

Book Review/Compte Rendu

Christie, Nils. *If Schools Didn't Exist: A Study in the Sociology of Schools.* Translated by Lucas Cone and Joachim Wiewiura. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020, pp. 185, \$47 paper, (9780262538893).

Although written in 1971, Nils Christie's study of individual schools as social structures that are shaped by and operate within society, still holds relevance today. *If Schools Didn't Exist* emphasizes that schools have been made necessary by a class-based contemporary society—a society which demands that differences in success and aptitude be made discernible to determine employment; that knowledge acquisition and transfer continue in the face of rapid knowledge growth; and that children be given 'a place to be' as members of an unproductive population. In fulfilling this final function, schools have become "a particularly expedient medium for containment" (52). The importance of this role today is made apparent by the social and economic consequences which followed school closures, removing 1.5 billion children from educational institutions during the early months of the novel 2019 coronavirus (Drane, Vernon, and O'Shea 2020). During this time, children felt socially isolated, parents scrambled to find childcare, and schools rushed to adapt. In short, society struggles without schools.

While necessary, Christie argues that schools are not always designed to be meaningful. The first chapter illustrates this point by providing three highly informative case studies: the formation of a village school in Mazières-en-Gâtine, France; the enforcement of a federal school on Sioux children in Dakota, United States; and the creation of severe social division in a secondary school situated in northern England. The village school is deemed relevant and dynamic, changing to meet the demands of the local community. This is unlike the Sioux school, which treats its students as fillable 'empty rooms'—disregarding and devaluing their prior knowledge and experiences, thus, producing a 'degrading school' intended for somebody else. In the third example, because of stratification, the secondary school, called the 'centrifuge,' also fails to produce a rich experience for its students. It recreates class divisions prevalent in society, where "powerless and powerful individuals, respectively, are condemned to external and extremist positions in an established social order" (30). Ultimately, by identifying social factors underlying the conditions created in these schools, all three examples provide a strong

framework with which we can begin to understand how to define meaningful schools.

This text, unlike Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, makes clear that its goal is not to conduct an analysis of schooling, teachers, or students, nor is it an argument for the dismantlement of the education system. Christie's ambitions are clearly distinct but likely to be incorrectly aligned with the work of Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers, Paul Goodman, and Ivan Illich. As indicated in the preface, Christie is concerned with offering an experiential, rather than abstract or theoretical, understanding of how schools and societies affect each other. His conclusions are not grounded in educational theories on the organization of schools. Instead, they arise from the analysis of pedagogical processes observed in particular schools. Some readers may find Christie's approach lacking due to the exclusion of theoretical answers to questions of educational reform. Yet the book succeeds in reaching its objective, clearly demonstrating why schools must be integrated with society.

Christie's second chapter speaks to schools' purpose in an industrialized society where youth are perceived as unproductive and irresponsible consumers, who are forced to contend with "their own meaningless uselessness" (40). The next chapter goes further, highlighting the losses society suffers when schools cease to exist. Within this section, Christie notes that schools are crucial for imparting knowledge. However, educators must rethink the purpose of knowledge transfer in a society where it is difficult to keep pace with the rapid growth of information. In today's information society, Christie's recommendation remains pertinent: it is not possible to form a 'knowledgeable citizenry,' therefore, "provide that citizenry with the tools and curiosity to look" (63).

The fourth chapter marks the final section that attends to the present state of schools. This section supplements ongoing dialogue around distribution of power and agency provided to stakeholders in the education system. Christie uses the development of a national curriculum in Norway and the 1969 Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act from the Norwegian Parliament to comment on the challenges that emerge for governments and their committees, when deciding on the content, structure, and activities of schools. This discussion is especially worthwhile for policymakers.

The final two sections envision a different school, one that helps children learn to live and function as productive individuals in society. Christie envisions this place of participation and value as a 'school-society.' This ideal model of a school borrows attributes characteristic to society, notably, a certain level of autonomy and self-sufficiency, a welcoming environment for socialization, and control over consequences

for deviant behaviour. Christie briefly rationalizes the barriers to creating such a school, but in the end, questions “who—which person, or at least, which function—would endeavour to shut down such a good place to be and learn” (155).

This English edition contains a foreword from Judith Suissa and introductory essay from translators Lucas Cone and Joachim Wiewiura, both insightful additions.

Overall, *If Schools Didn't Exist* delivers an engaging and accessible text, essential for educators, parents, administrators, policy analysts, legislators, governments, and academics. The book not only presents persuasive evidence for educational reform but informs readers of concrete methods that can be applied to achieve positive change in the education system. For all readers, this text can stand as an entry point for understanding issues inherent to schools. It is vital that the citizenry recognize the need for good schools because “a dream of a school is a dream of a society” (160), a good society.

REFERENCE

Drane, Catherine F., Lynette Vernon, and Sarah O'Shea. “Vulnerable Learners in the Age of COVID-19: A Scoping Review.” *The Australian Educational Researcher*, (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00409-5>.

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