Education though a gendered lens

Judith Harford

Gender and Education in England since 1770: a social and cultural history

Jane Martin, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
304pp, paperback, £21.99, ISBN: 978-3-030-79746-1

Jane Martin's ambitious aim to bring the past 'into a critical dialogue with the present' (p1) is expertly achieved in her new book *Gender and Education in England since 1770: a social and cultural history*. Threading biographical approaches and local history, the book traces key periods in the history of education in England through a gendered lens. Whilst at first glance, the extensive period the book examines might appear overly ambitious to allow for a meaningful and nuanced reading, the individual chapters and sections provide comprehensive, compelling and very readable accounts of the period and of the particular theme being reviewed. The three strands on which the book is built – politics and policies, learners and learning, and teachers and teaching – guide the reader from the outside in, gradually deepening and personalising the nature of what's being examined.

Writing in 1929, Virginia Woolf observed 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'. As is typical of Martin's scholarship, this book emerges from a personal place and perspective, and she harnesses this lived experience to read and re-read key moments and ideas across space and time, honing in on illustrative flashpoints and episodes of dissonance. One such flashpoint is Martin and her mother's experience of the implications of a gendered curriculum during Martin's childhood: 'The making of the feminine through single-sex lessons in cookery and needlework, including overt messages about dress, deportment and etiquette, seemed pointless but laughable and while I dreamed of being an architect was dissuaded when told that technical drawing was a "boys' subject". As was my mum when she raised the issue at a parents' evening' (p2).

Again, a trademark of Martin's writing, the book offers theoretical and methodological insights into educational biography through an excavation and interlacing of oral testimony, autobiography, ethnography and documentary sources. What makes the book especially accessible and engaging, however, is how Martin cleverly introduces the reader to an individual and then uses the individual life as the lens through which the social, historical and political contextual layers are examined and deconstructed. One such example is Florence Ellen Key (1887-1965), profiled in chapter nine on 'Women in teaching'. Martin employs Key's voice in order to document and problematise social class, gendered work practices, suffrage and trade unionism. She then draws parallels with the work of D.H. Lawrence and his protagonist in *The Rainbow*, Ursula Brangwen. Martin then moves from a discussion of the historical roots for the feminisation of teaching

 DOI 10.3898/FORUM.2022.64.2.15

to a critique of current concerns over the impact of such feminisation, highlighting research which suggests male teachers do not necessarily enhance academic outcomes or motivational levels for boys.

Each of the 11 chapters opens with an evocative primary source which generates a sense of immediacy and crystallises the key issue. Chapter six, 'Culture and curriculum', commences with a powerful quote from Mary Gavin Clarke, headteacher of Manchester High School, one of the leading girls' secondary schools in England, who harnessed her social and cultural capital and powerful familial connects to advance education for females. Writing in *The Head Mistress Speaks,* an edited collection that the Association of Head Mistresses produced in the late 1930s, Gavin Clarke observed:

> The education of girls is beset by problems and difficulties, from which that of boys is happily free; for the boys have so far had it all their own way … To give a girl an education suited to her capacities – should she happen to have any out of the ordinary –is still widely held to be at best a folly, at worst a crime, if matrimony and motherhood are in view.

Gavin Clarke was of course referencing the ideology of the separate spheres, and the way in which the education system worked to reproduce and perpetuate the dominant male hegemony. As Martin's book powerfully demonstrates, the residual impact of this historic privileging in and through the education system still reverberates to this day.

Quite fittingly, the book finishes with a discussion of leadership in public office in England and the 'rear guard machismo' culture which has characterised political office in recent years (p275). The final chapter also comments on the way in which Covid-19 has served to underscore and accentuate the fault lines at the heart of society, demonstrating that those on the margins have suffered most from the threat of the virus. Joining together these two issues, Martin posits the view of some that the UK's response to the pandemic suffered from the lack of a female perspective, citing a powerful quote from a female MP that 'the predominance of single-sex education around the cabinet table' had contributed to a 'very blokey mentality at the top' of government. Ultimately, the book testifies to the fact that while the struggle for gender equality has come a long way since the Georgian era, we are a long way off enacting a vision of 'gender democratisation that has commitment from everyone' (p284).

Meticulously researched and elegantly penned, *Gender and Education in England since 1770* will appeal to students, lecturers, scholars and all those interested in the wider field of gender and education. It deserves a wide readership.

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