

## A new school for a new society. An experience of innovation and experimentation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

### Una nuova scuola per una nuova società. Un'esperienza di innovazione e sperimentazione nel secondo Novecento

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#### ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to examine the birth and evolution of an idea of innovation and experimentation in the second half of the 20th century. The promotion and construction of a participatory, democratic, and collaborative school context are the result of a particular experience carried out by the principal Tranquillo Bertamini at the "G.B. Brocchi" high school of Bassano del Grappa. In line with the cultural comparison and collaboration with Mons. Erminio Filippin and Giovanni Gozzer, Bertamini looks to a new school for a new society through adopting specific intellectual processes that respond to the need to adapt schools appropriately to reality. He believes in the possible consolidation of community systems with widespread participation through a new school organization based on the "module". The interdisciplinary approach becomes a habitual and necessary method for personal growth and for the development of individual attitudes and abilities that will find maximum expression in the community.

Il presente contributo si prefigge di esaminare nascita ed evoluzione di un'idea d'innovazione e sperimentazione nel secondo Novecento. Promozione e costruzione di un contesto scolastico partecipativo, democratico e collaborativo sono l'esito di una particolare esperienza realizzata dal preside Tranquillo Bertamini al liceo "G.B. Brocchi" di Bassano del Grappa. In linea con il confronto culturale e la collaborazione con Mons. Erminio Filippin e Giovanni Gozzer, Bertamini guarda ad una nuova scuola per una nuova società attraverso l'adozione di processi intellettuali articolati in funzione di un adeguato adattamento della scuola alla realtà. Egli crede nel possibile consolidamento di sistemi comunitari a larga partecipazione mediante una nuova organizzazione scolastica fondata sul "modulo". L'approccio interdisciplinare diventa metodo abituale e necessario alla crescita personale e alla maturazione di attitudini e capacità individuali che troveranno massima esplicitazione nella collettività.

**Keywords:** history of high school | experimentation | Tranquillo Bertamini | Giovanni Gozzer | Mons. Erminio Filippin

**Parole chiave:** storia della scuola secondaria; sperimentazione | Tranquillo Bertamini | Giovanni Gozzer, Mons. Erminio Filippin

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## Introduction

Through the figure of the principal Tranquillo Bertamini (1921-2017) it is possible to trace the renewal of a school context and a sense of “doing school” that characterized the twenty years of his direction with repercussions well beyond these temporal limits. A sense of “doing school” that begins in Bertamini’s formative years when he was the professor of history and philosophy at the scientific high school in Paderno del Grappa. A ten-year participation in the cultural context of change promoted by Mons. Erminio Filippin, reformer, and founder of the Paderno institutes, and Giovanni Gozzer with whom Bertamini collaborates in the magazine «Scuola libera» sharing considerations and experiences regarding a necessary and not postponable school renovation. In that context and in opposition to a conventional method of teaching, a new idea of school begins taking its first steps and Bertamini will share it throughout his life. He is principal in a historic moment of profound change, an opportunity that he will fully grasp by becoming a protagonist of the great experimentation started in the 1970s.

The investigation that relates to the promotion and the construction of a scholastic, participatory, democratic, and collaborative context as a result of the structural and methodological didactic experimentation pursued by Bertamini, mainly makes use of the material of the private archive of the same and conserved at the Museum of Education in Padua. These documents concern personal correspondences, drafts of interventions, contributions to the press, reform projects, reflections on pedagogical topics and many notes. Private and non-private papers that contribute to opening the “black box of the school” (Julia, 1995), offering a contribution to a cross-section of the history of secondary school, that of the great experimentation started in the 1970s.

### 1. Significant encounters

Tranquillo Bertamini, originally from Vignole, a small district in the province of Trento, after the premature death of his father, was housed by the religious congregation of the Institute of Charity, known as the “Rosminiani.” In this way he was able to attend high school at the “Mellerio Rosmini” collage in Domodossola, where he served the students at the boarding school and looked after the library (Tessarolo, 2019, pp. 13-14)<sup>1</sup>. Having obtained his high school diploma as a private student at the “Alfieri” state classical high school in Turin, he enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Catholic University in Milan and after two years he moved to Padua<sup>2</sup>. Graduating on 13 November 1945, he became professor of history and philosophy at the equivalent scientific high school of the Filippin institute in Paderno del Grappa, where he served until 30 September 1957<sup>3</sup>.

In those years, Bertamini was nourished by the cultural closeness of Mons. Filippin, “a great forerunner, a great organizer, a great educator”<sup>4</sup>, who wanted to reshape Catholic school making freedom and persuasion as the cornerstones of a new educational action. A profound change based on the educational rela-

1 See also Morello F. (2018, p. 93).

2 To support his university studies, Bertamini substitutes for literary subjects at the middle schools of Stresa Borromeo and at the “Mellerio-Rosmini” college in Domodossola. Then he moved to the University of Padua, despite the difficulties of moving due to the war, he is a substitute professor at the Filippin Institute middle school in Paderno del Grappa (Treviso). Cfr. Museum of Education in Padua (henceforth omitted), Fondo Bertamini, faldone A, signed CV at the end of his career; Certificate of services rendered in the academic year 1941-42, signed by the priest prof. Mario Zambrini, principal at the “Rosmini” lower secondary school in Stresa Borromeo, and dated 12 October 1946; Certificate of services rendered in the academic year 1942-43, signed by prof. Francesco Airandi, acting principal at the “Mellerio-Rosmini” high school in Domodossola, dated 23 October 1946.

3 The institute founded by Mons. Filippin soon became an important school complex. In a speech given to teachers and students in March 1931, Filippin himself recalled that he had always believed that the area at the foot of Grappa, where many young people had sacrificed themselves in the name of their country, could become the seat of a study center where “to sprout more youth, other ranks: the ranks of young students who in the purity of the spirit, in the salubrity of the air, in the atmosphere of sacrifice, are preparing to become impetuous phalanxes, renewing society” (Filippin, 1934, p.141).

4 As Gozzer wrote to Bertamini on 31 December 1998. Fondo Bertamini, faldone B, (unnumbered correspondence).

tionship at a time when authoritarianism was rife with its ineffective forms of purely coercive and external discipline<sup>5</sup>.

In 1953 the writer from Vicenza Guido Piovene described the visit to the institute

Modernity appears in Paderno [...] in about fifteen years Mons. Filippin has given rise to the largest Italian college for middle schools, to which he would like to associate an English college with four university faculties [...]. A pool Olympic measuring, a horse-riding school, courts for every sport and beautiful classrooms [...]. The pupils have a small bank, run by a priest, a bar, a room each, and do not wear uniforms; self-discipline, responsibility, patriotism is taught [...]. Ascertained the economic power of the parents, the richest pupils pay for those who are less so. This extraordinary college, created and dominated by a priest, with maximum honour to sports and social justice is typical of the Veneto when the Veneto is reformist (1957, p. 40).

Since the time of substitute for middle school, Bertamini participates and fully shares the educational principles underlying the pedagogical model of Mons. Filippin whose roots can be traced in the Rosminian formation of both. He considers the teacher not simply a transmitter of knowledge but a promoter of a lifestyle, a charismatic example for his students, an exemplification of true culture which is a discipline of the spirit. He looks to the idea of a school that must prepare to life starting from the pupil and what surrounds him and feed motivation to study and active participation of young people in cultural achievements through didactic communication<sup>6</sup>. The core elements behind Filippin's thinking, wholeheartedly shared by Bertamini, were an attention to giving a person an all-round education, the need to use persuasive methods, the importance of mutual respect and cooperation between educators and students to ensure a rational and disciplined use of personal freedom – seen as the founding principle of a liberal education.

In October 1946 Giovanni Gozzer<sup>7</sup> arrives in Paderno called by Mons. Filippin that entrusts him the direction of the middle school of Asolo established in 1942. On the strength of experience gained at the “valley school centers”<sup>8</sup> Gozzer embarked on a first teaching experiment at the lower secondary school. The need to develop a lower secondary school “connected to the primary school in the difficult period when the young need to be guided to make the most congenial choices and helped to gradually orient themselves according to their aptitudes and real abilities” (Fondo Bertamini, faldone B)<sup>9</sup> gave life to what was defined as the “bridge school” (Gozzer, 1948).

The relationship with Gozzer was strengthened thanks to Bertamini's commitment in the editorial committee of the new journal «Scuola Libera», closely related to the Filippin research center (Centro Studi Problemi Scolastici) in Asolo, where he was secretary.

The research center and the journal become the voices of free examination of school problems, of the participation of families, of the desire to promote research, surveys, and discussions for the improvement of the school and to make it more responsive to the actual needs of families and educators. As Bertamini himself claimed, it was not a matter of simply outlining the programmatic lines<sup>10</sup> but of identifying clear

5 Regarding the figure of Mons. Filippin see Quadrio (1971); Andreatta *et alii*, (1999).

6 In this regard, see the long passage, taken from Antonio Rosmini's *La Logica* which Bertamini reproduces in its entirety to outline Filippin's pedagogical vision, inserted in the text he promoted in honour of the founder (Andreatta *et alii*, 1999, pp. 106-107).

7 About Giovanni Gozzer, see Antonelli, Arcaini (2016); Gaudio (2018); Gaudio (2021). We also indicate the contributions currently in print A. Gaudio (2023), Gozzer, il CLN e la sperimentazione del decentramento scolastico, *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche*, and *Giovanni Gozzer e la scuola cattolica*, in the collected book by A. Sanzo L. Silvestri, (eds.), for Roma Tre-Press.

8 The centers “brought together students from different types of school (vocational, lower secondary schools, classical and scientific high schools, teacher-training and technical colleges). In a way, they were basically an early version of the unified system. Since every type of institute had some subjects in common (though the course content was not always identical), students from different classes came together for lessons on the subjects they shared and had separate lessons on the subjects specific to each type of institute. This required a degree of adaptability, but also enabled innovations that later took years and years to be included in the Italian school system” (Tessadri, 1997, pp. 2-3).

9 Fondo Bertamini, faldone B, typed draft with notes in the margin of a contribution to the text commemorating Mons. Filippin, (handwritten page numbering, p. 22).

10 A program revolving around seven points concerning freedom of organization, programs, school arrangements, initiative,

proposals for school reforms in the spheres of organization and teaching, “suggestions that anticipate by half a century a problem that is highly topical today” (Fondo Bertamini, faldone B)<sup>11</sup>.

Bertamini fully shares the stimuli of that cultural environment, and he recognizes the need to experiment with educational forms suited to the change in society and youth. He is against an approximate experimentalism and supports the idea of “free experimental schools” for the study and application of the various education systems correlated with the knowledge afforded by medical, biological, and scientific advances regarding character development and psychology, as a necessary support for the teacher’s work. From this moment Bertamini’s interest is concentrated on studies and researches that look at psychological foundations and scientific education theories to identify the most suitable means for a school “made for school-goers”, designed to suit the young people attending it, respecting their developmental age, and adapting to the various stages of their development and human life, in general and as single individuals in relation to that “strictly personal something” characteristic of each individual (Bertamini, 1949-50b, p.10). The teacher must be a “*instigator* of education [...] prepared scientifically to understand and guide the student’s free initiative” since it is the latter who must act directly (Bertamini, 1949-50a, p. 3).

For more than a decade, Tranquillo Bertamini at the Filippin institute had a formative experience that was decisive for his future role as principal and for the renewal of the secondary school. On 16 January 1998, he wrote to Gozzer:

I have always retained incisive and grateful memories of you because it was by working alongside you that I learned the ropes, albeit in cooperation ‘with that brave and loyal group of teachers that (at that time!) gave life and soul to the institutes in Paderno’. And I can tell you that, along with your teachings, I have also carried with me in the state schools a clear and precise idea concerning the EXPERIMENTATION OF NEW WAYS (structural and, above all, methodological/didactic) better suited to the current education needs of our society. And the outcome has been (and continues to be) positive (Fondo Bertamini, faldone B).

## 2. The principal and the experimentation

When Tranquillo Bertamini, Taber to his friends, in 1967 took up his duties as director of the “G.B. Brocchi” in Bassano del Grappa, is breathless for “the [...] suffocating atmosphere, typical of an old-fashioned, highly selective school” (Castellan, 2006, p. 28). He set to work for a change adapted to the times and to the requests of the students. He is guided by the basic idea of “renewing the school to renew the culture,” for which the innovation of the school requires a profound didactic reform conditioned by new teachers, witnesses of a problematic culture based on research and experimentation (Fondo Bertamini, faldone C)<sup>12</sup>.

Bertamini was unable to take part in the general drive for renewal of the school system that first took concrete shape in the “Progetto 80”<sup>13</sup>, and in the proposals for reform outlined at the end of the conference in Frascati in 1970 on the new approaches to secondary-school education, held at the head office of the Centro Europeo dell’Educazione (CEDE), of which Giovanni Gozzer was president. In fact, Bertamini was trained in an idea of school modeled on a wider democratic, plural, formative participation, respectful of human and territorial singularities.

and the creation of free experimental schools with the fundamental acknowledgement of their equal standing (Filippin, 1946, pp. 1-8).

11 Handwritten notes (unnumbered papers). The journal (on the theoretical plane, and as regards the open exchange of ideas in the field of education), and the research center (on the practical plane of delivering lessons and continually assessing the results) made a fundamental contribution to the first experimentation in post-war Italy.

12 Handwritten speech for the meeting on Tuesday 23-XII-1969 (unnumbered papers).

13 “The Italian school will have to gradually transform [...] into an open institution, characterized by a broad freedom guaranteed to the individuals and groups that take part in it; by a high degree of participation; by a wide autonomy of the scholastic institutions, by a high degree of regional decentralization. The reorganization of the school entails the implementation of a research and experimentation mechanism, which allows the school system to adapt permanently to new needs, and the implementation of some fundamental reforms [...]” (*Progetto 80. Rapporto preliminare al programma economico nazionale 1971-1975*, 1969, p. 31)

It is the D.P.R. 419 of 31 May 1974 to show the possibility of realizing the profound change in the school by providing for two levels of experimentation, a methodological-didactic one and a more comprehensive and radical one concerning regulations and structures. The high school “Brocchi” in Bassano is one of the twenty high schools that undertook the complex path of structural experimentation by referring to the unitary two-year model of an orientational nature, outlined in Frascati, and independently developing the following three-year period. For Bertamini it was the possibility of starting a transformation of the high school, making it more responsive to the needs of young people and a rapidly changing society. It was a question of identifying a new cultural and educational axis for a new unitary school inclusive of multiple options and articulated in such a way as to respond to the needs and interests of young people, helping them and directing them to seriously contemplated cultural and professional choices. Bertamini engaged the teaching staff in this long preparatory work from 1974-75. The collaboration and sharing of all the teachers made it possible to start an ambitious experimentation project from the following school year.

[...] anticipating the results of the expected REFORM of upper secondary schools that, within a few years, will be enshrined in law and will modify the school system, a ministerial decree has already been put into effect at the “G.B. BROCCHI” state high school, where an EXPERIMENTAL UNIFIED TWO-YEAR PROGRAM ensures that students who enroll can complete their cycle of studies up to the threshold of their profession, or – at the end of the subsequent THREE-YEAR PROGRAM – up until the final school-leaving exams that enable access to the university (Fondo Bertamini, faldone D)<sup>14</sup>.

The work of defining a new model of secondary school was however only at the beginning. The need to calibrate, update, improve objectives, structures, contents, and methods in the spirit of experimentation and comparison with schools that had started similar paths led to a review of the starting structure.

The expected articulation of a common two-year period with orientation options and a three-year period of specific paths aimed at those who did not intend to go out laterally but complete the five years soon showed its fragility regarding to the response of the context. In fact, those leaving after the two-year period collided with the lack of immediate absorption by the world of work but also with the lack of adequate professional apprenticeship schools not yet established by the Region. Reintegration through supplementary tests in traditional schools was also difficult. These difficulties made evident the need to adapt the models to concrete situations. Thus, a five-year structure was drawn up characterized by a progressive internal development based on three consolidated paths. The first common year was orientating, the second propaedeutic with only two differentiated weekly hours, the third and fourth were “of developmental” with eight to ten differentiated hours for each course, the fifth year offered basic professional indications within each of the three paths.

During experimentation, Bertamini highlighted the progressive awareness that the same division between the common area and the address area could be extremely formal and abstract. More relevant, on the other hand, was an articulated curricular and interdisciplinary program with appropriate teaching modules such as to make it possible to pass from the “more distant” subjects to the “more characterizing” ones. The question did not concern the quantitative distribution, but the specific “cuts” given to the common subjects according to the type of curriculum. A careful analysis of the context then guided the professionalizing nature of the three courses, trying to respond to the practical concerns of a territory that did not present many choices. To broaden the range of alternatives for each of the three courses, two outcomes have been foreseen related to the requests of young people concerned about obtaining, at the end of the five-year period, precise basic professional indications in view of future university choices or for entering the world of work.

<sup>14</sup> Presentation pamphlet of the new high school, (unnumbered papers). See also the manuscript for a meeting of the Comitato di Coordinamento Sperimentazione 3 April 1978.

### 3. Educate to community systems with large participation

Bertamini worked all his life to build a school organization that educates to large participation. In fact, he highlights the need to overcome the traditional conception of a school based on individual competition, a school understood as a sort of selective means aimed at preparing the “ruling classes”. The refusal of a selective school, incapable of considering the mass sacrificed for the few on whose basis and capacity the scholastic activity was carried out, was already the basis of the experimentation of the “bridge school” of Asolo wanted by Mons. Filippin, created by Gozzer, and shared and supported by Bertamini. Still in 1948 Gozzer advanced the start of a new school and announced, maybe a little optimistically, already finished the school that excluded or promoted “limiting itself to giving the so-called best people the opportunity to continue their studies”. The school was intended as a method by which society assesses individual aptitudes and abilities and

helps everyone to reach that point, to put themselves in that place where these attitudes will be best expressed, in the dual interest of the individual and of the community. Not good and sad, promoted or rejected, but students who follow an activity, an address, students who follow other activities, other directions [...] the school that educates, prepares, and guides the formation of man: not “man” in the abstract, but concrete and real men: The school that doesn’t exclude anyone, that to nobody is a step-mother. In other words, the school that is for society what the family is for the individual (Gozzer, 1948, pp. 19-20).

Compared to those first previews Bertamini focuses on the “module” central element of a new school organization and to which he will devote all his attention by developing it and making it increasingly responsive to the needs of a rapidly changing society. The module of the five-year period that could be defined as interdisciplinary (or, more realistically, cross-disciplinary) research activities, undertaken directly by students organized into groups, and monitored by their teachers. The object of this research activity is the global analysis of societies as they have historically evolved starting from the Middle Ages (second year of the course) up to the contemporary era (fifth year of the course). The module is not a normal group work activity. It is designed to enable students to acquire a more complex view of society, going beyond overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge, by taking an interdisciplinary approach as a habitual and necessary way to achieve personal growth. The programming of the whole activity (object of research, coordination of the disciplines, etc.) took place within periodic meetings of the module teachers in which all the teachers of the common area disciplines, teachers in the parallel classes of each year of the course participated. In this way you had a module for parallel classes (second, third etc.). Once the general framework had been identified, discussion with the students on the specific problems that were the object of the research of the various groups were carried out. Once the problem to be analysed had been defined, it was necessary to proceed with the identification of the objectives and the choice of the bibliographic material to be studied and analysed by the students. The groups were formed with suitable criteria to obtain work capacities on average equal. These groups could be composed of students belonging to the same class or to different classes of the same course year. One morning a week, planned at the beginning of the school year when the timetable was drawn up, was dedicated to reading and analysing texts. The hours of this morning were an integral part of the schedule of the various teachers who participated in the module by providing advice to the working groups and carrying out co-presence. With this organization, students can count on the help of several teachers at the same time. Each teacher assumes the role of expert in the discipline of competence without necessarily having an encyclopedic knowledge of the historical period considered. A written paper for each group is the final moment of the research activity to be shared in a moment of comparison and discussion with the other groups to obtain an overall view of the society considered, examined through the various disciplines (Perini, 1984)<sup>15</sup>.

Bertamini recognizes the module as a didactic methodological innovation capable of making a new school possible for a new society. His attention is constantly directed to the young people, who need ad-

15 *Il modulo: esperienza di lavoro svolta presso il Quinquennio Unitario Sperimentale “G.B. Brocchi” di Bassano del Grappa*. Autograph cyclostyle Fondo Bertamini, faldone N (unnumbered papers).

equate tools to respond to a society dominated by extremely variable situations. Hence the necessary adoption of articulated intellectual processes shaped as a function of an adequate adaptation of school to reality. Bertamini fights the traditional individual competition with the module as a research activity built on the interdependence of group work and capable of educating to the perspective of community systems with large participation. The “temporary” and “provisional” always prevail over any duties, roles, models, and fixed arrangements.

A rapid adaptation to transient and constantly varying criteria will help to: release our school system from its current vertical hierarchy, based on ranks, grades and roles; replace it with a lively dialectic, constructive contributions from all the various components (students, teachers, society) that, taking action from both inside and outside, are part of the school world; and nurture the development of every student's personal capabilities and social adaptability (Fondo Bertamini, faldone H).

Bertamini searches to separate the old institutional and ritualistic structures (lectures, votes, ballots, exams, etc.). So, he looks to a

school that proceeds on the strength of homogeneous groups with processes that develop young people's capability levels, the mobile social interferences, the inventive teaching methods and the so-called leisure-time schooling, the maturation of the critical spirit, the scientific approach to group research and, ultimately, the variety of opportunities to meet those socio-economic demands that correspond to young people's vocational choices (*Ibidem*).

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