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Bacon, Kate and O'Riordan, Zoe (2020) What are schools for? In: Studying Education: An introduction to the study and exploration of education. Sage Publications Ltd. ISBN 9781526490483

Publisher: Sage Publications Ltd

Version: Accepted Version

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What are schools for?

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How to reference this book chapter:
Bacon, K. and O'Riordan, Z. (forthcoming) 'What are schools for?' *Studying Education*. London: Sage.

key words Children's perspectives, School, History, Marketization, Political, Power, Childhood Studies, Space, Children's rights

Key notes

- The idea that all children should receive some formal schooling only became widely accepted from the early nineteenth century.
- When exploring the purposes of school, we find that schools are about more than just 'transferring knowledge' to children.
- Schooling is political. Education policy is shaped and debated by political parties.
- Children have very different experiences at school, based on their gender, age, social class, (dis)advantage, ethnicity and (dis)ability, as well as their individual characteristics, and these differences result in different outcomes and different life-chances.
- Children have the right to express their views on all matters concerning them and to participate effectively in decision-making processes concerning them.

Introduction

This chapter examines children's experiences of schooling. It introduces you to some key ideas and theories and challenges you to think about what children's experiences of school reveal about the purpose of schooling. We begin with a brief history of mass schooling and draw your attention to some different political and academic perspectives on the purposes of school. We then move on to discuss children's perspectives and experiences of school.

The emergence of mass schooling

How does your experience of compulsory schooling compare to your parent/s/guardian's? What does this start to tell you about the extent to which schooling has changed?

Although, in everyday life, we might use the terms 'school' and 'education' interchangeably, school is just one place where education and learning happen. Worldwide, around 91% of primary-school-age children are enrolled in school (UNCIEF, 2018).

The history of mass schooling in the Western World is relatively short. The idea that all children should receive some formal schooling only became widely accepted from the early nineteenth century. In pre-industrial Britain, children worked from an early age – for example on farms or as apprentices (Cunningham, 2003). Education was largely linked to religious 'salvation' – reading the bible (e.g. at Sunday school) was vital to developing a virtuous life (McDowall Clark, 2016).

Industrialisation brought new modes of industry - mills, factories and mines. Families began moving from the country to work in towns and cities. 'For the great mass of the population of Western European countries like Britain and France, children's lives were characterised by poverty, hard labour and exploitation' (Clarke, 2010: 9). Over time, labour reformers, concerned for the child's moral character and the impact of the harsh conditions on the child's mind and body helped to fuel legislative changes (e.g. various Factory Acts and Mines Acts) which reduced the child's working day (Cunningham, 2003).

Study skills

Choosing credible media sources to support your learning
When studying education, you will find a wealth of sources of information available to you. Some of these from your institution's library and some from the media. It is important to always be aware of the credibility of the source of information.

Watch: The Children Who Built Victorian Britain https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00t6t3r

As you watch you will notice some clues to how credible/believable this information is. This is a BBC documentary narrated by historian Professor Jane Humphries. You can find out more about Jane Humphries online and see that she has published work on child labour so we can assume the source is using evidence and relaying trustworthy information.

Some questions to think/watch with?

1. What does it tell you about how children experienced life and work during the industrial era?
2. Is there anything that surprised you? If so, think about why it did. What assumptions and ideas were you already carrying?

Adult work moved out of the home and child labour becoming more restricted so more children became visible on the streets. Compulsory schooling in England was largely a response to the perceived 'social problems' that these 'street' children presented. There were concerns about the threats to order posed by children who were not in school or work, and concerns that, left unregulated, the impoverished 'dangerous classes' would reproduce their delinquent habits, values and lifestyle (Hendrick, 1996). Compulsory schooling was one way that large populations (of children, but also indirectly, parents) could be controlled and supervised (Boronski and Hassan, 2015).

In England and Wales, schooling became compulsory for children aged five to ten in 1880. Bolstered by child study 'scientific' research, the advent of compulsory schooling helped to position children as ignorant apprentices who, through formal schooling, would be regulated and reshaped to fit a civilised and Christian nation (McNamee, 2016; Hendrick, 1996). 'Childhood' was being reconstructed as a time 'requiring protection and fostering through school education' (Hendrick, 1996: 39). Now designated as 'pupils', the school conferred on all children and all parents a national (British) childhood. Children were deemed to be 'in need' of regulation and control. Investing in this control and regulation of future adult citizen was important (Hendrick, 1996).

The purposes of mass education

We tend to think of school as a natural place for children to be, and to assume that children are learning things they need to know while they are there. However, schools are built on ***ideas*** about what children need to know, and these ideas can change.

Schiro (2013) identifies four purposes of mass education. Each purpose is linked to a world view, or ideology, which in turn leads to particular methods of teaching and learning.

1. **Transmitting knowledge to children.**
Schiro calls this a 'scholar academic' ideology. Achieving this purpose involves deciding what children need to know, dividing this knowledge into subjects, and teaching children in a way that values memorisation and understanding.
2. Training children to become contributors to society.
This is a 'social efficiency' ideology, which prioritises children's future role in society. Children are provided skills and knowledge required for employment, and the curriculum is directly related to developing these skills.
3. Supporting children's growth as individuals.
This is a 'learner-centred' ideology. The aim is to develop a child's unique attributes, taking a holistic approach to the child, with a curriculum focused on their social, emotional **and** *cognitive development.*
4. **Turning children into critically educated citizens.**
This is a 'social reconstruction' ideology. The aim is not just to develop children's sense of themselves and to help them to flourish, but also to give them a sense of the wider context within which they exist, and to encourage them to critically reflect on the power structures that shape their lives.

key questions

Think back to your own experiences of school:

- Which of these ideas can you see in the ways that education was provided to you in school?
- How were these ideas put into practice?
- Is there evidence of more than one of these ideas in your experience?
- What was your role in school (learner of facts, apprentice for future employment, unique and nurtured being or critical citizen-in-the-making)?

You may find that there are conflicting ideas in your experience of education. Perhaps different ideas seemed to dominate at different points in your school life, or maybe you went to different schools that had different approaches to education or some teachers who seemed to have different ideas about education than others. This should give you the opportunity to reflect on how

your status in the school/classroom was shaped by the ideas that your schooling was built upon.

Schooling is political

It should be becoming clear to you that schooling is political. Education policy is shaped and debated by political parties. Describing the political spectrum is complex but one way to do this for the UK, is to offer some simplified categorisations of the two different 'wings' of thought that exist. The left-wing Labour party has traditionally been inclined towards state intervention and publicly funded services such as schools and hospitals. This political perspective has been associated with the view that schools are there to promote social justice – to tackle inequality by ensuring equal opportunities to access and get the most out of education. The right-wing Conservative party has tended to promote lower rates of taxation and less state involvement in public services (Ward, 2013). Traditionally this political perspective has been associated with promoting school discipline, a conservative curriculum of traditional subjects, increased autonomy for head teachers and selective schooling and grammar schools (including privately funded schools) as routes through which some children can reach their full potential.

key question
How do these political views relate to Schiro's philosophies about the purpose of education?

Of course, these general categorisations oversimplify and in reality, education policy agendas reflect stronger and weaker versions of 'left' and 'right' and can also combine elements of both. For example, very much in line with a traditional left wing perspective, in 1965 the Labour government moved towards comprehensive education (where all types of students are educated together). However, under Tony Blair, New Labour often combined elements of these two perspectives together to create a 'third way' (Evans, 2002). Tony Blair helped to build a post-comprehensive era where specialist schools (schools with a special focus on their chosen subject area e.g. sports, technology, etc) funded by the government and private business could recruit a small proportion of pupils based on ability.

It is also fair to say that some principles relating to education are adhered to, to varying degrees, by parties from across the UK political spectrum. For example,

reflecting broader global trends, recent Labour and Conservative governments have both, to some degree, argued that education provision should be guided by market forces. Two important market forces are **choice** and **competition**. Under the current system schools are externally monitored by Ofsted and through league tables (that show data such as SATs results), which enables the public to assess the 'quality' of schooling on offer (see Ward, 2013). Families are able to use this information to 'choose' the school their child goes to and unpopular schools that do not recruit and schools deemed to be 'failing' can go 'out of business'/close down. In reality, some families have more 'choice' than others, and middle-class parents are more likely to have the knowledge and resources to help them make the most of this system (not least because they may be able to move into 'catchment areas' which have 'better' schools). When education operates along market principles theorists talk about the 'marketization of education'.

Children's experiences of school

There is an abundance of research, especially from within Childhood Studies and Education Studies, which provides insight into children's experiences of school. Childhood Studies has done much to draw attention to how children's lives are shaped and constrained by adults/ society and how children can and do shape their own lives and the lives of others too (see Prout and James,1997). You will see examples of this below.

When we explore research on children's experiences of school some interesting points emerge. Whilst there is evidence that children identify some 'good sides' to school, there is also evidence that some children find schools oppressive, boring and alienating places that restrict their voices and citizenship. These findings contradict some of the 'functions' of schooling outlined earlier. We explore these themes below.

key question
What do children's experiences of school tell us about what schools do for/to children?

The good things about school

Research reveals that children associate school with a number of positive things/benefits. School can help prepare them for work (Davis, 2015) and they

can spend time with friends, do sports and enjoy particular lessons (Alderson, 1999). In some studies children report liking doing things and achieving things, being active and energetic (Mayall, 2002). Children enjoy receiving praise in school, being challenged, working together and find ways to exercise some power over their learning and their lives (though not always in ways that their teachers knew about) (Hargreaves, 2017). So there is evidence that schools are preparing children for the future, and providing them with positive learning experiences. However, some children have less positive experiences of school.

Schools can be oppressive, boring and scary

Schools are places where adults have more power and authority than children (Mayall, 2002). Many children find schools oppressive places where they have limited autonomy (little freedom to make choices or use their own initiative to set/achieve goals). Research highlights how the physical design of schools can be used to regulate and control children. Pike (2008) shows how schools have a role to play in monitoring children's manners, food intake and opportunities for social interaction. Similarly, Devine's (2002) study with 133 primary school children, their teachers and head teachers in Ireland showed how the organisation of tables in the classroom prevented children from socialising with friends.

This lack of control over time and space at school, is, according to Christensen and James (2001) one of the main reasons why children find school 'boring'. In his cross-national study (comparing England, Australia and New Zealand), Sargeant (2014) linked children's boredom to distractions, poor concentration and the role of the teacher. As one child put it, 'If kids aren't interested they get bored, and when they get bored they don't do their work' (2014: 196).

Hargreaves (2017) goes further, drawing on a range of research from the UK, Palestine and Egypt, to say that schools are often experienced by children as authoritarian regimes, sometimes characterised by coercion, physical control and (for the children) fear. Children were afraid of disappointing their teachers, failing, being shouted at (or beaten, in Palestine), being punished or humiliated, and of their parents being told about misdemeanours. Even teachers who cared about their pupils and wanted them to have a happy and productive time in school became more authoritarian as they came under increased pressure to 'perform' – to ensure they hit attainment targets. Fear seemed to be a normal part of school lives for the children, and they were clear that fear made it harder for them to learn.

key information feature

Christensen, P and James, A. (2001) 'What are schools for? The temporal experience of children's learning in Northern England' in, Alanen, L and Mayall, B (eds.) *Conceptualizing Child-Adult Relations,* London: Routledge Falmer

This book chapter, written by two key thinkers within Childhood Studies, relays key findings from an ethnographic study of three primary schools in England with teachers and children. The findings reveal that despite wanting to offer children a 'rounded' education, the teachers often felt under pressure to use classroom teaching to help children achieve the specified literacy/numeracy targets. For the children, school was often regarded as necessary preparation for future work. When exploring children's and teachers' control of time and space at school, the researchers found that teachers had more control over the use of school space. Some buildings were designated as 'adult spaces' and teachers also used time to penalize children – for example, by restricting the time children had to play. In contrast, children had less control over their time – who to talk to, what to wear, where to go - and often described school as 'boring'.

Children pushing back

Although children may be subject to adult regulation and control, the research shows that they still find ways of pushing back. In her study of two schools (one primary, one secondary) in Northern England, Simpson (2000) found that whilst strict uniform policies were in place and enforced, students developed 'micro' strategies of resistance to adult authority. 'Boys and girls habitually flouted the dress code by wearing plastic 'friendship bands' on their wrists, sometimes up to a dozen on each arm and these were a source of real contention among the staff' (Simpson, 2000: 72). In their study cited above, Christensen and James (2001) found that the children developed strategies that helped them to gain some degree of control over time: not looking at the clock and fast writing were used by the children to help school time to pass more quickly. Children in Hargreaves' (2017) studies took pleasure in playing 'tricks' on their teachers, finding ways of appearing to comply whilst actually doing what they chose to do. Exercising power in this way made the children feel good, as one child says: 'It makes me feel like I'm the cleverest boy in the whole school…and that I can do anything I want!' (Hargreaves, 2017, p.45).

Schools can be alienating for some and beneficial for others

So far in this chapter we have talked, for the most part, about schooling as if it is the same for everyone. This is not the case. Children have very different experiences at school, based on their gender, age, social class, (dis)advantage, ethnicity and (dis)ability, as well as their individual characteristics, and these differences result in different outcomes and different life-chances. This makes us question if schools are meritocracies – institutions that reward students based on merit alone.

To demonstrate this we will focus on social class/disadvantage, as this is one of the strongest and most persistent influences on children's experiences and achievement in school in the developed world (Perry and Francis, 2010). Social class is difficult to define, so we tend to use disadvantage as a 'proxy' measure, and a key measure of disadvantage in England is eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM). In England, children who are assessed as being entitled to FSM achieve much less in secondary school than children who are not (Department of Education, 2019).

Research exploring working class and middle class children's experiences of school life suggests that many working class children feel out of place at school. Even at a young age children are aware of social differences between themselves and others, and the implications this has for the ways they are treated at school (Hirsch, 2007). Middle class children are 'trained' for school from an early age, spending leisure time on 'school-like' activities (such as reading, writing and playing educational games), and building school-oriented skills (listening to adults, following instructions, performing in front of others). School, for them, is a comfortable and familiar place. Working class children tend to spend their free time in unstructured activities with peers and siblings, and develop a different set of skills, which are not as valued in school (Lareau, 2000).

When working class children talk about how they are viewed by their teachers in school they sometimes say that they feel they are not respected by their teachers. Two boys in Reay's (2006: 297) study capture this particularly well:

> ***Martin****: Those teachers look down on you*
> ***Kenny:*** *Yeah, like they think you're dumb … we don't expect them to treat us like their own children. We're not…you don't need to love us. All you need to do is treat us like humans.*

These attitudes to working class children can result in them being disproportionately placed in lower sets in school, sometimes as a result of unconscious bias rather than an objective measure of their ability (Crenna-Jennings, 2018). This leads to lower ability groups being dominated by working class children, whilst top sets are dominated by middle class children. The children in the lower sets know that they have less value than those in the higher sets, and are more likely to find school alienating (Raey, 2012; Hargreaves, 2017). Some of the working class children that Reay (2006: 298) spoke to wondered if there was any point in trying:

> **Neil**: It's too easy, it's like they think you're stupid or something.
> **Sean:** Yeah, like 'How do you write "the"'?

Schools can be places that highlight the material differences between children. Some schools choose expensive school uniforms that can only be bought from certain shops, some offer costly extra-curricular trips (skiing, theatre, sports events). Further expense can also be incurred when buying equipment and materials for study, coursework projects and exams. Not all families will be able to afford all these things. This can make some children feel like they don't belong. However, rather than just being passively affected *by* poverty, children actively find strategies to deal with the inequalities and stigma they face such as:

- Trying to remain invisible so that their peers do not notice/comment on their appearance (Brown, 2018)

  '… my sleeves were all wrecked and that so I was nervous…of what they thought… So I went into my new class and …and…then I just got on like with my work real quiet.' (Helen) (Brown, 2018: 51).

- Not telling their parents about school trips, because they know that they cannot afford them, and want to protect their parents from worry or guilt (Ridge 2003).

  'I don't usually go on trips 'cos they are expensive and that . . .At our school they do loads of activities and they go to loads of different places . . . I don't bother asking.' (Martin) (Ridge, 2003: 8).

Whilst these strategies may help the children to cope with the day-to-day reality of school, they also deepen the children's social exclusion, reinforcing the divide between the children who 'have' and those who 'have not'.

Unable to belong in school in an approved way, many seek belonging in 'anti-school' friendship groups (for examples see Willis, 1977; Macleod, 2009; Brown, 2018). This goes some way to explaining why rather than being 'engines of mobility, helping children to overcome the accidents of birth and background…our schools system does not close the gaps, it widens them' (Department of Education, 2010). In fact, data shows us that disadvantaged children are, on average, 4.3 months behind their non-disadvantaged peers when in their Early Years, but in secondary school they are 19.3 months behind (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017).

Schools can restrict children's voices and participation

In 1989, the UK along with almost every other nation in the world signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This international treaty contains a wide range of rights, covering many aspects of children's lives. One of the most important is Article 12 which says children have the right to express their views on all matters concerning them (their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity) and to participate effectively in decision-making processes concerning them. These kinds of rights are often referred to as participation rights, and they seem to be particularly difficult to incorporate into everyday school life. Teachers perceptions of children, concerns about their own lack of voice in the school and feeling that this is just *another* initiative being imposed on them, can act as barriers to teachers engaging with student voice (Lundy, 2007). Sometimes, perhaps as a result, capturing and responding to student's voices becomes the responsibility of a few key members of staff rather than the whole school (Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

Study skills

Building your skills as an independent learner

You may not be familiar with the idea of children's rights. You can learn more about them here:

https://www.open.edu/openlearn/people-politics-law/politics-policy-people/sociology/childrens-rights/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab

This is one of many ‘open’ learning courses you can find on the internet. If you are introduced to a new idea, or want to understand something in more depth, then you can often find courses like this online to supplement your learning. Sometimes you can get a certificate to show that you have completed the course. These are usually not recognised by employers as qualifications, but they show that you are self-motivated and interested in learning, and employers highly value these qualities.

Democracy in schools

Children’s right to participate in decision-making in school is often enacted through the use of school councils. These are now a common feature of schools, and could be an effective way for schools to support participation. However, councils are limited in their effectiveness by the issues they are allowed to consider/interested in (which generally do not include teaching and learning, school rules or timetables), the way they are run (often with adult facilitators, who lead the discussion) and because of the way councillors are selected (Wyness, 2005; 2009).

It is usual for schools to use representative democratic processes to select children for the council – potential councillors put themselves forward and are then elected by the other children to represent them. The children who get elected are often those who are most articulate and confident, resulting in academically able children, who are best served by the school as it is, representing their peers (Alderson, 2000; Wyness, 2009). This may go some way explain the findings of the Good Childhood Report, which suggests that less than half of all children feel they have a say in the running of their school (Pople, 2009).

Schools in Sweden as ‘democratic places’

Thornberg, R. and Elvstrand, H. (2012) Children’s experiences of democracy, participation and trust in school. *International Journal of Educational Research* (53) 44-54.

This journal article reports the findings of an ethnographic study with 183 children and 26 teachers conducted in three schools in Sweden. The researchers collected data using observations and informal conversations, and interviewed children and teachers. The children were asked to draw pictures of 'a day in my school' as part of their interviews.
In Sweden schools are required to be democratic places, which explicitly teach citizenship. Schools are expected to work with their pupils, to develop an agreed set of norms and values, through listening and discussion. However, even when this is embedded in law and teachers are committed to practicing in this way, this study reveals how participation is still limited by:

- discontinuity - changes in teachers led to changes in rules that had previously been agreed with pupils;
- power relations that teach compliance - children learn through interactions with teachers that they will be rewarded for contributions that the teacher agrees with;
- naïve trust in teachers - based on their status as teachers, rather than on their actions;
- school processes suppressing children's voices, such as weekly class councils that become places for reinforcing rules, rather than democratic discussions;
- lack of fairness - different rules for some children than others, and for teachers, and rules that are unwritten.

The researchers concluded that the ways that the power of adults, and beliefs about children's incompetence (in the eyes of both adults and children) are enacted through the school day has a greater influence on children's ability to experience democracy, participation and trust in schools than the law that is supposed to direct and shape their lives.

To conclude: So, what are schools for?

In trying to understand the purpose of schools this chapter has asked two key questions. Firstly, what are adults trying to achieve through the ways that they have created and developed the state school system? We have shown that this varies, depending on the perspective of the adult, ideology and political stance. Common purposes of education are to:

- provide children with a moral education;
- keep them busy and out of trouble;

- prepare them for the routines of work;
- provide them with skills and knowledge for work.

Importantly, as the aims of schooling change, so does what (and how) children are taught.

Secondly, we have explored children's perspectives to find out how they experience school. Whilst some children enjoy their classes and value schools as a route into work, others find it a boring, alienating place that offers limited opportunities for meaningful participation, and a place where they may face (further) inequality and stigma. Ultimately, the chapter encourages you to be cautious about assuming too much! We may think we 'know' what schools are for, but we need to question where these ideas come from and recognise that, in reality, these ideas and ideals may not be borne out or reflected in children's lives. In fact, children may be learning a range of 'subliminal' messages through the hidden curriculum that contravene the dominant, 'obvious', purposes of schooling.

Resources for further learning

Hargreaves, E. (2017) *Children's experiences of classrooms: Talking about being pupils in the classroom,* London: Sage
This book offers rare insights into children's experiences of classrooms. It mixes academic discussion of children's school lives with the children's own words, to show how the way we set up and manage our schools and classrooms affects children. It prioritises the children's view of the classroom, and pushes us to take them seriously.

McNamee, S. (2016) *The Social Study of Childhood,* London: Palgrave Macmillan
This book offers a really thorough overview of research within Childhood Studies. It outlines the main defining features of Childhood Studies and then helps you to see what researchers have found out. It's really readable.

Frankel, S. (2018) *Giving Children a Voice: A Step-by-Step Guide to Promoting Child-Centred Practice,* London: Jessica Kingsley.
This book is centrally concerned with how settings can build cultures of advocacy where children's voices are respected, heard and taken seriously. It encourages you to think about how ideas from Childhood Studies can feed into and shape your professional practice. It's not a boring book, it's a practical (but passionate)

book with a range of well-designed exercises to help you figure things out for yourself.

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