

The “ignored martyr”.
The kindergarten teacher at the dawn of the Twentieth Century

La “martire ignorata”.
La maestra d’asilo all’alba del Novecento

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

In Italy, the limited attention paid by nineteenth-century governments to early childhood education fostered an enduring conception of kindergartens as basic care facilities rather than educational institutions and delayed the definition of the professional, economic, and legal status of kindergarten teachers. The article sheds light on the effects of this policy orientation by examining the condition of acute precariousness in which these teachers still found themselves in the early 1900s. In line with recent historiographical approaches, which call for moving beyond the analysis of institutional sources, the study draws on a body of evidence that has been only partially explored by scholars, namely educational journals for teachers.

KEYWORDS

Kindergarten teacher, educational journals, history of early childhood education, Italy, Twentieth century.
Maestra d’asilo, periodici educativo-scolastici, storia dell’educazione infantile, Italia, XX secolo.

In Italia la scarsa attenzione dei governi ottocenteschi nei riguardi dell’educazione infantile contribuì a perpetuare l’idea di asilo come istituto a carattere per lo più assistenziale e a determinare un significativo ritardo nella definizione del profilo professionale, economico e giuridico delle educatrici. Il presente contributo getta luce sugli effetti di tale indirizzo politico, indagando la condizione di grave precarietà in cui, ancora agli inizi del XX secolo, versavano quelle insegnanti. Sulla scia dei recenti orientamenti della storiografia educativo-scolastica, che invitano ad andare oltre l’esame dei documenti istituzionali, per svolgere la ricerca si è ricorso a una fonte solo parzialmente valorizzata dagli studiosi, ossia le riviste educativo-scolastiche.

Citation: Bressanelli R. (2026). The “Ignored Martyr”. The Kindergarten Teacher at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century. *Women & Education*, 4(7), 108-112.

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Conflicts of interest: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-IV-07-26_19

Submitted: March 25, 2026 • **Accepted:** June 4, 2026 • **Published:** June 30, 2026

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

1. Introduction

Unlike their counterparts in elementary education (Covato, 1996; Ascenzi, 2019), kindergarten teachers have not been the subject of systematic and dedicated studies. Reflections on this group have thus far been situated within broader research on the history of early childhood education (Tomasi, 1978; Catarsi, 1994; Di Pol, 2005). Moreover, as these investigations have drawn primarily on institutional sources, such as ministerial inquiries into kindergartens, they have yielded evidence that is largely quantitative in nature. In order to provide an empirical counterpart to these numerical findings – which do not allow for a comprehensive reconstruction of the professional, personal, and social profile of this category of workers – the present study turns to a source that has not yet been adequately examined in historiography, namely educational journals. This methodological choice is grounded in the now well-established recognition, within the history of schooling and education, of the role of such publications as a privileged forum for the circulation of pedagogical approaches, teaching practices, and organisational models, as well as for the legitimisation of the professional aspirations of teachers (Chiosso, 1997).

2. The legacy of nineteenth century legislation

The inaction of the nineteenth-century Italian political class with regard to early childhood education had significant repercussions not only for the organisation and expansion of kindergartens, but also for their recognition as educational institutions. These shortcomings contributed both to perpetuating their predominantly care-oriented character, which had marked them since their inception, and to delaying the definition of the professional, economic, and legal status of kindergarten teachers.

As can be seen from a number of government inquiries conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the dawn of the new century most Italian kindergartens were staffed by teachers lacking training in educational theory and methods (Gioda, 1899; Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1900; Ministero di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1906; Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1910). In short, kindergarten teachers were unable to respond to the emerging conception of childhood, which emphasised the importance of fostering children's spontaneity and interests (Gecchele, Polenghi, Dal Toso, 2017; Ghizzoni, Mattioni, 2023). The present review of educational journals for teachers allows us to contextualise these statistical data more precisely. The investigation suggests that the profile of kindergarten teachers in the early 1900s did not differ significantly from that depicted, in 1830, by Ferrante Aporti in a letter to the Austrian philanthropist Joseph Wertheimer, namely that of "ignorant little women who limit[ed] the care [of children] to mere supervision" (Aporti, 1976, p. 324). Between November 1901 and January 1902, in the authoritative journal *I Diritti della scuola* (Chiosso, 1997, pp. 234-239), Pietro Pasquali (Mazzetti, 1962; Macchietti, 1984), in denouncing the general state of neglect in which kindergartens operated, also reflected on the figure of the teacher. The picture that emerged was bleak. After noting that early childhood education was "forgotten by the law, neglected by those in authority" (Pasquali, 1901), the director of elementary schools and kindergartens in Brescia observed that, particularly in rural and mountainous areas, "necessary and sufficient qualification" for the role of kindergarten teacher "[was] poverty, preferably coming from a family in decline or having experienced misfortune". In such contexts, the belief persisted that "a kindergarten teacher could be any ignorant woman, or, at most, a kind-hearted one, without the need for technical training, considered a luxury form of education". Pasquali went on to denounce the miserable working conditions and social marginalisation to which these "unfortunate displaced women" were condemned. Rewarded only "with a bowl of soup and a few lire a day", he wrote, they lived "resigned to a life of sacrifice and apathy", "harassed by prejudice, targeted by gossip, in conflict with the coarsest families, at the mercy of administrators' whims". Such an existence, marked by solitude, deprivation, and harassment, had a decisive impact on the fate of these "poor martyrs", who often "grew old and died prematurely" (Id., 1902).

Pasquali's reflections were not isolated at the time. The profile of the kindergarten teacher he outlined – namely that of a teacher neglected by the state, of humble social background, with limited education, worn down by hardship and deprivation, and resigned to her working conditions and lack of social recognition – found ample confirmation in contemporary educational journals. The image of the teacher as a "martyr" evoked by Pasquali was also frequently echoed in biographical accounts. For example, between January and March 1905, the newly founded journal for kindergarten teachers *La Voce delle maestre d'asilo* (Chiosso, 1997, pp. 740-742) published, in its "Appendix" section, a three-part narrative in which Ida Pilotto Sottini (Chiosso, Sani, 2013, II, pp. 341-342), a kindergarten director from the Belluno area, recounted the true and "painful story of a poor rural kindergarten teacher". From the opening lines, the author reveals the tragic outcome of the story. Nella is described as "a heroine, an unrecognised martyr ... a victim of her duty and of human injustice" (Pilotto Sottini, 1905a). The narrative recounts the vicissitudes of a young teacher who, in addition to working continuously "from eight in the morning [...] to five in the afternoon" for a meagre salary (Ead., 1905b), was also forced to endure the abuses of the kindergarten's head, a selfish man lacking pedagogical competence, whom Pilotto Sottini portrays as an "ignorant nouveau riche".

These circumstances took a severe toll on her health and, weakened by fatigue, deprivation, and solitude, and above all by “constant humiliation and human injustice”, she died “without a caress, without comfort, neglected and abandoned” (Ead., 1905c).

Alongside contributions that denounced the “truly wretched” working conditions of educators (*I Diritti della scuola*, 1904), there also appeared calls for the formal definition of their legal status, the provision of adequate salaries, and the establishment of training programmes capable of equipping them with the skills required to perform their demanding role (Paolini, 1902). These measures were regarded as essential not only for improving their working conditions but also for securing the social recognition that had hitherto been denied to them.

3. Professional associationism

In the early twentieth century, educational journals served as a sounding board for the demands of kindergarten teachers and played a crucial role in fostering a sense of collective identity. During these years, kindergarten teachers, like their counterparts across other levels of schooling, became increasingly aware of the need to organise themselves into a professional association. Towards the end of 1903, the foundations were laid for the *Unione nazionale per le educatrici d'infanzia* (Unei). Formally established about a year later within the *Unione Magistrale Nazionale* (Barausse, 2002), the association pursued, alongside the defence of teachers' rights, the municipalisation and secularisation of kindergartens (Sani, 2001, pp. 242-247). As awareness of the initiative spread, appeals multiplied in teachers' journals. Convinced that only by overcoming hesitation could “victory soon be achieved”, contributors urged kindergarten teachers to commit themselves to the union “for the good of all” (Pilotto Sottini, 1905c).

During the Giolittian era, the growing visibility of kindergarten teachers – fostered in part by the attention of the specialist press and by the emergence of collective mobilisation – prompted governments to address their condition more directly. The political class thus appeared, at last, to recognise the key role that they, like their counterparts in elementary education, could play in the process of national renewal. Aware that meeting this need required appropriately trained educators, in 1904 the Ministry of Public Instruction (Royal Decree of 13 October 1904, no. 598 - Regulation on examinations in secondary and elementary schools) established the qualifications required to teach in preschool institutions (Moro, 1952, pp. 31-35).

Educational journals gave considerable prominence both to the establishment of the Unei and to the regulations concerning the training of educators. In this respect, a leading role was undoubtedly played by its official journal, *La Voce delle maestre d'asilo*. The inaugural issue opened with a brief text in which Maria Cleofe Pellegrini (Chiosso, Sani, 2013, II, p. 308) expressed the hope that the journal – like the association she led – would demonstrate “sufficient force to rouse the dormant from their deep slumber, to awaken [...] a righteous indignation against injustice, and to stir the consciences of [...] legislators to redress it” (Pellegrini, 1904). In the same issue, Umberto Caratti (Chiosso, Sani, 2013, I, p. 277), writing as president of the *Unione Magistrale Nazionale*, likewise expressed the hope that, with the support of the new journal, the Unei would succeed in “laying bare all the wounds from which [...] its kindergarten teachers bled” (Caratti, 1904).

As can be seen from the proceedings of the Unei congresses, the rights of this professional group, described as “unrecognised and unprotected” (Zoli, 1905, p. 5), began to be asserted with increasing determination. These gatherings provided valuable opportunities to draw the attention of both governments and public opinion to the urgent need to improve the economic position of kindergarten teachers who were “treated and remunerated like servants”, with salaries deemed “an insult to human dignity”, to call for measures granting them “a fair legal status appropriate to their role” (Ead., p. 6), and to advocate the secular character of kindergartens and their staff.

With regard to this latter aspect, for example, during the second Unei congress (Ancona, 24 September 1905), criticism was directed at nuns, who constituted a substantial proportion of the teaching staff in early childhood institutions. On that occasion, Gaetano Grilli (1905, p. 9), confirming what had already been documented by contemporary ministerial inquiries, noted that “in the 3,314 existing kindergartens, 4,441 teachers were lay and as many as 3,258 belonged to religious orders”. The Ancona-based professor accused nuns not only of engaging in “ruthless competition with lay teachers, accepting posts with derisory salaries, scarcely sufficient for women who often had families – quite unlike the good Jesus” (*Ibidem*), but also of being unqualified, as they frequently performed this role without the requisite credentials. These criticisms were taken up by Pilotto Sottini at the third Unei congress, held in Cremona on 8-9 September 1906, where she described the nuns employed in kindergartens as “narrow and impoverished minds, weak and ailing spirits” (Pilotto Sottini, 1906, p. 3). On that occasion, the Belluno-born kindergarten director also expressed reservations about the training pathways introduced by the 1904 Royal Decree. In her view, the measure, initially welcomed as “providential”, was proving inadequate due to the excessively theoretical orientation of the courses. They promoted, indeed, a “verbose and empty method” (Ivi, p. 4) which, by providing little practical training, hindered the long-awaited reform of early childhood education.

During this period, the reasons for the marked delay in the process of innovation in kindergartens began to be attributed not only to the negligence and inadequacy of governments, but also, in part, to the “apathy” of teachers

themselves (Fiore, 1907, p. 7). A particularly forceful critique in this vein was articulated in the pages of the association's official journal. In March 1907, Rosina Fiore, addressing the many colleagues who, although enrolled in the Unei like herself, failed to commit to the cause of the profession, described them as an "unthinking flock". She then offered the following bitter reflection: "If kindergarten teachers truly believe that they are something, that they are entitled to the consideration and treatment accorded to porters in the humblest offices or to janitors in elementary schools, let them assert themselves. If, on the other hand, they are convinced that the pay they receive is generous and their condition enviable, let them thank God for the privilege granted and invoke upon the heads of their employers all the blessings of heaven" (ibid., p. 8). These words gave rise to a heated debate (Burzio, 1907; Basso, 1907; Saini, 1907). Although the need to "rouse the apathetic" was widely acknowledged, the decision of *La Voce delle maestre d'asilo* to publish these comments was deemed "inappropriate" by one branch of Unei members (Unione Nazionale Educatrici Infanzia - Sezione Ligure, 1907).

4. The ineffectiveness of Giolittian-era legislation

The measures introduced in the early twentieth century in support of kindergarten teachers did not result in any significant improvement in their training, in the development of a solid sense of collective identity, or in their social recognition. Nor did the enactment, towards the end of the Giolittian era, of two important measures – Law no. 517 of 25 May 1913, concerning the transformation of institutions of instruction and education and establishing the *Scuole pratiche magistrali* (Moro, 1952, pp. 40-43), and Royal Decree no. 27 of 4 January 1914 on kindergarten curricula (Lombardi, 1970, pp. 27-39) – succeed in breaking the deadlock. Despite the enthusiasm with which the law on vocational training pathways for kindergarten teachers was initially received in pedagogical circles, its limitations and ambiguities were soon highlighted in the specialist press (*Pro Infanzia*, 1916; *Noi*, 1917). Educational periodicals also hosted extensive discussion of the publication of the first kindergarten curricula in Italy. This framework, which recognised that the kindergarten was "first and foremost an educational institution" (Lombardi, 1970, p. 192), was welcomed as a "sign of goodwill, of action, of intelligent and energetic inquiry" (*Il "Pro Infanzia"*, 1914). Educational journals also shed light on the obstacles kindergarten teachers encountered in assimilating and implementing the innovations introduced by this document. In practice, only "a few" proved "equal to the task" (*Un'abbonata*, 1914).

Towards the end of the Giolittian era, work in kindergartens still carried little prestige and was consequently of limited appeal. The measures enacted had, in fact, failed to provide kindergarten teachers with guarantees either in legal or in economic terms. In the absence of secure prospects, young women preferred to enrol in "popular, technical, lower secondary, and complementary schools", which offered more stable and better-remunerated employment. On the eve of the First World War, many kindergartens thus remained in the hands of "poor women, almost illiterate, unfit for the hard labour of the fields and workshops, where strong muscles, legs, and arms [were] required", or of "poor creatures [...] sickly, anaemic, lymphatic, scrofulous, tubercular" (Pasquali, 1914, p. 242).

The persistent marginalisation of this group of teachers is underscored by the striking similarity of the language used, a decade apart, in two articles by the editors of *I Diritti della Scuola* and *La Voce delle maestre d'asilo*. In October 1905, Annibale Tona (Chiosso, Sani, 2013, II, pp. 587-588) described them as "poor, humble creatures, admired by no one and remembered by no one" (Tona, 1905, p. 329); scarcely ten years later, on the eve of Italy's entry into the Great War, Giacomo Merendi (Chiosso, Sani, 2013, II, pp. 158-159) referred to them as "the daughters of no one" (Merendi, 1915).

5. Conclusions

Educational journals have proved to be a rich source of information, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the living and working conditions of kindergarten teachers and allowing for a more precise and nuanced profile of this professional group. The findings not only confirm the value of the research perspective adopted, which moves beyond an institutional approach, but also point to the desirability of extending the analysis to subsequent decades, when the professional trajectory of kindergarten teachers became intertwined with the reforms introduced under Fascism, beginning with Giovanni Gentile's 1923 reform.

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