Early Education, Children’s Lives, and the Transition from Home to School in Italy and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Child care policies adopted in many countries in Western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s have generally evolved as part of broad based civic communities in which the federal, regional and local governments, voluntary organizations, and families work together to support children and families. In this paper I focus on child care and early education in Italy as a case study in this trend. I first examine how initial legislation calling for primarily custodial care of preschool children developed into a highly progressive early education system in which the goal is to provide a bridge for children’s transition from the family to the elementary school and Italian community life more generally. I then go on to report on my ethnographic work in an Italian scuola materna to capture how early child care and education policies directly affect the lives of Italian children. The paper concludes with brief speculation regarding how U.S. policies regarding child care and early education would benefit from the adoption of some elements of the Italian model.

Introduction

ENCOURAGED BY then President Nixon’s call for a national commitment to provide all American children a healthful and stimulating environment in the first five years, a Congress still influenced by the reformist 1960’s passed the Comprehensive Child Development Bill in 1971. This bill would have established a national child care program for the first time in the United States (see Lamb, Sternberg, and Ketterlinus, 1992; Martinez, 1989; Olmstedt, 1989). The bill authorizing $2 billion to fund construction and operation of child care centers was hailed by the Washington Post as “important a breakthrough for the young as Medicare was for the old” (as quoted in Martinez, 1989:115). To give some meaning to the level of a $2 billion dollar commitment in 1971, the

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spending allocation for Head Start, one of the few national programs for the care and education of young children, was $2.6 billion (in 1990 dollars) in 1992. Nixon was clearly not ready for this level of commitment. He vetoed the bill arguing that the legislation "would commit the vast moral authority of the National government to the side of communal approaches of childrearing over against the family-centered approach" (Nixon, 1971:211-29). Although I firmly believe Nixon was wrong in vetoing the legislation, he was probably right in his prognosis that it would have resulted in a commitment to and the development of more communal child-rearing and early education programs in the United States. It is, however, just such a commitment that the United States needed then and needs even more today. What we have instead is an incoherent set of federal policies (some universal and some means tested) that provide minimal support for families that are more and more in need.

What might be the state of child care and the quality of the life of children in the U.S. today if the veto had not occurred and the Comprehensive Child Development Bill had become law? It would surely have grown more expensive, and given today's budget deficit its continued financing would have been a daunting challenge. We will return to this issue in the conclusion of our discussion. Now let's consider the kind of national child care policy that may have evolved out of that 1971 legislation. To do this, we need to look to child care policies in Western Europe. Child care policies adopted in many countries in Western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s have generally evolved as part of broad based civic communities in which the federal, regional and local governments, voluntary organizations, and families work together to support children and families. In this paper I focus on child care and early education in Italy as a case study in this trend. I first examine how initial legislation calling for primarily custodial care of preschool children developed into a highly progressive early education system in which the goal is to provide a bridge for children's transition from the family to the elementary school and Italian community life more generally. I then go on to report on my ethnographic work in an Italian scuola materna to capture how early child care and education policies directly affect the lives of Italian children.

Cultural Values and Educational Goals in Italy

A Brief History of Early Education in Italy

Italy has a long history of preschool care and education with the first private care institution, Aporti's asilo di carità (charitable shelter), established in 1831. Pistillo (1989) has presented a discussion of these early institutions and an historical overview of preschool education from 1831 to 1968. I will not repeat her coverage of this period here, but rather briefly review and expand on her description of the establishment of a public system beginning in the 1960s (see Corsaro and Emiliani, 1992).

Given the changes brought about by rapid industrialization, the political