

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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