



If schools didn't exist: A study in the sociology of schools

Nils Christie. Translated and edited by Lucas Cone and Joachim Wiewiura. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA/London, UK, 2020, 185 pp. ISBN 987-0-262-53889-3 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-262-35848-4 (eBook), ISBN 978-0-262-35847-7 (open access ePDF chapters)

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Published online: 31 March 2021

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In terms of the notion of accelerated time, which has been pervading our sense and senses since at least the end of 19th century, fifty years may sound like a very long time. That's how long ago Nils Christie's book *Hvis skolen ikke fantes* was published in its original Norwegian version.¹ Now educational theorists, reformers, teachers and many others all around the world can read it in English. Nils Christie (1928–2015) was a sociologist who specialised in criminology. *If Schools Didn't Exist* – as Judith Suissa, who wrote the Foreword, and editors and translators Lucas Cone and Joachim Wiewiura, who authored the Introduction, let us know – was Christie's only book entirely dedicated to education. Considering the time lapse between the publication years of the original and the translation, Suissa as well as Cone and Wiewiura explain the motives for presenting the book to a global readership after so many years. We learn that Christie engaged with the very lively re-thinking of the role and sense of education in the revolutionary 1960s and 1970s. What makes this book interesting to us today is its specific difference regarding many resonant ideas of radical educational thinkers and activists in various alternative movements of the time.

In her Foreword, Suissa succinctly and pointedly depicts Christie's stances in view of groundbreaking ideas such as those, for example, of Ivan Illich or Paulo Freire.² If I understand her claim correctly, Suissa argues that Christie made a difference by pointing to the role of particular schools in their social context instead of just emphasising the problems of "school" as a system. Undoubtedly, the time in which

¹ Christie, N. (1971). *Hvis skolen ikke fantes*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

² Ivan Illich (1926–2002) and Paulo Freire (1921–1997), each in their own right, were the most influential critics of school systems and inventors of emancipatory educational practices of their time. Illich's book *Deschooling Society* (1971) and Freire's *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (1968; English translation *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 1970) still represent seminal foundations of the critical pedagogy of today.

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Christie wrote this book was extraordinary, not least because of the emergence of new ideas concerning education. In the wide-ranging theory of critical philosophy and pedagogy, the age of Enlightenment became an object of critical scrutiny. Public schooling as an offspring of that age was seen as a system which ceased to fulfil its main function: namely to provide education for each and every-one. Some critics, especially Ivan Illich in his in many respects well-founded and inspirational theory, went a step too far by expressing radical demands for abolishing schools altogether. But in the 1960s and 1970s generally, the topic of “school and society” was strongly accentuated. Considering this framework, Suissa appropriately underlines Christie’s proximity to earlier educational reformer John Dewey³ by citing his leading idea of school as a form of “active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons” (p. XIII).

Christie’s book, now available in English, is important for examining the roots of modern educational theory, and sociology of education in particular. About the same time, another seminal book was published: *Reproduction* by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron.⁴ It is quite unlikely that Christie knew about this book while writing his own. However, opening the first chapter of his book, many readers will now be reminded of Bourdieu and his anthropologically founded approach to social theory. In Chapter 1, Christie presents three different case studies of village schools in diverse times and places. The first case is a mid-19th-century French village, Mazières-en-Gâtine; the next is the case of a school founded in 1960s Dakota in the native American (Sioux) territory; and the last is a case of a secondary school “somewhere in northern England” in a “dirty industrial town” (p. 22) in the 1960s, which is for some well-explained reasons presented in fictionalised form. Christie’s depiction of the role of schools, their bonds and relations with local communities (and cultures), daily life of schools and even presentations of the life trajectories of individual pupils provides the basis for his elaborations of concepts and school practices in a society in subsequent chapters.

“The social scientist is an interpreter who tries to help society understand itself” (p. 35) is a statement which clearly characterises Christie’s theoretical orientation. Thus, referring to migrations from rural to urban and to the consequences of modernisation, Christie, in Chapter 2, points to the phenomenon of “adolescence” as a concept that was unknown to traditional societies. Further on, it is interesting for us today to “hear” from a sociologist writing precisely during that era which saw the birth of certain phenomena concerning the status of teenagers, ideas about youth culture and the political connotations of counterculture.

From this follows the question addressed in Chapter 3: “What would happen to society in its current form if schools didn’t exist?” (p. 45). In our current situation of preventive lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19, measures which include

³ Dewey, J. (1907). *The school and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) is considered by many as the greatest sociologist of the 20th century. Although education was not permanently an object of his interest, his book *Reproduction* (1970, English translation 1977) is considered to be a seminal text of sociology of education. Jean-Claude Passeron (1930) cooperated with Bourdieu especially on projects concerning sociology of education.

school closures, one part of Christie's answer to his own rhetorical question is especially graspable: schools "provide children with *a place to be*" (p. 46; italics in original). However, Christie's focus is determined by his socio-historical approach, which sheds light on the process of a gradual disappearance of child labour. Further on, in this chapter, the importance of schools is explained in a manner similar to Bourdieu's concept of reproduction, since schools happen to be the instruments for "funneling" children into jobs and into the separate segments of class society. Based on resources of data already rich in his time, Christie also emphasises the fact that schools do not only inculcate skills, but also crucially support the transfer of culture within a society. Of course, as we are told in Chapter 4, school is an institution, which is very much determined by the relations of internal and external power. Strong critical tones permeate the discussion on legislature, conceptual frames, the role of religion and political controversies in Norway's transformation of the school system at the time.

Chapter 5 reveals Christie as a sociologist of education belonging to the legacy of what is known today as critical pedagogy. "Schools are mirrors of society" (p. 107), but Christie pleads for them to be much more. After pointing out the central role of teachers and showing their social position, he declares that "our mission is to create a thriving school community of collaborating individuals" (p. 110). This chapter is full of criticism concerning administration and the rigid practices of "top-down" management which is countered by the ideas of an open curriculum. In tune with the *zeitgeist*, Christie does not omit the aspect of class distinctions affecting the functioning of schools, nor does he leave out the complex problems of dropout students and parents' anxieties. He continues his thinking in the form of a fictitious dialogue by answering complex questions. He expands his transformative ideas from school as a *place to be* to a *place to learn*. This chapter concludes with a suggestion for a "different school" (p. 152), which will educate critical and dedicated people, for whom society at the time apparently "ha[d] no need" (p. 152). Chapter 6, which is quite short, is somehow poetic in its presentation of the author's "dream of a school" (p. 158), which forms a part of a society's life itself.

Due to its insights and style of writing – congratulations to the translators! – this book is more than a reading from a distant past. Nils Christie died more than five years ago, but due to his intelligent criticism and transformative conceptual approach, his evidence-based ideas are still very much alive.

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