

Curricular Reforms in the Italian University System: Humanities Faculties and the Training of Secondary School Teachers between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries

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ABSTRACT: Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the Italian school and university system underwent a series of profound changes, but above all it was entrusted with a new and significant responsibility – not merely cultural, but more broadly political, social and economic. In the aftermath of the process of national unification, the role of schools and the organisation of teacher training programmes became a central topic in educational and school debates. Concerning the latter issue, it is therefore interesting to link the “fate” of this training to the history of the university, notably in light of the structural changes it experienced. This paper aims to highlight the role played by the Humanities Faculties in the transformation of secondary school teacher training programmes. During this period, these faculties came to be regarded as key sites of disciplinary reconfiguration and as pivotal institutions in shaping the profile of the secondary school teacher. The history of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature is closely intertwined with debates surrounding the education of the ruling class and the development of professional teaching competencies. A central issue concerns the quality of training programmes and the selection of content. These elements were intended not only to produce “good” teachers, but above all to educate citizens suited to and “useful” for the renewed national context.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: History of University; Humanities Faculties; Secondary school teacher training; Italy; XIX-XX Centuries.

Introduction

Within the domain of educational historical research, reflections on the evolution of teacher training between the 19th and 20th centuries have consistently accorded significant attention to the development of primary school teachers. At a critical juncture in our country's history, the primary requirement was the construction of the nation as a whole. The broadening of access to culture, therefore, coupled with the considerable efforts of the political class in the post-unification period to combat illiteracy and launch a genuine process of modernization, has, in point of fact, precipitated decisive transformations in Italy's profile. This phenomenon was observed across a range of levels, including cultural, social and economic domains. Undeniably, a pivotal issue pertained to the substantiation of the significance of education, encompassing its instructional and civic functions, in addition to its formative capacities. In the aftermath of the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy, the imperative arose to «make Italians», or more precisely, in the wake of the geographical and political unification of Italy, to embark on the creation of a new generation that was authentically and unambiguously Italian. This generation possessed a common language, history, traditions, values and ideologies, spurred on by the fervor of the earlier Risorgimento movements and firmly committed to the affirmation of the new bourgeois principles¹.

From a historical and educational standpoint, the issue of secondary school teacher training appears to have been relegated to a secondary position. The reasons for this phenomenon can be traced back to two main factors. Firstly, there was a lack of systematic organization and attendance at secondary school – as we understand it today – until the second half of the twentieth century. Secondly, upper secondary education between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was primarily the preserve of a specific social class, and therefore still closely linked to the training of the future ruling class.

Moreover, a range of other factors may be considered to fall under more purely cultural and scientific considerations. Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several significant cultural movements emerged. The contrast between neo-idealism and positivism is a useful example of this phenomenon. These movements influenced both scientific and academic debate. It is noteworthy that concurrently, Italian universities underwent substantial transformations that extended beyond mere numerical growth in terms of uni-

¹ See for example: G. Chiosso, *Nazionalità ed educazione degli Italiani nel secondo Ottocento*, «Pedagogia e Vita», n. 4, 1987, pp. 421-440; S. Soldani, G. Turi (edd.), *Fare gli italiani. Scuola e cultura nell'Italia contemporanea*, 2 vols., Bologna, il Mulino, 1993; A. Ascenzi, *Tra educazione etico-civile e costruzione dell'identità nazionale*, Milan, Vita & Pensiero, 2004; R. Sani, *Sub specie educationis. Studi e ricerche su istruzione, istituzioni scolastiche e processi culturali e formativi nell'Italia contemporanea*, Macerata, eum, 2011; Id., *Education, school and cultural processes in contemporary Italy*, Macerata, eum, 2018.

versities and student population, or the tension between the themes of freedom and centralization. Concurrently, a gradual process of differentiation had commenced between hard science and soft science, between the humanities and the sciences. This, in turn, had given rise to questions regarding academic training, curricula, and the very definition of the role of universities².

Indeed, as the 19th and 20th centuries progressed, the necessity to educate and instruct professionals at all levels of education became increasingly evident. Italy required not only professional and well-trained teachers, but also individuals capable of providing guidance to the nation during a period of substantial and significant transitions. The establishment of a modern Italy was reliant upon the cultivation of a new generation, the implementation of political and social restructuring, and the advancement of processes of modernization and nationalization. Additionally, it was imperative to safeguard, conserve, and promote the nation's historical memory and its cultural and human heritage³.

1. *Legislative changes and the clash between different university paradigms in the aftermath of national unification*

If one wishes to investigate how and in what ways the training of secondary school teachers in Italy has undergone changes, with reference to the period of unification and the turning point of the 20th century, specific attention must necessarily also be paid to the academic sphere. Until then, the recruitment of teachers for both classical and technical schools had relied on methods that were not always conventional or systematic; this clearly had significant consequences for the quality of training and the standard of students' preparation.

As is well known, the first law that attempted to organize the educational and academic system of the new Kingdom of Italy was the Casati Law. Law No. 3725, initially enacted in 1859 in the Kingdom of Piedmont and Sardinia, was in fact extended to the whole of Italy in 1861 following the completion of unification.

The Casati Law devoted the entire Title II to higher education, specifying

² Please refer to the overview provided by U.M. Miozzi, *Lo sviluppo storico dell'università italiana*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1993.

³ It is worth mentioning heritage as a means of identity-building. See, for example D. Caroli, E. Patrizi (edd.), *«Educare alla bellezza la gioventù della nuova Italia». Scuola, beni culturali e costruzione dell'identità nazionale dall'Unità al secondo dopoguerra*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2017; F. Targhetta, *Un paese da scoprire una terra da amare: paesaggi educativi e formazione dell'identità nazionale nella prima metà del Novecento*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2020. As for the memory see J. Meda, L. Paciaroni, R. Sani (edd.), *The School and Its Many Pasts*, 4 vols., Macerata, eum, 2024.

its functions in the first instance. Article 47, in fact, explained that «The purpose of higher education is to guide young people, already equipped with the necessary general knowledge, towards careers in both the public and private sectors where specialized studies are required, and to maintain and enhance scientific and literary culture throughout the various parts of the State». Article 49 then specified the types of faculties envisaged, namely Theology, Law, Medicine, Physical, Mathematical and Natural Sciences, and Philosophy and Literature⁴.

Within the framework of the necessary reorganization of the educational system of the new Kingdom of Italy, the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, in particular, was regarded as a sort of ideological “workshop” or “laboratory” useful for the formation of the nation. This Faculty was not merely a centre of learning or knowledge but was entrusted with a “new” and significant civic responsibility during this historical phase: it would train the teaching staff for secondary schools, but above all, it was essentially tasked with educating the country’s future ruling class.

What, then, was to be the function and purpose of a “purely” humanistic education within the renewed national political and social landscape? And, first and foremost, on what subject matter was such an education to be based? In this regard, it is worth referring once again to the Casati Law and, specifically, to Chapter II of the law. Here, in fact, one can find the subjects that were to be taught in the aforementioned faculties and, with specific reference to the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, these were identified as: «1. Logic and Metaphysics; 2. Moral Philosophy; 3. History of Philosophy; 4. Pedagogy; 5. Philosophy of History; 6. Geography and Statistics; 7. Ancient and Modern History; 8. Archaeology; 9. Greek, Latin and Italian Literature (and French in the Faculty of Ciamberi); 10. Philology».

It was, therefore, a curriculum that appeared firmly rooted in philosophy, in which even pedagogy, though present, was very subordinate. The Faculty’s structure also revealed a lack of specialisation in teaching; it was essentially centred on classical culture, philological rigour and history, considered the foundations of knowledge and, above all, necessary for defining the country’s civic and political identity. The structure appeared rather rigid and purely didactic.

Article 52 then included a precise and useful clarification

These various subjects shall be taught, as far as possible, where the individual faculties exist. However, the teaching of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters shall not be provid-

⁴ 1° Supplemento al n° 285 della Gazzetta Piemontese, Parte Ufficiale, Legge sul Riordinamento dell’Istruzione Pubblica, «Gazzetta Piemontese. Giornale Ufficiale del Regno», n. 285, 18 novembre 1859, now available at the link: <<https://archive.org/details/LeggeCasatiNumero3725/mode/2up>> (last access: 12.01.2026).

ed in full, nor shall the academic degrees to which it leads be conferred except at the University of Turin, the Accademia di Milano, and the University Institute of Ciamberì. In the other universities, the teaching of philosophy and literature shall be provided within the limits of a suitable support to the studies of the various faculties established there⁵.

Furthermore, Article 54 stated that

In the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Turin and at the Accademia di Milano, courses in ancient and modern languages may also be offered, as well as special courses in Literature and Philosophy, and temporary courses relating to various branches of the Sciences to complement the other faculties⁶.

Despite the important role entrusted to the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, the percentage of students enrolled in arts degree courses remained at minimal levels throughout the nineteenth century; it only began to grow more significantly in the first decade of the twentieth century⁷. Yet, it was precisely in the aftermath of national unification that the “fate” of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters began to become increasingly linked to the training of secondary school teachers and to emerge in the Italian political debate. One of the crucial issues in this debate concerned, in particular, the need to transform these faculties into genuine specialized centres of great scientific value, and the question of whether or not to include specific teacher training courses within them.

In 1861, the philosopher Terenzio Mamiani – Casati’s successor – emphatically reiterated the separation between universities and teacher training programmes and advocated for the establishment of a «superior teacher training college», in which secondary school teachers could be adequately trained⁸.

In the same year and following on from the same theme, Francesco De Sanctis⁹, a leading figure in Italian culture and politics who had succeeded him at the Ministry of Education, decided to present a proposal to the Senate for the establishment of specific schools to train «excellent teachers», to be established, however, both within the Faculties of Philosophy and Arts and within

⁵ *Ibid.* It should be noted that all translations of the quotations in this paper have been conducted by the author.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Interesting information can be obtained and analysed from Istat’s database *Serie Storiche*. See in particular <https://seriestoriche.istat.it/index.php?id=1&no_cache=1&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcategoria%5D=7&tx_usercento_centofe%5Baction%5D=show&tx_usercento_centofe%5Bcontroller%5D=Categoria&cHash=1b020e5419ca607971010a98271e3209> (last access: 14.01.2026).

⁸ Cf. M. Morandi, *La fucina dei professori. Storia della formazione docente dal Risorgimento ad oggi*, Brescia, Scholé, p. 50.

⁹ For a brief overview of De Sanctis, see the entry on him by Attilio Marinari in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1991, Vol. 39, <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-de-sanctis_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-de-sanctis_(Dizionario-Biografico)/>) (last access: 12.01.2026).

the Faculties of Physical and Mathematical Sciences, and thus within the universities rather than outside them. According to the minister, in fact, this was a necessity, as a sort of stalemate was now being felt in both the methods and the content of teaching. Ancient and classical culture had been blended with modern ideas, which, however, still appeared confused and unclear. Nevertheless, this situation could not be resolved merely by imposing methodologies or new teaching aids, or through the simple publication of new texts. The «sole remedy» was rather found in greater freedom of teaching and in the proper training of teachers, on whose intelligence and professional abilities one would then have to rely.

De Sanctis had already considered it appropriate at the time to emphasize that the training provided in the Faculties of Arts and Philosophy and of Physical and Mathematical Sciences was not sufficiently «practical»; if one wished to achieve more “robust”, more solid studies, one could not, in fact, limit oneself to theory alone. He saw in practical exercises, readings, seminars, group work, practical training and direct, authentic dialogue with professors the elements needed not only to strengthen the disciplines, but also to rekindle the scientific curiosity and spirit of initiative capable of heralding «the intellectual rebirth of nations»¹⁰.

De Sanctis's proposal, despite extensive discussion, came to nothing; yet it paved the way for a reflection on ‘knowledge’ that was revisited several times in the years that followed.

In reality, to understand the institutional architecture of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in post-unification Italy, one must also consider the dialectic that existed at that time between the Napoleonic model and the aspirations stemming instead from the Prussian paradigm¹¹.

The Casati Law, whilst formally adopting the Humboldtian model, had in some respects betrayed its spirit, remaining anchored to a bureaucratic and highly centralized structure.

The principles of the model proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt¹² in the early nineteenth century, developed during his tenure as director of the section of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior responsible for religion and education,

¹⁰ M. Di Domizio, *L'Università italiana. Lineamenti storici*, Milan, AVE, 1952, pp. 213–214.

¹¹ With regard to the structure of the models established by European universities, please refer primarily to: P. Piovani, *Morte (e trasfigurazione?) dell'Università*, Naples, Guida, 1969; I. Porciani (ed.), *L'Università tra Otto e Novecento: i modelli europei e il caso italiano*, Naples, Jovine, 1994; and P. Prodi, *Università dentro e fuori*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013.

¹² About von Humboldt, see in particular: W. von Humboldt, *Università e umanità*, ed. by F. Tessitore, Naples, Guida, 1971; T. Borsche *et alii*, *W. von Humboldt e il dissolvimento della filosofia nei “sapere positivi”*, Naples, Morano, 1993; and also <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/wilhelm-von-humboldt_\(Dizionario-di-filosofia\)/>](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/wilhelm-von-humboldt_(Dizionario-di-filosofia)/>) (last access: 14.01.2026); the section edited by M.C. Pievatolo in <<https://btfp.sp.unipi.it/dida/humboldt/>> (last access: 14.01.2026).

can essentially be found in the fragment *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin* [*On the Internal and External Organisation of Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin*], dated 1809-1810. However, this text only became known at the end of the nineteenth century, when it was rediscovered by the historian Bruno Gebhardt¹³; paradoxically, this was at the very time when the Prussian university system was undergoing a significant process of transformation towards a “capitalist” model.

Humboldt was an official of an absolute monarchy of the *ancien régime*, yet he espoused liberal ethical and cultural principles. He proposed a vision of the university as a *corpus*, as an institution capable of guaranteeing the nation's progress and the advancement of knowledge through the dissemination of science, whilst remaining firmly rooted in research and academic freedom. At the same time, the university was to ensure the certification of specific professional skills and the efficiency of the nation's public and productive systems. In this sense, the university functioned as a branch of the State yet endowed with its own distinct role and a form of “protected” autonomy. The university was linked externally to the State, but on the basis of an autonomy that the State itself had to respect and foster, justified by the very purpose for which the university was established, namely free scientific research and the moral and cultural education of the individual.

According to the Prussian model, therefore, universities were to be dedicated to the pursuit of science [*Wissenschaft*], understood in the deepest sense of the term. As a place where the nation's moral culture converges, they must then offer this science to spiritual and ethical education. In this way, it is possible to connect objective science and subjective education, but also formal schooling and study conducted according to one's own personal inclinations and intentions. The core of the model proposed by Humboldt remains, however, science¹⁴.

Inversely, the alternative model of reference was to be found in the French centralist-bureaucratic paradigm, of Napoleonic origin. According to this approach, the University was an extension of the State, albeit aimed at the legal certification of the skills useful and necessary for access to public careers. In this sense, the humanities faculties did not therefore represent autonomous entities, but rather a tool, or rather a technical body for the training of teachers

¹³ See B. Gebhardt, *Wilhelm von Humboldt als Staatsmann*, 2 vols., Stuttgart, J.C. Cotta, 1896-1899.

¹⁴ Cf. D. Venturelli, *L'idea humboldtiana di Università tra passato e futuro*, in R. Celeda Ballanti, L. Mauro (edd.), *L'idea di Università tra passato e futuro*, Genoa, De Ferrari editore, 2011, pp. 12-13.

and civil servants, which was regulated by uniform ministerial programmes designed to standardize the cultural identity of the State¹⁵.

In detail, the nature of the French university model was twofold: on the one hand, the faculties, and on the other, the *Grandes Écoles*, which differed in terms of recruitment, training and career prospects. The *Grandes Écoles* operated a highly selective system; attendance was compulsory, discipline was strict, and the curricula were very precise and well-defined; students who graduated from them went on to the highest echelons of civil, military or public administration. In a sense, they entered a protected market. The faculties, on the contrary, were in turn divided into two categories: firstly, the law and medical faculties, which essentially functioned as vocational training schools and were therefore often referred to as *écoles*; secondly, the faculties of arts and sciences, which were designed to fulfil limited social functions, mostly of a bureaucratic or cultural nature. It is no coincidence that, from an institutional point of view, they enjoyed little autonomy and often ended up being seen as appendages of the lycées, with a dual role: to certify the completion of secondary education and to train teachers¹⁶.

Despite increased resources and the attainment of a certain degree of autonomy, even by the end of the nineteenth century, the Faculties of Arts and Sciences continued to face the problem of a lack of regularly enrolled students. They needed “professional” students, an idea that was not actually new, originating from the *normaliens*, that is, the students of the *École normale supérieure*. This institution had already implemented a system of scholarships, more clearly defined academic requirements and favorable career prospects thanks to the opportunity to obtain the *agrégation*, necessary for teaching in secondary schools¹⁷.

Considering the above analysis, discussions regarding the reform of the Italian university system thus take on a renewed and broader significance. The university, in fact, was called upon to play a role of primary importance, as it represented the place where the ruling class was trained; this class had to be equipped with specific scientific and professional skills, as well as an awareness of the civic duty to which it was called.

Against this backdrop, Senator Matteucci sought to establish new rules: he wished to restore value and prestige to academic institutions that were by then in decline and attempted to dismantle the academic system of the time, which still allowed for too many compromises and too much room for manoeuvre.

¹⁵ For an overview of the history of the French university system, see: S. d'Irsay, *Histoire des universités françaises et étrangères des origines à nos jours. Tome 1: Moyen âge et Renaissance. Tome 2: Du XVIème siècle à 1860*, 2 vols., Paris, Auguste Picard, 1933; J. Verger, *Histoire des universités en France*, Toulouse, Privat, 1986.

¹⁶ Cf. V. Karady, *Le Facoltà di lettere e scienze in Francia*, in Porciani, *L'Università tra Otto e Novecento: i modelli europei e il caso italiano*, cit., pp. 63-66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

In his draft bill, presented in 1861, the senator clearly explained his point of view: he believed it necessary to establish a small number of comprehensive higher education institutions, far more useful than an excessive number of “imperfect” institutions or uncoordinated faculties¹⁸. Matteucci thus reiterated the need to standardize the various Italian academic institutions, and to establish faculties of arts and sciences in which to train secondary school teachers. To create a robust system, he also envisaged the establishment of two teacher training colleges where graduates in philosophy, philology and the natural sciences could prepare for teaching¹⁹.

At a time, steeped in patriotic rhetoric, Matteucci sought to highlight the need to establish an academic structure capable of genuinely advancing science; otherwise, Italian universities, despite their long cultural and scientific tradition, would not be able to compete with their foreign counterparts.

Following these considerations, Carlo Matteucci, Minister of Education during the Rattazzi government, proposed an initial reorganization of university and faculty regulations in 1862. These were approved by Royal Decree No. 842 dated 14 September²⁰. Regarding the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy specifically, the minister requested an increase in the number of academic positions, reflecting the advancements in philological and historical disciplines, as well as the evolving landscape of philosophical systems. He reiterated that the primary objective of this faculty was to educate «good teachers» for secondary schools.

2. From Minister Bonghi's proposal to the debate of the early 20th century

During such a pivotal period in the development of Italy's new educational and academic system, reforms – or at least attempts at reform – of the university system continued at pace in the years that followed, albeit amidst constant tension between the demands for centralization and those for autonomy.

In 1874, the Minister of Education, Ruggero Bonghi, referred to the problem of the uneven distribution of universities across Italy²¹ and reiterated the

¹⁸ See I. Porciani, *Lo Stato e la Questione dell'Università*, in Ead., *L'Università tra Otto e Novecento: i modelli europei e il caso italiano*, cit., pp. 135-144.

¹⁹ *Progetto di legge presentato al Senato dal senatore Matteucci preso in considerazione nella tornata del 14 agosto 1861*, in *Atti parlamentari, Documenti*, sess. 1861, v. II.

²⁰ R.D. 14 September 1862, n. 842, *Di approvazione del Regolamento universitario e di quelli delle Facoltà di giurisprudenza, di medica e chirurgia, di scienze fisiche, matematiche e naturali, e di filosofia e lettere*, «Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia», n. 232, 1862. Regulations attached to: *1° Supplemento ordinario al n. 239*, 9 October 1861, <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1862/10/09/239/so/239/sg/pdf>> (last access: 14.01.2026).

²¹ For more on this topic see the interesting paper by M. Moretti, *Sulla geografia accademica nell'Italia contemporanea (1859-1962)*, in L. Blanco, A. Giorgi, L. Mineo (edd.), *Costruire*

need to proceed “slowly” with reform, as the rules and guidelines needed to be “workable” in order to be respected. The Higher Council was also invited to propose new solutions, rather than leaving the entire structuring and administrative management to the faculties’ discretion²².

In accordance with the regulations that were issued during Bonghi’s tenure as Minister, to ensure the continued prioritization of humanities faculties, Chapter II of the *Ministry of Education’s Yearbook* (1873-1874) delineated specific criteria for the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature.

Admission to degree courses at the faculty required candidates to present a secondary school leaving certificate and pass an entrance examination covering Italian and Latin language and literature, Greek grammar, ancient history and geography, and the fundamentals of philosophy. The regulatory document stipulates that the Faculty’s courses are intended to train secondary school teachers and, more broadly, to promote philosophical and literary culture.

The curriculum is then described in detail. For the Philosophy degree course, the first year included Latin literature, ancient history, theoretical philosophy, anthropology and pedagogy; the second year included Greek literature, theoretical philosophy, the history of philosophy and modern history; the third year included Greek literature, moral or practical philosophy, the history of philosophy and theoretical philosophy; and the fourth year included moral or practical philosophy, the history of philosophy, comparative languages and literature, and the philosophy of history.

As for the degree in Letters, however, in the first year students studied Greek, Italian and Latin literature, ancient and modern geography, and ancient history; in the second year, they continued to study Greek, Italian and Latin literature, and ancient and modern history; in the third year, Greek, Italian and Latin literature, modern history, anthropology and pedagogy; finally, in the fourth year, Greek, Italian and Latin literature, archaeology, comparative languages and literatures, and the philosophy of history.

Separate guidelines were in place for the *Scuola Normale* institutions. Upon completing the course and passing all the required examinations, graduates were awarded a diploma qualifying them to teach in secondary schools. In the section of Philosophy and Literature, teaching was usually centred on «lectures and seminars» relating to Italian, Latin and Greek literature; ancient and modern history; geography; theoretical and moral philosophy; the history of philosophy; aesthetics; the history of the Church; pedagogy; and anthropology. Thus, the disciplinary content prescribed in the faculties was emphasized²³.

un’università. Le fonti documentarie per la storia dell’Università degli studi di Trento (1962-1972), Bologna, il Mulino, pp. 59-100.

²² Cf. «Bollettino Ufficiale del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione» (from now on BUMPI), vol. I, 1874, p. 7.

²³ Cf. *Capo II. Ordinamento degli studi superiori – Disposizioni speciali concernenti i vari*

In this context, it is therefore worth noting that in 1875 Minister Bonghi decided to establish the so-called *Teacher Training Colleges* or *Schools of Education* [*Scuole di Magistero*] for the training of secondary school teachers. Their structure, which was partly the result of a comparative study of school legislation in the major European countries, provided for them to operate alongside the standard degree courses already offered within universities²⁴. These Schools were established within the Faculties of Arts and Philosophy and of Mathematical, Physical and Natural Sciences as genuine centres for the country's scientific and cultural development. Specifically, Schools for both disciplines were established in Turin, Padua, Pisa, Bologna, Rome and Naples, whilst in Pavia and Palermo only those for the teaching of scientific disciplines were created²⁵.

These schools, however, proved to be still too tied to a disciplinary focus, even though lectures, practical sessions, work placements and lesson simulations were included.

The following year, in 1876, Minister Coppino attempted to reorganize and clarify the aims of these *Schools*. He emphasized the importance of training future teachers who were to be «experts in the methods and limitations of teaching», whilst also being inclined towards and competent in the research and study of scientific doctrines. The aim, therefore, was to combine subject-specific knowledge, theoretical understanding and teaching skills²⁶.

Coppino's proposal, more streamlined than the previous one, called for an expansion of the teaching dimension and an assessment of the teaching aptitudes of future teachers, at the expense of the imbalance in favour of the theoretical dimension alone. However, very often the final dissertations discussed at the end of these courses bore similarities to university theses and were no less scientific.

As Villari effectively analyses²⁷, and as evidenced by the numerous subsequent reforms to the school systems – proposed by Ministers Boselli, Villari and Orlando – the critical issue remained the ability of teachers to combine

corsi universitari, in *Annuario della Istruzione Pubblica del Regno d'Italia per 1873-74*, Rome, Regia Tipografia, 1874, pp. 38-52.

²⁴ See: R.D. 11 October 1875, n. 2743 – *Regolamento della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*. These Regulations also stipulate that the Faculty may award two degrees: the licence and the bachelor's degree.

²⁵ BUMPI, vol. II, 1876. See also, M.C. Morandini, *Teaching or research? The training of secondary school teachers in Magisterium Schools (1875-1920)*, «Pedagogia oggi», vol. 20, n. 1, 2022, pp. 48-54 and for a more comprehensive overview of the process of establishing these schools, Morandi, *La fucina dei professori. Storia della formazione docente dal Risorgimento ad oggi*, cit.

²⁶ R.D. 8 October 1876, n. 3434 – *Regolamento Speciale per la Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*.

²⁷ The reference is specifically to P. Villari, *Nuovi scritti pedagogici*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1891.

scientific commitment, cultural knowledge and teaching skills²⁸. Despite attempts to transform the training pathway for secondary school teachers, the main shortcomings were essentially found in teachers' teaching skills, in their ability to adapt lessons and teaching content to the knowledge and skills of their students.

From the 1880s onwards, with the rise of positivist culture, the specialist and more practical paradigm was, therefore, attempting to establish itself in Italy at the expense of the more traditionally and purely theoretical-cultural one, even within the field of teacher training. With the aim of bringing Italy into line with the major European powers and aligning it with the German university model, the attempt was made to adopt a system of seminars and practical exercises to "professionalize" the student, turning them into a research professional. A "technical" approach that primarily centred on mastery of sources and greater specialization within disciplines.

Clearly, this model was contrasted by that of neo-idealism, whose leading exponents included, among others, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile²⁹. This perspective rejected empirical specialization, whilst elevating culture and knowledge to a fundamentally philosophical and spiritual vision. It placed the role of culture and classical and humanistic education at the centre. Croce's absolute historicism identified historical understanding as the sole form of pure knowledge. For Benedetto Croce, history was the expression of the process of the spirit's realization in its various forms; consequently, its subject was the spirit itself, which resolves everything within itself. This also amounts to a history of freedom, which becomes humanity's moral ideal³⁰.

It was precisely during Croce's tenure as Minister of Education in the last Giolitti government that the system of *Teacher training Colleges or Schools of*

²⁸ The following regulatory measures must be highlighted: R.D. 30 December 1888, n. 5888 – *Regolamento per le Scuole di magistero annesse alle Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*; R.D. 29 November 1891, n. 711 – *Regolamento per le Scuole di magistero presso la Facoltà di Filosofia e lettere e di Scienze matematiche e naturali*; R.D. 13 March 1902, n. 70 – *Regolamento speciale per la Scuola di Magistero annessa alla Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*; R.D. 6 December 1903, n. 549 – *Regolamento delle Scuole di Magistero annesse alle Facoltà di filosofia e lettere e di Scienze fisiche, matematiche e naturali*. See also the analysis offered by Di Domizio, *L'Università italiana. Lineamenti storici*, cit., pp. 214-219; and G. Fioravanti, M. Moretti, I. Porciani (edd.), *Archivio centrale dello Stato. Fonti per la storia della scuola. V. L'istruzione universitaria (1859-1915)*, Rome, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 2000.

²⁹ Please refer to M. Lancellotti, *Croce e Gentile: la distinzione e l'unità dello spirito*, Rome, Studium, 1988; G. Cotroneo, *L'ingresso nella modernità. Momenti della filosofia italiana tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Naples, Morano, 1992; M. Ciliberto (ed.), *Croce e Gentile fra tradizione nazionale e filosofia europea*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1993.

³⁰ See B. Croce, *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Bari, Laterza, 1939 and the more recent M. Maggi, *La formazione della classe dirigente. Studi sulla filosofia italiana del Novecento*, Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003.

Education was effectively abolished³¹. By Royal Decree No. 1546 of 8 October 1920, *practical training courses* were in fact established at universities and higher education institutions³². These courses, which were scientific, affirmed the connection between university education and the world of research. The proposal was certainly not accepted without controversy and protests, which came from supporters of Positivist culture and, more broadly, from those who upheld the importance of training teachers in teaching methodologies, and from those who opposed the principle that «those who know, also know how to teach well»³³.

3. *Gentile and Bottai: a renewed civic and cultural mission for the university*

With the subsequent enactment of the Gentile Reform in 1923, the neo-idealist model was firmly established within the context of university reorganization. Philosophy became the primary and essential tool for strengthening one's own culture, and it was only through the "internalization" of these two elements that one could become a competent and suitable teacher³⁴.

Consistent, therefore, with the tenets of this cultural and philosophical movement and with the fundamental principle of selection – reinforced also by the rigid examination system – the training of teachers from the 1920s onwards became exclusively subject-specific, the result of a university course aimed at obtaining a degree and oriented towards research.

Teaching became synonymous with a "creative" act in a certain sense: it could spring only from the teacher's profound culture. Teaching (or didactics) was not considered a technique or methodology to be learnt, since the action of teaching was a spiritual moment in which the teacher's culture merged with that of the pupil. In this sense, pedagogy was also rejected as a science of

³¹ On Croce's work as a minister see: G. Tognon, *Benedetto Croce alla Minerva. La politica scolastica italiana tra Caporetto e la marcia su Roma*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1990.

³² R.D. 8 October 1920, n. 1546 – *Che istituisce corsi di esercitazioni presso le Università e gli Istituti di istruzione superiore*, «Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia», n. 270, 1920, available at the link: <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1920/11/16/270/sg/pdf>> (last access: 20.01.2026).

³³ Cf. Morandi, *La fucina dei professori. Storia della formazione docente dal Risorgimento ad oggi*, cit., pp. 80-83.

³⁴ On Gentile's work see: G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, 2 vols., Bari, Laterza & Figli, 1913-1914; Id., *Educazione e scuola laica*, Florence, Vallecchi, 1921; Id., *Discorsi parlamentari*, with an essay by F. Perfetti, Bologna, il Mulino, 2004; M.A. D'Arcangeli, G. Spadafora (edd.), *Giovanni Gentile. La pedagogia, la scuola*, Rome, Armando, 2023 (new edition); A. Mattone, M. Moretti, E. Signori (edd.), *La riforma Gentile e la sua eredità*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2023.

education; in its place, the centrality of an elitist spiritual preparation was established.

For Giovanni Gentile, secondary schools and universities had the task of building the new Italian ruling class, founded on humanistic and classical culture. For the Sicilian philosopher, the *Scuola Normale Superiore* in Pisa represented a likely model for resolving the problem of teacher training. In particular, Gentile appreciated the concept of the «scientific seminar» in Pisa, where high-level cultural training was conceived as the ethical foundation of teacher training. The teacher, as an educator, possessed the capacity to bring about change in schools and universities and, more broadly and by extension, to the entire political, cultural and social context of the Country³⁵.

Gentile had essentially reaffirmed the specifically scientific character and role of universities. Article 1 of Royal Decree No. 2102 of 30 September 1923, dedicated precisely to the organization of higher education, stated:

The purpose of higher education is to promote the advancement of science and to provide the scientific knowledge necessary for the exercise of public offices and professions. It is provided, for the purposes and effects set out in this decree: 1) in the Royal Universities and Royal Higher Institutes listed in the attached Tables A and B; 2) in private universities and higher institutes.

Universities and higher education institutions shall have legal personality and administrative, educational and disciplinary autonomy, within the limits established by this decree and under the supervision of the State exercised by the Minister of Education³⁶.

The tables attached to the decree prove very useful for reconstructing the geographical distribution of universities, but also that of faculties and thus of the main centres of research and education. Certainly, with Gentile at the Ministry of Education, the centrality of humanistic education was reaffirmed, seen as a fundamental element for national ideological growth. Furthermore, the Italian university was required to safeguard this humanistic and disciplinary character precisely because it was entrusted with the education of the elites; this also entailed a reflection on the relationship established between culture and politics and, above all, on the premise that the individual, through cultural education, can identify with the “ethical” State, to which they also entrust their personal freedoms.

The *Schools of Education* [*Istituti di Magistero*] had also been reorganized, but by Royal Decree No. 736 of 13 March 1923. Article 1 explicitly mentioned the *Higher Teacher Training Colleges* of Florence and Rome, which were

³⁵ Cf. R.A. Rossi, *La formazione superiore dei professionisti dell'educazione e della formazione: dal modello disciplinarista al focus sui contenuti core*, «Education Sciences & Society», n. 1, 2020, p. 384.

³⁶ R.D. 30 settembre 1923, n. 2102 – *Ordinamento della istruzione superiore*, «Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia», n. 239, 1923, available at the link <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1923/10/11/239/sg/pdf>> (last access: 20.01.2026).

equated with university institutions. Their task was to complete the training of those who had graduated from teacher training colleges and thus to prepare them to teach philosophy and pedagogy in teacher training colleges (secondary level) and literary subjects in secondary schools for boys and girls. These Schools also had the power to qualify teachers in state primary schools for the posts of headteacher and school inspector³⁷. Schools of Education could therefore award diplomas for the teaching of Italian and Latin in lower secondary schools, and of history and geography in both secondary schools and teacher training colleges. They also awarded diplomas for the teaching of pedagogy and philosophy in teacher training colleges and qualifications for educational inspectors in primary schools for educational management (Art. 2).

Article 3 is also of considerable interest, as it specified the subjects included in the curriculum, divided into core and supplementary subjects:

Core subjects are: philosophy and the history of philosophy; pedagogy; Italian language and literature; Latin language and literature; history; geography.

Complementary subjects are: French language and literature; German language and literature; English language and literature; public law and school legislation; school hygiene. The core subjects are taught through lectures and practical sessions³⁸.

With the advent and consolidation of fascism, Gentile's neo-idealist model, in which humanistic culture was seen as a spiritual act, was gradually superseded. The regime's totalitarian outlook sought to bend even universities and higher education to the needs of fascism³⁹. Over the course of the twenty-year period, lecturers, students, and all school and academic staff were called upon to become "militant" instruments of fascist culture.

In the decade preceding Italy's entry into the war, it is also worth noting two other legislative proposals which, in the 1930s, sought to intervene in the university structure and link the academic sphere with the country's needs.

The first reference is to Royal Decree No. 1592 of 31 August 1933. From an ideological perspective that had by then become fully totalitarian, the text entitled *Approval of the Consolidated Act on Higher Education* sought to reaffirm the validity of the previous framework already proposed by Gentile, but also to clarify details concerning regulations, university structures, and the organization of chairs and academic staff⁴⁰.

³⁷ R.D. 13 marzo 1923, n. 736 – *Norme per il riordinamento degli Istituti superiori di magistero*, «Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia», n. 88, 1923, available at the link <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1923/04/14/88/sg/pdf>> (last access: 13.01.2026).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ See E. Signori, *Università e Fascismo*, in G.P. Brizzi, P. Dal Negro, A. Romano (edd.), *Storia delle Università in Italia*, Messina, Sicania, 2007, Vol. I, pp. 381-423.

⁴⁰ R.D. 31 August 1933, n. 1592 – *Approvazione del testo unico delle leggi sull'istruzione superiore*, «Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia», n. 283, 1933, available at the link <<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/1933/12/07/283/so/283/sg/pdf>> (last access: 14.01.2026).

Higher education continued to have as its primary aim the advancement of science and the task of providing the scientific knowledge necessary for the practice of professions and the exercise of public office. Although universities and higher education institutions continued to enjoy legal personality and administrative, educational and disciplinary autonomy, state supervision was clearly strengthened during this period, now exercised through the Ministry of National Education. Once again, moreover, the tables appended to the decree prove extremely useful for reconstructing the distribution of universities, faculties and chairs across Italy.

Article 172 reiterates that the degree titles and diplomas awarded by universities and higher education institutions are recognized as academic qualifications, whilst professional certificate is conferred solely through state examinations.

Also in the same Royal Decree, in Title II, dedicated to *Higher education institutions with special regulations*, reference is made to the regulations governing teacher training colleges. Teaching subjects continue to be divided into core and supplementary subjects (Art. 215). The core subjects included: philosophy, history of philosophy, pedagogy, Italian language and literature, Latin language and literature, history, and geography; whilst the supplementary subjects included: French language and literature, German language and literature, English language and literature, institutions of public law and school legislation, and also school hygiene. It was also specified that teaching was delivered through a system of lectures and practical sessions⁴¹.

The consolidation of the regime in the 1930s was accompanied by a gradual erosion of academic autonomy and a substantial levelling down of university regulations, culminating, in a sense, in Royal Decree-Law No. 1071 of 20 June 1935, issued by Minister De Vecchi.

The second point we wish to highlight here, however, concerns the draft *School Charter* [*Carta della Scuola*] proposed in 1939 by the Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai⁴².

The Minister, who had previously also served as Undersecretary for Corporations, had already had occasion to express the “confidence” he placed in the role played by the Italian university system in the Italian renewal. For Bottai, universities were true cultural centres, places for training the future ruling class, responsible not only for guiding the country but also for creating a new fascist culture. Or rather, universities were to be the instrument through which the dichotomy between *fascism-action* and *fascism-culture* could finally be overcome. The universities, called upon to conform to the programmatic and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² G. Bottai, *Carta della Scuola* (Riunione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo, del 15 febbraio 1939-XVII), in <file:///C:/Users/UX431FL-AN059T/Downloads/Carta%20della%20scuola.pdf> (last access: 11.12.2025).

ideological lines of fascism, were therefore expected to generate a new way of doing science and understanding culture⁴³.

In the political programme set out in the *Carta della Scuola*, Bottai proposed a concrete solution for the reorganization of the Italian school and university system. He identified education and culture as the very pillars of the nation's strengthening. These two "forces" represented, in fact, the means to foster genuine human, civic and political growth among Italian citizens, through which to fully realize moral, ideological and identity-based unity within the Fascist State.

The primary responsibility of universities was to guide the spiritual development of the younger generations, rather than being exclusively focused on their scientific and cultural mission. The objective was to cultivate individuals who were active, responsible and passionate, capable of integrating into social and political organizations and of fulfilling the regime's ideological mission.

Bottai's position is that the academia must avoid the tendency to become isolated and must not remain mired in the stagnation and ineptitude that had often characterized it in the past. Instead, the system must assume the role of guiding the process of integration between science and technology⁴⁴, placing itself at the service of new contemporary productive, economic and political needs, promoting the expansion of studies and scientific research, and with the support of the school system, achieving the moral unity of the country⁴⁵. It is evident that a unifying force would serve to bind the Fascist state, the school, the family, the Corporations, and the Party together in an indissoluble bond.

4. *Final considerations on the identity of teachers*

The recent resurgence of interest in teacher training is likely to be associated with the implementation of recent reforms. These changes have resulted in a fundamental rethinking of the courses to secondary school teaching qualifications over the last few years⁴⁶.

Following the post-war period and the transition towards a democratic sys-

⁴³ For further information on the university reform proposed by Bottai, see in particular L. Pomante, *Giuseppe Bottai e il rinnovamento fascista dell'Università italiana (1936-1942)*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2018.

⁴⁴ On this subject see also S. Montecchiani, "La necessità e la possibilità di portare gli studi fino alla concretezza della realtà". *L'evoluzione della mission universitaria italiana e l'integrazione tra scienza e tecnica*, «Pedagogia oggi», vol. 23, n. 1, 2025, pp. 34-40.

⁴⁵ G. Ricuperati, *Per una storia dell'università italiana da Gentile a Bottai: appunti e discussioni*, in Porciani (ed.), *L'Università tra Otto e Novecento: i modelli europei e il caso italiano*, cit., pp. 311-377.

⁴⁶ The reference is primarily to the abolition of the SSIS, the reform of the TFA, and the 60/30-credit qualification programmes and those for special education teachers.

tem of government, Italy has unquestionably experienced a series of profound and multifaceted transformations, both structural and cultural in nature. The national school and university systems have undergone significant changes, and the profile of teachers has also evolved⁴⁷.

With regard to secondary school teachers, a significant transformation in their identity has become particularly evident. The transition from a primarily intellectual and scientific figure, characterized by a deep commitment to cultural and moral values, to a more professional and specialized role has been marked by a shift towards modernization. This transformation has given rise to the emergence of a teacher-as-professional, a figure who possesses not only an advanced understanding of educational sciences but also a technical expertise in teaching methodology. The professional is capable of combining theoretical knowledge with practical skills.

The long process of ontological redefinition undergone by pedagogy, the establishment of the scientific nature of the field, and the expansion of research avenues and applications within the educational sciences have contributed to the evolution of “purely” humanistic culture and education. These have moved away from being regarded as mere erudition and have asserted a renewed value and potential – civil, political, economic, as well as cultural.

It is noteworthy that, over the long period stretching from the mid-19th century through to the end of the 20th century, and then into the present day, the perception of the teacher as a mere civil servant or scholar has been abandoned, giving way to their recognition as a professional in training, teaching, education and the caring relationship, as well as an expert mediator.

For a considerable period, humanistic culture had been regarded as a near-sacred institution, serving as a pivotal instrument in the pursuit of the public ethical, civic, and political objectives. Secondary school teachers and university professors, precisely because they were responsible for the education of the elites, enjoyed high social prestige as well as widespread cultural recognition.

The advent of democratization and, above all, of mass society had severely undermined this model⁴⁸. The conventional authority of teachers had been

⁴⁷ On the University subject see G. Luzzatto, M. Michelini, M.T. Pieri (edd.), *Università e formazione degli insegnanti: non si parte da zero*, Udine, Forum, 2002; T. Colacicco, S. Salustri (edd.), *La difficile transizione. L'Università italiana tra fascismo e repubblica*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2022 and L. Pomante, *L'Università della Repubblica (1946-1980). Quarant'anni di Storia dell'istruzione superiore in Italia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2022; on the changing role of teachers see also M. Morandi, *La scuola secondaria in Italia. Ordinamento e programmi dal 1859 ad oggi*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2014.

⁴⁸ In this regard, it seems interesting recall the contribution of L. Bianco, *Conflitti disciplinari: scienze politiche e scienze sociali nella rinascita repubblicana*, in D. Novarese, E. Pelleriti (edd.), *Università «contro»? Il ruolo degli Atenei negli ordinamenti in crisi*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2020.

contested by student protests⁴⁹, social renewal and the transformation – towards a more active approach – of the entire educational sector. In this sense, the teacher's identity has shifted towards a shared, collegial and collaborative dimension; they are no longer an intellectual holding a chair, but a professional called upon to engage with families, the local community, institutions and scientific centres.

The decline of humanistic hegemony has, however, paved the way for a model of education and learning now centred on transversal and orientational skills, in which culture also fulfils a social role.

In the complex contemporary landscape, where teachers are called upon to be highly specialized and flexible professionals, it therefore seems useful to reclaim that dimension of «magisteriality»⁵⁰ – as Bertagna defines it – which restores awareness and solidity to their teaching “mission”.

⁴⁹ See C. Betti, F. Cambi (edd.), *Il '68: una rivoluzione culturale tra pedagogia e scuola. Itinerari, modelli, frontiere*, Milano, Unicopli, 2011; M. Galfré, *La scuola è il nostro Vietnam. Il '68 e l'istruzione secondaria italiana*, Rome, Viella, 2019.

⁵⁰ G. Bertagna, «Magisterialità pedagogica», *abilitazione all'insegnamento e sviluppo della professionalità docente. Il passato, il presente, il futuro*, in G. Bertagna, F. Magni (edd.), *Lauree e abilitazione all'insegnamento. Analisi del presente, tracce del futuro*, Rome, Edizioni Studium, 2022, pp. 90-172.

