RONALD LALLY

Thus, the time for Italians to tell us more about their work is opportune for several reasons. One is the renewed emphasis on the quality of relationship and care in light of the new findings in brain development research that show how warm, responsive, consistent care and its continuity foster many aspects of successful social, emotional, and cognitive development in young children. A second reason is the increasing need for infant-toddler care on the part of working families, as a global economy transforms working opportunities and conditions, and as welfare support diminishes. And a third reason, among still others that one could cite, is the recent establishment in 1996 of Early Head Start for infants from birth to three years, and the resulting need to develop this large, expanding federal program in the best possible way. All of these reasons provide a good rationale to study the experiences of our colleagues in Italy.

The Italian achievements in early childhood education stand out with great distinction. They have aroused admiration and enthusiasm in North America, at least partly because their
underlying philosophy and pedagogy display so many elements originally developed in the United States, both of progressive educational philosophy from previous decades, and of the latest professional thinking about the early years. Progressive educational theory coming from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean now emphasizes the same key themes. An integrated theoretical and research basis is seen as necessary for applied work, and practice is seen as essential in nourishing research. Early care, education, and intervention are understood to be complementary. Strong rapport and caring relationships define the basis of trust necessary at the base of the service triangle, with implications for professional roles, system organization, and curriculum (Greenspan & Weider, 1997). Open and ongoing negotiation among all stakeholders (including advocates and the public as well as families and professionals) is critical to defining and reaching for quality programming for young children.

The infant-toddler programs of those Italian cities that have made the most consistent investments of financial and human resources are praised for their family-centered philosophy, combined mission of care, education, and intervention, and innovative approaches to design of space and environments (Kamerman & Kahn, 1994). Different cities, as we shall see, have specialized in providing different kinds and combinations
of services. Some cities continue to focus effort and funding on the earliest established, full-day programs (called asili nido, the first term can be translated as asylum-or safe heaven and the second as nest. It refers to the historical roots of this institution in the charity asylum or crèche). Other cities provide not only these services but others as well, intended to serve demonstrated or expressed needs that are particular to their citizens. Through continual dialogue and exchange, the administrative, political, and educational leaders in each city have shared and built upon the successes and experiences of others, and given each other reciprocal support in solving problems. Indeed, some of the very educational leaders most influential in bridging theory to practice, offering new possible theoretical interpretations through their practice, formulating policy, designing programmatic and curriculum innovations, and setting the terms of public and professional debate, have contributed chapters to this book.