Schooling, Family, and the Ethnic Working Class before World War II

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Since the 1970s, “revisionist” scholars have challenged many long-held assumptions about schooling in American history in ways that students and teachers can find fruitful for understanding the educational system within which they work. They contest the idea that public schools throughout the nation’s history equally benefited students from different race, class, and gender backgrounds. As they engage questions of culture and difference, they also show that parents and students often held different views of schooling than did American teachers and professional reformers. For example, until the implementation of effective compulsory school attendance and child labor laws in the late 1930s, large numbers of working-class children quit formal schooling to work in the labor force. Low-income families depended on the earnings of their children to contribute to the family’s material subsistence. This was particularly true among immigrants to America, disproportionately poor and culturally predisposed to look skeptically upon American schools. They feared these institutions would influence their children in ways that conflicted with their own transplanted, old world cultures.

The historical impact of public schooling on white working-class families is addressed skillfully by Stephen Lassonde in Learning to Forget: Schooling and Family Life in New Haven’s Working Class, 1870-1940. Although he does not explicitly identify himself as a revisionist, Lassonde works with many of the assumptions of these historians in this study of effects of American education on parent-child relations among immigrants before World War II. His ambitious book engages several subfields of scholarship: child and educational history, family history, immigrant Italian American history, and working-class history. Lassonde wants to “contemplate the effects of school attendance on working-class children’s changing economic and emotional worth” (3). He focuses on the relationship between families and schools rather than on schooling as an institution, choosing as a case study New Haven, Connecticut, beginning in the late nineteenth century, when the Irish were the largest immigrant group in the city. In this period, what has been termed the “family economy” dominated working-class values about work and school. Collective family concerns were paramount. For the children, obligations often conflicted with school attendance. Studies of other immigrant groups in different cities report similar results.
The working class widely embraced the family economy, although this did not mean that all working-class children left school for work. Typically, a family sent one or two of its children to work, while their other children might attend school. How many children went to work or school often depended on the income of the father. During the late nineteenth century, if the father was employed as an unskilled laborer, the family needed at least two working children to meet its basic subsistence needs. If the father worked in a skilled occupation, his income might be sufficient for the family's survival, but often one of his children might work to help improve the family's standard of living. Thus, immigrant families, who dominated the composition of the working class, embraced collective values very different from the middle and upper class. The early life course of their children therefore differed substantially from those above them in the class structure.

Class tensions became evident when middle-class educators viewed working-class parents as greedy, ignorant, and exploitative for favoring family needs, leading to juvenile employment over schooling. These educators rarely understood, or empathized with, the burdens of working-class life. Reformers reacted harshly when the working class frustrated their efforts to impose predefined ideas, behavior, and standards of conduct through schooling. Lassonde notes that according to the middle-class authorities, family reliance on child labor testified to parents' "lack of foresight and self-discipline" (31).

After two chapters on the late nineteenth century, the book proceeds in a chronological fashion, with the bulk of the text devoted to family and schooling during the first four decades of the twentieth century. In the new century, working-class attitudes were slow to change due to the settlement of successive waves of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Many of the same trade-offs between school and work occurred within these low-income families. In New Haven, southern Italian immigrants arrived in large numbers after 1900. By 1920, they and their American-born children formed the city's largest ethnic group, totaling about 25 percent of the population. Italian parents often held culturally specific negative attitudes toward American public schools, viewing them as "amoral" because they did not encourage strong feelings of respect and devotion to parents. The parents also objected to schools' perceived lack of discipline. Moreover, parents preferred that boys, rather than girls, attend school. As Lassonde notes, "[s]chooling for girls clearly represented their independence—a radical departure and utterly removed from their conception of the purpose of schooling" (79).

By the 1920s and 1930s, the family economy began to unravel and greater numbers of children attended school. For the first time, more sixteen year olds were in school rather than at work. Some immigrant parents felt America had "stolen" their young because the American-born children felt less family obligation, influenced by the values taught in the schools as well as by mass culture institutions such as movies, radio, and advertising.
While young women had less autonomy than men to withhold their wages, the goal of individual gratification and enhanced self-presentation increasingly created a generational divide. So did courtship practices. The second generation embraced very different ideas about relations between the sexes than those adopted by their parents. Italian parents, even more than elders from other immigrant groups, hoped to assert their preference in children's choice of a mate. Their preference could take precedence over the wishes of their young, a practice carried over from Italy. Parental restrictiveness for daughters included the use of chaperones during courtship. However, by the late 1930s the young increasingly viewed these practices as awkward and retrograde. Less restrictive dating (as opposed to "calling") practices stressed romantic sentiment. Those who stayed in school were more likely to challenge the "traditional" path to marriage. In particular, Italian immigrant daughters who attended high school "gained much more everyday exposure to boys and to Anglo-American, middle-class conceptions of romance and marriage than their wage-earning sisters who started working when they were fourteen." (120).

Lassonde's focus on the second generation advances knowledge because more has been written about the immigrant generations than their American-born children. During the 1930s, this rising group made up about 38 percent of New England's population and exceeded 40 percent in the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island. Popular writers of the time noticed their presence, often suggesting they developed a negative "dual culture," caught between two worlds. Sociologist Robert Park and the Chicago School promoted the "marginal man" thesis with its dim view of this generation. In a similar vein, Louis Adamic's 1934 article in Haig's magazine, "Thirty Million New Americans," complained of this "tremendous mass of neutral, politically dead citizenship." According to Lassonde, however, the younger generation of Italian Americans in New Haven seemed to embrace an optimistic outlook while "learning to forget" ways of their parents that were outmoded and unconnected to the world around them.

By the 1930s, high school attendance was commonplace for Italian American students and others of recent European descent. Both immigrant parents and their children recognized that extended schooling beyond age fourteen enlarged individual opportunity. There is some debate whether the idea of individual opportunity should be narrowly identified only with middle-class culture. For example, the extensive life histories collected by the Federal Writers Project in Connecticut reveal that the second generation often aspired to work in skilled trades and identified themselves and their aspirations as working class. In this light, I read a survey Lassonde cites differently than he does. In 1936, the New Haven Chamber of Commerce found that only about one-third of senior-year boys in the city's high schools hoped to work in professional white-collar occupations. Thus, the majority of students either wanted working-class jobs or were uncertain of their future path. The decade of
the 1930s also witnessed the birth of strong class-based social movements in trade unions and politics. Middle-class values had a marginal place in worker organizing led by the rising second generation.

Lassonde argues that the middle-class idea of the “sentimentalized” and “priceless” child spread among young Italian Americans. Again, he emphasizes the impact of middle-class values on the second generation: Parents gave up their children to an emerging national youth culture and the “official culture of American middle class society” (11). But he supports this argument with little historical evidence. His conception of the middle class is static. In recent years, social historians have argued that the “middle class” should not be treated as an ideology. It has a history and is remade in different eras. Of course, reaching the middle class does not mean the abandonment of ethnicity. In particular, the topic of the ethnic middle class is neglected area of study which, in courses on immigration, students might research by conducting oral histories of relatives, friends, or neighbors. For example, how did a middle class made of Italians differ from a middle class made up of Northern Europeans? Are there variations of the sentimental child embedded in each group? More broadly, teachers may want to encourage students to consider what it means to identify as part of the middle class as opposed to the working class.

Lassonde’s work points to the need for a more student-centered approach to educational study. Both scholars and students can fruitfully focus on student interactions in urban public schools and the creation of a youth culture from the bottom up. The schools could be reinterpreted as a nurturing ground for working-class multiculturalism, rather than just a site where teachers imposed American values. The public school, by nurturing student friendship across ethnic lines, contributed to building alliances among a diverse population. We still know too little about what went on inside the schools from the students’ perspective. How did students as an audience receive the lessons of their teachers? Studying the peer group context for the reception of American values is critical to more fully comprehend the school experience from diverse viewpoints. Historical study of student relationships to their families, peers, and American authority figures can help students and educators in the present as well.

As part of the New Deal, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 and its provisions eliminating child labor precipitated the further expansion of the educational system across class lines. But as high school attendance became widespread in the United States in the post-war period, problems of inequity in education persisted: tracking, racial segregation, and uneven funding. Unequal classroom opportunities became a basic problem. Working-class students suffered disproportionately and schools themselves helped reproduce inequality in society? Still, as Lassonde documents, schooling had become integral to the process of adolescent development, or “growing up,” in ways working-class parents of the nineteenth and early twentieth century rarely envisioned.
WORKS CITED


