Chapter 3 Activities

Web activity WA3.1

‘Special’ schools for the poorest children

Read the descriptions below and consider what you think about the following question:

* How far would you consider the three types of institutions described below as ‘special’ schools in the sense that you understand this term?
* To what extent would you say that these schools serve the interests of society or the children themselves?

Three types of school: workhouse schools, ragged schools and industrial and reformatory schools, existed from the late eighteenth well into the nineteenth century to provide a form of education for the very poorest children.

**Workhouse schools**

During this period, the prevalent view about academic education for the poor was that it was detrimental. What the poor needed was industrial and ‘useful’ training (O’Day, 1982, p. 259[[1]](#footnote-1)). A Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834, proposed that ‘pauper’ children should receive daily education. However, many poor-law guardians opposed the idea of educating pauper children, so the Act had limited effect.

An inspection of 41 workhouses in 1847 found that the teachers in 25 were paupers themselves, and that most of them were ‘grossly incompetent, cannot write, or spell, or ask a question in a proper manner’ (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p. 283).

Education was virtually impossible for children living in the workhouse environment. As Louisa Twining, a philanthropist concerned with issues related to the English Poor Law, wrote: ‘the utter helplessness and incapacity of workhouse children has become almost proverbial’ (Twining, 1861, cited in Lawson and Silver, 1973, p. 283).

**Ragged schools**

Around 1818 John Pounds (1766–1839), who was a cobbler in Portsmouth, tried to organise some care and training for a group of ragged children. Subsequently others, most notably Lord Shaftesbury, who helped to form the Ragged School Union in 1844, followed his example. In practice they were a blend of Christian principles with care for the most deprived children so that they were in a state to learn. Most schools fed the children, using whatever makeshift accommodation they could find, and helped the children to work as shoeblacks (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.285).

Most ragged schools in England concentrated on literacy and numeracy, as well as ‘strongly evangelical religious instruction’ (Stephens, 1998, p. 10). Ragged schools in Scotland were nondenominational day schools that also taught literacy and numeracy, but also focused on industrial training for potential delinquents.

**Industrial and reformatory schools**

During this period, industrial schools provided a basic education, with some craft training for boys and domestic skills for girls. In Scotland, the Scottish Society for the Preservation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) founded three working schools in Edinburgh in 1758, that taught mainly spinning, stocking knitting, literacy, numeracy and church music. These institutions became schools to which children under fourteen could be committed as vagrants. The [1854 Youthful Offenders Act](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/1854-youthful-offenders-act.html) gave official recognition to reformatory schools, for offenders under sixteen who had served a minimum of fourteen days in prison. In Scotland the 1854 Reformatory and Industrial Schools (Scotland) Act empowered sheriffs or magistrates to send vagrant children under 14 to reformatory or industrial schools. Reformatory schools did not substitute for a prison sentence until the 1890s, however (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.285).

Web activity WA3.2

Functions of early schools for the blind and the deaf

Read the descriptions below of the purpose and function for which schools for the deaf and the blind were established in the nineteenth century.

What do you think this material tells us about how deaf and blind individuals were regarded at that time?

Whose interest(s) do you feel these schools served?

**Schools for the blind**

The School of Industry in Liverpool was intended ‘to furnish the blind with employment that may prevent them from being burdens to their family and community. [...]’. As recipients of public charity, the inmates should form ‘habits of industry’, with men making baskets, tablecloths and whips while the women spun yarn, made sail-cloths and picked oakum[[2]](#footnote-2). The penalty for misdemeanours could be harsh. As the Liverpool School Visitors’ Books records, in 1825, two boys were flogged for insolence and another for ‘making away with his yarns’ (Oliphant, 2006, p. 58). Educational aspects were not introduced into the curriculum until other schools were founded thirty years later, for example in the London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read in 1838. Here the founder, Robert Lucas, taught blind individuals to read using a system of embossed ‘Lucas Type’, which was a modification of stenographic characters[[3]](#footnote-3), together with a system of contractions (<http://archive.rsbc.org.uk/history/thomas-lucas-makes-the-1842-illustrated-london-news/>, accessed 15.12.2019).

The Liverpool foundation was quickly followed by other private ventures: the Asylum for the Industrious Blind at Edinburgh (1793), the Asylum for the Blind at Bristol (1793), the School for the Indigent Blind in London (1800) and the Asylum and School for the Indigent Blind at Norwich (1805). As at Liverpool, these institutions were solely concerned with providing vocational training for future employment and relied on the profits from their workshops.

Schools whose courses included a genuinely educational element began to be established in the 1830s. The Yorkshire School for the Blind (1835) taught arithmetic, reading and writing as part of vocational training; while at the school established by the London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read (1838) a general education was seen as the foundation for subsequent training in manual skills. The Society later opened branches in Exeter and Nottingham.

The General Institution for the Blind in Birmingham (1847) combined industrial training with a broad curriculum in general subjects; and after at first concentrating on training, Henshaw’s Blind Asylum in Manchester (1838) eventually developed a thriving school with educational objectives.

**Schools for the deaf**

The first school for the deaf in Great Britain was Thomas Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf and Dumb that opened in Edinburgh in the early 1760s. It taught a handful of selected paying pupils to speak and read. In 1783 the Academy moved to London, where in 1792, the first English school for the deaf opened with six children under the direction of Braidwood’s nephew. In 1814 an Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb opened in Edgbaston with Thomas Braidwood’s grandson (also Thomas) as the teacher.

More schools for the deaf followed: in Liverpool, Manchester, Exeter and Doncaster in the 1820s; at Aberystwyth in 1847; and in Edinburgh (Donaldson’s Hospital) in 1851.

These early institutions for the deaf – like those for the blind – were protective places: there was little or no contact with the outside world. The education they provided was limited, and despite the training they offered, many of their inmates subsequently failed to find employment and ended up begging, as the Warnock Report (DES, 1978, p. 9) notes ironically.

Web activity WA3.3

Understanding the history of ‘All things bright and beautiful’ in context

If you are interested in reading about the history of this hymn, you can access it at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/3668059/The-story-behind-the-hymn.html> (accessed 26.10.2021).

Web activity WA3.4

Considering early definitions of 'mentally defective'

Read the definitions of ‘mental defectives’ below.

What do you feel about identifying other people’s children in this way?

A Mental Deficiency Act, passed in 1913, followed the three grades of ‘mental defectives’ identified by the 1889 Royal Commission, and added a fourth. In each case the condition had to be present’ from birth or from an early age’. The archive of the National Association for the Feebleminded (Kirby, 1914) reads as follows in relation to this Act:

It would be well for every public official and social worker to commit the wording of these definitions to memory, in order that the mentally defective may not pass unrecognized, and be, in consequence, committed to unsuitable institutions, submitted to inappropriate treatment, and discharged; his mental abnormality still remaining undiscovered and ignored.

Definition.

The four classes of mental defectives within the meaning of the Act are described as follows:

(1) Idiots; that is to say, persons so deeply defective in mind from birth or from an early age as to be unable to guard themselves against common physical dangers.

(2) Imbeciles; that is to say, persons in whose case there exists from birth or from an early age mental defectiveness not amounting to idiocy, yet so pronounced that they are incapable of managing themselves or their affairs, or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so.

(3) Feeble-minded Persons; that is to say, persons in whose case there exists from birth or from an early age mental defectiveness not amounting to imbecility, yet so pronounced that they require care, supervision, and control for their own protection, or for the protection of others, or, in the case of children, that they by reason of such defectiveness appear to be permanently incapable of receiving proper benefit from the instruction in ordinary schools.

(4) Moral Imbeciles; that is to say, persons who from an early age display some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious, or criminal propensities, on which punishment has had little or no deterrent effect.

The scheme of provision under the Mental Deficiency Act is based upon the assumption that a defective person is one who remains mentally immature, and in need, therefore, of the permanent care and protection which should be the natural right of every child during immature years.

(<http://www.archive.org/stream/legislationforfe00kirbrich/legislationforfe00kirbrich_djvu.txt>, accessed 07.01.2020)

Web activity WA3.5

Considering the effects of identification as ‘maladjusted’

Read the text below and ask yourself the following questions:

* In whose interest was it to label Jack as ‘maladjusted’?
* If the etymology of ‘maladjusted’ is ‘mal’ + ‘adjusted’, in other words ‘badly adjusted’, to what do you think he was badly adjusted?
* Why, in your experience, might a young child with his experience in the early years have made a habit of climbing on the school roof and disrupting classrooms?
* What could you do to address this problem behaviour?
* Do you consider it helps to add a label such as ‘maladjusted’?

‘Maladjusted’ Jack was an inmate in one of Her Majesty’s prisons who was interviewed by the current author as part of a wider study concerned with spoiled identity. During his interview he related what he remembered of his assessment as ‘maladjusted’ when he was young, and what happened to him through the education system as a result.

Jack recalled an unsettled family life in his early years: ‘I had home problems… my parents split up when I was three and I went to live with my sister… she already had two children of her own, and she couldn’t cope with me as well.’ Social Services were involved from an early stage, ‘… she [his sister] put me into care’, and when he started infant school he relates: ‘… climbing on the school roofs… tipping the bins over… disrupting the classrooms.’ At the age of six he, ‘… was expelled because they couldn’t handle me’, and he was referred to a psychologist who assessed him as ‘maladjusted’. As a result of this assessment, ‘Social Services decided I should go to the boarding school.’ This event was the beginning of his experience of the special sector in education in ‘malad’ schools.

He remained at this school until he was 13 when the decision was made to transfer him to another special residential school for ‘maladjusted’ pupils. He recalled that there he quickly became disruptive; challenging teachers’ knowledge and authority because ‘… the school was total crap… it was rubbish… it was totally unorganised’ and he lost all sense of achievement and purpose. At 15 he went on to a secure unit for ‘disturbed’ adolescents where he refined his skills in disrupting the functioning of institutions: ‘I was laughing in their faces because I knew how far they could push… how far they can go… I was locked up, wasn’t I?… I was in there for seven months… “Beyond control”, they actually said. I was locked up, wasn’t I? It was just another institution where you had to learn to run the rules and bend them to your best advantage… I was totally out of it… I thought, “You’ve ruined my education, now you watch me putting you through it… putting you through the grinding mill”… I was out to beat them any way I could do.’ On his release, with no qualifications to show for his years of compulsory education and with nothing positive on his records, he joined the growing numbers of unemployed until he was convicted for a petty offence and imprisoned.

(Adapted from Wearmouth, 1999, pp. 15–22)

What did you think about all this?

1. O'Day R (1982) *Education and Society 1500-1800* London: Longman [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Picking oakum means untwisting old ropes and teasing out fibres that were often sold to ship-builders to mix with tar to seal the lining of wooden boats. It was very hard on the fingers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stenographic characters comprise a form of shorthand. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)