

**JANET MCKENZIE**

# Changing Education

A sociology of education since 1944



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A SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION SINCE 1944

Janet McKenzie

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To my parents Cliff and Doris Nicholls and  
in loving memory of my brave sister Liz Sherlock.

# Preface

This book originally emerged from the need to find a resource for my students that would not only provide them with general information about the sociology of education, but also confront the problems involved in studying something that was constantly changing. Although the prime incentive was to provide such a resource, there were two other incentives. I was also experiencing regrets about having carried out an extensive piece of research without thoroughly disseminating and effectively utilizing the findings. How can anyone be justified in receiving research funds if they don't make the most of them? Yet the struggle to cope with the daily pressures of a demanding job constantly took precedence over the need to make people aware of educational experiences in Torytown and Labourville. Even the analysis in this book does not do justice to the mass of data collected. A third incentive was my position as one of a surprisingly large number of academics who have found that their own experiences of educational failure and frustration have actually spurred them on to prove something to themselves, if not to others. So this book has emerged after a long struggle to tackle what seemed to be intellectual inadequacies in a very positive way.

Rapid and continuous changes mean that books about education seem to be out of date as soon as they arrive in the bookshops – and this book is no exception. Yet we still need to reflect on the ways that knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, to be aware of changing assumptions and processes and to critically evaluate the actions of people who are in positions of power within education systems. So the regular output of books about education is vital in order to keep people on

their toes. In adding yet another book to many others I aimed to provide a useful resource for readers who may be interested in education for many wide-ranging reasons. Although it is called 'a sociology of education', sociology is a discipline without clear boundaries and the book takes a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach in its review of the mass of research findings and theories provided by many well-known writers. In general, the aims of the book are to provide a refreshing and stimulating source of information and to help readers to understand and challenge assumptions about what education *has been*, *is* and *should be* like. As you read this book you should try to be active and reflective. Try not to think of what you read as just information that has to be learned; but challenge it, consider who, when and where it comes from and how it relates to your own experiences. Remember too that sociologists are looking for patterns, types, trends, generalities and so on, and that contradictions based on the experiences of *one* individual may not be enough to demolish findings about *common* experiences.

The research findings from Torytown and Labourville provide illustrations of how many of the debates and theories about education can be linked with the experiences of real people in certain settings, but the analysis of those findings is only partly developed. You are expected to carry out some of the analysis yourself and may even develop your own theories. This is why I have taken the unusual step of including biographies in Appendix 1. Although the need for anonymity means that the biographies are brief, and in some cases even vague, they do at least provide some background

to the many quotes in the main text and have the potential to be used in a variety of projects.

In Part One you will find chapters about general themes (changing research methods, perspectives, systems and issues) whilst Part Two focuses more on changing contexts, with individual chapters for each of the last six decades of the twentieth century, together with a concluding chapter looking forward to educational futures. The book is designed to allow you to follow through interests in various pathways via common headings in each of the decades in Part Two and links with the general themes in Part One. The main text is also supplemented in various ways in order to help you to understand jargon (Appendix 2, Glossary of terms), get further details (boxed sections include original sources), reflect on what you have read (occasional questions) and follow up ideas (Appendix 1, Family biographies; Appendix 3, Useful websites).

In offering my own theories about the immiseration of education I am aware of putting myself into a high-risk situation. Progress in the development of knowledge is based on critiques of existing theories and mine will be as much subject to critique as any others. There may also be criticisms of the shift from convention, as writers of textbooks

usually concentrate on the presentation of other people's findings and therefore manage to minimize claims of personal bias. Yet this book would have had little to offer if it had just reviewed changes in education without the addition of new primary research findings and the attempt to make sense of change at a wider theoretical level. If it is good practice for the writers of more conventional textbooks to acknowledge their own perspectives, it is even more important that someone presenting her own primary research should reflect on the findings and how their presentation could have been affected by personal bias. You will therefore see some of this sort of reflection in Chapter 2 and Appendix 1.

Please take from this book what you can, read it from cover to cover or dip into it occasionally as part of your wider readings. Whatever your interests and successes or failures in education, I hope that you will feel encouraged by my favourite citation (or misquote, as I have lost the full source) from the philosopher Francis Bacon, who said that

There is no comparison between that which is lost by not succeeding and that which is lost by not trying.

# Acknowledgements

This book has emerged from so many years of immersion in ‘education’ that it would be impossible to thank everyone who has helped me during that time. I am particularly indebted to the people in Labourville and Torytown whose experiences and views have been represented and quoted in this book. Most of the interviews took place in the summer months and on hot summer days they provided cooling drinks and cold flannels for a fevered and flustered interviewer. Meeting and getting to know them, even over long intervals, has been one of the most enjoyable experiences of my academic life. In 1992 the interviewing was shared with Christine Benney. Access to all of these people was made possible by Stephen Edgell and Vic Duke (of Salford University) who started the Greater Manchester Study, selected and labelled the areas ‘Torytown’ and ‘Labourville’, carried out the first two phases of the research in 1980/1 (SSRC grant HR 7315) and 1983/4 (ESRC grant GOO23107) and accepted me as their research student. I could not have had more supportive supervisors for my Ph.D. The provision of a competition award by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant A00428624318) and further funding from Salford University, Liverpool Hope University College and Anglia Polytechnic University made my three phases of the research possible. I would also like to thank Julian Thomas and Liz Bradbury (both Anglia Polytechnic University) for each commenting on sections of this book. Heather Warwick supplied some much needed moral support when the book was in its early stages. Former Pearson editor Sara Caro helped to tailor this project into something feasible and her replacement, Matthew

Smith, along with Magda Robson, have been a constant source of reassurance and support.

On a personal level I would like to thank the tutor who, in 1976, offered me a place on a degree course at Hatfield Polytechnic (now the University of Hertfordshire), despite my lack of A levels. Hertfordshire Education Department also paid my fees and provided me with a student grant, without which I would not have been able to take a degree. Thanks also to the late Patrick McGeeney (Manchester University) who was an inspiration to his students over many years and who understood the value of education to a single parent experiencing a difficult time. Similarly, the late Michael Wilson (the Open University) is remembered with gratitude for his resounding faith and encouragement. Deep-felt thanks and love to Nicole and Marie for not only tolerating their mother’s obsession from an early age, but also learning to love her for it. Particular appreciation and love go to Roddie for enduring my moods and ensuring that this book did not totally control my life. Thanks also to my sister Susan, who designed the book cover and provided the illustrations. Also thanks to John Walsh for providing the maps.

This book is dedicated to my parents Doris and Clifford Nicholls, who have supported and taken pride in not only their children’s successes, but also their efforts and many failures. They demonstrated by example that intellect is about interest, curiosity and creativity, rather than about official recognition. Moreover, whilst some parents punish their children for their failures, mine once spent money they didn’t have on a reward for my futile efforts.

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# Part One

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## Changing Approaches

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# Introduction: The immiseration of education since 1944

Changing Ed. - Chap. 1  
**Notes**

Immiseration → a miserable book?  
 Branch changes  
 Transformations

Teacher's autonomy  
 Teacher's lot's better  
 Discourse of division  
 constant  
 spot light  
 critical gaze

Get course pack  
 Room 132

Credentialed  
 inflation  
 10-A\*

Individualization

Infallibility

Risk society  
 handling fear &  
 insecurity  
 essential cultural  
 qualification

Info. overload

Fear of failure  
 unemployment

Rationalization  
 Innovation  
 Fatigue

Florence Nightingale  
sick no harm

need prosperous  
 economy

Theory lect 12 cancelled  
 Indi. old complaint !!!

*My thesis is that in the risk society we are concerned with a type of immiseration which is comparable to that of the working masses in the nineteenth century, and yet not comparable at all.*  
Beck, 1992, p 51

Why has British education become so miserable? Although sociological studies of educational change involve many perspectives trying to focus on a constantly moving target, one underlying pattern seems to follow behind recent changes in education: the contemporary history of educational change has been associated with a process of gradual immiseration for many of the people concerned. True, it is always possible to cite heartening illustrations of progress and the sheer pleasure of individual educational achievements, but the one feature that stands out from a sociological study of the often confusing images of educational change is the growth of a new type of misery. This is not the misery of the downtrodden masses of the past, or of the children of the elite, who were expected to follow in their parents' clogs or brogues. Rather it is the misery of constant endeavour to achieve an impossible ideal of perfection, in order to compete against others who are similarly pressed, and to fend off threats of exclusion in an insecure social and economic environment. It is the misery of pupils, students, teachers and workers who know that they will always be regarded as deficient in some way, always have to run in order to keep still and always be aware that unexpected changes may be imposed on them.

This long-term view of changes in education since 1944 shows that social and economic influences have led to new perceptions of what education, and a lack of education, actually signifies for the individual, and genuine fears about personal prospects for the twenty-first century. With its interest in the wider picture, sociology can study the place of education in its changing social context and appreciate how context can influence personal educational experiences. It helps us to appreciate how our personal educational histories belong to a setting in time, place and station.

Despite the many, severe and challenging faults within British education during the 1940s, the spotlight of public debate (discourse) at the time seemed to emit a relatively balmy warmth, based on plans for a new and exciting postwar future in which all children would have greater educational

opportunities than ever before. Any changes were likely to be for the better. Yet, by the 1990s, education was wilting after years in the glare of the concentrated and unyielding spotlight of critical discourse, and educationalists faced prospects for the future with a sense of resignation, or even foreboding, based on innovation fatigue. What sociologists called a 'discourse of derision' (e.g. Ball, 1990) meant that, no matter what changes took place in education, more changes would follow, demands would never be wholly satisfied and the critical gaze would continue. Yet the role of sociology in this discourse of derision may be seen as ambiguous because, whilst criticizing the critics, sociologists are themselves critics. It is the job of sociologists to make visible problems that were previously invisible and therefore generate their own critical discourse.

Many changes are obviously essential, as progress through learning is based on a critical understanding of what is already known. Yet a basic understanding of behavioural psychology indicates that rewards, or praise, are at least as necessary as threats or criticisms (some theorists would claim even more so) in any effective training programme. In the UK such praise often seems rare and is usually directed at individual actors or schools when they are seen as outstanding within a generally derided system. The educational 'system' itself is badly in need of succour and sociology should be able to offer some hope as well as criticism. Because of its analysis of what is common (group behaviour, group cultures and social trends), as well as individual, a sociological approach is able to describe and explain what then becomes all too obvious; in this case that the continual reinforcement of negativity can have adverse consequences.

Surely British education must have improved since 1944! It certainly has, and the many radical improvements will be charted throughout this book. Yet, whilst many major and minor problems in education have been tackled effectively, and in some cases apparently eliminated, there was little room for self-congratulation when lingering problems immediately replaced the ones that had been

tackled. If the hopes of the 1940s now seem too optimistic, the realism of more recent decades can be experienced as too depressing. In the 1940s it was widely assumed that the new education system would create opportunities for greater social mobility; the working-class child would be able to use education as a way of 'getting on' in life. Passing the 11+ and/or acquiring any qualifications at school-leaving age were regarded as major achievements. Yet a shortage of workers meant that even school leavers without qualifications could find jobs and sometimes choose from a variety of employment options. Despite occasional pressure from parents and teachers, young people knew that school leavers without qualifications were the norm and that they did not have to succeed in education in order to succeed in life. Once employed, promotion in 'jobs for life' often resulted from practical experience and longevity, rather than academic credentials. Competitiveness could be balanced by the sense of mutual dependence emerging from wartime experiences. The late 1940s was not a 'golden age' in which to experience education, but it was an age of relative optimism about the nature of post-war society. Just as we are currently engaged in exciting debates about the prospects for a new millennium, policy-makers and public alike were then fascinated by the prospects for life in a new society fit for heroes and built upon the experience of wartime comradeship. Public discourse about education was generally positive and optimistic and, given the scarce educational opportunities that existed before 1944, it was quite realistic to assume that anything would be an improvement.

Teachers too experienced a relatively comfortable educational environment, with high status in communities that respected them as autonomous professionals and had faith in their ability to determine the 'secret garden' of the curriculum. High wages, self-regulation, short hours, long holidays (when compared to the long hours and short holidays of other workers at the time) and a confident sense of authority meant that teaching came to be regarded as a relatively easy life. Although this positive image conceals a mass of educational problems, education was under a warm and pleasant spotlight, rather than the heat and glare experienced in recent years.

Many, significant, improvements have taken place during the past 60 years, but there is a sense of something not right, a feeling that British education is failing the country and that we are not developing the skills needed in order to compete with other countries in a global community. We are experiencing a never-ending search for perfection and those involved in educational institutions (as students and staff) are subject to increasing surveillance, without serious attention being paid to their emotional well-being. Along the way we may have lost an appreciation that the subjects of this critical gaze are thinking, feeling and emotional humans. Their inputs, processes and outputs are continually monitored as we would monitor those of any factory, and although some interest is shown in educational welfare (e.g. attendance, discipline and so on), happiness in the educational workplace is not a priority or a major issue for public debate.

Individualization, rationalization, mass unemployment and stiff competition for jobs have created a competitive and highly critical culture in which we are all being constantly evaluated. A competitive environment gives rise to a fear of failure, our experience of continuous criticism creates severe anxieties, and we may sense feelings of alienation from the education system itself. Moreover, whilst monetary inflation is the prime concern of most governments, the toll of credential inflation has been ignored. School leavers must now acquire as many qualifications (credentials) as possible; so much so that the highest aspirations of a child in the 1940s could be seen as failure in the child of today. A suggestion that, like monetary inflation, credential inflation could be tackled by limiting the credentials in circulation, would be met by gasps of horror for its educational barbarism. We must aim for the highest possible standards, but such standards can include unreasonable expectations of infallibility, and result in the failure of many individuals who would have been regarded as socially and economically useful citizens in the 1940s. Perceptions of success or failure change according to the criteria against which they are measured. Thus, at one extreme, the most obvious failures are leaving school with literacy and numeracy problems, no hope of a rewarding job and the prospect of social exclusion. Yet

sociologists can show (see 'Frank's problems' in this book) that even a lack of apparently essential skills could be balanced by other personal qualities. At the other extreme, those apparent successes who are acquiring advanced technological and other skills (of the sort that would have been regarded as science fiction in the 1940s) may not have developed the reflexive attitude needed in order to effectively utilize, evaluate and monitor that knowledge. There may be little interest in acquiring knowledge for its own sake when students work hard out of fear of the consequences of failure in an increasingly competitive and insecure society.

Teachers too are withering under the pressure to achieve perfection. Their relative reduction in wages, loss of autonomy (with the introduction of the National Curriculum, auditing, monitoring and league tables), long hours and shorter holidays (the leisure time of the past being filled by paperwork and training programmes), loss of status and authority within a changing local community, and severe discipline problems now make teaching a particularly stressful occupation (see Dunham, 1992).

By the end of the century public discourse about the behaviour of young people (e.g. drugs, alcohol, violence and various other criminal activities) was habitually critical of schools and schooling, whilst the potential for immiseration within education tended to be overlooked. Golman therefore created a best-seller (1996) when he suggested that educationalists should concern themselves just as much with emotional intelligence as with academic credentials. It was an idea many educationalists could immediately identify with. Yet the problem is not simply about how education can be used to treat or prevent existing and/or external social problems, as another, overriding problem may be about the pressure on education of social expectations. Just as Florence Nightingale observed that 'It may seem a strange principle to enunciate as the very first requirement in a hospital that it should do the sick no harm' (1863), it is reasonable to observe that the first requirement of an educational establishment is that it does its students no harm. Perhaps a generous spirit could add that it should also do the staff no harm, since we need to feel confident that the work they do will benefit the students.

How and when did the shift from the optimism of the 1940s to the misery of the 1990s take place? In general, although an effective education system is often seen as essential for a prosperous economy, the reverse is very rarely appreciated: *a prosperous economy is essential for a thriving education system*. There were certainly traces of a growing critical discourse during the 1960s but a turning point can be seen in the economic crises of the 1970s. The global oil crisis affected economies and impacted on social systems in various ways and it was difficult for the governments of Western democracies to explain to the public the apparent failure of their economic policies. It was much easier to shift the blame to education systems for not providing the necessary skilled workforce and to subsequently generate the pressure of credential inflation. Education in general, and schools in particular, could easily be treated as what A.H. Halsey *et al.* (1980) called 'the wastebasket of society' or, as Andy Hargreaves described them (1994, p 3), 'policy receptacles into which society's unsolved and unsolvable problems are unceremoniously deposited'. Education provided a neat and simplistic focus for otherwise disparate and complex discontents. Social trends such as mass unemployment, aging populations and changes to the traditional family meant that governments were also becoming overburdened by their responsibilities for social welfare. This provided a supportive environment for the monetarist policies of the New Right (involving cuts in educational spending) and its associated moral underclass discourse (failure in education being discussed in terms of personal inadequacies rather than unequal life chances; see Levitas, 1998). A focus on the never-ending search for better academic qualifications and infallibility in the workplace could easily ignore other, more fundamental needs.

In the risk society, therefore, handling fear and insecurity becomes an *essential cultural qualification*, and the cultivation of the abilities demanded for it becomes an essential mission of pedagogical institutions.

Beck, 1992, p 76

At the start of the twenty-first century the problems associated with credential inflation, information overload and infallibility are still largely unacknowledged.

edged and education is still immiserated by what has become an ingrained critical discourse. Indeed, in many ways it seems that claims that there has been a shift from old- to new-style politics (involving a shift from concerns about emancipation from oppression to concerns about reflexivity and self-actualization) do not fit comfortably with current educational discourse. The arrival of a Labour government in 1997, with its 'Third Way' agenda (Giddens, 1998) as an alternative to the individualist agenda of the New Right, has so far had little impact on the pressures within the education system.

This book will show that, by the 1990s, educational experiences pre-1979 had become what one informant (in the Labourville and Torytown studies) called '... a different culture'. In 1990 Stephen Ball described general changes in educational discourse and what he called a 'discourse of derision'.

Some aspects of the once unproblematic consensus are now beyond the pale, and policies which might have seemed like economic barbarism twenty years ago now seem right and proper.

Ball, 1990, p 38

The focus in this book will therefore be on how such changes took place and what can be learned from them as we consider prospects for the future. We are not only looking at relatively minor branch changes (see David Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991), associated with changes in educational practice which may be adopted, adapted or resisted, but also at more fundamental root changes (Andy Hargreaves, 1994), those deeper transformations affecting how education is socially organized and experienced; such as the increasing emphasis on market values. We are not looking at something that is past and finished, but at an on-going project for personal and social advancement. People who experienced these changes are all around us and their experiences impact on our present and future lives by shaping our own identities, understandings and experiences. A sociological study of educational change can, and should, help us to appreciate the wider social context of our individual educational experiences and how even the language used in educational debates (the discourse) has contextual influences over which we have little control. An

understanding of how education has changed in the past will help us to influence its future.

Chapters 1–5 in Part One, 'Changing Approaches', provide a grounding for subsequent chapters by considering general aspects of educational change. Readers can therefore organize their reading according to their specialist interests. For example, someone who wants to read about 'social class' will find a discussion about how the concept may be operationalized for educational research in Chapter 2, a general overview of relevant theories in Chapter 3, relevant information about educational organization in Chapter 4, a discussion about associated issues in Chapter 5 and more detailed chronological accounts in the headed sections of Chapters 6–11.

Chapter 2, 'Researching change', considers various research styles and some of the problems encountered when carrying out research in the sociology of education. It also introduces and explains the case studies of education in Torytown and Labourville and the interviews with a panel of voters in those areas. Findings from this primary research will be used throughout the book in order to show how some individuals experienced educational change for themselves and how their attitudes relate to the various themes discussed in the book. From Chapter 2 onwards you will find boxed extracts from the Torytown and Labourville studies at various points in other chapters. The sources of the many quotes can be found in Appendix 1.

Chapter 3, 'Changing perspectives', considers wider sociological and political perspectives in order to provide a framework for the more detailed theories to be addressed in Part Two. Sociological and political perspectives are combined in this one chapter, rather than in separate chapters, because they are closely related and interact within educational discourse. This will include debates about what some academics perceive as a move from modernity to postmodernity, or late modernity, and associated claims about diversity and fragmentation.

Chapter 4, 'Changing systems', considers the organization of education in the UK in order to provide a framework for the more detailed analysis of its historical development in Part Two. Although largely descriptive, it identifies some of the key debates in educational policy-making.

Chapter 5, 'Changing issues', introduces some key topics in sociological studies of education in order to provide a framework for the more detailed analysis of historical developments in Part Two. It may be used as a point of reference and a means of identifying long-term changes from amongst the contextualized information provided for each decade. Themes and issues are presented as responding to and interacting with their changing social and political context.

Part Two, 'Decades of Change', provides a chronological account of change since the 1940s. There were obviously several possible ways of allocating time frames to individual chapters; for example, a larger number of chapters would have emerged if they had been allocated according to changes in central government. Ultimately it seemed to make sense to use decades, according to common perceptions of time periods, because people often talk about 'the 1950s', 'the 1960s' and so on as distinct periods conjuring distinct social images of cultural change. Thus images of 'the 1960s' may be of the Beatles, hippies, Woodstock, civil rights movements in Northern Ireland and the USA, the building of the Berlin Wall and so on, whilst images of 'the 1980s' may be of punks, yuppies, Live Aid, Thatcherism, the miners' strike, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the arrival of AIDS and so on. Therefore Chapters 6–11 each cover a

period of ten years. You will, no doubt, notice that the earlier decades are covered in less detail than the later ones. This is partly because, whilst findings about attitudes to education during the 1940s–1970s generally emerged from secondary sources, the 1980s and 1990s included the fieldwork stages of the Torytown and Labourville studies, which allowed questions to be asked about current issues. It was, nevertheless, reassuring to discover that others have experienced the same pattern of information growing over time: as the well-known historian A.J.P. Taylor noted, 'History gets thicker as it approaches recent times' (1970).

Chapter 12, 'Changing education in the future', brings the book to a conclusion by considering the ways in which an understanding of educational change and wider social expectations may impact upon education in the future. It considers the place of schools in a post- or late modern society, the fears and anxieties experienced by pupils and students and the value of discourses of possibilities. Four scenarios for educational development are outlined and a case is made for the ecological development of education with a greater emphasis on reflexive knowledge. Finally, the commentary provided by the Torytown and Labourville cohort finishes with their reinforcement of the idea that 'Education is our future'.

### A NEW FORM OF MISERY?

The Victorian labourer whatever his poverty and sense of social inferiority always enjoyed a psychological comfort. He knew, or could believe, that his station in life was not due to any failing on his part but to the structure within which he was placed. He lacked access to secondary education and the examinations through which he could have advanced himself. Yet his fellows were all in the same boat; there was no need for jealousy of them or recrimination about himself. The late twentieth century unskilled or unemployed labourer, after all the educational reforms, is in a psychologically much more vulnerable situation. He is at the end of a long sequence of failing every examination and neglecting every opportunity placed before him. He is confronted with the fact that his fault lies in himself. As Young notes: 'For the first time in human history the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self regard.' Some indeed see meritocracy as but a new kind of social democratic right-wing society 'where the people at the bottom will no longer have the consolation of knowing that they are there by accident rather than examination'.<sup>1</sup> The dangerous feelings of lack of self worth if not self-loathing that can result from this cruel confrontation already manifest themselves in too many familiar forms of deviant behaviour, the violence, football and other hooliganism and vandalism which are among the nastier aspects of British life.

Sanderson, 1987, pp 86–7

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, 1960, London, p 13.

### **Questions**

Do you agree with the claim that in the late twentieth century unskilled or unemployed workers were 'in a psychologically much more vulnerable situation' than those in Victorian times?

Do you agree that 'his fault lies in himself'?

Do Sanderson's claims also apply to women?

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