European Education: Is EU Education the Façade or the Future?

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I. HYPOTHESES

This paper focuses on the EU's efforts to harmonize secondary education and improve student achievement and teacher qualification in member states. It will analyze how those states are either receptive or ambivalent to those efforts. Great Britain and Italy are two worthy case studies due to the former's proud traditions in schooling and the latter's recent schooling reforms. In Europe, Great Britain has consistently been a leader in secondary education. Italy, meanwhile, was falling behind other Western European countries in quality of secondary schooling in the 1960s and '70s before it, under EU pressure, implemented reforms. These reforms were designed to strengthen the quality of Italy's education system, with the goal of making an Italian secondary school degree comparable to a degree from other EU members states. This paper will look at the EU's role in education as a whole, with an emphasis placed on the British and Italian systems.

-RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS-

Integration theory advances the hypothesis that EU member states continue to develop common institutions in an effort to make the EU run more smoothly. According to this research hypothesis, the EU's supranational educational policies are promoting (a) the harmonization of secondary education policies among the member states, and (b) improvements in the educational achievement of students and in the qualifications of teachers. For the research hypothesis, the independent variable is the EU's supranational educational policies. The dependent variables are: the harmonization of secondary education policies among EU member states and levels of student achievement and teacher qualifications.

-ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS-

Alternatively, we may hypothesize that domestic political, economic and social factors are continuing to produce (a) separate secondary ed. policies among the EU states, with little or no harmonization, and (b) varying levels of student achievement and teacher qualifications. For the alternative hypothesis, the <u>independent variables</u> are domestic political, economic, and social factors. The <u>dependent variables</u> are the harmonization of secondary education policies and the levels of student achievement and teacher qualification.

The international system level of analysis is represented in the research hypothesis, as this hypothesis believes the influences of the EU's supranational policies and state-to-state relations are stronger than domestic influences in determining educational policies. The domestic level of analysis emphasizes the influence of the domestic political environment in determining states' policies. The alternative hypothesis favors the

-EXPECTATIONS-

If the research hypothesis is true, we would expect increased integration of education policies and measurable improvements in educational achievement and teacher qualification. More specifically, we would expect (a) the leaders of the British and Italian governments, and their education ministers, have articulated similar perceptions of the problems facing secondary education in their respective countries (and perhaps in Europe); (b) these leaders have joined in promoting supranational EU policies based on Commission proposals; (c) they have acted in similar ways to implement the EU policies and recommendations, increasingly harmonizing their policies to improve student achievement and teacher qualifications; and (d) these policies have largely worked,

resulting in marked improvement in student achievement and teacher qualification in both countries.

Conversely, if the alternative hypothesis is true, then one would expect to find (a) political elites and education leaders both in and out of government are divided – both in the UK and in Italy – in their perceptions of the problems affecting secondary education in their respective countries; (b) accordingly, these people are divided in the recommendations for dealing with these problems; (c) based on their respective domestic differences, the British and Italian governments have taken different approaches to improving student achievement and teacher qualifications, with the Italians favoring EU harmonization and the British favoring home-grown solutions; and (d) the results have varied in the two countries.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the EU's education initiatives, there have been several articles analyzing the EU's proposed reforms. Josef Mikl, for example, reviews the Council of Ministers' (education formation) 2001 report on educational reform, as it relates to the "knowledge society." Mikl perceives a trend of economic-minded reform in the Council's common pairing of "education and training." Within this economic context, according to Mikl, "the education and training systems are to be judged solely on the basis of their effectiveness in promoting competitiveness on the macro level and employability on the individual level. In this regard they are to be made more accountable for their output and level of efficiency." Mikl believes that the EU's goal regarding educational policy integration is to make individuals more employable and thus the EU labor pool more qualified and more competitive. He claims that the Council gives lip service to the

concept of education as a humanistic betterment of the individual. Mikl believes that the direction of EU education policy makes the concept of education almost synonymous with "career preparation." Since specific qualifications and training are constantly changing, there is an increased focus on the development of cognitive and communication skills, both of which help the individual adapt to new training.

Peter Scrimshaw, meanwhile, examines the effects of information and communications technology (ICT) in trans-national educational policy cooperation. Scrimshaw views the creation of the European Schoolnet (EUN) and its ValNet initiative as the most dynamic development in EU education cooperation. The European Schoolnet is a partnership of 26 Ministries of Education (mostly from EU member states) that provides an ICT infrastructure for collaboration between states' education policymakers, teachers, and students. Scrimshaw recognizes that states' implementations (or lack thereof) of EUN initiatives will differ, but does not provide any comprehensive analysis of which domestic factors impact said implementation. Instead, his analysis merely focuses on the evidenced effects of ICT through case studies. Scrimshaw uses these case studies to provide a framework through which we may study ICT's effectiveness in harmonizing the EU member states' educational systems.

Some scholars have addressed the domestic political environment and its impact on educational policy. Italy, for example, has embraced the EU's recommendation of ICT use in education reform. Annamaria Fichera and Palmira Ronchi's 2004 article, "ICT: An Italian Case," reports that ICT has had a profound impact on secondary schooling in Italy. Not only has ICT become widespread throughout Italian secondary schools, but ICT training for teachers has become standard. A 2001-2002 Italian

initiative called FORTIC provided all teachers with ICT training courses, with the training tailored to teachers' skill levels and the teachers' roles in ICT development in their schools. Fichera and Ronchi argue that ICT in Italian schools has profoundly improved both student achievement and teachers' qualifications. Roberto Moscati also analyzes Italian education reforms, but does so in the context of Italian acquiescence to EU mandates. Moscati argues that Italian educational reform has essentially been a response to EU pressure and Italy's desire to make its labor pool compatible with those from other EU member states.

There is extensive literature for EU education initiatives, such as the EUN and ValNet. I intend to determine whether EU attempts to harmonize education within member states prompt internal reform, such as Moscati's research on Italian education indicates, or are overridden by domestic policies. There is also a great deal of scholarship on ICT that fails to place ICT within the scope of domestic state politics. This scholarship, such as that of Mikl and Scrimshaw, is still useful because it provides a foundation by which we can analyze states' adoption or rejection of ICT, as well as other EU education mandates. While there is extensive scholarship on ICT and Italian adoption of EU reforms, there is a gap in the existing literature on Great Britain's secondary school reform in the context of EU education mandates (although there is a great deal of scholarship on British higher education reform). I intend, therefore, to fill in this gap by first analyzing secondary school reform in Great Britain. After this, I intend to analyze that reform in the context of EU education mandates *and* in the context of Britain's domestic political environment.

One of the best sources for EU education policy is Gisella Gori's *Towards an EU Right to Education*. Gori traces the development of EU education policy and analyzes the legal framework by which the EU may (and has) increased its role in education. Her study of the legal framework for EU education policy provides valuable insight into the justifications for the EU's involvement in education and proves an excellent source for information in a field in which evidence and expert analysis is often lacking.

III. TESTING OF THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

As I've noted, the research hypothesis's first expectation is that European countries' leaders have expressed a common concern regarding shortcomings of their education systems. There is substantial evidence that supports this expectation. In 2001, for example, Britain's Education and Employment minister, Tessa Jowel, called for a task force to address a Europe-wide shortage of trained IT workers[1]. While this is not a direct call for an overhaul of the education system, it is important to understand the connection between secondary education and the workforce. The aforementioned ValNet initiative – and Italy's embrace of the program's philosophies – is an excellent example of how IT (called ICT – information and communications technology) training affects schooling and education policies. In Italy, the Ministry of Education appointed a task force of experts to develop guidelines for the education system. That group heavily referenced ICT and its integral role in the Italian education system[2]. Indeed, there appears to be common agreement among European education personalities that IT/ICT development is essential to European educational systems because of the link between education and employment. When proposing the Socrates II and da Vinci II education programs, the European

Commission declared that, "as a consequence of technological evolution and the information society, the divide between 'education' and 'training' is becoming more and more porous, the same goes for the distinction between initial and continuing training or even the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' education[3]."

The evidence, in part, supports the second expectation of the research hypothesis – that individual EU states (and their leaders) have supported supranational measures to harmonize and coordinate education policies. The Socrates II program, for example, evidences the increasing role of the supranational EU in promoting increased harmonization. The Socrates charter, approved by both the European Commission and the European Parliament, includes provisions for such harmonizing projects as joint curricula programs between schools; European languages programs; and ICT development[4]. The individual states within the EU have, furthermore, expressed a degree of support for harmonizing projects through the creation of the European Schoolnet (EUN). The eTwinning program of the EUN, for example, is a resource through which different schools throughout Europe coordinate joint educational projects (much in the same manner that the Comenius program of Socrates develops joint curriculum projects)[5]. Thus, there is evidence of increasing cooperation and coordination on education policies, both by individual EU states and by the supranational body.

At the same time, however, there is evidence suggesting that, while individual states often support the aforementioned initiatives, they do not necessarily support strong EU decision-making powers with respect to education. Indeed, the centrality of education to a state's culture was recognized in the charter for the Socrates program when it was renewed in 2000. According to Article 1, Section 4 of the Socrates decision, the

program "shall support and supplement action taken by and in the Member States, while fully respecting their responsibility for the content of education and the organization of education and training systems, and their cultural and linguistic diversity[6]." Presently, member states can veto any EU education policies, but the proposed EU Constitution would give the EU bodies the competence (legal power) to make education rulings through their regular voting procedures[7]. Unfortunately, the literature on the EU Constitution lacks an in-depth analysis of the potential impact of this change.

The evidence does not support the third expectation of the research hypothesis – the expectation that individual states have acted in similar ways to implement EU policies and regulations. This lack of uniformity is most evident in states' development of ICT. Great Britain, for example, has been one of the most ardent proponents of ICT. The government set a goal of 5 pupils per computer in secondary schools by 2004, and was able to surpass that goal. This was no accident – British schools, on average, increased ICT spending by more than 35% from 2003 to 2004[8]. According to a British Department for Education and Skills spokesman, "ICT is integral to the government's strategy for raising standards and has the potential to completely transform teaching and learning for all pupils and address better ways of working for teachers and support staff[9]." Thus, one can see the British method of addressing ICT was to establish its own benchmark goals and take the necessary steps (and spend the necessary money) to meet those goals.

Italy has also heavily invested in ICT, but has taken a different approach and set different benchmark goals. Italy decided to focus on two areas with respect to ICT: broadband connections in all schools and teacher training. The nationwide teacher ICT training program, called FORTIC, was started in 2001 as a part of the overall Italian ICT

development plan[10]. The other main aspect was, as mentioned, ensuring that every

school has a broadband connection[11]. While this may at first seem similar to the British

goals of student-computer ratios, the difference is noticeable when one recognizes that

the Italian benchmarks are qualitative and the British quantitative. Though they may

produce similar results, it is important to recognize the different approaches to ICT.

Though both countries recognize ICT as an important resource, British leaders have

focused on bringing ICT to as many students as possible. Italian leaders, on the other

hand, have focused on making teachers qualified so as to maximize their effectiveness in

utilizing the advantages of ICT.

Other countries have implemented ICT in their education systems to varying

degrees. Unfortunately, there is not extensive statistical evidence on the quantitative and

qualitative aspects of ICT implementation in EU member states. The evidence available

is, however, sufficient to show which countries lag behind in ICT development compared

to others. Greece, Poland, Latvia, and Slovakia, for example, each average more than 20

students per computer[12]. Unfortunately, it is even more difficult to assess the degree to

which computers in each country were used for ICT – and, furthermore, how exactly ICT

may have been involved in schools' curricula. What we are able to determine from the

varying degrees of improvement in ICT is that member states are not adopting common

measures to harmonize programs and are not working together to improve Union-wide

student achievement/teacher qualification.

As I mentioned above, the evidence rejects the expectation that individual states

have adopted similar policies to respond to EU education policies and recommendations;

thus, one may assume that the fourth expectation – that common policies have largely

worked to improve student achievement and teacher qualifications – is also not supported

by the evidence. In fact, it is very difficult to measure improvement in student

achievement and teacher qualification. One way to do so is through testing. However, a

lack of common assessment standards makes comparison between states near impossible.

An alternative method is qualitative comparison. For example, Italy has developed a

policy whereby all education personnel are ICT-trained and, furthermore, are put in

training programs suited to their roles in education[13]. Even without statistics on levels of

teacher qualification, it is safe to assume that the ICT training program has improved

teacher qualification. It would not be safe to assume that this improvement in teacher

qualification has automatically improved student achievement, but there can be no doubt

that teacher qualification has (keeping all other variables constant) an impact on the

quality of education for students.

Overall, the evidence is mixed on the research hypothesis. On the one hand, one

can clearly see an increase in the role of the EU, as a supranational role, in education.

The EU has shown the desire to increase harmonization between member states'

education policies through common curricula, European language programs, and a heavy

emphasis on the role of ICT in improving and harmonizing the education systems of

member states. These member states have, furthermore, shown support for such

harmonization policies by developing the European Schoolnet. On the other hand, there

is a general reluctance to give the EU the final word on any education policies. Its role

has been somewhat of a complementary role to the independent education systems.

Though the EU Constitution *could* provide the EU with greater authority on education

policy, it is uncertain whether member states would react negatively to such a

transgression on their sovereignty – not to mention the fact that the constitution must be ratified.

IV. TESTING OF THE ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS

As I noted above, the first two expectations of the alternative hypothesis are that a)politicians and education leaders of individual countries differ in their perceptions of the problems facing secondary education, and b)their recommended solutions differ. The evidence is mostly against these expectations. Again, the case of ICT and its increasing centrality to education brings light to the situation. There was an already existing perception in Britain that a lack of ICT in the classroom was crippling not only education but also the workforce[14]. As mentioned above, a British Education and Skills Department spokesperson spoke of the importance of ICT in the British effort to raise standards. Likewise, the Italian administrations of recent years have made ICT improvement a fundamental aspect of Italian educational reform. Both the British and the Italians, this evidence shows, have identified a lack of ICT in schools as one of the major problems in their education systems.

The third expectation of the alternative hypothesis – that member states have taken different approaches to improving student achievement and teacher qualifications – is in part supported by the evidence. As noted above, there have been different approaches that attempt to reach the same ends. Specifically, one can observe the different approaches taken by the British and Italian education systems to improve ICT infrastructure – the quantitative approach of the British and the qualitative approach of the Italians. This does not imply that the British have paid no heed to the qualitative

aspect, nor the converse for the Italians. Rather, the evidence merely notes the different emphases of the two educational systems.

The fourth expectation of the alternative hypothesis is that the results have been different for the education systems. The lack of universal standards for measuring achievement makes this difficult. Much of the comparative statistics available are not measures of the *quality* of countries' education systems, but are instead measures of demographic-oriented information (i.e. the ages of teachers)[15]. The data for completion of secondary education place the U.K. slightly ahead of Italy[16], but this data does not necessarily reflect the quality of education students receive. Indeed, the lack of universal standards often leads to a lack of diploma transferability between countries. Thus, there is a lack of evidence to compare the quality of education systems within Europe.

Overall, the evidence is mixed on the alternative hypothesis. The first two expectations of the alternative hypothesis are mostly refuted by the evidence; both Italy and the UK, as well as the rest of the member states, have recognized common problems and tend to agree with the EU on overall measures to solve education problems (especially with the emphasis on ICT). The alternative hypothesis is supported, however, by the evidence that shows the UK and Italy taking different approaches to the problems. There is a lack of sufficient evidence to assess the success of measures taken by the different education systems.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The evidence in this paper is decidedly mixed. There is no doubt that the EU has become more involved in education policy. While the EU may have its beginnings in economic cooperation, expansions in political union make education an issue of ever-

increasing importance. Education cannot, furthermore, be separated from other areas of importance to the EU, such as employment, training, ICT, and workforce mobility. Secondary education is also vital in its connection to higher education and any attempts by the EU to make university degrees transferable must address the similar plight of secondary education degrees. The issue of secondary education degrees is important to both universities and the labor market. The EU has recognized this and thus ingratiated itself into the larger discussion of secondary education in the EU. The Socrates program showcases the EU's efforts to coordinate curricula, language education, and ICT development in member states. The Socrates program and other supranational education efforts, such as the European Schoolnet, have been well-received by member states in their own efforts to improve student achievement and teacher qualifications. This must not, however, be taken as a general capitulation of education policy by member states to the EU. Education has traditionally been a state issue, and indeed the EU's involvement in education has usually included a stipulation by that body that it will not interfere with member states' education content. The evidence shows that while states such as Great Britain and Italy have recognized common areas of education that need improvement, they have tended to approach those problems in their own ways. Though neither approach is an outright rejection of EU supranational recommendations, both appear to be the result of unique domestic institutions. While the Italian reforms appear to be prompted by EU pressure (though the specific policies are uniquely Italian), British reforms appear to have been home-grown. Progress, furthermore, has been measured by British-set benchmarks. The research hypothesis is supported by the increased cooperation and EU supranational involvement in education policy, but falls short when

one observes both the differences in domestic education policies and the member states'

refusal to concede increased decision-making power to the EU. The alternative

hypothesis, conversely, is supported by the different approaches to education policies.

The evidence, however, rejects the alternative hypothesis's expectation that domestic

political and education decision-makers differ in their basic perceptions of problems in

their educational systems. Decision-makers throughout Europe recognize the need to

increase technological skills in order to develop a better-trained workforce, and

furthermore agree that teachers need to be qualified to teach these important

technological skills. The evidence I've presented shows a dichotomy in the current

trends – a general agreement on the problems facing European education but a

disagreement on how states should approach these problems.

VI. SCENARIOS

In view of the evidence in this paper, it is possible that the EU will develop a

more substantive policy toward education in the future. The current draft of the EU

Constitution eliminates the member states' veto on education-related policies adopted by

the EU. Thus, an EU under the proposed constitution would, potentially, have the power

to pass binding education policy through qualified majority voting. Not much discussion

on the EU Constitution has been devoted to provisions for education, so it is difficult to

determine how member states feel about a potential decrease in sovereignty.

At the same time, it is also possible that the EU will always have a subservient

position in the field of education, as it currently does. Voters in France and the

Netherlands rejected the constitution in referendums, leaving the future of the

constitution in question. Even if the constitution, or a reformed constitution/treaty with

similar provisions regarding education, is passed, there will not necessarily be submission to an aggressive EU education policy. The EU has already, with the Growth and Stability Pact, shown an inability to punish transgressions of EU policy by member states – and that was after member states supported the Pact. Aggressive EU education policy – especially if it involves content and/or binding agreements – could very well be met with hostility. The path of EU education policy will be largely influenced by a)how important the EU feels education is in its relationship to employment, b)how much leeway the EU feels the member states will allow it, and c)how well it can strike a balance between the necessity for qualified students and the need to respect state rights (especially regarding content).

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU's future economic development will depend a great deal on the quality of its labor pool. The population in parts of the EU is actually on the decline, making workers more valuable than ever. A qualified labor force will need to be highly trained and will need to be mobile within the EU. The European Commission usually initiates EU education policy, and should adopt more aggressive education policies. Much of the current policy is focused on promoting voluntary cooperation between member states. The EU needs to aggressively pursue a policy that oversees education cooperation instead of merely promoting state-to-state cooperation. The EU should set binding standards of integration between member states' education systems that make secondary education degrees transferable. The EU must also set standards of literacy and perhaps even mandate ICT integration into secondary education systems. Though differences in domestic language, politics, and culture prevent complete educational integration, there is

nothing wrong with EU-mandated standards that force member states to address

shortcomings in domestic education policies. Such a move is vital to the development of

Europe into an information society that it ready to compete with global forces in the 21st

century.

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[9] -- Ibid, 3.
[10] Fichera and Ronchi, 85-87.
[11] -- Ibid, 93-95.
[12] Commission of the European Communities, *Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and
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[13] Fichera and Ronchi, 85.
[14] Rhode, "U.K. calls for EU task force."
[15] Commission of the European Communities, *Progress Towards the Lisbon Objectives*, 31-32.
[16] -- Ibid, 46-47.

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