

# A feminist manifesto for education

Cliff Jones reviews *Miriam David's recent book*

Miriam E. David, *A Feminist Manifesto for Education*, Polity, 2016 ISBN 9 781509 504275

'I would not be seen dead walking down the street with a feller carrying a shopping bag. It's a woman's job.'

This was fifteen year old Agnes to me not long after the passing of the Equal Pay Act (1970) as I automatically reached for the bags from the chipshop. We had taken the order from her classmates who used to come back to school in the evening to make progress with their exam projects (coursework). Homes were sometimes crowded and noisy. It was a school for girls in a very Catholic part of Liverpool. We had a contract with Radio Merseyside to turn some of these projects into programmes to be broadcast. They were often family-based, containing interviews with grandmothers as guardians of both family history and values.

Agnes was more assertive than me and on home ground. The fact that my mother's mother had been born a hundred year's earlier on the Protestant side of the road gave me no authority. But I was her teacher and insisted. We compromised on one bag each.

Reading Miriam David's brilliant book reminds me that even back then it was not enough to believe that what we thought of as 'progress' (abolition of slavery, the factory acts, extension of the franchise and the Welfare State, for example) was demarcated by Acts of Parliament and great 'events' and clearly defined 'movements'. I suppose that in the 1970s we might also have heard a lot the phrase 'women's lib' and felt that here was a classification that matched all circumstances. It did not. Agnes was not out of date and neither was I an arbiter with the power to make her fit my preferred social template.

This is not a long book but neither is it a compressed summary. Miriam David skilfully

provides great detail using the perspectives of time, place, culture and scholarship. And yet it is a very readable page-turner. It is also a critical sense-maker revealing the influence upon education of instrumental, target-driven, possessive individualism. For too many politicians feminism is a pressure group whose historical significance has faded. The recently proposed A-level Politics syllabus did not totally exclude feminism: candidates could, if they were bothered enough or had even heard of it, write about feminism as an example of an interest group. It seems the decision has been taken that education is to be less collective, less inclusive and less social. It is now about doing better than others. We might think that feminism is in the interests of all. Some powerful decision-makers have reduced it to a nuisance that, if it makes enough noise, might be placated from time to time.

We learn about the global and historical complexities, changes of direction and differing emphases of feminism and also about the hard issues of violence that we must confront. Pick up the book and probably the first word you will see is *Feminist* but *Manifesto* and *Education* are crucial to its meaning. Miriam David makes manifest that education is a key to creating change.

It is divided into two parts. The first concentrates upon 'Socio-Cultural and Political Contexts'. Feminism is never context free. Politics is about the arrival at and establishment of public values so who might take part in that process? Whose voices are heard? We are given a comprehensive account of research on gender. We are also shown how research, social action and formal codification of rights may have generated statistical evidence for the appearance of increased equality but not led to its normalisation. The rise of female participation in education, including the rise in the number of women occupying senior positions, has, for some, been a

disturbing phenomenon. When David Willetts, former Minister of State for Universities and Science, noticed this rise he did not celebrate it; he did not regard it as unremarkable and normal; he saw it as an unwelcome challenge to which government should respond.

The second part is 'Feminist Waves about Gender Equalities and Gender Violence'. Among many the work of Olive Banks is acknowledged here. Biography, life history and the concept of waves of feminists continue to be important keys to understanding. We might also recall Banks's first book, *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education* (1955) and her other work on education. She personified the intersecting struggles and issues of class, gender and limited access to formal education. She retired the only female professor in the University of Leicester.

Miriam David draws our attention to a lack of commitment on the part of governments to take consistent, comprehensive and supportive approaches to gender-related violence. Why has it been such a struggle to persuade politicians to even circulate to secondary schools information about female genital mutilation (FGM)?

The 1970s political education movement promised for a while to provide a social/educational context for the normalisation of gender in the curriculum. The later suppression of thematic approaches to learning has, in my view, made it more difficult. Work is being done on, for example, mental health and wellbeing in education. That might help. But even if schoolteachers undertaking higher degrees wish to bring into the classroom what they have learned about feminism the hand of officialdom remains dead and discouraging.

Agnes's home ground? Later, boys and girls there helped plan the largest housing co-operative in Western Europe. Academic credit came by means of a customised GCSE. It was stopped: not mainstream. It also generated a brilliant GCSE in Women's Studies. It was not, we were told, a subject worthy of study.

Do read this strong and important book. I have touched on so little that it offers. The issues have not gone away: they have become more urgent.



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