

# Children in three contexts

## Family, education and social development

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*This paper explores the relationship between family environment and behaviour of primary school children living in three family contexts. It uses data from studies including children of married heterosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples, and examines the extent to which these children differ with regard to scholastic achievement and aspects of social development. It shows that in the majority of cases, the most successful are children of married couples, followed by children of cohabiting couples and finally by children of homosexual couples.*

The significance of the family for the educational success and social development of children has already been documented (Connell et al 1982; Brown 1990). Writers from diverse backgrounds have produced evidence which supports the notion that family resources in general and structural conditions and parental attributes in particular are very significant for shaping the future of the child. In spite of this, very little is known about the effects the nature of the family has on the development of the child; we know very little, for instance, about whether families of heterosexual married couples, heterosexual cohabiting couples and homosexual cohabiting couples offer significantly different environments for their young children. Have children of married heterosexual parents better chances for a better social and educational development than children of heterosexual cohabiting parents or homosexual parents? Does the nature of the relationship of the parents make a difference? Are children of cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual parents 'children of a lesser God'?

In this paper an attempt will be made to seek some answers to these questions. Using findings from studies conducted by the author relating to educational achievement and social development of children living in these three contexts (marriage, heterosexual cohabitation, and homosexual cohabitation), the relationship between

the nature of parental relationship and the educational and social development of young children will be explored.

### METHOD

This paper presents findings which were collected through a sample of 174 primary school children living in three different types of families. More specifically this sample included 58 children of heterosexual cohabiting couples, 58 children of heterosexual married couples and 58 children of homosexual (47 lesbian and 11 gay) couples, matched according to age, gender, year of study, and parental characteristics (education, occupation and employment status). All children were of primary school age, and were living with at least one of their biological parents at the time of the study.

The sample of the parents was chosen from the context of previous studies. The homosexual couples were taken from the homosexual project which is currently in progress, and were chosen by means of snowball sampling procedures. All couples came from metropolitan and country areas of NSW and Victoria, and constitute a part of a larger project on homosexual couples which is currently under way. Only couples with children of primary school age were considered in this study.

These couples were matched according to socially significant criteria (eg, age,

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number of children, education, occupation, and socio-economic status) to married and cohabiting (heterosexual) couples taken from a longitudinal cohabitation study conducted by the author over the last 20 years (Sarantakos 1984; Sarantakos 1992); this study included 330 married and 330 cohabiting heterosexual couples and over 900 children.

The selection of the children for this study began with the children of homosexual couples. As stated above, all children of the cohabiting homosexual couples which are currently included in the homosexual cohabitation project were included in the study. These children were born in a previous relationship (marriage, cohabitation or unmarried motherhood) and were subsequently brought into the homosexual relationship. These children were subsequently matched to children living in families of married and cohabiting heterosexual couples of same or similar attributes (education, occupation, employment status, etc) to those of the homosexual parents. One child of primary school age from each unit was selected to match the children of homosexual couples. This process resulted in 174 children, who constituted the sample of this study.

The study was interested in exploring a large number of issues, attitudes, conditions, etc, regarding parents, children and schools. Issues related to parents and schools will be discussed in another place. In this paper the following areas will be considered:

- the level of academic performance of these children at school, by considering their achievement in a number of representative subjects (eg, language, mathematics, social studies and sport);
- their social behaviour at school, attitudes to school and learning, and educational aspirations;
- some fundamental personality issues, such as sex identity, autonomy and power;
- school-related family issues such as parental support, participation in household tasks, methods of control and punishment, and parent-school relationships.

Information for this study was collected primarily from teachers and only secondarily from parents and children. This information was collected by means of semi-structured questionnaires, and was enriched through telephone interviews. Information already available through previous studies (cohabitation project, homosexual cohabitation project) was also considered. Measures of achievement included a child's aptitude in various areas and were computed by the teachers, according to a child's performance in class and in out-of-class interests and activities, and by means of criteria which will be discussed later in this article. Analysis of variance allowed us to test the significance of the differences identified in the various contexts.

It must be noted that although precautions have been taken to control for bias, objectivity and distortions, certain aspects of the nature of the study deserve special attention. In the first place the sample is rather small; a larger and more representative sample might bring to light more accurate and more detailed data on children living in diverse family environments. In a similar vein, the measures chosen to evaluate the status of children are limited; considering more diverse measures of children's performance may enhance the overall image of children. Finally, using teachers as informers may entail an inherent bias which could distort the real picture of children. For these reasons, the findings of this study reported below should be interpreted in the context of these parameters.

## FINDINGS IN GROUP DIFFERENCES

### Language

The first issue that was considered in the context of this study was related to the level of performance of all children in the area of language. The main question was about whether children living in certain family environments performed differently than children living in other environments. In order to establish the linguistic abilities of these children a series of tests were employed, administered by the teachers; in most cases they were part

of the normal school assessment but some additional tests were also initiated just for this study. These tests contained a number of elements, such as reading, writing, comprehension, verbal skills, vocabulary, and composition. An overall score was computed by the teacher and assigned to each student of the three family groups on the basis of his/her performance in each of these areas ranging from 1 (very low performance), through 5 (moderate performance) to 9 (very high performance).

The findings arrived at through this process of evaluation can be summarised as follows:

1. the achievement of the children of the various family groups varied with family type;
2. the children of the married couples achieved the highest scores and the children of the homosexual couples the lowest: the average achievement score of the children of homosexual, cohabiting and married parents was 5.5, 6.8 and 7.7 respectively; the respective standard deviations were 0.9319, 0.6097, and 0.6606 ( $F=128.66$ , significant at 0.000 level);
3. the average score of the children of homosexual couples in all items of assessment was lower than the average of the children of the other two groups, and it was more pronounced in the areas of verbal skills, vocabulary and composition.

### Mathematics

The achievement of the children in arithmetic was concentrated in three major areas, namely, basic mathematical skills, knowledge of the basic operations and application of arithmetic in solving problems. The performance of the children in the three family groups shows the same trend that was identified in the context of language: here children of homosexual partners showed an overall performance of 5.5, as against 7.0 and 7.9 for the children of cohabiting and married couples respectively; the respective standard deviations were 0.9753, 0.5484 and 0.5414. ( $F=167.48$ , significant at the 0.000 level). While the achievement of

the children of homosexual couples in the area of problem solving was satisfactory (6.9), their score in basic mathematical skills was 5.6 (which is below the average score of all students of 7.1); and their ability in doing operations was lower still, their score being 4.9, while the average score of all students was 6.5.

### Social studies

In the area of social studies, the performance of the children in our study is quite different from that demonstrated in the areas of language and arithmetic. Here, children of homosexual couples tend to perform slightly better than the children of the other two groups. The teachers reported that their interest in social issues and their involvement in projects related to social studies were very strong, their knowledge and comprehension of relevant issues above average, and the quality of their work relatively high. The differences between these three groups is shown in their average scores, ie, 7.6, 7.3 and 7.0 for the children of homosexual couples, married couples and cohabiting couples respectively; the respective standard deviations were 1.018, 0.827 and 1.188. ( $F=5.07$ , significant at the 0.008 level). As the figures show, the differences between the scores of the three groups of children are not as pronounced as in previous measures.

### Sport

The interest and involvement in sport activities of the children of the three groups was diverse, with the children of heterosexual cohabiting couples following closely the children of married couples, and with children of homosexual couples far behind. More specifically, the average scores of married, heterosexual cohabiting and homosexual couples were 8.9, 8.3 and 5.9 respectively; the respective standard deviations were 0.6745, 0.9965, 0.9074. ( $F=175.43$ , significant at 0.000 level).

The performance of the children of homosexual couples in sport activities has caused some concern to the teachers. The reason for this concern was that, firstly, children of homosexual couples did not express an

interest in group sport to the same degree as other children; secondly, because of their 'rather passive' orientation to sport; and, thirdly, because of the type of sport interests they chose to pursue – when they did so.

Commenting on the low performance of these children in sport, the teachers added that many children avoided involvement in group activities of any kind, including group work in class and project work in teams, preferring to work alone; they were considered by their teachers to be 'introverts' and 'loners'. Experiences in their personal and family life were thought to have motivated them to avoid working with and relying on others, and to mistrust other children – in the case of children of lesbians, males in particular.

### Class work, sociability and popularity

The class behaviour of children of all three groups was similar. Overall, most children were reported to listen attentively, to attend closely to classroom activities, to complete assigned homework on time, to obey school rules, to participate in classroom discussions, to volunteer for special tasks, to show interest in subjects taught, and sensitivity to the needs and problems of others, and to enjoy helping others in class, while the teacher was present. In this sense, and without considering at this stage the degree to which these tasks were accomplished, these children were not different.

Nevertheless, more children of homosexual couples were reported to be timid, reserved, unwilling to work in a team, unwilling to talk about family life, holidays and about out-of-school activities in general, to feel uncomfortable when having to work with students of a sex different to the parent they lived with, and to be characterised as loners and as introvert. To a certain extent these feelings were reciprocated by a number of the students in class, who preferred not to work with them, to sit next to them, or work together on a project.

A similar attitude was expressed by these children in their out-of-class activities. In most cases children of

homosexual couples ended up being by themselves, skipping rope or drawing, while the others were involved in team sports. In extreme cases, they have been ridiculed by the other children for some personal habits or beliefs, or for the sexual preferences of their parents. In certain cases, these children were called *sissies*, *lesbians* or *gays*, or asked to tell 'what their parents do at home', where they slept, and so forth. Such incidents were one of the reasons for these children to move to another school, to refuse to go to that school, or even for the parents to move away from that neighbourhood or town.

The averages of sociability scores for the three groups of children, as reported by the teachers, were 7.5 for the children of married couples, 6.5 for the children of cohabiting couples and 5.0 for the children of homosexual couples; the respective standard deviations were 0.9319, 0.991 and 1.0121. ( $F=94.29$ , significant at the 0.000 level).

When two or three children of homosexual parents were attending the same school, and if they happened to know about their family circumstances (and in most cases they did), they tended to group together and to spend their time inside and outside the class together. Such incidents were reported to 'make these kids happier', but also to generate negative reactions on the part of the other school children and to motivate them to take more drastic and more aggressive attitudes towards the children of homosexual families. Parents and teachers alike reported that comments such as 'the pervs are coming', 'don't mix with the sissies', or 'sisterhood is filthy', made by some pupils, were not uncommon.

Another point raised by many teachers is that children of homosexual parents, in comparison to children of the other two family groups, tend to be more overly polite and formal, careful in their behaviour and actions, generally distant, and to show stronger feelings of respect to authority, to teachers, secretaries and to parents of fellow students.

### School and learning

The general attitude of most children to school and to learning was positive. Overall, this attitude was found to

depend on the experiences children have at school, with the students and the teachers. On the whole, most children were found to try hard to please the school in general and the teachers in particular, and to avoid conflicts and disappointments, but children of cohabiting couples (especially homosexuals) demonstrated a stronger attitude to learning than other children. These children seem to have a high tolerance level of irritating behaviour and to act towards the others – students and teachers alike – in a formal, polite and distant manner.

In general, the average score of the children of the various groups, ranked between 1 and 9 by the teachers on the basis of the attitude to school and learning, was 7.5 for the children of married couples, 6.8 for the children of cohabiting couples and 6.5 for the children of homosexual couples; the respective standard deviations were 1.373, 1.179 and 1.183 ( $F = 9.60$ , significant at the 0.000). Obviously, the influence of the attitudes of teachers to life styles on the process of evaluation of students' performance cannot be underestimated. A separate study of these attitudes is currently under way.

### Parent-school relationships

While many married couples (particularly mothers) maintained close relationships with schools and teachers, visited school functions, and saw the teacher frequently, cohabiting couples did so to a lesser extent. In such cases it was more likely that the biological parent of the child visited the school or attended school functions.

With regard to homosexual couples the relationships between parents and the school were relatively weaker and the visits fewer and almost exclusively between the school and the biological parent. In most cases the parent visited the school or the teacher either to discuss problems of the child, or at the teacher's request concerning the child's progress or behaviour at school. In only a few cases both 'parents' visited the school, or explained to the school principal or the teacher the nature of their relationship and asked for consideration. There were also only a few parents who attended parents and teachers meetings, or who offered

volunteer work of any kind. They rarely inquired about the progress of their child at school in person, and when they did so, it was the biological parent who undertook the inquiry, and in most cases by telephone.

Ranked in a continuum between 1 and 9, the average school participation score of the parents was 7.5 for the marrieds, 6.0 for the cohabitants and 5.0 for the homosexual couples ( $F = 151.30$ , significant at the 0.000 level).

### Sex identity

This issue was approached especially with regard to children of homosexual couples who have quite often been thought to have difficulties in establishing a sex identity, that is, to know what is expected of a male or a female, and to behave the way it is expected of a male or a female in the school and in the community in general. This issue was assumed to be particularly relevant for the very young pupils, but it was also a common one among older students.

More particularly, children were reported by teachers to have some identity problems, varying in extent and intensity from case to case. Teachers felt that a number of students of homosexual parents were confused about their identity and what was considered right and expected of them in certain situations. Girls of gay fathers were reported to demonstrate more 'boyish' attitudes and behaviour than girls of heterosexual parents. Most young boys of lesbian mothers were reported to be more effeminate in their behaviour and mannerisms than boys of heterosexual parents. Compared to boys of heterosexual parents, they were reported to be more interested in toys, sport activities and games usually chosen by girls; they cried more often when under the same type of stressful situations; and they more often sought the advice of female teachers.

In general, children of homosexual couples were described by teachers as more expressive, more effeminate (irrespective of their gender) and 'more confused about their gender' than children of heterosexual couples.

With regard to the experiences young children of homosexuals gain in their

everyday life, the findings show that these children usually find it difficult to be fully accepted by their peers as boys or girls. In many cases these children have been harassed or ridiculed by their peers for having a homosexual parent, for 'being queer' and even labelled as homosexuals themselves.

In certain cases, heterosexual parents advised their children not to associate with children of homosexuals, or gave instructions to the teachers to keep their children as much as possible away from children of homosexual couples. Teachers also reported exceptional cases where a group of 'concerned parents' demanded that three children of homosexuals be removed from their school. Others approached the homosexual parents with the same request.

Teachers have reported that children who went through such experiences have suffered significantly in social and emotional terms, but also in terms of scholastic achievement, and have developed negative attitudes to school and learning. These children found it very difficult to adjust in school, to trust friends inside and outside the school, and to join peer groups in general. Children with such experiences were reported to show more interest in the circles of the acquaintances of their parents than in the peers of the school or their neighbourhood.

### Support with homework

The amount of school-related support offered to children by their parents varies among the three family types of our study. In general, all parents offered support to their children; however, children of married couples received support more frequently and in higher proportions.

More particularly, the study shows that the proportion of children receiving assistance with their school work at home increases significantly when we move from the homosexual couples to the cohabiting couples and to the married couples. The extent of support, ranked in a continuum ranging from 1 to 9, was expressed in relevant scores identified by the teachers on the basis of statements made by the children. The average scores for each of the three groups were 7 for the children of married couples, 6.5 for the children of

cohabiting couples and 5.5 for the children of homosexual couples; the respective standard deviations were 0.9688, 0.8057, 1.1698. ( $F = 34.34$ , significant at the 0.000 level).

Personal judgement of the teachers suggests that, in many cases, while children of married couples obtain assistance in all subjects (reading, writing, arithmetic and project work), children of cohabiting and homosexual couples are less likely to obtain assistance in more than reading or arithmetic. Further, married couples are reported to offer assistance more readily and more often of their own accord than parents of the other two groups, who are more likely to assist their children at the child's request and/or on the teacher's advice. Homosexual parents are more likely to employ tutors to assist their children with their homework than parents of the other two groups, who are more likely to assist their children personally. While in families of cohabiting and married couples both parents are likely to be involved in helping their children with their homework, in most homosexual families only the natural parent of the child provides assistance.

Overall, married couples and, to a certain extent, cohabiting couples are reported by the teachers to offer more assistance and more personal support and to be more interested in the school work of their children than homosexual couples. A similar trend was reported with regard to parents assisting their children with sport and other personal tasks. Given that parents of the three groups were matched according to education, the educational status of the parents is excluded as a possible cause of this trend.

### Parental aspirations

Children were asked by their teachers about the educational aspirations of their parents, that is, whether the parents expected them to continue beyond Year 10, to undertake tertiary studies and to have definite plans, and whether they expected them to enter certain occupations. Parents' efforts to facilitate such aspirations were also considered. Teachers fused the information they obtained for each child and expressed it in a score

ranging from 1 to 9, expressing the relevant strength of parental aspirations respectively.

The findings show a marked difference between the three groups. The average score was for married parents 8.1, for cohabiting parents 7.4 and for homosexual parents 6.2; the respective standard deviations were 0.6807, 0.7027, 1.0978. ( $F = 75.38$ , significant at the 0.000 level). More significant was the difference between married parents and homosexual parents ( $F = 53.13$ , significant at the 0.000 level) and cohabiting parents and homosexual parents ( $F = 28.0$ , significant at the 0.000 level).

Overall, most of the children had a firm idea about what they intended to do in the future. However, the proportion of children of homosexual couples who reported that they were expected to continue their studies beyond year 10, and who would undertake university studies, particularly engineering, law or medicine, was significantly smaller than the proportion of children of the other two family groups. There were also more female children of homosexuals who expressed a preference for traditional female jobs than girls of the other two family groups. Finally, there was an obvious trend among the children of cohabiting homosexual and heterosexual couples to get a job as soon as possible, to earn money, and to establish a household of their own.

It was more likely for homosexual parents to have no firm expectations regarding the education of their child and to leave the decision to their children and their future interest and progress. Unlike the parents of the other two groups, although they valued higher quality education, they still tended in lower proportions to expect their children to complete high school, to study at a university and to enter prestigious professions.

### Personal autonomy

Of interest also is the degree of autonomy the child has in his/her own home. The question is about the extent to which children are involved in buying new clothes, spending free time, going out with friends, choosing friends and leisure time activities, watching TV, having to go to bed,

spending holidays, and about inviting friends home. On the basis of this information children were ranked in a continuum of autonomy ranging from 1 (lowest degree of autonomy) to 9 (highest degree of autonomy).

The findings show that the average autonomy score for the children of married couples, heterosexual cohabiting and homosexual cohabiting couples was 5.9, 7.2 and 8.3 respectively; the respective standard deviations were 1.147, 0.9562, 0.7897. ( $F = 87.89$ , significant at the 0.000 level) The highest difference was between children of married couples showing the lowest level of autonomy and children of homosexual couples showing the highest ( $F = 157.80$ , significant at the 0.000 level).

Overall, the study shows that children of homosexual couples enjoy the highest degree of autonomy and power to decide on personal issues, followed by the children of cohabiting couples and lastly the children of married couples. In many cases, the child's life revolved around his/her own space which overlapped with that of the parents to a much lesser extent than that of other children. More children of homosexual couples had their 'own living room' which usually was their bedroom equipped with their own TV set, radio and, sometimes, stereo system and sitting area, giving them a relatively high degree of freedom and autonomy at home.

Further, children of heterosexual cohabitants report less autonomy and power at home than children of homosexuals but more than children of marrieds, who seem to report lower scores in this context. Marrieds are reported to control and direct their children more than the couples of the other two groups.

### Household tasks

A similar trend was identified in the context of the contribution children made to household tasks. The issue considered here was the extent to which children were making their bed, doing the shopping, preparing their lunch, ironing clothes, doing the dishes, sweeping the floor, washing clothes, cleaning the table, tidying their room, and tidying the house, that is, whether

they were participating in these tasks every day, often, sometimes or never.

The responses show that the proportion of children of homosexual parents completing these tasks on a regular basis ('every day' or 'often') is significantly higher than the proportion of children of the other two family groups ( $\chi^2 = 28.84$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The highest difference in household participation is between children of married and children of homosexual couples ( $\chi^2 = 21.953$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and the lowest between children of heterosexual and homosexual cohabiting couples ( $\chi^2 = 2.892$ ,  $df = 3$ , ns) The degree of autonomy and independence coupled with responsibility for household tasks is significantly higher among these children than among children of heterosexual cohabiting and married couples.

### Parenting styles – control and punishment

The study explored the ways in which punishment is administered in the families in question, who administers it, and in what way. The first question asked by the teacher in this context was: If you do something wrong that makes your parents angry, who usually punishes you? Mostly father, father and mother, mostly mother, or none?

The answers to this question indicate that:

1. in the majority of cases the natural parent controls the children in all three groups;
2. for minor problems the 'mother' or the person who spends most time in the home administers the punishment;
3. in step-relationships, the natural parent carries the responsibility for the misbehaviour of the child;
4. in a small number of cases both partners/spouses are reported to have control over the child, and share the responsibility for his/her actions.

In summary, there were no differences between the three groups with regard to controlling young children. What was characteristic for the same-sex couples was that, when the relationship was based on the 'butch-femme' model

(where one partner plays the role of the husband and the other the role of the wife), minor offences were settled by the 'wife' and more serious problems by the 'husband', irrespective of their sex, or of whether he/she was the natural parent of the child. Designation of the role also entailed the authority to control the child unconditionally.

The next question was: If you do something wrong what does your father/mother do to you? The following options were given, of which the respondents were asked to answer one for each parent:

- they tell me they hate me (9);
- hit me (8);
- yell at me (7);
- withdraw privileges (6);
- ignore me for some time (5);
- threaten me (4);
- tell me to be more careful (3);
- sit down and talk about it (2);
- do nothing (1).

The numbers next to each response category indicate the scores allocated to each item. The results show no difference between the three groups of children.

Overall, parents throughout the study indicated that they did not punish their children more or less than their own parents punished them. Nevertheless, compared to the homosexual couples, there were relatively more married and cohabiting couples reporting punishment levels administered to their children which were lower than those employed on them by their own parents. Finally, in spite of the diversity of responses, there were no statistically significant differences between the three groups regarding control and punishment of children.

### DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings show that there are differences between the children of the three family groups, and that these differences are significant in most areas of educational and social development. However, although differences between the three groups of children might be easy to establish, the explanation of these differences is not. The paucity of research on heterosexual married and

cohabiting couples and their children as well as on homosexual families makes an attempt to clarify this issue even more difficult. The only information available in this area is about families as social systems and about their effects on young children. We shall use this information as a basis for our approach to understand and explain the differences identified among our subjects. The general trend in the literature on this point can be summarised as follows:

#### Socio-economic status (SES)

Australian and overseas studies have shown that SES, as expressed in the form of class, income, occupation and material wealth of the parents, has a significant impact on a child's educational and occupational achievement (Lareau 1987, p. 83; Stevenson and Baker 1987; Lareau 1989). Keeping in mind the concerns of some writers (Share et al 1993; Winter 1988), namely, that SES differences may reflect personal and social attributes of the parents such as parental education and school involvement, educational aspirations, language models, income and academic guidance, most relevant studies show that the higher the SES:

- the higher the retention rates (Poole 1983; Ashendon et al 1987);
- the more access children have to private coaching; and this is reported to have a 'massive effect' on test scores (Egan and Bunting 1991, p. 90);
- the more likely it is for children to attend private schools (Graetz 1990);
- the more likely it is for children to enter tertiary institutions (Byrne and Byrne 1990; Lee 1989; Mortimore and Mortimore 1986; ILEA 1983);
- the higher the IQ (Birch 1980), for example, the more opportunities children have to develop their potential or even to better prepare themselves for IQ tests and to do well in them;
- the more access they have to resources, and the less likely it is for them to live in poverty, a factor which has adverse effects on the educational success of children (Edgar 1986; Connell and White 1989, p. 111; Garnezy 1992;

Werner 1989; Garner and Raudenbush 1991, p. 258).

Although the notion that SES has a diverse impact on the educational development of young children is valid, this explanation is of little value for our analysis since all family units were chosen to be of the same or similar status. Consequently, the differences identified in the three groups of children are unlikely to be caused by differences in the status of the SES of the parents.

#### Parental characteristics

More logical is the explanation that educational achievement of children may be associated with personal characteristics of the parents. This notion has been widely supported by relevant Australian and overseas research, which indicates that:

- the higher the expectations of the parents, the higher the motivation of the children and the higher the educational success (Ainley et al 1991);
- the higher the education of the parents, the more likely it is for children to succeed at school (Dronkers 1993). Positive parental characteristics also help reduce attrition rates (Ensminger and Slucavick 1992; Useem 1992);
- authoritative parenting styles are more conducive to educational success than other styles, for example, permissive or authoritarian (Steinberg et al 1989; Dornbush et al 1987; Grolnick and Ryan 1989; de Jong 1993; Rumberger et al 1990; Rumberger 1987);
- the higher the motivation of the parents, and the more they support and encourage children to do well at school, the more likely it is for these children to succeed at school. The example with ethnic families is relevant here (Partington and McCudden 1992; Hartley 1987; Cahill and Ewen 1987; Bullivant 1988; Clifton et al 1991).

This suggests that the differences among the three groups of children identified in our study may be caused by differences in the attributes of the parents. Of these attributes, parental expectations, parenting styles, motivation, support and encouragement

are most important. Parental education is less significant since parents of the three groups were chosen to have same or similar education. It is therefore reasonable to expect that differences in educational achievement between the three groups of children may be associated with differences in personal attributes of the parents.

#### Family environment

The environment of the family and its relationship to educational progress and school performance has been explored very extensively by many writers (eg, Bradley et al 1988). For instance, the importance of a stimulating environment and of gifted mentors such as parents and teachers has been stressed by a study of child prodigies and exceptional early achievers (eg, Radford 1990). Although both environmental and genetic factors are given due recognition, family environments seem to be assigned central position in the process of personal and educational development. Overall, it has been reported that the family environment:

- entails materials and experiences which contribute immensely to the child's education in general and scholastic achievement in particular;
- offers the setting of growth and development and is 'the gatekeeper which controls the child's access to society and also the society's access to the child'; and it encourages social competence which is associated with scholastic achievement (Wentzel 1991);
- regulates quality of life;
- offers the setting for social development and instils social control which promotes attentiveness at school (de Jong 1993);
- maximises or minimises learning potential, depending on its quality. Reading activity at home, for instance, has been reported to have 'significant positive influences on students' reading achievement, as well as the mediating variables of attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom' (Rowe 1991, p. 30) and, finally, on educational development in general (Kirner 1989; Hewison 1988).

Applied in the area of our analysis, these findings indicate that the differences identified in the performance levels of children of the three groups of families of our study may be due to differences in family environments of married couples and cohabiting homosexual and heterosexual couples. Family environments of married couples may be more positive, supportive, rich, rewarding, secure and guiding than the family environments of cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual couples. Family environments may explain parts of the differences identified in our study among children of the three family contexts.

#### Family structure

Two-parent and one-parent families have often been reported to offer different educational opportunities to children. In the first place single parent families are often the product of divorce; and divorce experience is reported to affect the scholastic achievement of children (Zimiles and Lee 1991; Amato and Keith 1991) and particularly of boys (Bisnaire et al 1990). Compared to children of intact and stepfamilies, children of single-parent families seem to demonstrate the lowest academic performance. This relates to overall performance but also to achievement in specific subjects, such as mathematics, as well as to specific family conditions of the single-parent family (Mednick et al 1990). Similar views have been held by other writers (Hetherington et al 1983; Milne et al 1986; Thompson et al 1988) although the justification of such differences vary (Mulkey et al 1992, p. 62). Children of divorce, finally, are thought to demonstrate in higher proportions low performance and misbehaviour at school, and to be suspended from school more often than other children (Furstenberg et al 1987; Peterson and Zill 1986; Wallerstein 1987; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1990; Sarantakos 1995).

This factor is found to have the strongest impact on a child's behaviour. As shown elsewhere, (Sarantakos 1995a), children who experienced parental divorce and have been through a number of family changes (eg, cohabitation and step-family) are more likely to report

problems, to have been involved in antisocial activities and delinquency and to be more likely to become recidivists than children who experienced no radical changes in their family history. In most cases it was not single parenthood alone that contributed to the problems but also marital breakdown of the parents, divorce, separation from the parents and siblings and finally step-parenthood. It is then reasonable to assume that parental divorce explains in part the differences in educational development of the children in the three contexts.

This factor may be considered not directly relevant to our study. However, given that the majority of children of cohabiting homosexual and heterosexual couples have experienced parental divorce, and in many cases not long ago, divorce as a factor of education and social development in general is far from irrelevant. For a number of theorists, divorce experiences influence the development of young children for a long period of time (Sarantakos 1995; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1990).

## CONCLUSION

The study has shown some directions regarding the effects the nature of parental relationships may have on the development of children. Some major differences between children of married and unmarried heterosexual couples and of homosexual couples were found to be significant. Overall, the study has shown that children of married couples are more likely to do well at school, in academic and social terms, than children of cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual couples.

However, these findings must be treated with caution. Before one jumps to conclusions encouraging homophobia and traditionalism, other relevant factors must be considered. There are many other factors which can cause or contribute to the trends demonstrated above in addition to the life styles of the parents. These factors can be equally responsible for such trends in the educational development of young children. Gender is one (Campbell and Greenberg 1993; Jones 1990; Leder and Sampson 1989; Leder and Sampson 1989); adequacy of

linguistic models offered by the family is another (Mehan 1992). Despite the similarity in education and socio-economic status, parenting styles and other competencies may vary. Apart from this, it is possible that the techniques of data collection may favour one life style more than another.

Overall, although the conclusions presented above are defensible, there are additional factors which must be considered when the differences in children's performance are generalised. In the first place it must be stressed that assessment of children's personal and educational characteristics were in most cases made by the teachers, who judged performance and state of mind of children on the basis of their personal qualities and cultural beliefs. The criteria of assessment are obviously expected to be fair and objective, however, they might have been biased – consciously and/or unconsciously – by the personal views and beliefs of the teachers. In this sense, the attributes of children described in this study might reflect perceptions of attributes rather than actual attributes or differences. Such perceptions might have favoured children of married couples more than children of other couples. (Teachers' attitudes to life styles and their implications for the quality reports on children's performance is being considered separately and will be reported elsewhere).

In summary, family environments are definitely instrumental for the development of the attributes which encourage educational progress and social development among children. However, these environments are shown to vary significantly according to the life style of the parents, leading to adverse reactions among these children. In this study, married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child's social and educational development. In the light of the cautions and implications, more research is required in this area. ☼

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