

PRESENTATION. THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL EXHIBITIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHOOL MARKET BETWEEN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

Presentación. La escuela en el escaparate: el papel de las exposiciones pedagógicas en el desarrollo del mercado escolar entre los siglos XIX y XX

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1. SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

The act of “exhibiting”, in other words “putting on display”, has always been closely associated with the concept of commercialisation: showing a product with the aim of selling it was already a common practice among the earliest street vendors, and became even more evident in shops, where shop windows exposed various goods to the gaze of potential buyers (Holleran, 2012)¹. Manufacturers of different kinds of products soon adopted the practice of setting up a permanent exhibition of their goods within the production site itself, in order to enhance their value and allow direct inspection by buyers (as well as by agents, representatives, or specific categories of customers), for whom specific presentations could occasionally be organized (Martínez Ruiz-Funes & Marín Murcia, 2023; Allgayer, 2025).

The world of didactic and teaching aids was no exception to this practice of “exhibition as a means of commercialization”. One need only recall the case of certain teacher-inventors who personally organized presentations in public squares (Ambrosini, 1906), or publishing houses that arranged dedicated rooms in their premises to welcome teacher-buyers and showcase new products for sale (Paravia, 1923). Yet the act of “putting on display” was not exclusively tied to commercial objectives: exhibiting soon came to signify the assertion of excellence, market leadership, and capacity for innovation. At the same time, “exhibition” became an expression of the will to make one’s work known, and at times to impose new methods, products, and ideas—an attempt to generate needs not only at the level of the individual buyer, but also to shape and homogenize ways of thinking across society (Meda, 2016), or even to steer political choices and ideas.

¹ While this paper was jointly conceived by the two authors, the writing of the manuscript was divided between them as follows: Francesca Davida Pizzigoni drafted Sections 1 and 2 and Juri Meda drafted Section 3.

It is also worth noting the bibliographical review *Itinerant Traders, Peddlers, and Hawkers*, dedicated to studies on the history of street vendors —including practices of displaying goods— edited by Anne Montenach for Oxford Bibliographies Online.

The great national and universal exhibitions often served to reaffirm the cultural, economic, and political primacy of a country, in a kind of power play from which school-related products —present since the very first Universal Exhibition in London in 1851 and progressively gaining a more defined space— were by no means exempt (Greenhalgh, 1988; Aymes, 1995; Findling & Pelle, 2008).

Studies dedicated to investigating the history of school materiality, which have become increasingly consolidated over the past thirty years (Gaspar, Meda & De Souza, 2021), have not neglected to address the various meanings of “exhibition”. They have gradually revealed the potential of studying the presence of schools and their objects on display as a heuristic approach, capable of extracting information at different and wide-ranging levels, thereby contributing to the interpretive framework of the history of education through the study of its material supports.

The new line of research that interpreted exhibitions as instruments for disseminating school material culture was opened by the pioneering studies carried out in the early 1980s by María del Mar del Pozo Andrés (1983). She examined the presence of Spanish pedagogy at nineteenth-century universal exhibitions and, by reconstructing the objects, furnishings, and teaching tools with which Spain participated in those events, outlined the “educational image” that the country intended to project abroad.

This thematic insight was subsequently embraced in Spain by CEINCE-Centro Internacional de la Cultura Escolar in Berlanga de Duero, which in 2007 organized an international seminar devoted entirely to this theme. The proceedings of that seminar (Lawn, 2009) became one of the cornerstones of the literature for those studying the history of school materiality. They definitively recognized exhibitions as places that foreshadow the future, within which the educational materials on display make it possible to identify the developmental trajectories of a given school industry and its related educational policies. From that moment, a significant body of scholarship emerged, devoted to investigating the relationship between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century universal exhibitions and the constant evolution of teaching aids, establishing this as a “field of historiographical analysis in which materialities and their representations are shown to us as a new item for cultural history, within an ethnographic and hermeneutic perspective” (Escolano Benito, 2011-2012: 151).

Alongside the great international exhibitions (Dussel, 2007, 2011; Grosvenor, 2005; Guereña, 2005; Dittrich, 2011, 2013; Matasci, 2015; Trigueros-Gordillo & Rubio-Mayoral, 2018; Viola, 2018; Brunelli, 2020; Bianchini & Pongiluppi, 2024), it has become clear that didactic exhibitions of a more strictly national or local character also offer elements of great interest for interpreting the history of school materiality in a given period. They also provide new pieces with which to complete the broader panorama of historical-educational research (Rico Mansard, 2004; D’Ascenzo & Vignoli, 2008; Meda, 2010, 2016; Durán Rodríguez, 2012; Barausse, 2020; Pizzigoni, 2022). Thus, while some works have focused on exploring how universal exhibitions influenced modern educational models and facilitated the transnational circulation of ideas, models, and technologies (Lawn & Grosvenor, 2009, 2021), other studies have enabled deeper investigations of specific contexts or countries, such as Argentina through the cited works of Dussel, Japan through those of Dittrich, and France through those of Matasci.

Taken together, these works have highlighted both the significant and multiple heuristic potential of exhibitions themselves and of the school materials displayed within them. Such materials, far from being mere “neutral” objects, were the expression of complex dynamics in which economic and political, educational and social aspects were interwoven, extending well beyond the boundaries of the classroom. By combining these two objects of investigation —exhibitions and the school materials displayed therein— both already polyvalent in themselves, the heuristic value and interpretive insights offered by this line of research are exponentially enhanced.

2. “EDUCATIONAL MATERIALITY ON DISPLAY”: INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORKS AND HEURISTIC PERSPECTIVES

To grasp the breadth of this perspective, it is enough to consider how the history of a teaching object on display often intertwines different exhibition levels—international, national, and local—blending them together (for example, objects awarded at a local exhibition that are later presented at an international one, or vice versa). This enables us to reconstruct relations, spheres of influence, economic and commercial exchanges between different countries or companies, and the trajectories of authors and their inventions. Studying the relationship between exhibitions and school materials thus makes it possible to construct what might be called a “multi-layered geography” of schooling and its didactic objects, in which not only pedagogical and educational aspects but also industrial, administrative, associative, and authorial dimensions, among others, come into play.

The showcase of didactic exhibitions offers numerous interpretative keys: from the function attributed to didactic objects according to the educational theories of the time, to the analysis of exhibition categories as expressions of political and organizational choices; from the study of the actors involved (promoters, exhibitors, jurors) to the reconstruction of networks of relations and strategies of representation. The related sources — catalogues, official reports, awards, photographs, and lectures— constitute a documentary heritage of great interest for the history of school materiality.

If we were to summarize the interpretative frameworks that have thus far been most developed within the line of research on “educational materiality on display”, four can undoubtedly be identified.

Exhibitions as showcases of educational modernity, in which participants sought to use schooling as a symbol of national progress. This line of research, developed in the works of Lawn, Grosvenor, Escolano, and Matasci, highlights the role of exhibitions as representational devices where teaching materials, furniture, architectural drawings, and students’ work were displayed not so much to emphasize their pedagogical value, but rather their degree of conformity with the educational and social policies of the time. The presence of schooling in exhibitions thus became above all a message, addressed both internally and externally, as a means of consolidating the position and leadership of the exhibiting nation.

Exhibitions as spaces and opportunities for circulation and exchange among different countries. In this perspective, as emphasized by the works of scholars such as Dussel, Dittrich, Roldán Vera, and Pizzigoni, the exhibition functioned as a facilitator of close observation of practices in other countries, and therefore as a site of cross-fertilization—and at times outright appropriation—of objects, ideas, solutions, models, and projects. Here, the study of exhibitions in a sense “extends” beyond the actual duration of the event, since it also encompasses the subsequent period, allowing us to grasp the impact of the exhibition, the image it projected, and, more explicitly, the repercussions of what was displayed on the school products and practices of various countries in the months and years that followed.

Exhibitions as opportunities to compile a catalogue of the material culture of schooling in a given year. In this interpretation, the exhibition functioned as a concentrator of objects, a venue that brought together all products considered most innovative, technologically advanced, or otherwise most representative of a specific historical moment. The exhibition became an ideal snapshot of its time, a kind of “current archive” that automatically transformed, once the event concluded, into a “historical archive,” enriched with the myriad sources produced or gathered by the exhibition (exhibitors’ catalogues, maps, reports of juries and delegates, official visits, lists of awardees, etc.). The catalogue of exhibitions has thus been used as a privileged source for understanding the typologies of objects, categories, producers, relations among

school materials of different countries, and the evolutionary trajectories of materials and disciplines. In this regard, the works of Barausse, Meda, and Brunelli represent excellent examples of this line of research.

Exhibitions as instruments for defining national and international educational policy. Within this line of research, addressed in the works of Del Pozo and Matasci previously cited, the focus shifts to the role of exhibitions as arenas where national or global educational agendas were defined and presented to policymakers, who in turn could influence the formulation and implementation of educational policies within their respective contexts. The numerous fact-finding missions conducted in these exhibitions from the late nineteenth century onwards by experts appointed by their Ministries of Education —aimed at identifying the most functional pedagogical models, teaching aids, and even school furnishings for the modernization of national school systems— clearly demonstrate this dynamic (Sani, 2022). These movements of objects and people must be investigated in depth, state by state, in order to understand how and to what extent the educational progress promoted in these contexts shaped the broader process of modernization in European society and —through diverse dynamics and varying speeds— in extra-European contexts during the nineteenth century. It is also interesting to note how these exhibitions indirectly reveal that the very idea of “modernity” was closely tied to the development of modes of production typical of capitalist systems, and that the transition to modernity was characterized by strong ethnocentrism and grounded in adherence to economic and social formations considered more dynamic than traditional ones.

Many other aspects could be emphasized, and many other studies and scholars could be cited, yet what matters most already emerges clearly from the data presented here: the time is ripe to dedicate a special issue to the theme of exhibitions. The field benefits from a substantial body of prior scholarship, which now makes it possible to provide a survey capable of gathering plural research perspectives and bringing together, in a single venue these interpretative frameworks. From their convergence, new perspectives may also emerge.

The aim of this special issue is therefore to serve as a forum for sharing viewpoints, ideas, and research in order to take a step forward in the study of the “display” of school materiality in local, national, and international exhibitions—its premises, its implications, and its concrete effects.

3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE TO THE ONGOING HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

In this special issue we include the contribution of Klaus Dittrich, a pioneer of these studies at the international level, who —focusing on the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867— clearly demonstrates how, in the nineteenth century, universal exhibitions functioned as amplifiers for the diffusion of educational models and pedagogical practices on a global scale. They served as genuine centers of dissemination, reverberating their effects even on the most remote and marginal school institutions, through the mediation of inspectors, headmasters, and teachers who had visited them, absorbed their innovations, and sought to adapt them both to their specific professional contexts and to their wider networks of colleagues. In the long run, this process contributed to the standardisation of a national educational space, aligned with those of other countries and continuously updated in line with modern times.

María del Mar del Pozo Andrés, who—as already noted—was among the first scholars to explore these issues, turns her attention to the National Didactic Exhibition held in Madrid between June and July 1882, following the first National Pedagogical Congress. The characteristics of this exhibition were markedly different from the previous case. It was not a Universal Exposition promoted globally by an

international organising committee, but rather a didactic exhibition promoted in the Spanish capital by the *Sociedad Fomento de las Artes*, a cultural association founded a few years earlier by the urban bourgeois elites to advance popular education. Here too, however, the event pursued a precise aim: to legitimize, in the eyes of Madrid's teaching corps, the innovative pedagogical methods practised by the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, in an attempt to uproot the traditional methods still employed by the majority of teachers. The author highlights how, in that context, the very exhibition layout and the arrangement of the objects reflected the sharp pedagogical tensions within Madrid's educational system between innovators and conservatives. This is further illustrated by the engravings of the exhibition spaces published in *La Ilustración Española y Americana* just prior to the opening of the exhibition, with clear promotional intent.

Mirella D'Ascenzo draws attention to a theme still largely unexplored but with wide heuristic potential: the relationship between pedagogical debate and its material repercussions on schooling. Specifically, she examines the didactic exhibitions linked to Pedagogical Congresses in post-unification Italy. Her analysis focuses on the case of the Ninth Italian Pedagogical Congress, held in Bologna in 1874. The study of the materials on display and of the assessments expressed by the Commissions serves as a mirror of the school, revealing the first traces of the introduction of object teaching and, above all, the significance of "grassroots" contributions. The author underscores how innovation often stemmed from the ideas and inventions of teachers themselves, and she identifies in the exhibitions associated with Pedagogical Congresses a valuable source for capturing change and development at the intersection of tradition and innovation.

Also situated within the Italian context is the contribution of Francesca Davida Pizzigoni, who focuses on a different level of exhibiting the "school on display": namely, its presence within the first major national exhibitions of the Nineteenth century. This presence —within events still primarily aimed at fostering the construction of a new unitary idea of the nation— is analyzed not only in its chronological evolution but also along three main axes: who exhibited the school, how the school was exhibited, and which aspects of the school were exhibited. The resulting picture is one of exhibitions that did not, in fact, manage to present a genuine drive for innovation in teaching tools, but rather seemed more concerned with offering the general public a new vision of the school of a unified Italy, in which schooling had —or aspired to have— a specific role in the making of Italians.

In his contribution, Johann-Günther Egginger demonstrates how universal exhibitions held from 1851 to 1889 were used to promote the use of three types of scientific teaching aids: wall charts, clastic models (as models of plants and plant organs by Louis Auzoux), and portable cabinet for the object lessons, known as *musée de l'école* (*literally, school museum*). These innovative objects for the improvement of the elementary science teaching were presented in the educational sections of the first universal exhibitions as tools for implementing the technique of "teaching by appearance" —based on the assumption that "it is enough to see to understand"— through the representation of things in two (wall board) or three dimensions (clastic models) or their presentation in well-designed display cases (*musée de l'école*). In this case too, world fairs serve to amplify the educational emergencies of a society such as the positivist one of the late 19th century devoted to scientific progress as a factor of social, economic and cultural development.

Gizele de Souza uses the lens of the 1922 Centenary of Brazilian Independence Exposition to highlight the role of national and universal exhibitions as drivers for the promotion of social, industrial, and educational modernities between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These events functioned as genuine showcases of material culture and pedagogical innovation, enabling the author to analyse exhibitions as part of broader processes of nation-building and the invention of tradition.

Guadalupe Trigueros Gordillo and Juan Luis Rubio Mayoral present a study of the 1888 Barcelona Universal Exposition from a particular perspective: the analysis of the presence of Spanish universities on display. By examining the types of materials presented, disciplinary fields, geographical origins, and awards received, the authors provide a quantitative framework that also offers interpretative insights into the presence and evolution of the university on display and the image it projected of itself.

Finally, Valeria Viola —who has previously worked on the history of Italian school architecture, with particular attention to rural schools in southern Italy— studies universal exhibitions to provide a comprehensive overview of the development of Italian school architecture through the reports written by Italian delegates sent by the Ministry of Industry, Handicraft, and Commerce in the early post-unification period. As has already been emphasized, these events offered opportunities to engage with the most innovative aspects of educational models and pedagogical practices in use in the more advanced national contexts, as well as to identify new trends in the design of school buildings and the organization of learning spaces.

The contributions presented in this special issue confirm—on the one hand—the use of exhibitions as showcases of educational modernity and as tools for defining national and international educational policies (Klaus Dittrich, María del Mar del Pozo Andrés and Mirella D’Ascenzo’s contributions are explicit) and —on the other— their central role in circulation and exchange of educational models and pedagogical practices among different countries (Johann-Günther Egginger, Francesca Pizzigoni and Valeria Viola).

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