

BOOK REVIEW

CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE – LIVING THROUGH DIVORCE

Ann Mitchell,
Tavistock Publications, London,
1985, p.p. 206

In the introduction to this book Ann Mitchell states that it is intended for anyone involved with children whose parents are experiencing separation and divorce, and further recommends the book to teachers, lawyers, social workers and also parents. In my view the book does not meet the needs of any of these interest groups adequately and is an incompatible mixture of both research and anecdotal reports.

The author based her writings on the outcome of research interviews with 70 custodial parents and one child from each family, where parental permission was given (giving a total of 50 children). The children were all aged between 16-18 at the time of interview and had been 10-13 at the time of the divorce but had a wide range of ages at separation, from 4 to nearly 13. Many of the interviews therefore relied on the memories of both parents and children on their experience of events that had taken place some years previously. The wide range of children's ages at separation also reduced the possibility of making any age specific conclusions in relations to children's experiences of separation.

One of the difficulties in evaluating the book is due to the lack of information given in relation to the actual interviews. It is

unclear whether or not the interviews were structured or unstructured and what particular questions were asked. No detailed statistical analysis is presented in relation to the significance or otherwise of the findings.

On the positive side there is a good review of the available literature on separation and its effects on children. There is also considerable information given with regard to the divorce laws in England and Scotland and the availability of conciliation services. The legal situation in Britain is very different from, and has little bearing on the Australian situation. Australia, with its uniform divorce laws, its provision for conciliation services and reports to the court when necessary, is much further advanced than our British counterparts.

The author's findings tend to support other research but it is difficult to assess the strength of these conclusions without further data on both the style of interview and the subsequent analysis, if any. For example, she concludes that the pattern of access immediately after separation clearly set the pattern for the future. The sooner and the more frequently that children had access, the more likely they were to continue to keep in touch with the absent parent. In general children of separating parents need more explanations from their parents and often feel very alone in their grief. They need someone to talk to and the knowledge that other children have similar experiences. They need continuing contact with both

parents and help in accepting step parents.

I found the style of the book to be irritating with research outcome and quote from the children often being interspersed. Some parts were poorly written and needed several readings in order to make sense of the meaning. For example "Parents who remembered their children's feelings mostly used the same two opposite terms that they had used to describe their own feelings; upset, and glad or relieved. Fewer than one third of the parents thought their children had been upset while the same number said their children had been glad. The rest could not remember". It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from such statements.

In summary, I felt the author should have given more detail about the actual interviews and provided some results in tabular form. A clearer delineation between research results and the anecdotal reports, which were dotted throughout, would also have been helpful. Ann Mitchell does have some good advice to offer in her concluding chapter. However, for welfare workers in the field and parents and children experiencing separation, there are other publications available from the Family Court of Australia which are more readable and pertain more readily to the Australian situation.

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FAMILY, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

Edited by Peter D.K. Ramsay
Published by George Allen and
Unwin Australia Pty. Ltd.
1984 Sydney. 340 pp \$19.95

This is essentially a book about schooling which is focussed on the New Zealand context. As the title suggests the book looks at schooling in New Zealand from a sociological point of view through the interplay of family, school and community. The editor's aim was to provide a source book for teachers, particularly teachers in training, which addresses the major issues of schooling in a modern western society in the 80's and which need to be considered as that society heads towards the 1990's. This is not as easy task to take up, but is one that the authors of this text have pursued fearlessly and with thoroughness; and as with all writings that challenge the inequalities of the status quo, and tackle some of our sacred cows (in the form of existing societal myths), this book will not please everyone.

The book is structured in four parts: Background and themes, The family, The

school, and social issues and the school. In Part 1 the editor introduces sociological theory and briefly describes its relevance to schooling – in particular, the themes that the rest of the book will pursue. Parts 2 to 4 then become a delight to delve into: editorial chapters in each part raise the major issues which are then taken up by the 16 readings. This quite comprehensive list of readings cover specific topics such as family sociology, women's education, adolescent language usage, teacher stress, school improvement, multi-culturalism, computers, rural schooling, pupil's influence on teachers, the beginning teacher, teaching as a profession, social background and educational achievement, technical education, economic and employment context of education, educational measurement, and teenage sexuality. The readings are impressive, both in scope of topics covered, and in presentation of argument. Points are cogently put, and backed with comprehensive literature citations and data. Readers will find much of value in these articles. Each of the major parts of the book are concluded with a list of simulations and exercises. These are

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designed to be of maximum relevance in teacher training institutions and take up in a simulation situation the issues raised in that section of the book.

The New Zealand focus of the book is clear and unmistakable. As such, it will be a major contribution to educational thinking in that country – but what of its relevance outside New Zealand, particularly in Australia? In this country the book will be important in two areas: on the one hand it will acquaint readers with an overview of the New Zealand education system – which is generally not well known in Australia; and on the other hand it will contribute forcefully to the quality of debate in Australia about the place of education in society. The issues the

author raises are certainly relevant in Australia: in particular the societal myths with which the author takes issue (that existing society is egalitarian in a classless, non racist, and non sexist manner) are contentious debating points in the Australian context. The implications for the process of schooling are the same in Australia as they are in New Zealand. Ramsay challenges us to look again at our goals of education, the assumptions that underlie these goals and the procedures that are employed to achieve them – this clearly applies in both countries.

Who, then, will find it a relevant book to add to their shelves? Certainly teacher training institutions will find it valuable, and the book therefore achieves one of its

primary goals. But also it will be useful for those individuals involved in critical analysis of current school practices, or who are rethinking their understanding of the issues and pressures that are relevant to schooling. School administrators, boards of education, school councils, parents and teachers should particularly consider this book. Professional not directly involved in education, but whose involvement with children and youth brings them into contact with the school system will also find this volume a useful reference from which to selectively read.

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M.D.A. Freeman, ed., *The State, The Law and The Family*, Tavistock Publications Ltd. Sweet and Maxwell Ltd., London, 1984 pp. xi + 318.

This is a compendium of writings on Family Law by sixteen of the foremost English scholars of the discipline, plus one Scottish and one Dutch expert. It is an outstanding collection, conspicuous by its realism, topicality and relevance to the social problems of the family.

The book is divided into four parts. The first, *Women, the State and the Law*, is written largely from a feminist perspective. Carol Smart, who has a refreshingly breezy style of writing, challenges the conventional English wisdom, exemplified in the *Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984*, of placing the primary burden of maintaining an ex-wife on the husband. She argues indeed against any reduction of State benefits, especially for working-class women. This theme is taken up by Hilary Lang, while the third essay, by Jan Pahl, is an intriguing study on the "political economy of the household". Miss Pahl cites several types of household to illustrate the remarkable diversity of financial arrangements that obtain among on-going families as to housekeeping allowances and the management of household affairs.

Undoubtedly one of the major essays in the collection is by the editor, Michael Freeman. Mr. Freeman reveals himself as a rare bird indeed, a male feminist. His piece on Domestic Violence is based on the premise that the law has a most significant role to play, and has so far done very little. The few cases which have provided a remedy to battered women are the exceptions that prove the rule that essentially the law has done nothing to improve the overall position of women. The reason for domestic violence, in Mr. Freeman's view, is not to be sought in psychological failings of individuals, but rather in social or cultural injustice. Mr. Freeman, who writes powerfully and persuasively, concludes with a diatribe against the immunity of husbands who rape their wives.

Katherine O'Donovan's essay poses the doctrinal problem, should the law provide



special protection for women or should it aim at perfect equality? Her conclusion, that equality in all things should be sought, seems to me rather facile. Surely pregnant working women should be given some special protection and immunity, if not for their own benefit, then at least for that of their embryo.

Most readers of this journal will probably find Part 2 of the book of most immediate relevance. For it deals with children, and highlights the perennial problem of family autonomy *versus* state intervention.

An outstanding essay by Robert Dingwall and John Eekelaar considers the criticism that the state has been intruding more and more into family life. The statistics, they say, do not justify any sinister inferences. The authors support greater use of procedures for termination of parental ties when *emotional* harm is foreseeable. And while they frankly acknowledge that recognition of children's interests necessarily entails the abridgement of

family autonomy, they have no qualms about advocating the greater use of interventive powers.

This position is challenged, however, by both Madeleine Colvin and Michael King, in Chaps. 7 and 9. Miss Colvin argues that there are too many children in care. By intervening, the State is abdicating its responsibility to provide services to prevent children from being separated from their natural family. Mr. King also cavils with Mr. Eekelaar. In a valuable comparison he adjudges the English juvenile jurisdiction much inferior to that of the *juges des enfants* in France. These judges actively seek co-operation with parents, and moreover, there is a flexible machinery for periodic review of wardship in France. Anyone with an interest in a child, including the child himself, may apply to any time to the *juges des enfants*, who is obliged to consider whether to terminate the wardship.