

PARENTS, GENDER & EDUCATION REFORM



Miriam E. David

*Parents, Gender
and
Education Reform*

Miriam E. David

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Introduction: Parents, Education Reforms and Social Research

Parents and education

This book is about the relations between parents and education. It explores these relations in the context of education reforms on the one hand and social changes in family life, on the other. Changes in family life, particularly those which affect women's lives as mothers, have typically been ignored as have those which affect certain ethnic minorities. My general argument is that the debates about education reforms and the part that parents should play in partnership with schools have taken place without any consideration for the various social changes that have been going on in family life. This means that the nature of education reforms, and their impact, especially on families, cannot fully be understood or appreciated. The corollary, the impact of family changes on education, also cannot fully be understood without due consideration of the interplay between the two.

I will explore the education policy debates, and review the social scientific evidence on which they have been based, over the last 50 years or so. I aim to show how the various educational and social reforms have been developed in particular political and social contexts. In particular I will review the contribution that social scientists have made to those policy formulations and evaluations. My aim is to evaluate both the policy strategies that have been developed by the right and the left and the evidence that has been produced by social and educational researchers to aid the process of social and educational reform.

The focus is on the relation between parents and education. These relations have been involved throughout the period under review, although they have often not been considered explicitly. They have often been seen as more traditional policy questions, such as about the concern to provide equal educational

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opportunities and to reduce disparities between families on the basis of social class, defined in terms of socio-economic circumstances, in educational opportunities. They may also have been used implicitly rather than explicitly as the basis for educational strategies, such as for socially disadvantaged children.

An interesting parallel has been the development of a partnership between educational and social reformers on the one hand and social and educational researchers on the other. This partnership mirrors that of parents and education in that their perspectives tend also to ignore questions of gender and race. Typically the dominant concern has been about how to address public policy issues, especially about education reforms.

These debates about educational policy and the role of parents will be discussed against the backdrop of changing family life – the increase in lone motherhood, the rise in maternal employment and the particular needs of some of the minority communities – and I will explore the ways in which education reforms affect parents, especially mothers, as well as their children. However, these social changes have rarely affected the public policy debates; nor have they been central to the social and educational research that has accompanied these debates and strategies.

The public agenda and political debates

In Britain, as in most other countries of the industrialised world, both education and family matters are high on the agenda for public concern and political debate at the moment. First, there is an enormous amount of public concern about how to improve educational provision and raise educational standards, in an increasingly competitive and global economy. Politicians and their advisers of right or left political persuasion tend to disagree about how this may be done. Both, however, agree on a central role for parents in the process.

The right argues that parents should be afforded the freedom to choose schools in an educational marketplace. Their demands will then improve educational standards. Schools which are not chosen by a group of parents will go out of business. This, for example, is part of the thinking behind the Parent's Charter for Education which the British Conservative government introduced in 1991. Similarly, in the United States there are a number of debates about how to make family choices more effective, especially in the central metropolitan areas. For example, Chubb and Moe (1990) have presented a most challenging polemic about how to improve America's schools by abolishing school bureaucracy and creating an educational market in its place. They have also applied their arguments, but not their very sophisticated statistical analysis of educational achievements, to the British context. They have argued that the

British Conservative government has gone much further than either the US federal or state administrations in creating a non-bureaucratic, effective system of education through the grant-maintained schools (*Sunday Times*, 9 February 1992).

The left, on the other hand, argues that parents should be given a greater role in education to ensure that schools are more effective. They too believe that parents will push for better standards for their children if they are more formally involved. The Labour party in Britain has given thought to more clearly specified contracts between 'home and school' to ensure a more equal and reciprocal relationship. These ideas are drawn from those of left political parties in other countries of Europe.

Second, much public concern focuses on changes in family structure, especially the growing rates of divorce and the increasing numbers of lone-mother families, and their likely effects on children's general and educational development. The political debates emphasise the general and ungendered role of parents. This point is well illustrated by the 1989 Children Act which has parental responsibility as its central theme and was passed by Parliament in Britain with support from all political parties.

However, wider public and political concern stresses the fact that social changes in family life have been so dramatic that they lead to the prediction that by the year 2,000 a large number of children will not grow up or spend most of their childhood in traditional family households, such as those comprising the two 'natural' parents. This excites varied political reactions, from the right's notions that children will inevitably suffer, to more measured evaluation of both the statistical predictions and their potential effects on children's lives.

Commentators on the right tend to bemoan the demise of the traditional family and argue that changes in family structure will necessarily have deleterious consequences for children, particularly in terms of their educational development. For instance, Peter Dawson, the General Secretary of the Professional Association of Teachers in Britain, raised the issue of the relationship between changes in family life and children's educational performance in his valedictory speech. He claimed that:

'By the end of this decade, most children will be brought up in one parent families . . . What are likely to be the consequences of a new social structure, with the young being raised by just one parent rather than two? . . . Professor Albert (sic) Halsey the Oxford Sociologist recently said that he shuddered for the next generation of children brought up in one parent families. They would do less well at school, be more likely to end up unemployed, be more inclined to get into trouble with the law.

Teachers are well placed to add to the list of deprivations. Children with only one parent often play truant, show signs of insecurity in their relationships with others, need more care and attention from their teachers . . . Children need two parents to grow and flourish as best they may . . .' (quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 8 August 1991: 12)

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However, Dawson cited the figures on changes in family life and their impacts on children's educational performance as if they were unequivocally correct. As we shall see, the evidence about changes in family life is far more complex than he suggests. Moreover, the impact of such changes on children's educational performance, achievements or success in adult life has not been carefully analysed and is much more sketchy than his assertions would have us believe.

In fact, Dawson was mounting more of a moral argument than a careful appraisal of the facts. This is indicated by his prefacing comments. He noted that:

'The connection between children's family circumstances and their performance in school is an emotional minefield. It passes judgment on every living adult who has attempted to raise children . . . Almost everything a child achieves, or fails to achieve, in school may be traced back to what happens at home.' (p. 12)

And he went on to chastise those who criticised his raising the topic publicly. He felt there had been an attempt by the 'one-parent industry' to 'justify the new social structure, and thereby a basis for insisting that the state fund it' (p. 12).

His arguments resonate with those of other writers usually seen as members of the New Right, who have mounted a defence of the traditional family. Such defences have occurred in both Britain and the US (Gilder 1981, 1982; Mount 1983; Anderson and Dawson, 1986; Scruton et al. 1987; Murray 1989, 1990). However, until now they have not usually been so clearly directed at the relationship between family changes and educational processes. In fact, Dawson's critique does not bear on recent educational reforms but continues in the traditional vein of considering only the potentially disastrous social and educational consequences of changing family structures. He does not address the implications of 'education reforms' in the context of these changing family structures.

In any event, social changes in family life may not be nearly as serious or as dramatic as these right-wing pundits would have us believe. The evidence seems to suggest that children's family experiences are rather complex. For example, in Britain in 1990, one in four children experienced parental divorce by the age of 16, but may not have spent much of childhood in a lone-parent family. They may have spent time in a step-family or with parents who cohabited rather than married. Similarly, in 1990, almost a third of all children were born into lone-mother families, although the births in some cases have been registered with both parents' names, indicating possible cohabitation instead of marriage of the parents. On the other hand, there is more evidence of child abuse or violence in families, usually two-parent households, than was the case in the past. Most importantly, there is substantial evidence of mothers' changed patterns of work and employment, whatever the type of family

structure. All of these changes in family life may have impacts upon children's social and educational developments. These will be one of the subjects of this review.

Why this book?

Many of the issues about parents and education have been explored in a myriad of ways before, and the reader is therefore entitled to ask why there is a need for yet another book on this topic. There are three reasons.

First, none of the previous books has explored the relations between education reform on the one hand and changes in family life on the other hand. They have focused on one or other of these topics. The reason for this book is to bring together these debates.

Second, all the studies of education reform or the development of educational policy and strategies have tended to concentrate on specific issues within the general area. They have either focused on an issue such as parental involvement in pre-school, early childhood or primary education, or parental choice of either state or private secondary schools. They have also tended to be based on one particular geographical area or region, with the exception of official reports, mainly carried out over a decade or two ago. In Britain, the official report that launched the spate of social, sociological, psychological and educational inquiries into parental involvement in schools and home-school relations was the Plowden report, published almost 25 years ago. It was in fact the last of the official inquiries of the Central Advisory Council for Education. And it was the last, despite its massive impact on action-research, policy developments in home-school relations for socially and educationally disadvantaged children, and fundamental as well as policy-oriented social research (Halsey 1987).

More recent official inquiries in Britain have tended to focus on specific issues, such as the Rampton report (1981) into the education of West Indian children. Its successor, the Swann report (1985), despite its all-embracing title *Education for All*, dealt mainly with the education of minority ethnic children and not with multicultural or multiracial education for all (Tomlinson 1990). None of the studies has attempted to review the available literature across the range of these issues, looking at the relevance of the various studies within the context of the contemporary policy debates. This is one of the aims of this current text.

I myself have already contributed to this literature by looking at the ways in which state policies defined and developed relationships between the family and education in historical and contemporary contexts. However, *The State, the Family and Education* was published over ten years ago and focused particularly on the evidence about the role that the state played in mediating and defining relationships between families and schools, particularly in terms of gender. It

did not review the wealth of research and scholarship from within the tradition of the sociology of education, albeit that that literature has been framed within a social-democratic, policy-oriented research tradition. It also did not look at the changing debates from the New Right about giving parents a different role in their children's education. In fact, it took a longer historical time-span, looking at the origins of the British educational system. The second reason for this present book is to bring up to date the impact of a changing policy context on the range and wealth of scholarship in this area.

The third reason is to review the policy-related research and scholarship in a comparative framework, and, where possible, to draw conclusions about the current state of our knowledge about the complex relationships between parents and education highlighting the range and diversity, given current reforms. Two key research themes in this current climate are parental choice and 'school effectiveness'. There is not much consideration of what kinds of families are to be included or of the effects being sought.

Somewhat curiously, given the fact that much of the work on parental involvement has been about strategies to improve equality of educational opportunities, there have been few attempts to look at the relationships between parents and education within the context of major changes in family-life circumstances or, given those changes, to look at them from either a gender or race perspective. The intention here is to review the available evidence with these perspectives paramount in order to question the impact of such changes on the range of educational opportunities.

In most of the literature on the relations between families and education, little consideration is given to the gendered notions of parents or children in a family context. The notions of 'parent' and 'child' are seen as relatively unproblematic. It is assumed that all parents are the same social category or group, regardless of their gender and/or their legal or marital status, and that they all have the same relationship to education and formal schools for their children. Indeed, the term 'parent' has become something of a political slogan. It is used by all shades of the political spectrum as if it were unproblematic: terms such as parental choice, parental involvement, parental participation, power and control abound in the political arena. Yet there are clear differences in social and legal expectations about mothers and fathers. The aim here is to explore the varied relationships of gendered parents to education, especially to schools.

Moreover, the social, economic and racial or ethnic position of gendered parents may critically affect how they can and do relate to schools and education. This will also be explored. Similarly, children are also gendered, and there are different social and legal expectations about their education and adult roles. Where possible, the complex relations between gendered parents and gendered children over the range of issues will also be the subject of consideration. However, it must be noted at this juncture that there is a dearth of evidence about these issues.

Structure of the book

Given that the book is about the relations between parents and education, it will start by looking at the various contexts in which these relations developed. The argument is that a partnership developed between policy-makers or education reformers on the one hand and social or educational researchers on the other, in which they developed the idea of a partnership between parents and education. In other words, a clear relationship grew up between policy and research, which influenced strategic developments in education and limited the perspectives that were deployed about parents. It also influenced the form of the study of policy and its allied research.

This book will review the available evidence about the relationships between parents and education both to situate the contemporary political debates and to provide a critical perspective on those debates from the point of view of the social scientific research and evidence. It will first of all review the ways in which the policy debates have focused upon the relationships between parents and education, from pre-school to primary to secondary to higher and adult education. In this review, the critical role that social scientists have played in both forming and developing the parameters of the policy debates will be considered.

Secondly, the review will investigate the kinds of research and social scientific evidence that have been collected around key questions about the relationship between parents and education, again covering the various levels of education and education reform and looking in particular at changes in family and socio-economic circumstances and their bearing upon a range of educational and social outcomes.

The book will conclude with a review of the contemporary public policy debates about family changes and education reforms, and the implications for the future, given those debates and the available research evidence. In particular, it will consider the broad issue of what the Americans originally termed the 'demographic time bomb' and its implications for women's educational and family lives.

The structure of the book is as follows. In chapter 2, I consider the ways in which the policy context for educational changes has been framed by debates about the nature of social welfare and education's relationships to families. I also look at the changing nature of family life in this context. I situate the evidence in terms of the ways in which social scientists have become involved in developing the policy context, providing critical evaluations of it and, more recently, developing feminist and other critiques of the relations between private families and public policies. I also briefly address the more recent critical debates about the import of changing family structures for public policies. However, the aim of this chapter is to locate the educational policy debates in