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# Feminist Theory and Educational Policy: How Gender Has Been "Involved" in Family School Choice Debates

**Few educational reform movements** have attracted more attention than choice programs in education—programs that, as a result of the reformulation of regulations governing public schools, provide parents with educational options in the forms of school vouchers, charter school programs, homeschooling, inter- and intradistrict enrollment options, and other alternatives to the traditional public school system. Using school choice as a lens through which to review mothers' involvement in educational reform, this article examines how gendered assumptions about families and markets pervade discussions about school choice, particularly those about homeschooling. Despite an abundance of research on school choice (e.g., Good and Braden 2000; Yancey 2000; Poetter and Knight-Abowitz 2001), few studies have considered the gender politics of parents' incorporation or the fact that school-choice programs are formulated in ways that often reveal gendered and social-classed assumptions about families, employment, markets, and education. Why? Why, when we have so many excellent accounts of the moral and structural constraints that mothers disproportionately face and of women as mothers and caretakers in the realm of education, have critical realist and feminist perspectives been so lacking in research on educational reform?[1] Why, when some policy researchers are clearly concerned with "welfare mothers" and "deadbeat dads" (e.g., Goodwin 1997; Mensing, French, and Fuller 2000), does gender escape consideration when the subject turns from thinking about schools as mechanisms for securing students' social welfare to thinking about schools as efficient structures that provide parents with educational options for their children?

[1] For several accounts of the moral and structural constraints that women as mothers and caretakers disproportionately face, see David 1993; David et al. 1993; David, West, and Ribbens 1994; Biklen 1995; Hays 1996; Stromquist 1997; Brantlinger and Jabbari 1998; Fine and Weis 1998; Grant 1998; Salisbury and Riddell 2000.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2005, vol. 30, no. 2]

As the following quotation captures through allegory, gendered images of families and society are implicit in the conceptual language of some approaches to choice programming. John E. Coons notes, on the dust jacket of the hardcover copy of Terry Moe's *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Moe 2001), "School choice was a child conceived in the sixties by strange bedfellows—urban poverty the mother, market theory the father. In the seventies, the latter abandoned his mate and kidnapped their offspring but, somehow, could never raise the baby on his own. According to Terry Moe, a reconciliation of the parents is now in the making, and school choice may yet reach its genetic potential as the hope of the poor. It's the love story of the year" (2001). Reference to poor urban women and masculinized markets depicts gender as a naturalized category (see also Thompson 1995, in Witte 2000, 163; Chubb 1997). It reveals a model of society that views the conventional family as the basic building block of more elaborate social structures, and it uses gender uncritically and unproblematically to talk derogatorily about race and class. Using gender this way can discount and dismiss rather than engage feminist theories and analyses. While policy analysts in the United States and Britain (our comparative focus here) have moved gender closer to the top of their list of considerations (Smith 1992, 160), they have failed to acknowledge transformations brought about by years of feminist research and activism (New and David 1985; David 2003).

In view of the fact that, even when researchers' analyses or theorizations engage gender systematically, gender is still only loosely moored to possibilities for transforming old dichotomies, this article asks: What can feminist analyses of gender reveal about the shifting place of women and men in debates about choice in education? How is gender interwoven with today's discussions about school reform (see Datnow 1998)? In examining these questions, we illustrate that gender pervasively underlies the history and present-day contours of parent-school relations and school-choice policies in the United States and Britain. We illustrate, through an examination of the histories of educational reforms and mothers' narrative accounts of choice programming, that women and men have held different positions within the system of formal education in the past and that their supposedly separate but equal places are in part reproduced in debates and research on school choice today.[2] We also consider that, whereas feminist analyses have had a place in the history of debates and

[2] "Choice programming" refers to educational schemes that give weight to parents' preferences for the kinds of school programs their children attend (cf. Brighouse 2000, 22–23).

research on school reform, feminists' current efforts are only minimally mobilized and only minimally geared toward educational change. The relatively greater focus on gender as a category rather than as a concept for imagining and realizing school reform suggests to us an oversight that, if addressed, would move discussions of school choice and mothers' school involvement in new and important theoretical and practical directions.

## Research on school choice: Neoliberal and liberal-interpretive views

Scholars of education have generally approached the study of school choice in one of two ways, either from neoliberal market-oriented points of view that provide blueprints for school reform or from liberal-interpretive frameworks that raise questions about social justice and equality.[3] Neoliberal perspectives stress that freeing schools from bureaucratic regulations creates competition within a system that is then responsive to the families it serves (Chubb and Moe 1990; Manno, Finn, and Vanourek 2000; Yancey 2000, 3). Parents are crucial to the success of students and are invited in to organize and operate aspects of public schools. Some neoliberal approaches emphasize that market forces, introduced as forms of consumerism, improve the quality of education for all children (Hassel 1999; Bulkley 2001). Competition among students and schools contributes to a more productive and goal-oriented system. Others point out that choice options provide parents as consumers with greater opportunities for direct democratic involvement (Yancey 2000; Smith 2001). Instead of being repulsed by educators, parents are invited into the mainstream of decision making. Research presented in a neoliberal vein often differentiates parents by income and education, as Moe does in *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (2001, 246, tables 7–11), or by ethnicity and residential location (Yancey 2000). Much of this work assesses gender equity through such measures as numeric representation and levels of income. In these assessments, women and men either "have" equality or, when they do not, it is for reasons of naturalized gender roles within families. And gender often rises to the surface when researchers and analysts talk about the problems faced by families in urban areas.

The double maneuver of emphasizing numeric equity and stressing the gendered division of labor within families is often used to the paradoxical effect of both treating urban matters as highly gendered, where poor

[3] In making this distinction, we adopt a variation of M. Elizabeth Graue, Janice Kroeger, and Dana Prager's (2001) "descriptive/prescriptive" and "interpretive/critical" categories, which they use to describe research on relations between home and school.

mothers require the aid of fathers and employment, and treating suburban matters either as mildly, if at all, gendered or else as naturally, if unremarkably, gender divided (e.g., Biddulph 1995; Sommers 2000; for a critical and historical analysis of this phenomenon, see Arnot, David, and Weiner 1999). In moving public education toward the market, neoliberal approaches shift the gender of urban and middle-class parenting toward masculinity. Coons's allegory, from the dust jacket quotation above, depicts a repentant father who had forgotten about his child's education. It connotes the return of an errant middle-class father who arrives to pay child support and alimony, and it suggests an image of middle-class market values coming to the rescue of urban poverty. Market approaches "bootstrap" urban mothers "up" into a system that is run like an experiment in social engineering—a phenomenon that, in its emphasis on incorporating mothers into a system of rational administration, resonates with earlier decades' experiments in scientific mothering (Ehrenreich and English 1979; Apple 1997). Under these conditions, urban mothers must involve themselves in a system that no longer equates nurturing with education. To the extent that this new system emphasizes parents' rationality, it overlooks that mothers' criteria for selecting schools may be different from the economic rationalist policy image of school choice, though no less rational in moral terms (David, West, and Ribbens 1994; David 1998; Duncan and Edwards 1999).

Meanwhile, whereas neoliberal approaches emphasize the benefits of school choice in involving parents across the social spectrum in education, liberal-interpretive approaches to school choice focus on parents' uneven engagement with the public system. These approaches often ask: What are the large-scale trends that give rise to and support choice programming in education (Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998; Wells et al. 1999)? What are the social and political tensions out of which the movement for choice and parental involvement arises (Paris 1998; Nakagawa 2000)? Research conducted within this vein suggests that the transformation of public institutions is linked to a coalition-led shift away from social-democratic ideas of state involvement in public life and toward ideals of minimal government and strong civil society. Much of this work has addressed issues of race and class head-on but has ignored gender. Many studies have demonstrated the importance of using feminist theory to trace historical changes and discursive shifts (e.g., Torres 1998), and others have connected feminist critiques of consumerism and capital with changes in people's daily lives (e.g., Giroux 1994). However, many of these researchers have also distanced themselves from gendered dynamics of schools and classrooms and from the gendered dimensions of education policy

by, in a sense, using feminist theory to theorize power and action but not discussing gender as a dedicated subject.

The use of feminist theory to study race and class but not gender suggests to us an emergent hierarchy within this strain of liberal-interpretive research that figures "gender" as low in the list of priorities. The dearth of attention to gender and to the recognition that gender both is embedded in and helps to construct wider systems of meaning renders gender a token for, not subject of, education analysis. When it comes to school reform, this inattention unwittingly reinforces neoliberal notions about urban and working-class parents as different from middle-class parents and about the former as gendered and highly feminized, the latter as virtually genderless. It also leaves in place unreflective and highly normalizing arguments about the heroic rescue of urban poverty by market theory and about market gender neutrality. The absence of gender as a focused subject naturalizes women and men as "equal" parents, when in fact they have different histories of engagement within families and public education. The dearth of critical discourse about the gender of market theory contributes to the pervasive belief that gender is a matter of numeric equity and, as such, is a resolved issue in educational policy.

In considering how neoliberal and liberal approaches interrelate on the subject of gender and in illustrating how research and debates might theorize and consider concrete questions of women, we are inspired by the work of Sylvia Walby (1999, 2001) and Peggy Reeves Sanday (1976, 2001), who have pointed out in different ways the need for feminist research to bridge an epistemological chasm between feminist theory and policy debate, and by Catherine Lutz's (1995) observation that macro theories—of which choice in education is one example—are implicitly ascribed a masculine gender. Elsewhere, we have used empirical data from surveys, interviews, and participant observation to discuss the particular social and moral constraints that mothers face as parents and educators (David 1993, 1997; Stambach 2001). Here, we present our argument using historical data and mothers' narrative accounts of homeschooling to illustrate women's and men's different—and, as categories, internally variable—perspectives in education. We look first to nineteenth-century educational reform movements and the research conducted on them by way of considering how the roles of mothers in schools—from the early era of common schooling to the present—foreshadow (though do not determine) the current division of labor by gender and reflect shifting complexities of gender politics. We especially revisit the now classic study by Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* ([1963] 1983), and Friedan's own recent reflections on how she came to touch a particular sensitive

moment in American women's history and to spark a whole social movement for change (2001). We ask whether, and if so how, Friedan's themes are, despite the rise of the women's movement and feminism, still evident in the lives of middle-class mothers involved in their children's homeschooling and in choice programs today. We then examine how policy analysts' portrayals of urban and working-class women reflect particular concerns with race and class and speak at odds, though sometimes in concert, with urban advocates' concerns for better schooling.

In examining how gender is woven into today's discussions about school reform, we encountered a unique—if not unexpected—connection between liberal feminist ideas of professionalism and motherhood and neoliberal ideals of markets and education such as those expressed by Coons. Specifically, an asymmetric complementarity emerged between middle-class mothers' desires to make choices, on the one hand, and neoliberal ideas about coupling education with employment, on the other. Whereas Coons's model of school reform sought the relocation of poor urban women to the workplace, middle-class mothers' ideas of school reform supported, in some cases, their decisions to quit work, to stay at home, and to take primary responsibility for educating their children. Middle-class mothers' ideas supported traditional expressions of two-parenting, gender-segregated families in which women work at home and men work in the paid labor force. As traditional expressions, middle-class mothers' self-images as mother-teachers (McDowell 2000) gave force to neoliberal models of school choice by reinforcing the gendered division of labor and linking this division to a consumer-oriented economy. While homeschooling parents are only a small percentage of the choosing population (in numeric terms vouchers, charter schools, and, especially, inter/intradistrict enrollment figure more prominently), homeschooling mothers' orientations provide a window through which to better view and understand the values of the traditional family that are at the heart of neoliberal visions of choice in education.

## Nineteenth-century educational reform and the roles of mothers in schools up to the civil rights era

In the early "common school reform" era—an era associated with Horace Mann's ([1848] 1957) call for a common, free education that would militate against the emergence of social unrest and enhance social unity—maternal organizations and mothers' clubs were central to the develop-

ment of education policy.[4] Dedicated to a spectrum of issues ranging from the education of mothers in matters of child rearing to meeting the material and professional needs of teachers and administrators, mothers' clubs and maternal associations provided a formal role for women in public education even as they limited and circumscribed women's participation. Club women, some of whom were electing members to serve on school boards by the 1870s (Cutler 2000, 78; Reese 2002), directed their efforts to matters most members believed fell within the natural domain of motherhood: child care, community development, and the improvement of family life, among them. Rooted in the antislavery, temperance, and moral reform associations of the mid-nineteenth century, the activities and philosophies of these maternal associations fed the creation of the U.S. National Congress of Mothers in 1897—renamed the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (NCPT) in 1908—and the Women's Cooperative Guild, founded by British wives of working-class men in the late nineteenth century (Lewis 1980). Before World War I, the British Women's Cooperative Guild supported programs that promoted women's and children's health and education; after the war, when policy makers began increasingly to speak about the importance of parental involvement, the Women's Guild stressed the continued need for recognizing mothers' services (Lewis 1980, 13). The shift in language from mothers to parents was emblematic of changes in the mediating role of the state between home and school. British policy makers' concern for physical efficiency in the war-era context of a perceived need to maintain the Anglo-Saxon race replaced the guild's emphasis on motherhood with the view that early education was more a matter of national than maternal concern. Similarly, contemporaneous discourses of scientific efficiency and domesticity as a science in the United States qualified mothers' roles in education through a language of scientific management.

Nonetheless, both British and American women's organizations at this time promoted legislation that supported women's and children's health and education. The U.S. National Congress of Mothers (NCM) and its local dues-paying parent-teacher associations (PTAs) lent support to the U.S. Children's Bureau, advocated for a separate justice system for juveniles, adopted kindergarten as a platform for education reform, argued the need for playgrounds in cities, and, by 1928, worked to get hot lunches available in public schools. Composed primarily of white middle- and upper-middle-class women—in 1908, mothers in the NCPT outnumbered

[4] See Lewis 1980; Ladd-Taylor 1997; Grant 1998; Reese 2002.

fathers eight to one (Cutler 2000, 46)—the NCM worked for the benefit of not only members' children but also the children of poor and immigrant families.

The social composition of early twentieth-century mothers' clubs tells a story about assumptions made today in educational policy making about race and social class. In response to what many African-American mothers identified in the early twentieth century as the white and segregationist norms of the NCPT, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) organized itself formally in 1926. More resilient than the NCPT against early twentieth-century administrators' contentions that a system of education operated more efficiently by principles of scientific management than by sentiments of maternal affect (Grant 1998, 98), NCCPT mothers, themselves also of the middle class (Salem 1990), rejected arguments about the need to educate children using behaviorist techniques of reward and scheduling and preferred to raise their children according to more seemingly authoritarian principles of compliance and respect. Such principles had served historically, according to some observers, to ensure "safe passage through the shoals of white society" (Grant 1998, 99; see also Polatnick 1997).[5] However, the cultural legacy of the NCCPT in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, combined with many white administrators' beliefs about the intellectual inferiority of African Americans, weighed against the practical possibility that the NCCPT and NCPT would hold equal sway in early twentieth-century education policy. In the eyes of many NCPT members and education policy makers, some of whom had relocated their families to the suburbs by the 1930s (Cutler 2000, 74), African-American mothers, particularly those who had migrated to the urban areas of the north, were in need themselves of basic education and parenting instruction. Chapters of the NCCPT were the objects of NCPT's educational programs and outreach policies. Thus, the actions and limited interactions of NCPT and NCCPT chapters in the early twentieth century suggest evidence of a perceived racialized and social-classed urban-suburban divide on the part of the NCPT—a divide not dissimilar to today's images of maternal urban poverty and masculinized theories evident in descriptions such as Coons's above.

In Britain, where the Women's Cooperative Guild was founded by working-class wives and mothers and where the specifics of class, race, and ethnic divisions took their own configurations, the decisions of policy makers nonetheless reflect a common theme of feminized poverty and

[5] See Grant 1998, 95–112, for the more comprehensive discussion of the NCCPT from which ours is drawn.

masculinized theory. British education policy of the early twentieth century continued to differentiate schools and curricula virtually by social class, that is, as academic, technical, and commercial, with the consequence that upper-middle- and ruling-class families increasingly chose to send their children to "public" boarding schools that emphasized curricula stressing liberal studies and "the classics" (David 1980, 59–61). Located in the country along new rail lines, these secondary schools symbolized the opposite of class-differentiated urban schools. From the vantage of the British working-class Women's Cooperative Guild, countryside boarding schools were the venues to which the wealthy and elite could retreat. From the vantage of elite schools in the countryside, urban-located differentiated schools were training grounds for the working class (David 1980; Lewis 1980). Thus, as with African-American observations that the NCPT harbored segregationist norms, the British Women's Cooperative Guild and British mothers' organizations generally illuminated patterns of social class and hierarchy in education—patterns that precede and tie in with today's images of maternal urban poverty and masculinized theories of school reform.

In the interim of the past hundred-plus years, maternal involvement has been completely intertwined with feminist movements and women's rights issues in the United States, Britain, and other industrialized societies (Berry 1993; Ladd-Taylor 1994). Debates in the first decades of the twentieth century about women's rights and moral authority and about the state's responsibility for social welfare provoked a backlash against feminism and women's involvement in education reform in the subsequent decades, a trend that partly parallels backlashes in the 1990s (David 1993). At both ends of the twentieth century, conservative politicians and popular parenting figures (e.g., Leach 1994) deployed the language of motherhood to effect new legislation and school reform (Ladd-Taylor 1997, 445), and religious groups, although widely ranging in views, debated the God-given and earthly roles of women. In contrast to late nineteenth-century views that maternal sympathies constituted the moral warp and woof of the social fabric, early twentieth-century motherhood was characterized as "a private preoccupation, not a collection of admirable traits" (Baker 1991; in Grant 1998, 40). By the 1920s, an ethos of consumerism and preoccupation with individual self-fulfillment had eclipsed late nineteenth-century maternalist concerns, and some women had begun to defend their public involvement in matters of educational policy less in terms of themselves as mothers (as they had done previously; Reese 2002) and more in terms of themselves as individuals with equal rights and voting powers (Grant 1998, 40). Early twentieth-century Freudian theories of

child development determined that mothers' extended roles in children's lives were healthy (Bowlby 1953), and industry-oriented principles of efficiency gave greater credence to programs that equated learning not with morality but with cognitive and behavioral management. Combined with the child-centered philosophies of some educators at the time, these then-new approaches to child rearing and education celebrated mothers' work for its centrality in creating a well-organized and developmentally appropriate home (Arnot, David, and Weiner 1999, chap. 4).

In keeping with early twentieth-century education administrators' emphasis on scientific management, mid-twentieth-century administrators stressed that the home and the school, while interdependent, were separate and distinct (David 1980). As in other arenas of social life, including the workforce and civic organizations, the relative self-regard of women by midcentury as either children's advocates or leaders in their own right had become a delicate subject of private as well as scholarly debate. According to William W. Cutler, "Those women who returned home from the workforce after World War II now felt a new respect for their sisters in the teaching profession, identifying with them as never before" (2000, 165). Likewise, popular images portrayed teachers as women who were independent and pioneering (Biklen 1995, 92). Women and teachers shared in "the desire to increase social recognition for paid and unpaid work with children" (Biklen 1995, 126). By the latter half of the twentieth century, the mother-teacher relationship that had enlivened the National Congress of Mothers in the late 1800s had, in part, reconfigured itself as a relationship between middle-class working teachers and middle-class working mothers. The class dimensions of this relationship, and its emphasis on employment, became a tacit factor in informing feminism's "second wave" of activism. Liberal feminists (e.g., Harding 1970; McBride 1973) argued that women deserved to be recognized as individuals even as they experienced common predicaments by virtue of their positions within society and families. In a transformation of what maternalist associations and mothers' clubs had previously emphasized, Friedan and other leaders of the women's movement maintained that women ought to work to advance their own higher education and to break from the patriarchal bonds that characterized typical suburban, middle-class families (Friedan 2001). It is to this disaggregation of women and domesticity that we turn next, and to a discussion of the ways in which the civil-rights-era ideas of choice and freedom, and the more recent (but not unprecedented) emphases on consumer-oriented market approaches, have become unevenly woven into the meanings of choice in education.

### The "feminine mystique" and mothers' involvement in home-school relations

In contrast to what is typical of our present day, popular writers and academics of the civil rights era frequently focused on women's education as an explicit topic of public policy. Friedan called for a "new life plan for women" that entailed pursuing higher education to escape the "baby trap" (Peck 1971). A host of early second-wave feminist studies raised questions about the place of gender in social policies, and by the early 1990s Carol Gilligan and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) had articulated policies designed to address girls' and women's self-esteem (American Association of University Women 1991; Gilligan 1993).[6] In Britain, scholars and activists involved in the National Child Care Campaign rallied the labor movement and trade unions to press for national child-care policies (New and David 1985, 349–51). Liberal feminists' calls for women to take positive steps toward enriching their lives through education contributed to political and popular support for educational reforms—among them Title IX of the U.S. Education Amendment of 1972, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded education programs; state-level vocational education acts that ensure men and women equal opportunities to train in any field; the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 in Britain, which had specific educational clauses to ensure equal educational opportunities (David 1980); and the establishment of women's studies programs in many colleges and universities. Activists called for a change in social norms and an expansion of women's educational opportunities, yet their messages did not correspond in any direct manner to a reduction in the activities of parent-teacher associations (Ladd-Taylor 1994; Broward County Council of PTAs 2003). Indeed, activists' calls for women to engage in education appear to have reinvigorated PTA activities, both by leading to the greater attribution of professional qualities to leaders within parent-teacher associations and, perhaps paradoxically, by fueling groups of middle-class mothers who reacted against the message of liberal feminism. The majority of "parents" in parent-teacher organizations continued to be mothers of elementary-school-age children, and, in state- and national-level organizations, most were mothers from middle- and upper-middle-class white suburban families.

What had changed in the years following the civil rights era was the

[6] See Stacey, Bereaud, and Daniels 1974; Joffe 1977; Chodorow 1978; Thorne and Yalom 1982; Hewlett 1986; Smith 1987.

backdrop against which mothers, now as "parents," defined themselves as a collective. Understanding the changing social patterns of these years is important for understanding why gender is so often downplayed today, or even ignored, as an issue in debates about school choice, or why, when taken up, gender is typically deployed in uncritical and antifeminist ways. Careful to distinguish their project from what popular discourse often thought of as the anti-institutional operations of "radical feminists," middle-class mothers involved in public education over the course of the 1980s and beyond typically underemphasized their roles as reformers and activists and instead highlighted their roles within traditional, two-gender nuclear families. As Sari Knopp Biklen says of teachers in the mid-1980s, mothers attempted to "avoid the gender issues that connected them" (Biklen 1995, 127), knowing that, while gender described them, reactionary responses to feminism might undermine them.

This was not the case for all mothers: not all abandoned the language of individual and collective rights that feminists had elaborated (see New and David 1985). In a new era of unionized teachers and collective bargaining in the United States, some American mothers worked to defend the interests and rights of parents (see Cutler 2000, 188). And in Britain, preschool playgroups of the 1970s and 1980s, organized under the umbrella of the Pre-schools Parents Association (see David 1980; Finch 1984; New and David 1985, 120–21), were composed of mainly middle-class "mums" who rotated as volunteers to assist the playgroup leader and served as information brokers for policies and programs on education. Yet in general, the public image of parental involvement in education since the 1980s has moved toward greater "genderlessness." Members of the widely publicized U.S. Scarsdale group, for instance, who contested the legality of requiring students to take state standardized exams in 2002, chose to portray themselves as a collective of "parents," not "mothers," who desired "a say" or a "choice" in their children's education. Their acronym, STOP, State Testing Opposed by Parents, obscured the fact that the active participants were mothers and that many were professionally employed—though it did not prevent the media from using gender to portray STOP members as overinvolved mothers and thus to use a reactionary portrayal of feminism to undermine the position of the group (*New York Times* journalist James Traub [2002], for instance, suggested that wealthy Scarsdale "soccer moms" used their upper-class social standing to unfairly advocate for their children).

Mothers' depictions of homeschooling life, and popular literature and Internet sites produced by and for homeschool parents, are likewise rich

with gendered images, even though they seldom, if ever, discuss gender explicitly or even problematize it. Top-selling books, including *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Homeschooling* (Ransom 2001) and *Creating a Cooperative Learning Center: An Idea Book for Homeschooling Families* (Houk 2000), neither index nor discuss the subjects of mothers, fathers, women, men, or the history of women as child advocates and teachers. Nor do they discuss in any overt manner women's positions within families as caretakers and educators. Such positions seem to be assumed in these works' association of homeschooling with maternal parenting. Some writers, such as Michael Farris, author of *The Homeschooling Father* (1999), make gender an overt issue, especially insofar as father-teaching is a departure from a cultural norm. But the majority of works, including essays written in more scholarly registers (e.g., Staehle 2000; Long 2001; Pawlas 2001), use *parents* without any focused examination of gender. Dori Staehle (2000) subtitles her work "A Mother's Reflections on Homeschooling" but does not discuss mothers as a social group or conceptual category. Joyce Fleck Long, a homeschooling mother who writes about what other parents might expect from the homeschooling experience, notes that her son, as part of his homeschooling program, "designed a remodeling project for our home" and that in the course of homeschooling her children, she helped them learn "to take their own place within the family unit" (2001, 3). Staehle, also a homeschooler, notes that her "husband, Mark," is a "Human Resources Manager" and that she, "a former foreign language teacher and finance professor," spends a lot of time figuring out her children's learning styles and developing a tailored approach to their education (2000, 2). Comments such as these are rich in gender imagery yet use *parent* for both mothers and fathers, even when they are not interchangeable (cf. David 1989, 51).

Moreover, the homeschool literature abounds with the assumption that all parents approach schooling as interested consumers. This assumption is implicit in directions about how to get started with homeschooling. In a section subtitled "Homeschooling and Your Rights," Marsha Ransom writes in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Homeschooling* that "you have the right to read and interpret the law as it pertains to you. It's your responsibility to make the final decision about how you will educate your children. No one else can do it for you" (2001, 53). She recommends that readers "consider all the information and advice you're given and the books and articles you've read, and make the choice you are comfortable with" (2001, 54), suggesting that, after researching the law and shopping for alternatives, every parent can arrive at a reasoned decision about what

is best, educationally, for their children. The cartoon drawing of a woman "speaking educationese"—a motif that appears thirty-plus times in the book—reinforces the idea that the active parent is a mother.

Images portrayed in advice and idea books convey a particular consumer and demographic profile that includes selective public resource use and patterned civic involvement. Long (2001), in a section subtitled "Examining My Educational Philosophy," recalls that she found it "tempting to purchase anything that might enhance" her children's learning and that "museums, zoos, theatres, nature centers, and other historical landmarks" became incorporated into her lesson plans (68). Long's choice of materials and sites to visit reflects the tastes of a particular cadre of Americans. Indeed, according to a federal study conducted in 1999, parents of homeschooled children have higher levels of education and are more likely than parents of traditionally schooled children to be non-Hispanic whites (Gewertz 2001, 12). Likewise, they are more likely to reside in certain areas of the country and to concentrate in particular states (Pawlas 2001).

Popular literature and parents' own emphasis on mothers' greater involvement in making choices about education contribute to the notion that concentrated parenting on the part of mothers is more likely than that of fathers to foster healthy families and, by extension, communities—a belief some observers have referred to as an "ideology of intensive mothering" (Hays 1996, 50). Sociologist Sharon Hays contends that "the ideology of intensive mothering has grown more extensive and elaborate in the present day, when the trend toward mothers' participation in the paid workforce is undeniable and the logic of the market and bureaucracy are increasingly invading the home" (1996, 50). To this we would add that the ideology of intensive mothering has grown more extensive and elaborate in education, where the trend toward mothers' participation in their children's schooling is undeniable and the logic of the market and bureaucracy are increasingly invading the school. The gendered and social-classed autobiographical tenor of many "how-to" descriptions of homeschooling mothers' involvement suggests that an ideology of intensive mothering has survived feminist arguments that have sought to demystify mothering and womanhood, and that this ideology of intensive mothering—avowed in widely read works such as Sara Ruddick's (1989)—has been heavily imbued with a middle-class sense of motherhood and professionalism. Hays writes, "Despite the entry of mothers into the paid workforce, the ideology of intensive mothering [has] persisted. It [has] survived [and, we would add, has surprisingly surpassed] Betty Friedan's (1963) famous attack on the 'feminine mystique,' widespread concern with 'momism,' the condemnation of Spockean methods, and feminism's

'second wave' of activism, which included the proliferation of literature damning the family as an oppressive institution" (Hays 1996, 50).

A middle-class sense of motherhood and professionalism, and of motherhood as preoccupation, is evidenced in the literature on homeschooling, particularly in passages that reflect presumed audiences. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Homeschooling* targets parents who make lists, give up health club memberships, "do aerobics at home to a tape," plan the occasional "glitzy vacation" (even though they should forgo this "luxury" in the interest of budget), and occasionally eat out at restaurants (even though, again in the interest of saving money, they should cook "more meals from scratch") (Ransom 2001, 35, 102)—activities that fall within the domain of middle-class women's traditional domestic work. The association of women's traditional work with a wider vision of society—the literature, for instance, supports a vision of a society with fewer regulations and greater parental/maternal input (Ransom 2001)—suggests, again, that intensive mothering is not about the use of education for women's liberation, as it had been conceptualized by some feminists of the civil rights era and beyond, but about the use of education for the social reproduction of a traditional family.

An ideology of intensive mothering has also survived and surpassed an abundance of educational policy making that has sought to bring about girls' and women's equality by making girls' education a priority and teaching against gender stereotypes. This is evidenced in the popular backlash against gains of equity made in girls' and women's higher education and against claims by popular writers and policy makers that feminism is unnatural and nonmaternal and stymies the competitive learning styles of boys and men (Sommers 2000; Coulter 2001). Rates of women's enrollment in higher education increased significantly in the years following the height of feminism's "second wave." In 1973, for instance, fewer than half (43 percent) of all U.S. female high school graduates aged sixteen to twenty-four were enrolled in college, compared to almost two-thirds (63 percent) in 1994; 17 percent of young women as compared to 26 percent of young men had completed four or more years of college in 1971, as compared to 27 percent of both in 1994 (U.S. Department of Education 1997). Similar trends appear in the United Kingdom, although the actual percentages are far lower than in the United States. In 1975–76, 6.5 percent of girls had completed one or more General Certificate of Education (GCE) A levels (enabling them to enter higher education), as compared with 7.6 percent of boys, while the figures were virtually trebled and reversed by the year 2000. Eighteen percent of girls had achieved one or more A level, while only 15 percent of boys had. There were similar

reversals in the numbers and proportions of female students of all ages entering higher education, with significantly more women than men in higher education on a part-time basis.[7]

These figures reflect one influence of feminist activism on improving educational opportunities and experiences for girls, but they are sometimes oddly used to suggest that gender is a solved problem in education. Popular authors, such as Christina Hoff Sommers (2000) and Ann Coulter (2001) in the United States and James Tooley (2002) in Britain, point to girls' gains as evidence of an antimale system, and legislators and public policy makers sometimes use girls' gains to direct public attention toward the concerns of boys and men. Theirs is the call to "return" middle-class households to the seemingly natural configurations of two-gender, labor-divided families and to reinvigorate, using antifeminist discourse, a cultural ideal of intensive mothering.[8] Implicit in such calls for revision is the view that gender is the natural basis on which a coherent society is built. It is the basis of the family unit that, when focused on men, binds wayward males to duties they would otherwise abandon and, when focused on women, associates mothers with the natural care and biology of "Mother Nature." Like Coons's portrayal of the engineered marriage of male market theory and female urban poverty, ideologies of intensive mothering depict gender as a naturalized category on which larger social units such as schools and families are built.

In contrast, civil-rights-era feminists targeted education as central to resolving women's discontent and argued that professional activity independent of home and children would solve the problem of women's alienation. "The key to the trap of [housewifery]," Friedan wrote, "is, of course, education. The feminine mystique has made higher education for women seem suspect, unnecessary, and even dangerous. But I think that education, and only education, has saved, and can continue to save, American women from the greater dangers of the feminine mystique" ([1963] 1983, 357). Friedan also noted that some of the women she interviewed "confessed" that they wanted to combine motherhood and a career. And she linked women's liberation through higher education to its "serious use in society." "Among the women I interviewed," wrote Friedan, "education was the key to the problem that has no name only when it was

[7] See "National Statistics Online" at http://www.statistics.gov.uk and the Department for Education and Skills at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/index.htm.

[8] Tooley (2002), a professor of education in Britain, mischievously titles his book *The Miseducation of Women*. His argument parallels that of Charles Murray (1994), inter alia, in the United States.

part of a new life plan, and meant for serious use in society—amateur or professional" (362).

Today's choice-programming parents—the majority of them mothers—appear to approach their project as a "new life plan." Not only in cases of homeschooling but in the vast majority of parent-initiated public charter schools, mothers engage in the bulk of the work of proposing, designing, implementing, and administering new school choice opportunities.[9] In some cases they combine their interest in participating in their children's education with advancing their own careers and education. Staehle, for instance, enrolled in a university-level teacher-training program. Having already earned a degree that had enabled her to work as a finance professor and foreign-language teacher, she ended her paid work, began teaching her children, and then, simultaneous to homeschooling, "entered a graduate program for gifted education" (2000, 2): "As my graduate program was more geared to the moderately gifted child in a public school classroom or gifted program, there was little that was applicable to students like Nicole and Evan [whom Staehle describes as highly gifted]. I abandoned this program and its philosophies and decided to learn from my children" (2000, 2). Yet this graduate program established a pattern of managerialism and professionalism that characterizes Staehle's work. She and her family "drew up a contract" that designated Dori the "Head Teacher and Director" of the children's program, and Dori eventually established herself as a consultant and tutor to other homeschoolers. Long (2001) approached her work as a social mission. She concludes her article "Schooling at Home" with a philosophical statement about homeschooling and society: "As each child is positively influenced, society can only benefit from the improvements. I realize now that my experience was both unique and typical of many other home schooling households, for home schooling is an expression of an educational philosophy that can only be understood in relation to society's current policies and instructional network. The growing momentum of home schooling seems to indicate a greater need for alternative forms of education" (2001, 69). Similarly, mothers involved in designing choice options and charter schools within traditional public schools often frame their work in terms of community effort and a social mission. Susan Moser (in Stambach 2001, 205), cofounder of a U.S. public charter school, asks rhetorically, "If this is what's happening with my children [i.e., being taught the same thing year after year], what's going on across the entire district? How many kids are sitting

[9] David 1993; David et al. 1993; David, West, and Ribbens 1994; Reay and Ball 1998; Yancey 2000; Stambach 2001.

in class year after year, learning the same thing? . . . When it became clear that we had the chance to propose a charter school for our kids, I thought it was important to include a curriculum that would be cumulative and age-graded."

A language of rights, social reform, and activism not dissimilar to feminism's "second wave" pervades middle-class suburban mothers' involvement in choice programs in education, leading some to describe homeschooling mothers as "closet feminists," not in the "classic National-Organization-of-Women sense" but in that they, along liberal feminist lines, advocate "the same social, political, and economic rights for homeschooling mother-teachers as for the public and/or private educational system" (McDowell 2000, 187). We concur that there is an uncanny similarity between liberal feminism and homeschooling mothers, but, as revealed through narratives such as those above, mothers' focus on rights and obligations circumvents feminist theorizations of gender as a subject for action and analysis. Mothers' self-portrayals and descriptions of their work as home teachers reinscribe normative ideas about traditional families and illustrate again how gender has been used in choice contexts to neutralize seemingly unnatural feminist principles.

## How feminist theory can contribute to enriching understandings

The uneven and unproblematic presence of gender in debates and research on choice in education is puzzling but not paralyzing. School choice is richly imbued with a history of maternal involvement. It is symbolically and pragmatically gendered in significant ways that go beyond what researchers and policy analysts have recognized and respected. The use of allegorical imagery in theoretical approaches to choice programming, and the practical fact that mothers are more involved in making decisions about school options than are fathers, forces us to think about how and when gender becomes a basis of new forms of inclusion and exclusion and to consider how and when gender is hijacked as a category and used perversely against feminist theories. Language about symbolically male markets and female urban-poor mothers (e.g., Moe 2001) reflects a more subtle backlash against feminism and girls' education than hitherto acknowledged. Instead of arguing that "radical" or even "liberal feminists" are making unreasonable demands on resource-limited educational systems, policy analysts and some neoliberal researchers now point to evidence of the "closing" of the academic-achievement "gender gap" (Arnot, David, and Weiner 1999) and to girls' superior performance on tests (Biddulph 1995; Office for Standards in Education 1996; Sommers 2000)

to describe—and simultanenously dismiss—feminism as having done its "job" in education. This dismissal facilitates increased attention toward matters of race and class and furthers the use of naturalized images of a traditional family to describe, reinscribe, and anticipate a normative, but not comprehensive, picture of a social order (Bullen, Kenway, and Hay 2000).

For the past thirty years, the so-called traditional family has undergone a series of transformations, including an increase in divorce rates in the 1970s, the subsequent reconfiguring of nuclear families, the sharp increase in work hours and commuting times, and changing ethnic demographics.[10] Recent welfare reform has transformed many urban families, starting with the creation of greater demand for child care, technical skills and education, and employment. Economic restructuring has accompanied familial shifts in both urban and suburban worlds, sometimes with the effect of producing similarities, such as demands for child care and trends toward working long hours, and at other times reinforcing differences, as when some suburban household incomes double while household income barely rises in inner cities. Choice programs in education that reformulate bureaucratic regulations and allow for greater parental involvement and flexibility must be understood in connection with these trends and changes in the overlap of suburban and urban communities. Mothers who have greater command of resources, time, and political capital are more likely to participate in and benefit from calls for parental involvement. While this does not exclude urban or full-time working mothers (the two are not mutually exclusive), it brings them together in novel ways. It blurs the distinction between mothers who work in the salaried and waged labor force and those who work in the home as "full-time mothers," even as it sometimes engages them problematically in rivalries over resources and the control of the direction of policies.

Related to this, the consumerist ideals that lie at the heart of school-choice programs presuppose that all people have opportunities to choose, that all people approach schooling as a consumerist product, and that all people engage in the same kinds of thinking about choice and consumerism—as is evidenced above in some of the excerpts drawn from home-schooling manuals and mothers' statements. Policy analysts and researchers would do well to approach their market theories reflexively; considering a policy's embedded values about selection and rational criteria would highlight assumptions about rational choice and about gender and class

[10] David 1998; Kiernan, Land, and Lewis 1998; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Holland, Lutz, and Nonini 1999, 1, paraphrased here.

issues implicit in market approaches. Approaching market theories reflexively would not only show how some reforms (e.g., vouchers and programs designed to reduce class size in cases where schools have a percentage of "minority" students), initiated for the sake of alleviating urban poverty, embed middle-class interests and consumerist practices; it would also illuminate how educational policies, like school activities themselves, remain thickly coded in urban communities as "middle class" and "white." In other words, looking at the gendered assumptions about families and employment, and about the interface between home and school, would show how gender, race, and class intertwine, not simply add on to one another. This interconnection is as much a factor in considering the formulation of policy as it is in considering how consumerist and class-oriented ideals are crafted into policy to reconfigure social organization, gendered identity, (re)productivity, and consumption. In an arena such as choice in education where "parental involvement" and "family interests" are at the heart of policy, it is crucial for feminist analyses of gender to examine the ways people conceptualize social differences and organize their social worlds.

Finally, to connect this second point to the theme of history with which we began our commentary, expositions of school choice would do well to consider the rich history of women in education. Mid- to late nineteenth-century economic and social policies sought to free people from the bonds of family and kin and to institute free markets governed by scientific methods of management (Reese 2002). Education, always closely tied to the domestic sphere, was less subject to these reforms than other institutions but nonetheless had become more "rationalized" by the early twentieth century. Over the course of the past hundred-plus years, intensive mothering has persisted as a cultural ideal, altering its tenor with the flow of time to meet the changing course of employment and activism. Whether in the shape of family values or in the form of professionalized mothers who school their children at home or take up the call to reform local schools, an ideology of intensive mothering continues to fuel parental involvement in education. It is embedded in theoretical approaches to choice policy in versions where urban mothers are figuratively rescued or saved by market theories, and it is infused in programs that set out to give parents, as a whole, a greater voice in education. People who study how policy functions would do well to unpack the history of this involvement. Understanding the expressed as well as unarticulated gendered dynamics of parental involvement in education is a first step toward transforming old dichotomies.

All of this is another way of saying that if we are to find a more useful

way to link feminist research to educational policy, we should consider seriously how to conceptualize gender without reducing it to numbers or abstracting it and using it allegorically. We would do well to emphasize the interplay of policy and social structure and to identify and understand how policies embed particular notions of families and employment while focusing on the needs of certain sectors. We would do well to reflect carefully on what it means to have a choice in education and consider seriously that models of two-parent nuclear families, not genderless individuals, are often embedded in choice policies.

If we are to find a more useful way of studying, understanding, and theorizing choice programming, we might begin with the premise that education is not a commodity like any other but is historically and culturally constructed and tied in unique ways to families and to parenting. We might recognize that policy recommendations that target urban women and underprivileged families often deploy gender in conventional two-parent and gender-dichotomous ways that do not always spell out the selective costs or benefits of these categorizations for women. In this way, as we make substantive and theoretical attempts toward understanding the gender dimensions of choice programming, possibilities may be created for women in any number of circumstances—as single mothers, separated or divorced mothers, married, employed, or otherwise—to pursue their visions of themselves and their worlds, as women and mothers, in educational programming and policy. The result may or may not bring us any closer to breaking free of gender structures that constitute and construct our social lives, but it would at any rate enable more mothers, as parents and educators, to work collectively in the arena of education, contributing, in their myriad ways, to the development of future generations.

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