

From Remembered School Objects to the Emotion of Objects

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Abstract

This study focuses on school objects from the perspective of the recollection of the students who used them. The data come from the responses to a survey about respondents' favourite school object and the reasons for choosing it. The 285 objects mentioned by the 252 respondents were first grouped into twelve categories according to the object and then according to their social or cultural nature. The reasons given for the choice were classified into four categories to facilitate the analysis of the emotions elicited by these objects. The main results show that school objects are more than objects; they communicate ideas, imply values, and provoke emotions. Objects should be analysed in terms of their use and the reasons why they are remembered, which often involve personal relationships. New ways of approaching memories of these objects by educational historians are suggested.

Keywords: material culture, history of education, school culture, pupils, affective turn

De los objetos escolares recordados a la emoción de los objetos

Resumen

Este estudio se centra en los objetos escolares desde la perspectiva del recuerdo de los alumnos que los usaron. Los datos proceden de las respuestas a una encuesta acerca del objeto escolar favorito y los motivos para elegirlo. Los 285 objetos mencionados por las 252 personas que contestaron se agruparon primero en 12 categorías dependiendo del objeto y, luego, según su naturaleza social o cultural. Los motivos indicados para la elección se clasificaron en cuatro categorías para facilitar el análisis de las emociones que provocan esos objetos. Los principales resultados muestran que los objetos escolares son más que objetos, comunican ideas, implican valores y provocan emociones. Los objetos deben analizarse teniendo en cuenta su uso y los motivos por los que son recordados, que implican a menudo relaciones personales. Se sugieren nuevas formas de acercarse a los recuerdos de esos objetos por parte de los historiadores de la educación.

Palabras clave: cultura material, historia de la educación, cultura escolar, alumnos, giro afectivo

Des objets scolaires remémorés à l'émotion des objets

Résumé

Cette étude se concentre sur les objets scolaires du point de vue de la mémoire des élèves qui les ont utilisés. Les données proviennent des réponses à une enquête sur l'objet scolaire préféré et les raisons de ce choix. Les 285 objets mentionnés par les 252 répondants ont d'abord été regroupés en 12 catégories selon l'objet, puis selon leur nature sociale ou culturelle. Les raisons invoquées pour le choix ont été classées en quatre catégories afin de faciliter l'analyse des émotions suscitées par ces objets. Les principaux résultats montrent que les objets scolaires sont plus que des objets, ils communiquent des idées, impliquent des valeurs et provoquent des émotions. Les objets doivent être analysés en fonction de leur utilisation et des raisons pour lesquelles on s'en souvient, ce qui implique souvent des relations personnelles. De nouvelles façons d'aborder la mémoire de ces objets par les historiens de l'éducation sont suggérées.

Mots clés : culture matérielle, histoire de l'éducation, culture scolaire, élèves, tournant affectif

School Objects

School memories are usually diffuse, vague, and capricious. We remember a teacher, a field trip, an anecdote, a book or a playground game, a smell, a noise . . . but it is difficult to reconstruct the day-to-day life of schools. We remember something that triggered a certain emotion, sometimes for reasons unrelated to the object itself. Spanish writer Machado used to say, “I only remember the emotion of things” (cited in Escolano Benito, 2019, p. 392), and that is exactly what happens.

The things used at school belong to the category of those “little things” that songwriter Serrat (1971) talks about in such a way that, although “we believe that they were killed by time and absence,” what happened is that “their train sold a return ticket.” We either keep them or may have never thought of keeping them. However, when we are asked about our school objects, memories, sensations, and emotions are triggered by their evocative potential, as they are linked to childhood and adolescence; that is, a period of life that is often remembered with nostalgia, especially as the years go by.

As Schlereth (1982) explained, through the study of objects we can learn about the belief system—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a specific society or community, usually over time (p. 3). The study of material culture is based on the obvious premise that the existence of an object made by a person indicates the presence of a mind at work, which is thinking while making it. The generally accepted idea underlying material culture research is that objects made by people, either consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, reflect the belief patterns of the people who made, ordered, bought, or used them. And by extension, these objects reflect the patterns of the society to which they belong.

Objects act as carriers of cultural meaning, offering a unique insight into the life of the past. However, this relationship between the object and its meaning is far from self-evident, and interpreting what an object means requires a thorough understanding of the object's context (Daston, 2004). Objects should be placed in a world of people and ideas and be considered as cultural products, not as isolated things (Alberti, 2005). While the design and manufacture of an object may be object-specific, its use is not, as it may differ in each case. This was the case with pencils and notebooks, for example. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, pencils and notebooks were expensive, so their use was restricted. Hence, the value and use of a new pencil or notebook for a child in the 1940s is different from today; pencils were used until they were too small to hold, as was every single sheet of notebook paper.

The meaning of an object may vary from one user to another at a given time, and from one time to another for the same user. This problem is inherent to cultural studies, as we use the variables *meaning* and *value*, which are common to all cultural studies regardless of their field. Historians have generally made little use of

objects despite the fact that social history already promoted the inclusion of everyday objects as a source and a topic of study almost a century ago. Additionally, the material culture of the school is especially relevant, given that many of the objects that children use have been designed by adults. This leads us to distinguish between objects made to be used at school (books, pens, pencil cases, computers, etc.) or in the context of school activity (drawings, exams, notebooks, manual work, photographs, etc.), namely *cultural objects* and *social objects* (Braster et al., 2011).

Historians somehow strive to know how things were; that is, to understand them. To that end, we need to know *how objects were* or, in the absence of them, their image. Historians of education are not interested in school objects as such, decontextualized, but in objects as part of the life of a person or a group, such as a social class. Therefore, objects are interesting as a source or topic of study for historical research on education, because we treat them as subjects or because we see the subject in them. If we fail to do this, objects remain inanimate, lifeless, and will not speak to us. In a way, historians aim to see the subjects behind the objects.

Visitors to education museums pay particular attention to objects that remind them of their school life because they have had the same or equivalent objects (Escolano Benito, 2018). Visitors are attracted by a book, a calculator, a pen, a photo, etc. Most of them see cultural objects perhaps because they are easily identifiable, while social objects, by their very nature, are personal, so they may have a value or meaning for their owner that cannot always be shared with others. However, social objects are more personally loaded, so it would be easier to see the subject behind a social object than behind a cultural one, and they may be more fondly remembered.

Interest in the study of the history of material culture has developed especially in recent decades in the context of cultural history (Grassby, 2005) and in parallel with the creation of educational or school museums and educational memory centers, often linked to the training of education professionals (Álvarez, 2016; Ruiz Berrio, 2010). There is also abundant literature on some school objects in the last 30 years, so much that it is beyond the scope of this paper to refer to them all. For example, the topics of the last three ISCHE conferences were close to the material aspects of education: ISCHE 41 (Porto, 2019), Spaces and Places of Education; ISCHE42 (Orebro, 2021), Looking from Above and Below; and ISCHE43 (Milan, 2022), Histories of Educational Technologies: Cultural and Social Dimensions of Pedagogical Objects. In addition, it is possible to find panels, sessions, and papers on school objects in history of education at national and international conferences. It is worth mentioning the research on school manuals, many of which are linked to the MANES project that began in 1992 and has provided much of the research on this subject (Tiana, 2000); research on school spaces, especially provided by a coordinated monograph by Viñao (1993-1994); publications and conferences on school notebooks such as that of Meda et al. (2010), and research on material aspects of the school such as the one edited by Lawn & Grosvenor (2005). However, despite intense museum and research activity, to the best of our knowledge, *remembered school objects* have been rarely considered in literature (Sanchidrián

and Molina, 2022). There are indeed publications on the use of oral sources in the history of education (Bedmar and Montero, 2010; Yanes-Cabrera et al., 2017), which sometimes involve material aspects of the school (Suárez Pazos, 2002) and references to the use of school objects in interviews in order to stimulate memories as a way to access oral sources (Targhetta, 2017) due to their ability to create “emotional and multisensory” connections, as stated by sociological and anthropological research (Edwards, 2010, pp. 3-33). This leads us to stress the need to open the field of study to the smells and sounds of school (Burke and Grosvenor, 2011; Grosvenor, 2012; Thyssen and Grosvenor, 2019; Van Campen, 2014).

As for the use of objects as a historical source, most of the literature covers the use of images considered as social objects. All other objects, whether they are books, notebooks, desks, videos, Apps, etc., should be used in a similar way to images (Depaepe and Hekens, 2000; Dussel and Priem, 2017; Edwards and Hart, 2004). Edwards (2005) says the same thing about photographs that can be said about school objects: “[School objects] become not simply visual history, but fundamentally oral history, linked to sound, gesture, and relationships” (p. 27). Photographs or objects should be analyzed from their material, relational, and contextual perspective; that is, from their emotional perspective. The affection that links us to school objects, considered as trivial in rational and knowledge processes, is currently known to be an essential part of learning, involved in decision-making and in our social development.

Based on these conceptual and theoretical approaches, the aim of this research is to go beyond the study of school objects to explore the possibilities of remembered objects and their emotional links. This study is framed in the affective or emotional turn taken since the twenty-first century by historians (Boddice, 2018; Rosenwein and Cristiani, 2018; Barclay et al., 2020; Barclay et al., 2022) and historians of education (Sobe, 2012; Dernikos et al., 2021; Soares, 2022; and Toro-Blanco, 2023) .

Which School Objects Are Remembered?

The aim of this research is to explore a way of studying remembered school objects by considering the reasons why they are remembered. It is essentially a qualitative work, although percentages are given to present some of the data. The range of school experiences and memories is as wide as human experiences. One needs only to listen to people who have been classmates for years to hear them talking about such and such teacher or such and such activity or field trip. We do not claim these results to be transferable, but rather to offer a way of approaching a complex subject as it is memories and emotions.

This is not to say that memories or oral sources are irrelevant to historians, but they are not history. Memory often coalesces in objects, places, and people, and history seeks to understand and interpret complex contexts through research into historical sources. We are not concerned with whether the memory is distorted here; rather we are interested in the emotion associated with the remembered object,

which is personal. You remember the time you waited to get an object, that you lost it, that you had it for many years, that your classmates loved it, etc. And you remember this because it generated lasting emotions in you.

However, a study on memories and emotions must leave sentimentality aside. In this line, the best way to avoid sentimentality of memories is to insert them into narrative structures, stories, and interpretative contexts in relation to school; that is, “contextualising, interpreting, narrating macro, medium, or micro stories that make sense because they have a beginning, a body or plot, and an end, or several beginnings, bodies, or endings” (Viñao, 2012b, 648-649).

More specifically, the aim here is to:

- Find out which school objects are remembered by a broad spectrum of the population (18 to 82 years old) and according to age- and gender-based differences.
- Categorise the objects remembered.
- Establish potential relationships between respondents’ gender and age and the categories of the objects recalled.
- Qualitatively approach the respondents’ reasons to justify their choices by establishing four categories of reasons to facilitate the analysis; that is, to get closer to the emotions behind the memories.

In order to avoid the subjectivity of a single person, two researchers independently categorised the objects into twelve social and cultural groups, categories of reasons, and their definition.

A Google Form was disseminated and collected by electronic means in order to have a convenience sample. After an introductory paragraph in which the researchers described the study and participants self-selected if they wished to participate, there were six short questions:

- 1-2. Identification: Age and gender
- 3-4. Remembered school object: Which school object (school, high school) do you remember most fondly and why?
5. Describe the object (if deemed necessary)
6. Do you still have it?

This kind of survey has major advantages and disadvantages, such as the fact that only a few people actually explained the reasons for their choice. The main advantage is the ease of access to different people and the systematisation of data. The main drawback is that we can only know what they have written. For some people, choosing one object was difficult. This is understandable as sometimes we remember an object that brings other objects to the level of awareness yet we do not know why; e.g., a person chooses a bag and explains that “it just came to mind when reading the question.”

Questions about school life and childhood are generally well received and people are willing to talk about it. From a total of 259 surveys, 252 were considered, as seven respondents remembered the school object from a teacher experience, not

as a student. These answers open up the possibility of a teacher approach to this topic (Kaire, 2016). Some people indicated several objects, and all of them were included, so the total number of objects is 285.

Twelve categories were designed according to the type of objects (books, pencil cases, uniforms, etc.). All objects could be included in one of these categories, although it was finally necessary to create the “Other Items” category. The categorisation was individually carried out by two people, with a 97.54% coincidence level. Where to include the seven discrepant objects was then discussed. Finally, the twelve categories used were:

- MEED: Items to write or draw with and to transport them: pencil case, pencil, ballpoint pen, eraser, sharpener, coloured pencils, felt-tipped pens, markers, crayons...
- MECL: Items on which to write or draw and to store them: notebooks, notepads, binders, grid sheets, folders, files...
- RCT: Items to calculate, measure and draw lines: rulers, compass, calculators...
- OMD: Musical and sports items: flute, piano, ball, racket...
- MANU: Crafts and tools to make them: plasticine, paper punch...
- LEL: School and reading books: textbooks, encyclopedias, primers...
- AE: School diary and yearbooks.
- MCBC: Equipment to transport items or books: backpack, purse, bag, satchel...
- CU: School clothes: uniforms, bibs...
- MEO: School furniture and classroom items: desk, table, chair, blackboard...
- FTG: Photographs.
- OO: Other items.

The next step was to work with the categories of social and cultural objects, which are less obvious than the above and became one of the greatest difficulties in the research. The agreed criterion was to understand that an object is social when, although it is manufactured outside the school to be used in it, it is substantially changed by its owner, e.g., a notebook (used for writing), a folder that is covered with pictures of singers or a diary in which daily tasks are written down and classmates write dedications. We may have the same diary or folders as everybody else at the beginning of the school year, but they will all look very different at the end. We understand that the criterion can be debatable and needs to be made explicit.

Next, four categories were established to classify the reasons why a school object is chosen as favourite. Csikszentmihalyi and Halton (1994) grouped into categories the reasons why some familiar objects were preferred, and nine categories belonged to the past. Based on them, and in view of the survey responses, the four categories of reasons why a school object is chosen as favourite are as follows:

1. General memories: In addition to memories that indicate general sensations

related to any object: A backpack because *I liked it a lot; because it meant happy moments*; a picture that *gave me peace*; a pencil case because *it had everything in it*; books *because they remind me of my childhood*. Also included are memories related to smells that are considered general memories. Although responses refer to smells such as that of the wood of pencils and crayons, we understand that these refer to the smell of school that permeated the memories related to these activities, carried out in class or at home. Smell is a very powerful sense when it comes to linking with memory.

2. Specific memories: Memories referring to a specific activity, like calligraphy or silent maps; and specific aspects of an object, like a pencil case because *I was fascinated by its side opening, to me it looked like the latest technology*, a diary *because my classmates wrote in it, etc.*
3. Origin: *It belonged to . . . was given to me by . . . was bought for me by . . . My father's watch because he thought it would bring me luck in my exams; the typewriter because it was a gift from my mother...*
4. Time of use or preservation: This answer indicates that the object is a favourite because it had been kept or used for a long time: The notebooks *because I have kept them for a long time*, my backpacks *because they accompanied me for many years...*

Once the categories were established, two researchers independently catalogued the objects and motifs based on the different criteria and discrepancies were subsequently revised until criteria could be finally applied. This process was carried out essentially because sometimes it was challenging to place an object in one of the categories.

There were 252 surveys answered by 185 women and 67 men aged 18 to 82. The 30-39 and 50-59 age groups are the most represented with 64 responses each, while those aged 69 and over are the least represented with only nine responses (Figures 1 and 2). Within each age group women are predominant although with some differences, as the under-30 group is the most gender-equal and the 40-49 and 50-59 groups are the least (Figure 3).

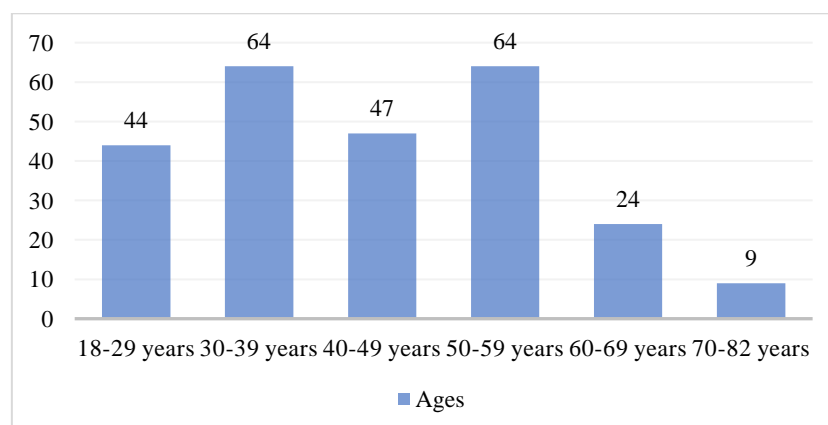


Figure 1. Survey responses by age group.

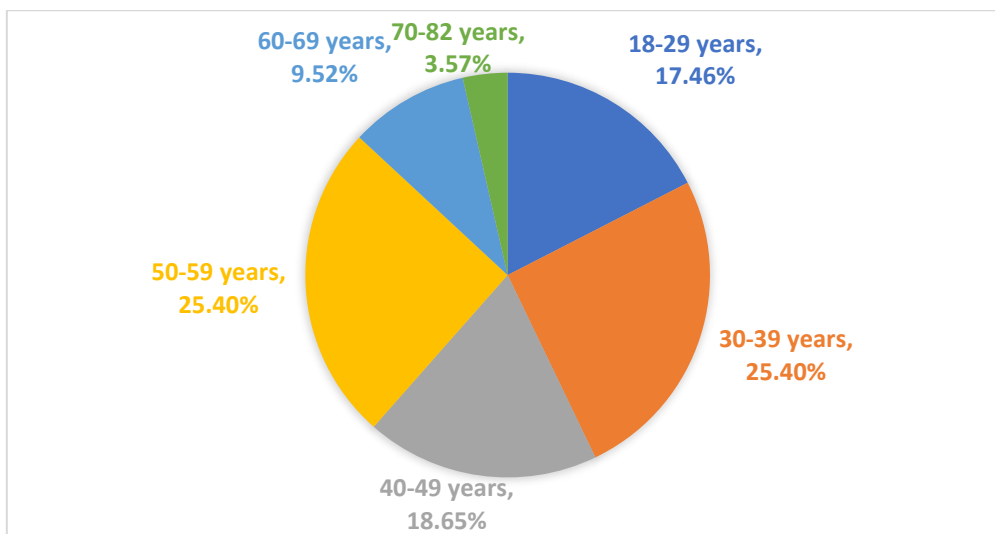


Figure 2. Survey responses by age group (percentage).

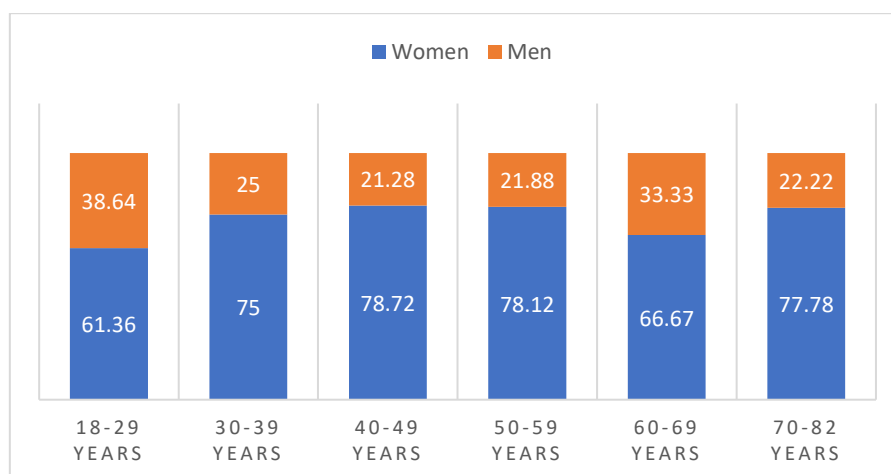


Figure 3. Gender breakdown in each age group.

The survey was sent to many contacts requesting their completion and dissemination. Our target was the general population, but we did not expect to have such a large difference in the responses from men and women. This disparity leads to a discussion of percentages of responses because the use of absolute values would distort the results. The intention was not to obtain a sample for which the results could be extrapolated to the population, nor to have only one age group. However, research controlling the variables of age and gender would clarify some intuitions derived from this study, which is closely related to the need for attachment to objects in order to generate emotions and remember them. If a person changes their school backpack or pencil case every year, it is difficult to remember or keep

any of them in 30-40 years' time. If you have thousands of photos, it is more difficult to remember or choose a special one than when you only have a few, and so on. One of the hypotheses we are working on is that younger participants show less attachment to school objects; however, further studies are needed.

With regard to whether or not the “favourite” object has been kept, 47.62% of participants have. Here the differences between men and women are minimal, with 48.65% of women and 44.78% of men keeping the object (Figure 4). The differences are greater when we look at their age. It is logical to think that the older an object is, the less well-preserved it is, and this is a general rule although there are some surprises. In all age groups, the percentage of women who keep them exceeds that of men, except in the 60-69 age group. Many of the objects that are claimed to be remembered most “fondly” are ephemeral, such as pens, crayons, pencil cases, erasers, or sharpeners, which would be almost impossible to have kept. Furthermore, the oldest objects were probably of poor quality (e.g., an individual blackboard, satchel), which were probably discarded before their owners finished schooling. Other objects were probably replaced year after year such as decorated folders or school diaries, while some others, by their very nature, are easier to preserve: the first pen, a particular book, a photograph, a school award, notebooks, etc.

By age groups (Figure 4), 65.90% of respondents aged 18 to 29 keep them, and similarly with 67.19% of respondents aged 30 to 39. From there, the percentage drops to 23.44%, which is the lowest obtained for 50–59-year-olds. In the 60-69 age group, the percentage (41.67%) is again similar to that of the 40-49 age group (42.55%), although it is not possible to explain these differences with the data we have. As the years go by we are forced to let go of objects, and the very nature of many of the objects remembered means that their preservation was never considered. This is why the preservation percentage is rated as high, considering that almost 43% of respondents are over 40 years of age, therefore they no longer live in their family home and may have moved house or city several times. From this point of view, the fact that 33.33% of respondents over 60 keep them reflects a strong attachment to these objects. However, some survey responses show a strong attachment even though the object is not kept.

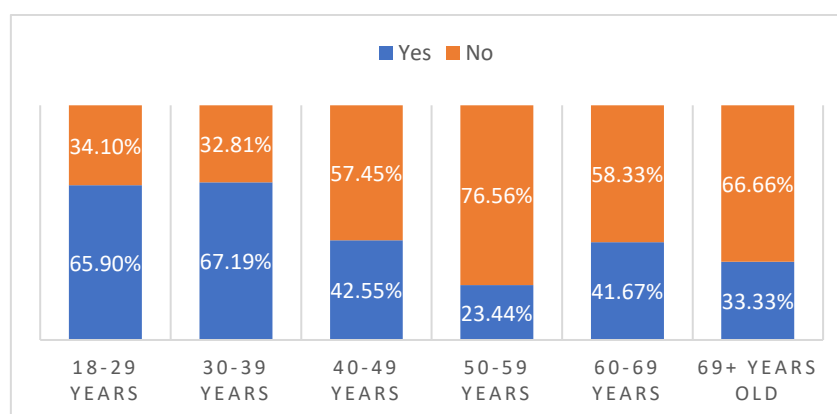


Figure 4. Preservation or non-preservation of the object depending on the age group.

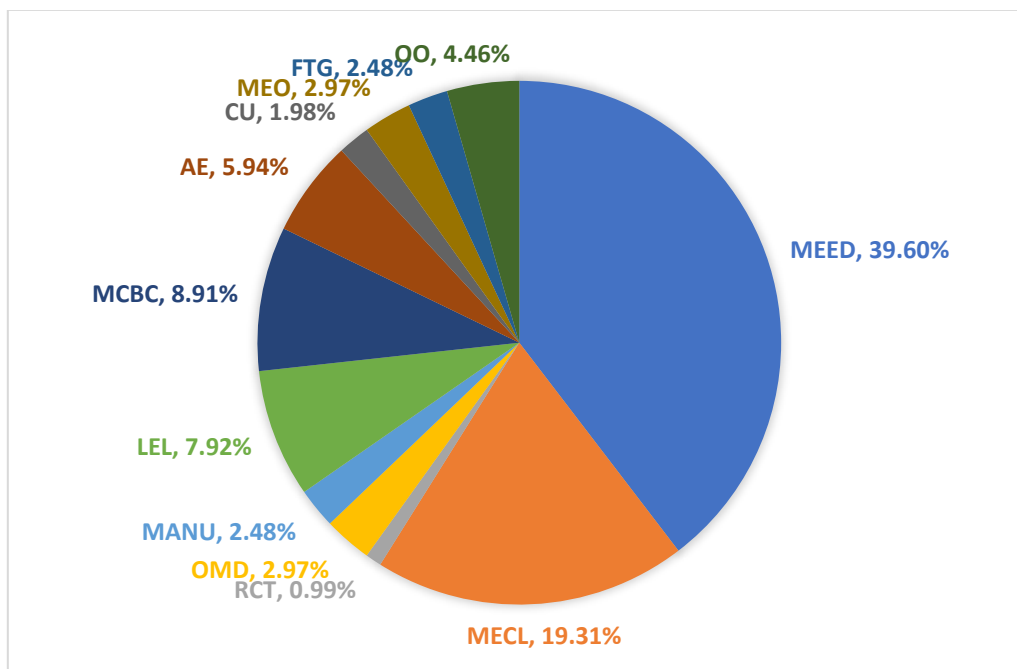


Figure 5. Percentages of objects in each category among women.

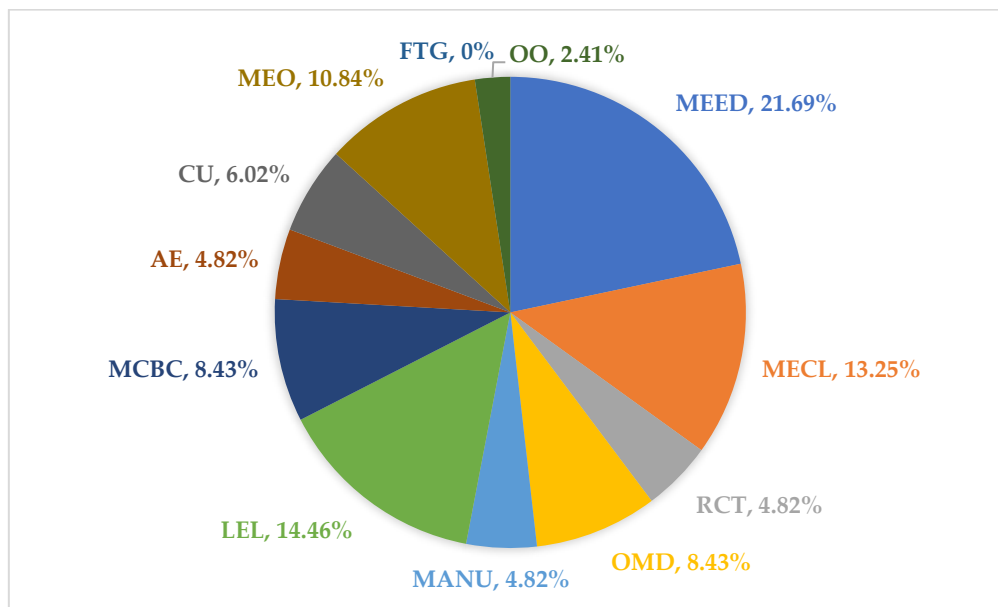


Figure 6. Percentages of objects in each category among men.

This study does not describe the objects chosen by each age group in detail. Instead, we present an overview of the weight of each group for men and women (Figures 5 and 6). The objects included in the MEED category (pencil cases, pencils, crayons, sharpeners, etc.) rank first, having been mentioned by 39.22% of women

and 21.18% of men. The following positions among women are the objects in the MECL category and, by far, those included in MCBC. For men it is books (LEL) in second place and notebooks (MECL) in third place. As for the last places, photographs were not mentioned as a favourite object by any of the men, and only 2 out of 67 men chose an object not included in any category: a stolen mp3 and the permission to read certain novels. Among women, the objects from the MEED and MECL categories account for 58.91% of all objects, while among men they account for 34.94%. In addition, each category has been chosen more, in percentage terms, by different age and gender groups.

In general terms, there are few detailed descriptions of the objects, which in most cases are unnecessary. In some cases, a different name for the object is clarified, such as “pouch” for pencil case. In the reasons for choosing a certain object, we miss more explicit answers, as it is precisely this elaboration of the reasons that allows us to subjectivise the object. There are many short or obvious answers, such as “because I liked it” or “because it was colourful,” although there are also more explicit ones. We will give just a few examples to show that there are differences in the way objects are remembered and why. Some participants simply remember ballpoint pens because they were a “faithful ally for writing non-stop hour after hour. You only had to look at your hands after a long day writing without lifting your head from the paper,” or because “I got to choose them.” Other respondents used multi-coloured pens because “the multi-coloured pen was unusual” or “because you had all four colours in one pen,” or pens of a specific brand and colour, such as the blue Pilot, “because I loved copying the instructions for the homework.”

Although there are 28 respondents choosing books as their favourite object, only a few mention a specific book. Except for four people who remember the reading book *Senda* (Santillana publishing house, used in 1st to 8th grade of Spanish primary education) and two primers, which we will refer to later. *Senda* was chosen “because I liked the readings it included,” because “I liked the stories featured,” and because “it had very nice readings,” but some people go further stating that it was their favourite object “because of its drawings and stories. *Senda* introduced me to the world of arts and literature,” and they specify: “The cover was not that great, but when you opened it, the drawings were spectacular.” The *Micho* primer is mentioned by two people, in one case because “it is associated with a beautiful time in my childhood when I was starting to read and of course because it reminds me of my classmates, playtime and, in short, a new stage of discoveries in life”; and in the other case because “I really liked reading and I remember the stories told in that primer with the family of kittens. I helped my little cousins when they started to read and I always showed them my primer so they could practice.” The 3rd *Paláu* primer is also remembered “because my mother, despite being busy with her work, always found time to read that primer with me.” The *Rayas* primer is also mentioned once, but only to explain that the only thing they took to school was a little blackboard—a favourite object—and that primer and the slate pencil, hile other objects refer to individual activities, “I really liked to paint” and “I covered it with my favourite

pictures.” As for primers, the respondents mentioned people who helped them in their learning to read process.

From Remembered Objects to Emotions

One of the starting points of this research was to find whether the remembered objects were social or cultural. In a first approach, we classified objects as social or cultural based on age and gender (Table 1). The overall data show that 28.07% of the objects mentioned (205 out of 285) can be considered social, representing 30.20% and 22.89% of objects mentioned by women and men, respectively. Among the social objects, notebooks, notepads, diaries and binders stand out above all others in both genders.

Ages	Women		Total W	Men		Total M
	Social	Cultural		Social	Cultural	
18-29	8	23	31	5	12	17
30-39	24	28	52	5	11	16
40-49	9	28	37	3	10	13
50-59	14	37	51	3	13	16
60-69	5	19	24	3	15	18
70-82	1	6	7	0	3	3
Total	61	141	202	19	64	83
%	30.20	69.80	100	22.89	77.11	100

Table 1. Social and cultural objects by age and gender.

The analysis of the motivations based on the four categories described also offers interesting results for further analysis (Figure 7). In 12 out of 285 objects, there is no reason for choosing them. The categorization of the reasons given for choosing the objects has been discussed, especially when it came to general and specific memories, despite having pre-established these categories.

As expected, most memories are general and refer to school life. We found very different answers, but they all belong to this category. Books are chosen because “they marked the beginning of the school year”; the flute because “it allowed me to create”; the bib because “it was special”; my backpack because “it was brand new”; etc. Memories related to smells have been included as general memories: a pencil case because of “the variety of objects: colored pencils, pencils, erasers, sharpeners, rulers, etc. or the way they were arranged, their smell”; another pencil

case because of “the smell and noise of the items stored in it”; books because of “their smell”; crayons “for their smell” or “for their smell and the feeling when sharpening them”; a pencil case “for their smell,” etc.

Almost one-third of all memories are specific memories, e.g., manual work is remembered because “I was terrible at it. I would do maths for a classmate in exchange for help with this”; a little blackboard because “you could write, draw, and then erase it all”; the ink and the inkwell because “at the age of 11 I lived in France for a while and went to school there. I had never seen these objects at my school in Spain”; a folder that “I covered myself [. . .] because I made it at home to be used at school”; silent maps “because they were so challenging for me”; my folder because “it was personalized with pictures,” etc.

In the other two categories, the reasons given are homogeneous. Thus, the first pen is remembered because “it belonged to my father, and it was very special to him”; a wooden pencil case with two levels because “I was fascinated by it and because of the sentimental value: My godmother gave it to me when I was 5”; the typewriter because “it was a present from my dad”; a satchel because “it was given to me by my sister who was 14 years older than me, shortly after I started school. I must have been six or seven”; or a pencil case because “my mom made it for me”. Having used or kept an object for a long time was given as a reason for choosing it in 21 cases: a ball because “I carried it every day basically”; a pencil case that “accompanied me for several years”; a pencil case because “I have had it since high school”; an Ágata Ruiz de la Prada pouch because “I’ve kept it for over 7 years, until I graduated”; another pencil case because “I always carried it”; a folder because “it accompanied me for all those years”; and so on.

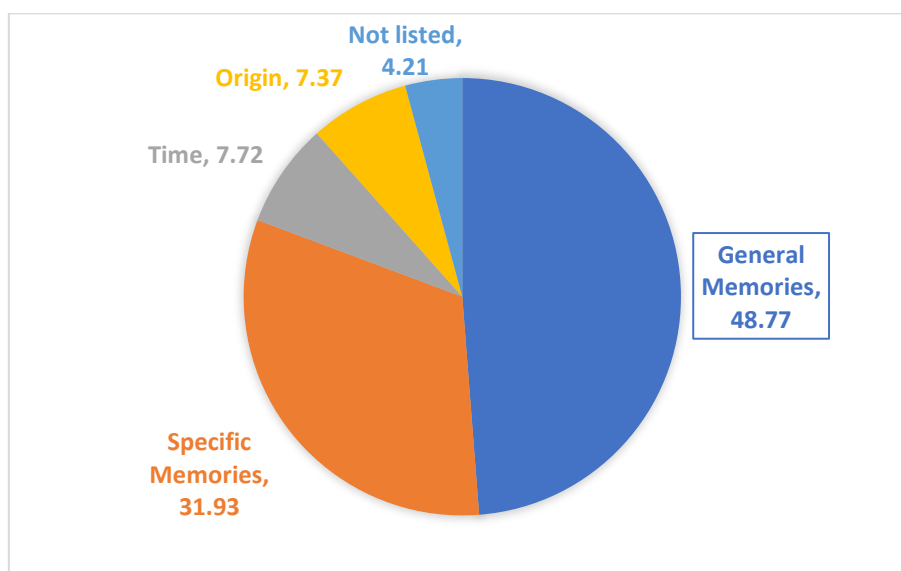


Figure 7. Percentages of objects chosen according to motifs.

In addition to studying the four reason-based categories, we may also consider certain keywords in the explanations given. Some people link their choice to the fact

that it was an object from their first school day: a little blackboard “because I was very happy to go to school with my little blackboard in a printed tote bag that my mum had made for me. It was like a treasure to me.” The beginning of the school year also plays a special role in memories. Thus, books are remembered because “they smelled very good and I liked to open them and see what we were going to study that year,” or because “they marked the beginning of the year”; the pencil case because “I loved to arrange pencils in my special way before starting the school year.” Some people refer to the fact that it was the first object of a particular kind, which is why they were chosen as favourite: the first portfolio, the first pencil case, the first binder, the first wheeled backpack, the first pen, or the first racket; or the object that brought them closer to new experiences, as explained by the person who chose the flute because “it was my first approach to musical performance,” or a T-shirt because “it belonged to my theatre group. It made me belong to a group for the first time.” Likewise, the economic value of objects or the effort to buy them is what gives them “emotional” value years later: a pencil case because “it reminds me of the pens that my parents financially struggled to buy me”; the Rotring pens because “they were expensive and very precious”; a pencil case because “it was expensive and it was nice to have coloured pencils”; another pencil case because “I bought it with my savings”; a backpack because “I bought it with my savings and it was hard to get, as it was an expensive brand and cost more money than my parents could afford,” and the like.

There are strange answers in terms of the chosen objects or the reasons. Some respondents generically mentioned “childhood” as an object, e.g., the bread rolls that were eaten at school on Andalusia Day; a prize of little value but well-preserved years later because it represented an “important” moment; or a cape because “we were kindergarteners, and we could be pirates, Zorro or Captain Thunder... a child’s imagination.” Remembered objects take on a different value when we put aside the reasons why they were chosen. There are many pencil cases, backpacks, and notebooks, but the reasons why they are chosen as favourite objects are personal.

Talking about the history of the school material culture is inextricably linked to personal memory. In fact, when asked about their favourite school object, interesting conversations arise in the group, involving memories, anecdotes, and discussions about those years. Even those who have been classmates seem to have different memories 20 years later, as they see things in a different way. This is not strange at all, because the same happens when recalling family scenes between siblings. All these are human feelings that emerge naturally from the uncritical contemplation of the textbook we studied with, a school picture, or any other object used for learning—notebooks or schoolwork, desks, writing tools, portfolios, maps, sheets, etc. “This is so because the school culture is a holistic set of cognitions and emotions in interaction” (Escolano, 2018, p. 394), although we know that the education received was not what we would have wished for (Viñao, 2012a, p. 10).

Conclusions

Historians of education have focused on the visible, visual, material heritage (Sanchidrián, 2011), but we know that intellectual reflection of a subject sometimes does not match our sensory experience, and if we really want to access the schools of the past, we should try to do so with all the senses. We do not know any other research on school objects similar to that carried out by Csikszentmihalyi and Halton (1994, pp. 145-146) in relation to remembered home objects. In their research, the participants were asked in interviews what things in their home were special to them and whether there were objects that had a special meaning in their life and were no longer in their possession.

Having a convenient sample implies that we cannot compare our results with other studies nor extend the results to a general population, and these are not our aims. Nevertheless, the complexity of the study of the history of the school material culture and “the invention necessary to study it” is generally admitted (Lawn & Grosvenor, 2021, p. 53). Thus, new ways of approaching this study are suggested. Behind every remembered object there is a story that may not have been shared because it would take a closer relationship with the participants for them to talk about it. Apart from carrying out a survey, groups could be organised to talk about this, and the stories behind each object could be explained so that they could be appreciated in their context. This effort to recover the objects and uses of school objects is far from a nostalgic perspective.

The results obtained can be analysed according to different age groups. A general reading of the chosen objects allows us to assume their age in many cases, as there are objects that clearly belong to an era (e.g., the slate pencil, the four-colour pens, or the wheeled backpack).

Respondents of all ages keep their favourite object because it brings back good memories or because they liked it. Without claiming to generalise the results obtained, this research highlights possible ways of studying the material culture of the school beyond the books, desks, or items used. It is more complicated to address the meaning and value of objects than to know the objects themselves, because meanings and values are unique, although they may be shared by many people, and may change over time.

The information obtained from these surveys, together with interviews about material and relational aspects of schooling in the past, depends very much on the objects themselves and on the researcher’s previous knowledge about the objects and the history of education. These research studies are an additional valuable source, because they can provide information that is not otherwise available, but they need, as every historical research, to be contextualised and complemented by other sources.

We remember objects that bind us to something or someone, classmates, teachers, siblings, parents, or ourselves in the past. The reasons for recalling objects are mostly general, which confirms the evocative power of objects. Each of these objects can help us to better understand the history of education only if they are

analysed taking into account their material characteristics, their use, and the reasons why they are remembered, which often involve emotions linked to personal relationships. How else can we explain that sharpeners are remembered because “I used to meet my friends at the wastebasket to chat”? Do we care about the sharpener itself or about what happened when several students met in the wastebasket? Are we interested in the cape or the boy turning into a pirate?

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