

THE PUBLIC LIFE OF SCHOOLS: EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Lucas Cone and Joachim Wiewiura

Nils Christie was born in Oslo on February 24, 1928, to local shop owners Ragnvald Christie and Ruth Hellum. Brought up in a context of widespread political turmoil before and during World War II, Christie took up an early interest in understanding the nature, development, and governance of violence and justice. After receiving his diploma from Berg gymnasium in 1946 and completing a brief spell as a journalist, he enrolled at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Oslo. As Christie notes in an interview reflecting back on his early work, the immediate worries permeating much sociological literature on violence and justice at the time played a key role in shaping the questions that would stay with him throughout his celebrated career: What does it take for a person to treat another human being like an animal? What are the roots of harboring concern and empathy for others, and how do or can societal institutions contribute to reinforcing these positive forces? In 1959, Christie's doctoral dissertation became the first of many works presenting Christie's profoundly original approach to

examining—and reframing—these questions.¹ Preempting his later appointment as Norway's first professor of criminology in 1966 at the University of Oslo, Christie's (1960) documentation of the lives and experiences of young law offenders was central in shifting the Norwegian debates on incarceration toward a more humanistic focus on the people involved. In the following decades up until his untimely death in a streetcar accident in 2015, he helped a generation of sociologists, criminologists, and educators "see further and wider, beyond the short-sighted and pre-categorized."² *If Schools Didn't Exist* (first published in 1971), whose arguments for autonomous schools were widely influential in shaping the Norwegian educational reform landscape up through the 1970s, remains Christie's only full-length engagement with the education system. Today, almost fifty years after the book was published in Norwegian, we are delighted to finally share Christie's profound perspectives on schools with a wider audience.

A SOCIOLOGIST OF PROXIMITY

Unlike other prominent sociologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Hartmut Rosa—one will find no supertheory of modern, globalized societies and individuals in Christie's work. Christie's sociological perspective is always proximal: his focus is on agents who live in tangible structures, how they interact with these structures, and to what extent the structures prevent or promote possibilities for meaningful interactions with one's surroundings. Whether looking at the lives of criminalized Norwegian youths or misbehaving boys in the British school system,

his work is characterized by an attention to how the frames *work*, so to say, on the lives, activities, and experiences of people. Christie's sociological starting point is the investigation of these dynamic frames, how they come about, and how those living in them might learn or see how to open them for change.

Christie's publications are filled with examples of how a careful sociological outlook may contribute to avail or create such openings. In Christie's seminal 1977 article in the *British Journal of Criminology*, "Conflicts as Property," it was exactly toward understanding and opening the "framework for conflict solution" that Christie directed his attention.³ In the article, which would define the fields of criminology and restorative justice for many years, he denounces the supposed need for juridical specialists to handle the feelings, experiences, and relations of both offenders and victims caught in the system of law. In homogenizing and fixing these peoples' experiences, stories, and values within opaque procedures that relate far beyond the average capacities of ordinary people, Christie argues that "conflicts have been taken away from the parties directly involved and thereby have either disappeared or become other people's property."⁴ Speaking from a communitarian point of view, this procedural disqualification of ordinary people's ability to participate in shared discussions of right or wrong risked paralyzing peoples' engagement in their environment. This is exactly, as made evident in this book, how specialized divisions of subjects and hierarchies in schools weaken the commitments of teachers, parents, school leaders, and students to nurture a vibrant school life that belongs to them and not to somebody else. Whether defending the right to experience

and debate one's own conflicts or essential school activities, Christie was an unwavering advocate of the "pedagogical possibilities" of peoples' involvement in matters normally left to political or juridical authorities and professional institutions. His documentations of people struggling within bureaucratic frameworks are a testament to this "potential for activity [and] participation," which was, for Christie, an inherent aspect of people living and communicating together.⁵

CHRISTIE'S SCHOOL

If it is the case that we have set up society in such a way that there is no use for people in that society until they reach a certain age—and have chosen instead to gather them in institutions we have called schools—we should then direct our efforts toward converting these institutions into a type of miniature society where life can be lived to the fullest and in the most ordinary form as a matter of course. ... In our context, this means that the public school must first and foremost be a place to be, before it is a place to learn.

In the preface to *If Schools Didn't Exist*, Christie presents himself as an "outsider harboring few assumptions about schools." This is, of course, not entirely true. As Christie asserts, we all have expectations about what schools can and cannot achieve, for the simple reason that the majority of people in the world have spent a large bulk of their childhood grappling with reading, writing, algebra, and building friendships in them. Yet there is a different point to Christie's self-proclaimed distance. As some readers may be quick to observe in the absence of references to classical educational theorists, Christie refers above all to his distance from the

cultural and pedagogical conventions and programs undergirding the study of schools: educating for democracy (John Dewey), educating for cognitive development (Jean Piaget), educating for freedom (Jean-Jacques Rousseau), educating for humanism (Carl Rogers), educating against oppression (Paulo Freire), and so on. Aside from a critical comment on the work of Ivan Illich, to whom Christie is often and somewhat mistakenly associated, no such references to educational theorists or movements appear in the book.⁶ And as Christie makes sure to emphasize, nor should they. *If Schools Didn't Exist* is about schools in situ: concrete places with people operating within whichever framework they have been provided. Christie proposes no canons, pedagogical principles, or organizational strategies for managing this operation other than those he already knows of. But in not providing this, he already offers a lot. *If Schools Didn't Exist* is a book about how schools can become meaningful places to be—not as society's de facto instrument of choice for realizing future aspirations, but as organisms with lives of their own.

In Judith Suissa's introduction to the critical environment of school research emerging at the time of Christie's writing, the highlighted similarities and differences between Christie and his peers elegantly illustrate something of what *If Schools Didn't Exist* has to offer. The premise of Christie's contribution is, in fact, simple. Because we have structured our societies around the need to ensure that knowledge and forms of social organization are passed on from generation to generation, the question is not *whether* schools are needed but rather *how* they are needed. "If schools didn't exist" is, in this paradoxical sense, a critical and impossible statement at the same time. The school is here to stay as long as societies

exist—and exactly because of this, Christie accurately notes, the question of schools becomes a basic sociological problem. Under which conditions, he asks, can societies' "need to create formal routines that will attend to the needs of the coming generation" become meaningful? How can politicians, administrators, and other decision makers create frameworks to support the maintenance of this need in ways that does not paralyze those involved in the process? And who decides on behalf of our society the needs of the coming generation?

For Christie, inquiring into the life of the school is to inquire into the roots and core processes of society's way of coping with itself. Understanding Christie's school means understanding how this *coping* has been handled, how it is currently maintained, and how it could be improved in ways that better reflect the needs of the particular communities that the school serves. Going through the book's six chapters, we will briefly try to summarize and discuss why Christie's contribution is essential for anyone engaged or interested in such understanding—or perhaps, why they should be.

THE SCHOOL IN SIX PARTS

In the opening chapter of the book, "Schools in Society: Three Case Studies," Christie presents three narrative examples of schools in different settings: the development of a French village school in the nineteenth century, the imposition of schools in the Sioux people's native community in the United States, and the stratified life of British lads attending the Lumley Secondary School in northern England. Each in their own way, he believes these examples are central to

“acquire an experiential understanding of what makes a school a school.”

The model of school that develops in Christie’s account of the French village society during the nineteenth century is, uncoincidentally, the entry point for this analytic focus. As the villagers’ lives were connected, both literally and figuratively, to goods, ideas, and roads reaching outside the village, they swiftly felt an increasing need for skills in arithmetic, reading, writing, and advanced knowledge about farming in order to communicate with and make use of the new possibilities. Even though the notion of a formalized school had come from the national government, the French village school, Christie argues, “first became relevant when changes in external factors clearly demonstrated a need for change in the inner structure,” hereby becoming “a school in step with the requirements of a given era.” Yet this sense of relevance is exactly what most school developers have forgotten. As Christie effectually draws forth in recounting the stories of both the Sioux children and the lads attending Lumley Secondary School, the need for relevance in most societies has been replaced by an instrumental notion of schools as vehicles for socialization, assimilation, and the distribution of societal positions. By imposing standardized curriculums, teachers, and values whose necessities originate outside local communities, the schools of the Sioux people and British lads become “*somebody else’s school*”—instruments to make the Sioux child think like an American and the British lad accept a hierarchical order in society.

But the aims, functions, and results of schools, Christie remarks, cannot exist or develop in isolation from their surroundings. Herein lies the perhaps most central point of the

book's opening chapter: "once this system, which is called school, has been created, it attains a life of its own," taking form as "an organism that evolves in accordance with its own internal needs," which reflect the hierarchies and structures of the society that surrounds them. The Sioux child, it turns out, does not arrive as an empty room waiting to learn the language and values determined by politicians in Washington, DC. Nor does the British lad. Despite the intentions of those who seek to craft the school as an instrument for achieving specific purposes and promoting certain ways of acting, *children bring society with them into the school—and find, for good and bad, ways to live meaningfully on their own terms within the school's framework*. Asking what makes a school a school, then, means questioning the extent to which we as a society have provided a frame for children to experience themselves, their lives, and their communities as meaningful and relevant. In the French village school, this frame developed naturally. In our time, it is up to educators and politicians to ensure that such a frame exists.⁷ There is, as the stories of the Sioux children and Lumley lads tragically confirm, everything at stake.

As schools have increasingly become instruments for external agendas, part of the difficulty in understanding them lies in their tendency to hold more than they promise. In the book's second and third chapters—"Social Order and the Reactions of Young People" and "If Schools Didn't Exist"—Christie introduces some of these central, albeit often-hidden instrumental needs that schools maintain. First is the school's function as a *storage space*. Children need a place to be while their parents work. In most contemporary societies, therefore, schools have come to serve as containers for the

segment of the unproductive population that cannot participate in the daily work routines of society—notably children and teenagers, but as we see today, increasingly also adults.⁸ Second is what in most contemporary societies can be summarized as the need for *differentiation*. Society needs schools to differentiate and allocate people based on merit to jobs and further education. Without them, society would have no way of determining who's successful and who's not, who's talented and who's not. But as Christie has already demonstrated in chapter 1, schools are by no means isolated from the social differences and social inequalities around them. In effect, they do little except perpetuate the distributional schemes within a seemingly meritocratic order.⁹ A similar logic runs through the third theme of Christie's critique—namely, securing an adequate distribution of *knowledge*. In our current situation, schools and similar institutions serve as the only pathway to secure the transfer of knowledge within society. Without schools, the learning required to function in a specialized society with a constant growth of available knowledge would cease or at least be heavily reduced, and for this reason, schools as institutions of knowledge acquisition are continuously legitimized. Yet for Christie, the purpose of the school is not to create a “*knowledgeable* citizenry” for the sake of knowing—we cannot know everything anyway—but rather to provide a place where people are provided the tools to look for themselves and figure out what they need to live in a meaningful way. Similarly to the need for storage and differentiation, the supposed necessity of institutionalized knowledge transfer is based on a notion of the school as an instrument for goals formulated outside the school.

In chapter 4, “Power in Schools,” Christie delves deeper into the questions that follow from the previous chapter’s investigations: Which mechanisms enable the school to function as an instrument reproducing the supposedly necessary functions of storage, differentiation, and knowledge transmission? And how, or in which type of societal framework, can the inner life of schools flourish? Once again, Christie does not look for answers to these questions in abstract principles or theoretical speculations. Through a thorough policy analysis of Norwegian parliamentary debates and reforms of the educational system from the nineteenth century up until the 1960s, he focuses instead on bringing to light the dual and opposing demands placed on schools from above. “On the one hand,” Christie writes, “they [policy makers and educators] want to create a thriving school community, which is both beneficial and important. There is no cause to doubt the sincerity of their intentions in this regard. But they also want something else. They want to preserve the main characteristics of the existing organization of schools.” Forced thus to achieve both ends at once, Christie brilliantly illustrates how politicians, school administrators, teachers, students, and subjects—despite the progressive aspirations across the board—remain bound to a mutual system of “hierarchically situated agencies” that “effectively remove[s] any form of sustenance for the inner life of schools.” Teaching can occur only in allocated time slots. Learning is perceived only within the learning goals of the given subject. School budgets are correlated to the municipality’s or state’s regulations. For Christie, this situation is not the product of an inherently sluggish school bureaucracy but rather a society structured around specialization in tasks and knowledge that

forces itself on the school's inhabitants. In this sense, any move toward a more vibrant and self-determining school does not imply that neither teachers nor school subjects should be banished or dissolved altogether. It is the ways in which "the inner life of schools parallels the common ways in which we organize ourselves" as a society of specialists and control that is at stake. What matters, in this sense, is that *what schools do* is accompanied by the structural support for teachers, students, and school principals to decide as well as reflect on for themselves *how to do it, who to manage it, and where it should lead*.

Chapter 5, "A Different School," merits the ambition of proposing how schools could develop and maintain the capacity to decide for themselves on the most important matters in school. Pivoting around the two central themes of *content* and *control*, Christie balances between installing and relinquishing determining factors that carve out his idea of schools—without becoming programmatic. The essential feature of the school in chapter 5, which is also the longest and arguably most central chapter of the book, is that of the school-society. Between the students, teachers, parents, and community members that comprise the school and its environment, the model of the school-society proposes a situation in which the school can decide for itself what and how the school should be, which factors its budgets should prioritize, and which positions its staff should occupy. In many ways, this notion of involvement mirrors Christie's defense of the "pedagogical possibilities" for victims, offenders, and laypeople to be involved in societal discussions of why we judge and punish as we do, as he proposed in "Conflicts as Property." Rather than leave aside such discussions to the

idiosyncratic procedures and terms of specialists, Christie believed strongly in the societal benefits of people working out for themselves how to structure their everyday life. Why should schools have a budget at all if they could not decide what to do with it? If there is a shortage of benches in the schoolyard, one class may take the initiative to make benches for the school and learn about woodcraft. Some may paint the walls and learn about color. Some may stage a play, and learn about cooperation and drama. *School activities will always be different.* Similarly, what schools do will always depend on their location—the countryside evokes other possibilities than the city—just as the needs and aims of a given school’s activities will be different due to the capabilities and values of that particular school-community. This is why standardization is not only a poor management strategy of schools; *it can never work.*

Importantly, Christie’s call for self-determining institutions and locally sourced content does not imply that all parliamentary aspirations to create thriving school communities—and ensure some degree of uniform financial support—are a problem. Indeed, as inspiration, governmental or municipal support may be helpful and necessary for many schools, insofar as the decision-making capacities remain anchored in the local school. What matters, ultimately, is that each school is “granted dominion over its own life”—not in order to arrive at some grand educational program of freedom that Christie sees waiting on the horizon, but because the very procedures and disagreements of continuously arriving is integral for “learning to function as a community.” In Christie’s terms, the role of the government is to encourage these procedures, and especially to do so in

spaces that lack resources for communal engagement. This is also why Christie, despite what many would find a logical extension of his previous arguments, did not support any movement to privatize schools, turn them into businesses, or introduce voucher programs based on the free choice of schools. His school is public—albeit perhaps not in the way that we are used to thinking about the term.

In chapter 6, “A Dream of a School,” Christie unfolds a vision of society based on normalizing—and building our societal institutions around—the needs and values of local communities. In a fitting ending for a book that set out to explore social life, he guides the reader through a visit to a rural Camphill community in Norway, describing how school activities have been integrated into the heart of everyday life needs—cooking, cleaning, building sheds, singing, and reading.¹⁰ Still today, the Camphill communities provide thousands of children and young adults with special needs a space to live, learn, and work together, representing what Christie believes to be an exemplary mode of noncategorizing engagement with people who, in many societies, would have been stowed away from communal activities. In a typical *Christie* fashion, there are no programmatic descriptions of a school-society but rather a careful portrait of a community in which people ordinarily considered disabled by society become “able within the framework that has been created.”

The point of Christie’s concluding depictions of the Camphill community should, by now, come as no surprise. By showing the benefits of constructing societal values, norms, practices, and culture around the actual experiential needs of people, Christie invites the reader to imagine a society

where the means, materials, and categories for living are constantly debated as well as put into play, entangled with the realities in which they are embedded. Such a community is exactly what Christie seems to call for in the previous chapters' descriptions of the "inner life of schools." For good and bad, schools have a profound ability to reach beyond the formal frameworks that they have been given in most societies.

Although the majority of formalized school policies deny schools the possibility to become vibrant school-societies—by virtue of their preconceived normative aspirations and specialized systems—Christie does not give in to the temptation to do so. Nor would he, as current trends would have it, devolve the state's responsibility to private operators. Christie wants more, not less, school. But he wants it in a way that is *self-determining*. As in the French village detailed in the opening chapter of the book, Christie dreams of a school that will, once again, become the bedrock on which our societies rest—a proving ground for ways of living together in society. His school, then, is a society committed and trained to reflect—because the frameworks enable us to do so—"on how we want our lives to be, free from oppression, free to direct our society in relation to values that our schools had demonstrated were worthy of realization."

THE PUBLIC LIFE OF SCHOOLS

The landscape of educational reform and thinking has naturally changed dramatically since *If Schools Didn't Exist* was published in 1971. From our first encounter with a torn paperback edition of the original text in summer 2014, the

continued relevance of Christie's book has lingered in the back of our minds. Why should teachers, students, parents, and others interested in schools find it interesting to read a nearly half-century-old book written about an entirely different context? The easy answer to this question is to simply repeat what Christie himself, as he reflects on the need in most societies to standardize the routines and content of educating future generations, calls "the general problems at stake in the development of formal schooling." For Christie, these problems appear in any space that has decided to fulfill the apparent need for storage, differentiation, and knowledge distribution through its schools—and will continue to do so insofar as schools are considered necessary to maintain central aspects of societies around the world. In this sense, the stories of the French villagers, Sioux people, British lads, and Norwegian youths will be worth spending time understanding.

The second and perhaps less obvious answer follows as a corollary to the first. As noted above, much has changed since Christie and his peers documented the standardized forms of "banking education" that dominated in most industrialized societies during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ Somewhat paradoxically, the critique of formal schooling has since then become mainstream: from left to right on the political spectrum, schools have become symbols of a factory-like model of citizen-production that has no place in a dynamic and individualized learning economy. US secretary of education Betsy DeVos's repeated proclamation of "the public's awareness that traditional public schools are not succeeding" now figures as a mantra of many educational reforms across the world that seek to promote portfolios, Innovative

Learning Environments, e-learning, and other forms of individualized learning in their stead.¹² The positions have been reversed: as suggestions to substitute the school with “a learning environment that places the talents, choices and coaching needs of the learner first” have become ever-more normalized, growing numbers of scholars and politicians from both the radical Left and Right find themselves defending the school along with the authorities it has traditionally harbored.¹³ And while the arguments in defense of the school vary—one preserving the need for institutionalized schools to bolster respect for traditional values, and the other shielding the school’s institutionalized ability to neutralize the socioeconomic backgrounds of children, providing them with a shared space for learning that does not presuppose disparity—the ironic implication is hard to miss.¹⁴ Can one propose an institutional critique of schools today without at the same time getting in bed with the neoliberal arguments propagated by DeVos and her colleagues, proposing to advance individual choice and competition between students and educational providers? Can one defend the school without concurrently preserving more or less conservative notions of universal content and authority that risks ignoring the school’s surrounding communities as well as the cultural starting points of its inhabitants?

Fifty years on, we believe Christie’s book can help us do exactly that. On the one hand, the mistrust of institutionalized schools for not accommodating individuals and their needs seems to resonate well with Christie’s ambitions to root the school *within* society, and not behind barred gates. On the other hand, the belief in the unique possibilities to promote genuine opportunities for learning *in and through*

the school is at the heart of Christie's project. It is exactly in proposing a dialectic between the self-determined inner life of schools and their surroundings that we are able to avoid the dead-ends noted above. Schools can and must work both *as societies, in society, and with the rest of the surrounding society*. And we need not look far to find possibilities for schools to do so—insofar as we, in recognizing the societal nature of schools, must at the same time come to terms with the fact that “no society can exist solely on the basis of the mutually provided services of its members.” Christie writes,

Is it not grotesque that nursing homes and schools, located across the street from each other, toil desperately away in isolation in their mutual and separate endeavors to solve opposite problems? Nursing homes are in need of nursing staff, and schools are in need of meaningful tasks for their students. ... Why shouldn't class 8B be responsible for doing the daily grocery shopping for the district's elderly residents who are living alone or stopping by on a regular basis to make sure everything is all right?

If considered on the basis of efficiently fulfilling the purportedly necessary tasks of the nursing home and school, the assigning of responsibility to the students of class 8B will probably fall short on many parameters. But then again, the widespread trend in social policies around the world to evaluate schools and other institutions according to efficiency in service delivery can hardly be perceived as a success, even in relation to the quality indicators that promoters of such policies propose.¹⁵ In the words of educational philosopher Gert Biesta, the tendency to “displace the normative question of good education with technical and managerial questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes” has debased the engagement of teachers, students,

and school leaders in the important deliberations about what they want as well as where they want to go.¹⁶ In this sense, it is perhaps no surprise that a reorientation toward the pedagogical possibilities of such deliberations, defended so adamantly by Christie, seems to be coming back into fashion: citizens' councils, community building projects, and even partnerships between nursing homes and schools are popping up in many spaces.¹⁷ Across these emerging projects is a recognition that treating tasks only as professional services ignores their potentials as interlocutors between the people who are involved and the society in which they take place. From involving children in painting a school's walls to getting acquainted with an inhabitant of a nursing home, a myriad of such possibilities are spread across the rugged surface of everyday life.

If Schools Didn't Exist is a testimony to the importance of these possibilities. Like a lung breathing in and breathing out, Christie reminds us that the school and its surrounding society are intricately connected. Both are vital for the other part to sustain itself—whether they like it or not.

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