Modern Families

Families in the OECD are changing. The nuclear family – mother and father, married with children – is becoming less common. The number of reconstituted and single-parent households is rising, families are becoming smaller and individuals are deciding to have children later in life, or not at all. Education plays an important role in supporting these modern families as well as traditional ones, and ensuring that learning needs are met for all.

Love then Marriage?

Over the past 40 years, marriage rates in OECD countries have fallen dramatically, from 8 marriages per 1,000 people in 1970 to only 5 in 2010. As can be seen in Figure 1, the decrease in marriage rates has been particularly pronounced in countries like Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia, where marriage rates declined by more than half in that time (OECD, 2011a). Furthermore, the average age of first marriage (29.7) has risen above the average age of first childbirth (27.7), signalling that more people now have children without getting married (OECD, 2014a). In the same time period, the average divorce rate in the OECD doubled from 1.2 divorces per 1,000 people to 2.4. This has led to a higher number of single-parent and step-parent families.

These demographic changes mean that many children in the OECD now grow up in families that are quite different from the traditional nuclear family. Do our education systems offer the necessary support for children growing up in these modern families? To what extent should schools be responsible for what have traditionally been thought of as “family matters”? And does family composition have any effect on education itself?

**Students from single-parent families lagging behind?**

In the mid-1980s, 5.5% of children grew up in single-parent families, a figure which rose to 14% in 2012 (OECD, 2011a). There is wide variation between countries: in Brazil, Chile and Hungary, more than 20% of 15-year-olds grow up in single-parent families, as compared to only 4% in Turkey. Still, the overall trend is expected to continue: by 2030 the share of single-parent families out of all households with children will rise across all OECD countries. In countries like Austria, Japan and New Zealand, the share of single parent families is expected to reach to between 30% and 40% by 2030 (OECD, 2012a).

On average, 84.5% of all single-parent families are female-headed. In Estonia, Iceland and Lithuania more than 90% of single parents are mothers (OECD, 2014a).

What does this mean for education? Unfortunately, there is an educational achievement gap between children who live with a single parent and those residing with two parents or their grandparents. This gap is reduced significantly after controlling for socio-economic differences (like levels of education and income). However it does not disappear: students from single-parent families perform on average 4.5 points below students from other types of families\(^1\) on PISA, even after controlling for socio-economic differences (see Figure 2).

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1. Other types of families include families where both parents live at home and families where children live with their grandparents.

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*Note: Countries where the performance gap is statistically significant are marked in dark red. Countries where the difference is not statistically significant are marked in light red. Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Database, Table II.3.1.*

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**Figure 2: Performance gap in PISA 2012 mathematics (controlling for socio-economic differences)**

- Students from single-parent families perform worse
- Students from single-parent families perform better

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This performance gap differs strongly between countries. In countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and Poland, the difference is over 15 points. In contrast, students from single-parent families and other types of families perform equally well in countries like Austria, Hungary and Mexico. Interestingly, in Estonia, students from single-parent families perform 10 points better in PISA that students from other types of families. These large variations between countries suggest that the relationship between single-parent families and low performance is not inevitable.

There are a number of reasons why students from single-parent families might fare worse in schools (Pong et al., 2003, OECD 2011a). Firstly, single-parent families are more likely to have lower income, higher poverty rates and lower educational attainment than other types of families (OECD 2011a). However, the PISA data in Figure 2 demonstrate that the achievement gap exists even when socio-economic factors are taken into account. Hence, other factors are important, too. Among the most influential is available time: single-parents are also generally the single income earners for the family (almost 75% of single parents also work in formal employment). Juggling work, family, and other commitments as a single parent does not leave much time for helping with homework, reading with children, and many of the other activities which are linked to student achievement. Furthermore, other factors like parental divorce might affect children (and indeed parents) negatively.

Education, in combination with welfare and family policy, plays an important role in supporting these modern families. Raising awareness of achievement gaps, providing hands-on support, establishing a good relationship with the student and his/her parent(s) or helping with homework and academic difficulties are just a few ways in which education can make a difference.

**Early childhood education**

In tandem with changing family structures, the demand for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is growing across the OECD. Women, the main care providers in all OECD countries, are entering the labour force in greater numbers. In addition, a growing number of countries require ECEC attendance as part of pre-school and in order to access education.

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Given the high demand for ECEC, countries have rapidly expanded access in recent years. In countries like Mexico and Poland, enrolment in ECEC for 4-year-olds has increased by 20% and more between 2005 and 2011 (see Figure 3). Access to ECEC for 3-5 year olds is universal in Belgium, France, Mexico, the Netherlands and Spain.

Figure 3: Enrolment rates in early childhood education, at age 4 (2005 and 2012)

Two issues are crucial in the delivery of ECEC for all: access to affordable care, and ensuring high quality. In many cases, the demand for affordable ECEC outstrips supply, especially for children under the age of three. In countries where subsidised childcare is limited, many working parents are forced to resort to the private (for-profit) market, where income levels determine access (OECD, 2013b).

Even though many other factors influence female labour force participation, providing affordable ECEC is an important step towards ensuring that women with children have the choice to pursue a career. The availability of affordable care can be an important enabler of female labour force participation. In the Nordic countries where high quality ECEC services are available from an early age, for example, female employment is far above the OECD average (OECD, 2011a).

High quality ECEC has a particularly strong effect on educational outcomes (Heckman, 2000; Shin et al., 2009). In contrast, low-quality care can have long-lasting detrimental effects on educational performance and socio-emotional outcomes (OECD, 2012b). In most OECD countries, students who attended at least one year of

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3 PISA research shows that the relationship between ECEC and educational performance is greater in school systems with a longer duration of pre-primary education, smaller pupil to staff ratios and higher expenditure per child (OECD 2010a, Table II.5.6).
Supporting “rainbow-families” in Germany

The rainbow-family centre in Berlin-Brandenburg is a new initiative that supports parents and children in LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersexed) families. Next to numerous activities aimed at parents, the centre also offers information, advice and classes for teachers who educate children from LGBTI families. The centre also provides information materials as well as a range of innovative games and books that can help children understand non-traditional family structures.

The centre was founded as part of the rainbow-family project, which aims to ensure that LGBTI families are recognized in schools and early childhood institutions as well as in society at large.

More information: http://berlin.lsvd.de/projekte/regenbogenfamilien/
The parent factor

On average parents across the OECD are older, more educated and have fewer children than before. As a result they have more time and resources to invest in participating in their children’s education. In most OECD countries, parents are now seen as important stakeholders and actors in schools (OECD, 2006; Hooge et al, 2012).

There are many different ways in which parents can influence and change the schools that educate their children (OECD, 2010b). For example, they can participate in school boards, parent teacher associations and take part in classroom or extra-curricular activities. If they are unhappy with the school in which their children are enrolled, in many countries they can transfer their children to another institution.

However, not all parents are actively involved in their children’s education. Parents from low-income families might not feel empowered or comfortable participating in school decision-making, or might simply not have the time. Similarly, parents who are not fluent in the local language may not feel comfortable enough to participate, or might not know that participation is welcome.

When it comes to school choice, low income parents might not be able to transfer their children to other schools due to monetary or other constraints (OECD, 2006). When parents can choose the school their children attend, less affluent parents tend to choose schools based on costs rather than academic achievement; while more wealthy parents show the reverse trend (see Figure 4). As a result, school choice affects students from different socio-economic backgrounds differently.

Figure 4: Parents’ reports on criteria used to choose schools for their child, by students’ socio-economic status (ESCS), 2012

Note: ESCS refers to the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.
Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Database, Tables IV.4.10 and IV.4.11.
Intergenerational learning

In both traditional and modern cultures, intergenerational learning has been an important vehicle for knowledge transfer within families (Hoff, 2007). However, in the past decades, the scope for intergenerational learning has been reduced. Grandparents only rarely live in the same home with their grandchildren; only 1 in 15 children in the OECD lived with one of their grandparents in 2012, as compared to 1 in 5 in 2000 (OECD, 2012a; Kreidl & Hubatkova, 2012).

This change results both from modern family structures as well as younger generations moving to large metropolitan areas for work, often increasing the geographical distance between family members. In addition, grandparents are more likely to be economically active; in 2013, 60% of people aged 55 to 64 were in formal employment, as compared to only 50% in 2000 (OECD, 2014b). In fact, just as the average age of parents has risen, so too has the age of grandparents. In the 1970s, grandparents were on average younger than 50 (OECD, 2012a). Between 1990s and 2005 the share of grandparents who are 55 at the birth of their first grandchild decreased from 70% to 35% (Lundholm and Malmberg, 2010).

However, these figures do not necessarily mean that grandparents are less involved. In fact, longevity and the health of elderly have been increasing. Nowadays, grandmothers are expected to live in good health for up to 30 years after their first grandchild is born (OECD, 2012a). Furthermore, due to lower fertility rates, the average number of grandchildren per family has decreased, potentially increasing the amount of time that grandparents have for each grandchild.

Some OECD countries have introduced policies to promote and support grandparents in their role as carers. For example, the Australian government introduced grandparent child care benefits in 2005, to support grandparents who have major child-care responsibilities.

Grandfathers in Swedish Schools

The “Granddad programme for intergenerational learning” in Sweden began in 1996 with just one volunteer who offered to help a handicraft teacher in a school near Stockholm. The programme now involves 1 000 “graddads” teaching in schools all across the country. The granddad programme gives retired men an opportunity to contribute to their community and also provides male role models in schools, where 66% of teaching staff is female (OECD, 2013c). The “graddads”, who participate on a voluntary basis, help children with homework, accompany students for lunch and during excursions and help pupils resolve conflicts.

More information:  
http://aginghorizons.com/2012/01/interview-how-swedish-granddads-won-school-childrens-hearts
(OECD, 2011a). Similarly, in countries like the Czech Republic, Russia or Slovenia, parental benefits can be transferred to grandparents.

Both older and younger people can benefit from intergenerational exchange. For young learners, interacting with older people can give them a sense of their past, increase self-confidence and give them a deeper understanding of older adults. Intergenerational exchange keeps older learners mentally active and socially involved, and can contribute to feeling valued, accepted and respected. It can also enhance their knowledge and skills, particularly when it comes to learning about new technologies, values and practices (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

There are several ways in which educational institutions can facilitate intergenerational exchange (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008; Boström, 2009). For example, schools can consult older people during curriculum development and teaching in cultural or historical subjects (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008). Universities can also promote cross-generational contact during teaching. For example, many universities encourage older people to enrol in courses and share instruction and research facilities with younger students. Such programmes have been carried out at the University of Valencia (NUGRAN program) and the University of Pittsburgh (Intergenerational Engineering) (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

**Fathers and the cognitive development of children**

In countries like Austria, Slovakia and Turkey, fathers spend just over 10 hours a week educating and caring for their children. In contrast, fathers in Norway, Poland and Sweden spend twice as much time on these activities.

Fathers are more involved in their children’s lives than ever before (Huerta et al., 2013). Even though the extent of their involvement varies between countries, the role of fathers has changed throughout the OECD. In many households, men are no longer the only breadwinners and increasingly participate in caring for their children.

Bianchi et al. (2006) estimate that between 1965 and 2000, the time that American fathers spent on childcare activities more than doubled from 2.6 hours a week to 6.5 hours a week. In 2010, fathers in the OECD spent on average 17 hours a week on childcare and education.

Despite this, in all OECD countries, women still spend more time caring for and educating children than their male partners (see Figure 5). Women spend on average 28 hours a week caring for their children, which makes up more than 60% of total caring time. Mothers perform around 70% of all caring and education work in countries like Austria, Slovakia and Turkey. Furthermore, evidence from PISA shows that fathers across the OECD are also less likely to be involved in activities such as reading, writing letters,
telling stories and singing songs, which are strongly associated with positive outcomes for children.

**Figure 5: Time spent on caring for and educating children, by gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Austria</td>
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<td>Bulgaria</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
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Note: Countries ordered by the total number of hours that men spend on childcare every week. Men in Turkey spend the least time on childcare and education (10 hours) while fathers in Sweden spend the most time (26 hours).

Huerta et al. (2013) find that father’s involvement around childbirth is associated with some positive cognitive outcomes for children but that involvement at ages 2 and 3 has a much stronger effect. In addition to timing, what the father does also matters: when fathers take part in activities like helping a child to eat, changing diapers or putting a child to bed, there is little or no positive relationship with cognitive or behavioural outcomes. However, when fathers are involved in activities like reading and playing, the relationship is stronger. Hence, they suggest that high quality involvement of fathers can have a strong effect on the educational outcomes of children.

Given the positive cognitive outcomes of increasing fathers’ involvement in children’s education in early years, policymakers across the OECD should encourage and support fathers to be more actively involved in child rearing. Currently, the proportion of fathers taking parental leave is low across most OECD countries. It is however relatively higher in countries where some part of the parental leave is designed to be shared between both parents on a take-it or lose-it basis.
Paternal leave can be a good way to encourage fathers to take off time from work to spend time with their children (Huerta et al., 2013).

Improved cognitive outcomes are not the only positive effect of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives and learning. Fathers’ involvement in caring and education can also contribute to changing attitudes about gender in society. Recent research demonstrates that how parents share dishes, laundry and other domestic duties seems to play a key role in shaping the gender attitudes and aspirations of their children, especially their daughters. In fact, the strongest predictor of daughters’ own professional ambitions was their fathers’ approach to household chores (Croft et al, 2014). Hence, increased involvement of fathers in children’s early years not only boosts cognitive outcomes but can also contribute to challenging gender-stereotypes.

**In sum**

The structure of families has changed substantially over the past decades and this has created several new challenges for education. Students growing up in single-parent families are lagging behind in terms of educational performance and need more support at home and in schools. In addition, the demand for ECEC is increasing rapidly at the same time as many countries struggle to supply high quality and affordable care. Thirdly, as households are becoming smaller, opportunities for intergenerational exchange are becoming scarcer. Local communities, schools and universities need to make efforts to ensure that younger and older people can once again learn from one another. And lastly, fathers should be encouraged to be more active in their child’s teaching and learning, especially at young ages.
References