who provided the residents with training in knitting, embroidery, weaving, shoemaking and bookbinding⁵³.

In terms of teacher recruitment at the “Marro” Colony-School across the 1920s and 1930s, a succession of different hires followed the letting go of Bertolotti and Ferrari. Analysis of personal files stored in the “San Lazzaro” Archive enables us to reconstruct the profiles of some of these teachers, although the information in the archive is sometimes incomplete or fragmentary.

In July 1926, for example, Elena Dalloli, a 20-year-old woman living in Reggio Emilia and recently qualified as an elementary school teacher, took up service at the Colony. She was then in «extremely difficult financial circumstances», because her father had passed away and she had been left trying to support a «large family». In June 1942, Dalloli herself died, and the Asylum’s Board of Management granted her mother – again in dire straits – an allowance. Among the various certificates attached by the teacher to her job application, none suggest that she had attended any specialized courses in teaching the mentally disabled⁵⁴.

Similarly, the teacher Maria Pia Venieri, who was employed at the “Marro” Colony-School from 1930 to 1937, when she got a job at a public school in the province of Reggio Emilia, had not received any specialist training, but – unlike her colleague – had participated in two editions of a course on physical education for elementary teachers organized by the “Opera Nazionale Balilla”, a Fascist youth organization. In the summer of 1934, she «passed her exams brilliantly, obtaining top marks and honours». Aldo Bertolani, husband of Maria Del Rio and new director of the Asylum, wrote to the Chairman of the

Commission of the S. Lazzaro Psychiatric Hospital convened on 17.04.1923.

⁵² ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Minutes of the Administrative Commission of the S. Lazzaro Psychiatric Hospital convened on 13.05.1925.

⁵³ Cf. Bertolani Del Rio, *Il primo decennio della colonia scuola A. Marro: 1921-1931*, cit., pp. 665-666.

⁵⁴ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of E. Dalloli.

Board of Management, Ottavio Ferrari, to express his great satisfaction with the teacher's achievement⁵⁵.

Another elementary teacher, Maria Guatteri, was also appointed in 1930. She went on to have a long teaching career at the Colony, which continued until her retirement in 1957. In reality, a brief hiatus occurred in May 1943, when she was suspended from duty and pay for six months. The reason for this was political, because she had uttered «words of insult and disapproval» towards the Duce, whom she criticized for having «valued the German soldier and not appreciated the Italian soldier». Also suspended from the National Fascist Party for six months, Guatteri was nevertheless awarded compensation in 1945, when the Board – at her request – paid her part of the sum lost two years earlier. With regard to her education, we know that she graduated as elementary teacher from the Scuola Normale in 1920 and had briefly worked in public schools in the province of Reggio Emilia. She had also obtained a nursing diploma from the Red Cross⁵⁶.

Ave Tamagnini, a teacher at the “Marro” from 1937 to 1942, had also previously worked as a substitute teacher in schools in the province of Reggio by virtue of her elementary school diploma. The mayor of the city testified that she had always displayed «good moral, civil and political conduct». She had even been appointed head-centurion in the “Piccole Italiane” (the fascist youth organization for young girls). She too was a member of the National Fascist Party and in the summer of 1938, she attended the national course on physical education held in Turin⁵⁷.

Once again, however, neither Guatteri and Tamagnini appeared to have received specialist training in the education of mentally disabled children. It is known that at least four other women were hired to teach the students of the “Marro” in the 1920s and 1930s, but there is too little information about these other teachers to reconstruct their educational background.

4. *Some concluding thoughts*

Our inquiry thus far suggests that the “Antonio Marro” Colony-School was founded under favorable conditions, particularly with regard to its teaching staff. Guicciardi, on multiple occasions, addressed the qualities required by the teachers of children with mental disabilities. He emphasized that they needed to be deeply committed to their educational work, characterizing them as

⁵⁵ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of M.P. Venieri.

⁵⁶ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of M. Guatteri.

⁵⁷ ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.2, File 10, Personal folder of A. Tamagnini.

«creatures whose stuff had some of the essence of angels mixed in to it»⁵⁸, but also that they required specific competence in teaching the mentally disabled.

Hence, in 1921, when the journal «I Diritti della Scuola» [*School Rights*] advertised two vacancies at the school being set up in Reggio Emilia, it was specified that the teachers competing for the positions would need to be «qualified in the education of the retarded»⁵⁹. At the time, however, only the Orthophrenic Teacher Training School founded in Rome in 1900 offered this kind of qualification. In 1925, a second such training school was opened in Florence – at the initiative of the educationalist Giovanni Calò and a medical doctor, Eugenio Modigliano⁶⁰ – and a year later a third school was opened in Milan – at the behest of Father Agostino Gemelli. It was not until the 1950s that the number of special training schools in Italy began to increase more rapidly⁶¹.

Although in the early 1920s it was thus difficult to find qualified staff, the profile of the first three teachers of the “Marro” Colony-School was in line with the original intentions of the Board of Management. While Gina Avvantaggiato had already graduated from Montesano’s training school at the time of her hiring, Margherita Bertolotti and Luisa Ferrari attended the training school after they had been assigned their teaching positions, albeit only for a few months. However, in a short space of time, the breakdown of relations between the management and this first group of teachers led to the decision to stop hiring residential teaching staff. From then on, the Colony only engaged external teachers, who only stayed at the Institute for the length of time required to deliver their classes.

This change in policy went hand in hand with the recruitment of staff who were required to have teaching qualifications, but not to have specialized in educating the mentally disabled. This is borne out by the personal records of some of the teachers who worked at the Colony during the 1920s and 1930s, none of whom appear to have graduated from an orthophrenic teacher training school. Further confirmation is provided by an administrative document dated 1937, which lists the documents that applicants for a teaching position at the “Marro” needed to present: their birth certificate to prove that they were no more than 35 years of age, proof that they did not have a criminal record, an elementary teaching license, membership of the National Fascist Party and

⁵⁸ Guicciardi, *Il nuovo reparto per fanciulli deficienti e anormali*, cit., p. 12.

⁵⁹ «I Diritti della Scuola», vol. XXII, n. 11, 1921, p. 175.

⁶⁰ Few works have investigated the history and training practices of the orthophrenic schools in Rome and Florence. For background on the Rome school, see G. Montesano, *La Scuola Magistrale Ortofrenica di Roma*, «L’assistenza dei Minorenni Anormali», n. 1, 1913 and B. Di Pofi, *L’educazione dei minori “anormali” nell’opera di Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano*, Roma, ed. Nuova Cultura, 2008; while on the Florence school, see G. Calò, *Educazione e scuola. Idee vecchie e nuove*, Firenze, Casa Editrice Marzocco, 1950.

⁶¹ Debè, *Maestri “speciali” alla Scuola di padre Gemelli*, cit.

attendance certificates for the courses organized by the “Opera Nazionale Balilla”⁶².

Thus, comparison of the teaching staff in the early 1920s with the teachers appointed between 1926 and the end of the 1930s, points up a shift in the training requirements laid down by the management and board of the Colony-School and, more generally, of the Asylum. Essentially, the requirement for documented training in special education evolved swiftly into acceptance of a regular elementary teaching diploma, contingent upon candidates also proving that they participated in all the salient initiatives organized by the fascist regime. The latter development is not so surprising in the post-1925 context, when Mussolini had consolidated his dictatorship. It aligns with other evidence that the “Marro” Colony-School, similarly to the “San Lazzaro” Asylum, operated in apparent conformity with government policy, at least formally⁶³.

Generally speaking, over the twenty years under study here, the pedagogical value of the Colony, which was held in such high regard by the promoters of the institution, may be said to have been progressively, albeit partially, sacrificed. This tendency was reflected in decreased interest in specialist training for the teachers, as well as in the significantly lower number of teaching hours delivered. Although the number of assistant nurses progressively increased, the number of teachers remained stuck at three. There were also teachers of the various arts and crafts, who however brought technical, not educational, competence. Taken together, all of this evidence suggests that the Colony-School found it extremely difficult to distance itself from the healthcare approach of the “San Lazzaro” Asylum, on which it depended.

However, further research is needed if we are to refine our views on this topic. Specifically, future studies should examine how the Colony’s educational offerings evolved over time, especially from the 1950s onwards, when the school, as earlier mentioned, was formally separated from the hospital.

⁶² ASLRE, Archivio Amministrativo, 1.1.4.1/2, File 9, Document from the “San Lazzaro” Asylum, 07.09.1937.

⁶³ In this regard, Maria Bertolani Del Rio wrote that: «One of the greatest satisfactions for those who devote their life’s work to the Residential School is to note how perfectly this is matched by the fascist Legislation, which, as no other, has concerned itself with child welfare». In *Il primo decennio della colonia scuola A. Marro: 1921-1931*, cit., p. 649.