

Families, gender and education: issues of policy and practice

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Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the relations between families, gender and education in the context of global social transformations and changes in policies and practices. In particular I want to highlight what has frequently been occluded in the policy debates about families and education and that is how gender is threaded through the issues, linked with social class and race/ethnicity. I want to illustrate how changing policies and practices have different implications for men and women, whether as students, teachers or professionals within education, or as parents in relation to educational institutions. I will refer to changing policy discourses about families and education and the research evidence that has been accumulated which illustrates especially the complexity of changing relations within families and between families and schools. I also want to focus on a particular policy discourse around parents and education, which is that of forms of parent education for future generations within schools. Here there has been a growing emphasis internationally on developing forms of sex or sexuality education together with a new emphasis on relationships but closely linked with the notion of 'family values'. Although these debates relate to evidence about changing family and women's lives the educational and social solutions are restrictive and focus on a narrow concept of 'risk'. More collaborative strategies, similar to those that many women tend to pursue, would enhance family, community and educational involvement.

Global social transformations and changing policy discourses

Over the last twenty years or so, there have been major political and policy shifts in the governance of many western countries. These social transformations have been closely linked with economic and labor market changes and family life changes. They have led to moves to transform the governance of social welfare and education. The traditional and post-war provision of social welfare through public policy, and what had become commonly known as the welfare state, has slowly been reconstructed towards more private provision. A hallmark of these developments has been moves towards marketisation of public services and developments of new forms of public management. In that process there have been changes in the relations between families and public services, education especially, and the reconstruction of participants in such services as 'consumers'. In the moves towards the specification of standards of performance in such public services families have become critical judges as well as users. On the other hand, there have been changing expectations about how families are involved in the provision of education services. It is this complexity and the implications for gender relations that I wish to explore.

These moves have taken place quite globally and instances can be found in many Anglophone countries (such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and USA) as well as in many parts of Europe. In Britain, as an example, educational

policy has been reconstructed through both Conservative and New Labor administrations so that notions of parental choice and involvement have become far more critical to the provision of education. However, what has become particularly important under New Labor in the last five years has been the interweaving of the concept of parental involvement with that of parental choice. Here parental involvement has become a necessity to educational provisions, from early childhood education coupled with childcare, through compulsory schooling and into higher education. The expectation of parental involvement whether at home or at school has become normative; virtually a truism. This is the case not only in Britain but also in other European countries, and in Anglophone countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA.

The centrality of this notion to education broadly defined is to be found in a plethora of British policy documents from the initial 1997 white paper on Educational Standards through to the Education Act, where the notion of home-school agreements was initiated. It has also emerged in subsequent policy documents, such as the National Childcare Strategy, Sure Start, Educational Action Zones and Excellence in Cities. It can also be found in policy expectations and the evidence of involvement in areas traditionally not seen as linking family and education, such as higher education (David, Ball and Reay, 2001, forthcoming).

Changing family lives

However, this critical notion of parental involvement in education has not been interrogated with respect to different families, and the extent to which families have been changing alongside education and social changes. Yet these changes in family life and women's lives especially have been carefully documented and researched by social science academics as well as more polemical and political commentators. A key feature is the changes in women's positions within families, education and the labor market (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999). These have also

been occurring on a global and international scale. There is also international research evidence about the impact of educational opportunities on the diversity of women's lives. (Brown, 1998; Kenway, Willis, Blackmore and Rennie, 1998; Tsolidis, 2001; Walkerdine, 1997) There are many complex developments about changes in women's public and private lives and their families such that the changes are about both gender or sexual relations and relations between the generations. In particular, the expansion of educational opportunities has been accompanied by the growth of women's involvement in the labor market and yet not on an equal basis with men. Moreover, these changes have been closely linked to social class and race or ethnicity. There is also an array of evidence about mothers' differential involvement in education and the labor market (Griffith and Smith, 1996). Various reasons have been proffered about mothers' involvement in education and on behalf of their children. (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Reay, 1998) One issue that has become the subject of controversial political debate has been the growth and preponderance of lone parent families and households, almost exclusively single mothers and often poor (Haskey, 1998).

The public policy discourse of family values

In some countries, USA and Britain especially, the issue of changing families and the growth of lone parent families was initially seen as a problematic issue with respect to social welfare but it has recently become important to educational policy debate also on a global basis. In the USA first but later borrowed by Britain, the moral element of this debate has been encompassed as about 'family values'. Thus, social welfare was reconstructed so that there was an increased expectation that single mothers with dependent children would work rather than be entitled to welfare. Moreover, such policy shifts are now being linked with education, and becoming new subjects or topics within the school curriculum. The debates in Anglophone countries, however, are at odds with those of

many countries of Europe, the Netherlands and Denmark especially, where sexual relations and family planning are normal topics for educational debate (Kelly, 2001). In these latter countries the contradictions between strategies for parental involvement may not be so stark as in Britain and the USA, nor recreate such levels of social and educational inequalities.

The developments have been most dramatic, and clearly spelled out in the USA (Kelly, 2001) In the USA social welfare provisions for poor and single mothers were redefined through the Personal Responsibility and Economic Opportunity Act of 1996. Thus the concept of 'personal responsibility' was introduced into public policy, here with the meaning of mother's responsibility for her children through employment rather than social welfare (Schram, 2000). This also turned social welfare into a temporary rather than more permanent form of social welfare - from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). An educational programme was also linked in with this development, to ensure that future generations of children would learn about 'family values'. The aim was to prevent the creation of more single mother households, teenage pregnancy and parenthood and generally ensure more 'personal responsibility'. States would be entitled to substantial federal funding if their schools taught about 'abstinence-only before marriage'. (Haley, 2001 personal communication)

In Britain, a similar approach has been followed by New Labor's first administration. In this case, teenage pregnancy and parenthood was identified as a major social problem and addressed as part of the government's innovative strategy on social inclusion and exclusion. (SEU, 1999) Thus social inclusion was defined as a public policy to deal with poverty and socially disadvantaged families, through education and other social welfare measures. The public policy solution to the social problem of teenage pregnancy and parenthood has been to develop sex and relationship education as part of a new programme of studies

within schools. Thus the government developed national guidance on Sex and Relationship Education and provided additional funding to target local education authorities with high levels of teenage pregnancies. In this case LEAs have been expected to develop educational strategies and courses for young people, women especially, in schools and this has to be within the moral framework of marriage. Again a particular moral stance in which diverse forms of sexuality and relationships may be talked about has not been proposed. However, there is also the development of alternative family, parent and community centres for young people and mothers who have left school.

Parental involvement and family, parent and community centres

Public strategies for parental involvement in education have taken many and diverse forms in recent years. These have ranged from particular and targeted approaches for a diversity of families especially those in poverty such as through family and parent centres, to the parental involvement associated with compulsory schooling. Whilst the expectation of parental involvement in education has become completely normative and a credo, it has not become sufficiently nuanced to take account of the diversity and complexity of different people's lives. Moreover, the phrase remains ungendered whilst there is nevertheless an unspoken assumption that parental involvement is gendered. Thus much of the policy rhetoric surrounding these debates takes as given that it is mothers that take the primary responsibility for their children, especially young children.

However, whilst there is continuing educational research which does not use gender as a variable or concept, most of the research evidence that has been accumulated in tandem with the public policy developments over the last two decades indicates how parental involvement is largely about mothers' involvement in education. Some of this research does not question the problems that this might pose for women's lives or

changing women's lives, whilst other research questions the power relations reinforced and re-invoked in these processes. Edwards and Duncan (1999) pointed powerfully to what they called 'gendered moral rationalities', drawing on their international research on lone parenthood. Here there is also now a question about the relation between women's lives as mothers and as teachers within education. (Sikes, 1996) Much of the research is about mothers of young and dependent children and includes mothers' involvement both at home and at school (David, 1994; West et al, 1999) There is also work on the differences between mothers and fathers and at different stages of the educational process and in different class locations. In a recent study about students choosing universities we have found that there are very different strategies amongst women from men, and that both daughters and mothers tend to collaborate over the processes of choosing. This is in contrast with most male students and the fathers, who tend to pursue traditional and individualistic strategies (David et al, 2001).

However, questioning differences between men and women as young people and their personal responsibilities has not been in a strong theme in the literature on parents and education. Here a stronger focus has been on the problematic lives of mothers, and their maternal strategies

(Ribbens-McCarthy, 2000; Weiss, 1999). Another question that is now being raised is about the relations between young motherhood and young children's lives and the contradictory expectations of involvement in education and employment. (David, 2001).

Conclusions

In this paper I hope I have raised a number of questions and challenges about the changing contexts within which the debates are taking place about developing new educational partnerships and collaboration between parents, schools and communities. The policy discourses are setting clear expectations about the resources of time and money that parents are expected to put to the service of education for their children at all levels. They are also framed within a particular moral discourse. Without attention to the particular changes in women's lives and the revised and reconstructed expectations about 'family values' women's lives as mothers will continue to be constrained and constricted, both financially and morally. However, our research evidence has also revealed that women's strategies for involvement in certain educational processes tend to be more collaborative than those of men. This could be an important resource on which to build bridges for the future.

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