DEVELOPING POTENTIALS FOR LEARNING

Abstracts

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Children’s socialization in everyday life of Italian and Swedish families

Chair: Karin Aronsson, University of Linköping, Sweden
Chair: Clotilde Pontecorvo, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy
Organiser: Camilla Monaco, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy
Organiser: Lucas Forsberg, University of Linköping, Sweden
Organiser: Vivian Liberati, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy
Organiser: Pal Aarsand, University of Linköping, Sweden
Discussant: Margarida Cesar, University of Lisbon, Portugal

The aim of this symposium is to offer a presentation of a study on everyday life of Italian and Swedish middle class families, focusing on the educational practices of parents and on the socialization interactions between children and parents. As it is well known, parents are the primary educators of children: they are responsible for children’s early socialization. Our data are drawn from a detailed ethnographic research, within a larger project on family life among concerning dual-earner families in three sites (Italy, Sweden and the United States) sponsored by the Sloan Foundation for studying Family and Work relationships. The overall research includes a range of methodological tools, that were used with each family: interviews to the parents, audio and video tours of the domestic space, carried out by each family member (even children of eight and more), maps of any space of the house and of their furniture, a large number of photos, and mainly video-recordings (with two cameras) of two weekdays (starting early in the morning when the first parent is up and coming back on the same day when the first family member comes back after work and school) and two weekend half-days (Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon); in each visit a third researcher marked, every ten minutes, the activity done in each room by whom. The US site researchers have observed 32 families of different ethnic background, while each of the two European groups studied eight families each: a common condition is the presence of at least two children (one between 8 and 11 year old). In this presentation we are using only the data collected in the Stockholm and the Rome families.

Parents’ educational representations and discursive practices
Francesco Arcidiacono, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy
Camilla Monaco, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy

This study aims at analyzing, in a qualitative perspective, educational representations and practices within eight Italian families. Since most studies focusing on parents’ representations and theories about children’s education are based on interviews and questionnaires, we decided to observe and compare "what parents say" and "what they do" within everyday interaction with children. Through this comparison it is possible to study some relevant implicit and explicit aspects of the family educational process. The methodology implies the use of two different instruments of data collection: parents’ individual semi-structured interviews and video recordings of family everyday interactions at home. Both these types of data are analyzed following the theoretical and methodological principles of Discourse and Conversation Analysis. Findings show some
differences between the eight Italian families that we studied, concerning the educational representations and practices: even though the analysis process is still in progress, we have found that in some families there are relevant differences between mother’s and father’s positions about educational matters. Moreover, it is possible also that everyday interactions within family are quite different from what parents say during the interviews. Both parents indeed have their own ideology about education, but during family interactions, they have continuously to re-define and re-negotiate them, in consideration of real contexts and situations of everyday family life. In our opinion, this kind of study can represent a starting point for better understanding parents’ representations about the educational process, if one looks also at interactions that occur in natural contexts in order to reach a good vision of how parents practice education as a process.

Learning is labour: Homework as children’s work
Lucas Forsberg, University of Linköping, Sweden
Tobias Samuelsson, University of Linköping, Sweden

The majority of studies on homework show that homework is away of socializing children to a future working life. By doing homework children learn good study habits and self-discipline. This perspective is also found in public discourses in Sweden – most politicians, teachers and parents see homework as a natural and taken-for-granted part of children’s schooling. At the same time there are critical, however marginal, voices arguing that homework should be understood as labour. Within this discourse children are depicted as stressed workers who are deprived of time for play and recreation. In this paper, we analyse how children and parents in interviews and everyday practice relate to homework as both a form of learning for the future, and as children’s work. Thus, education and homework are understood as not only a way of learning to labour, but learning is also seen as children’s labour. The empirical data are taken from two ethnographical studies in Sweden. One has mainly been carried out through participant observations with video camera in the homes of eight middle-class, dual earner families in a medium-sized city, as well as qualitative interviews with the parents and their 8-10 year old children. The other material consists of questionnaires, qualitative interviews and participant observations with children (in the age 9-16) in a smaller community and in a suburb of a major city.

Parental monitoring strategies on children’s homework
Vivian Liberati, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy
Marilena Fatigante, University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy

In our society, an important duty of the parents is providing their children with education, being this education also codified as a children’s universal right in the UN Chart for Children. Emphasis on education has implied not only that parents and other adult partners of the child (teachers, school representatives, policy makers) have worked to build, facilitate and diffuse children’s access to formal schooling but, also, that school aims, efforts and practices have entered informal sites of socialization and specifically, family. This is mainly done through children’s homework. In Italy, hours devoted to homework accounts for a great part of the children’s overall out-of-school time. The burden of children’s homework for both kids and their families is such that it gave rise, few years ago, to a national discussion in favor of the reduction of homework. Despite this ‘public’, and even political interest in the subject, few research has been carried out on the actual participation of, specifically, the dual-career parental couple in the children’s homework. Grounding on the analysis of videorecorded family interactions and interviews, the paper illustrates how assisting or monitoring children in doing homework requires parents a great effort and the ability to mediate between the multiple demands of childrearing, household chores and