



**The Children of London: Attendance and Welfare at School 1870-1990.**

by A. Susan Williams, Patrick Ivin, Caroline Morse  
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**Review by Amelia Hempel-Jorgensen**

This book charts the history of educational welfare policy and provision in London over a period of 120 years: 1870-1990. This period is particularly interesting and unique because London's education system was governed by a succession of unified bodies. The book begins in 1870, just after the Forster Act, when the authorities began to take an interest in and responsibility for the education and welfare of poor children. It is therefore the beginning of an extended period during which the understanding of poor children developed alongside the way in which authorities have responded to these children's needs. As Baroness Serota points out in the foreword, this history has shaped the key issues which are still being debated in the contemporary politics of educational welfare. This book is therefore a highly valuable resource for anyone interested in the relationship between poverty and education. As a sociologist of education with a particular interest in class and the social context of education, this review will be written from a sociologists' perspective. However, the book will also be of keen interest to other social scientists particularly in the fields of history, education and social policy and those with interests at the intersections of these fields.

The first four chapters of the book span the period 1870 to the beginning of the Second World War (WWII). This period is characterised by the interest in children's welfare but with a philanthropic approach that characterised wider social welfare during this time. While formal committees were set up to ensure school attendance and monitor welfare, the educational welfare workforce depended in large part on middle class volunteers. However, this period throws up an interesting tension between the largely female middle class Children's Care Committee volunteers and male, working class Attendance Officers. The remit of the former was to address the welfare needs of poor children whereas that of the latter was to ensure their attendance at school. This reflects the underlying tension between the welfare needs of poor children and compulsory schooling. Poor children were often too hungry, cold and poorly dressed to go to school and their families needed them to be at home to work for extra income. Chapter two charts the work on the School Board Men who were responsible for attendance and chapter three, the Children's Care Committees. Chapter four covers the period between WWI and WWII where the welfare of children began to see prioritisation of children's welfare above the work of school attendance workers. This saw the very beginnings of a more holistic understanding of children's welfare, albeit at this time the focus was still on the physical needs of children – housing, clothes, food and health.

The period during and just after WWII, which is the focus of chapters five and six, gave rise to a dramatic change in the conceptualisation of poor children and hence the policy response. The authors describe a change in mentality, brought about by increased equality necessitated by war-time rationing of resources. Chapter five discusses the effect of war and evacuation on a growing sense of equality and chapter six, the subsequent rise of the welfare state. The major shift in educational welfare at this time was a change in the way

children from poor backgrounds were no longer seen as children *with* problems but as children as problems. With the decrease in material poverty as a consequence of the rise of state welfare the focus shifted from material poverty and poor health to the social deprivation of children and a significant part of this was 'the problems of anxiety and personal adjustment' of children from deprived/working class backgrounds. This translated into behaviours which were seen as incongruous with education – children from working class backgrounds who were seen to not value education and therefore not prepared to receive it.

This is a central issue in the contemporary sociology of education – children who are seen to not comply with what is implicitly required by schools in terms of behaviour and orientation towards learning. This book therefore provides an invaluable background in describing the social and political origins of how poor children and their families came to be blamed for what was and is often perceived as their social deficiencies in relation to schooling. It is therefore highly relevant and complementary to anyone studying the sociology of schools and education in the London context, particularly work which takes a more post-structuralist, and hence ahistorical, approach.

The book is also relevant to the literature on the sociological context of schooling (e.g. Lupton, 2006) in that it provides a more in-depth historical understanding of the specific, local context to educational welfare in London. Context is important because, as this book shows, the relationship between poverty, deprivation and education is not generic. Rather, it is rooted in the specific social and political developments in a given area. Nevertheless, while the book focuses specifically on the history of London, it reminds us that the historical context is key to understanding contemporary debates in education anywhere.

From a sociological perspective, the strength of this book is in the richly detailed narrative of how educational welfare developed in London, providing an in-depth understanding of its historical context. This also makes the book highly engaging and very accessible, which is a welcome quality in the field of academic literature. It is therefore also highly relevant to policy makers and practitioners in educational welfare.

## References:

Lupton R. (2006). Schools in Disadvantaged Areas: Low Attainment and a Contextualised Policy Response, in H. Lauder, P. Brown, J. Dillabough and A. H. Halsey (Eds), *Education, Globalisation and Social Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.