

STUDIES IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE AND WORK

Schooling the Estate Kids

Carl Parsons



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STUDIES IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE AND WORK
Volume 7

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Scope

The series will commission books in the broad area of professional life and work. This is a burgeoning area of study now in educational research with more and more books coming out on teachers' lives and work, on nurses' life and work, and on the whole interface between professional knowledge and professional lives.

The focus on life and work has been growing rapidly in the last two decades. There are a number of rationales for this. Firstly, there is a methodological impulse: many new studies are adopting a life history approach. The life history tradition aims to understand the interface between people's life and work and to explore the historical context and the socio-political circumstances in which people's professional life and work is located. The growth in life history studies demands a series of books which allow people to explore this methodological focus within the context of professional settings.

The second rationale for growth in this area is a huge range of restructuring initiatives taking place throughout the world. There is in fact a world movement to restructure education and health. In most forms this takes the introduction of more targets, tests and tables and increasing accountability and performativity regimes. These initiatives have been introduced at governmental level – in most cases without detailed consultation with the teaching and nursing workforces. As a result there is growing evidence of a clash between people's professional life and work missions and the restructuring initiatives which aim to transform these missions. One way of exploring this increasingly acute clash of values is through studies of professional life and work. Hence the European Commission, for instance, have begun to commission quite large studies of professional life and work focussing on teachers and nurses. One of these projects – the Professional Knowledge Network project has studied teachers' and nurses' life and work in seven countries. There will be a range of books coming out from this project and it is intended to commission the main books on nurses and on teachers for this series.

The series will begin with a number of works which aim to define and delineate the field of professional life and work. One of the first books 'Investigating the Teacher's Life and Work' by Ivor Goodson will attempt to bring together the methodological and substantive approaches in one book. This is something of a 'how to do' book in that it looks at how such studies can be undertaken as well as what kind of generic findings might be anticipated.

Future books in the series might expect to look at either the methodological approach of studying professional life and work or provide substantive findings from research projects which aim to investigate professional life and work particularly in education and health settings.

Schooling the Estate Kids

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SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6209-011-8 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6209-012-5 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6209-013-2 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

Cover design by Holly Zarneci: <http://hollyzarneci.moonfruit.com/>

Printed on acid-free paper

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was researched and written in pursuit of a passion, an affection for an under-rated and overlooked area and its people and a deeply felt anger at enduring, institutional, politically contrived, deceitful injustice. The book owes most to the residents of the Newington and neighbouring estates in Ramsgate, Thanet in north-east Kent, and the professionals associated with the The Conyngham School which became The Ramsgate School and in 2005 The Marlowe Academy. I was made very welcome in the community, in homes, centres, offices and workplaces. I have intruded into people's lives in a way I hope was at all times respectful. The many hours spent in the Marlowe Academy, shadowing students as they went from class to class, interviewing, either by appointment or through chance encounters, was a delight. I am most grateful for the forbearance, generosity and openness of staff and students.

I interviewed many who had worked in the Conyngham or Ramsgate Schools and got their stories which varied across a range of emotions from joy through frustration to survival and even guilt. Past pupils dug into memories which were hugely varied. It added valuably to my notes of visits to the school over ten years and resonated with how I was impressed with survival skills well beyond my own and sadness that things became so bad and were apparently so difficult to alter. Out of all these efforts to tell the story of the estates and the school which was to serve them, I am acutely aware that the duration and depth of my association with the school is small compared with those who have lived and worked in Newington or its secondary school. Many teachers have recognised that the school has been and still is exceptional on many counts and have said that they should have written a book about it. But they did not. And this is probably not the book they would have written.

Many of those I have written about have read through parts of the text and commented, telling me what I had got wrong, omitted or over- or understated. Others have dug out documents for me or processed data and tolerated my requests for more and more. Kent's Information Management Unit was particularly helpful.

In developing the book, four people have read parts or the whole and fed back perceptively and helped me avoid naivety, exaggeration or timidity. I hope I have responded appropriately in crafting the book to avoid these weaknesses. Peter Carver applied his journalistic skills to sections and encouraged me to write for *everyone*, not just a narrow academic audience, to 'get quite porky' about conclusions and not to write of 'a digging implement' when I meant, or should have meant, 'a spade'. I might not have understood the phrase properly. David Ewens, a novelist at heart and with a keen eye for equal opportunities language, could spot the subtleties that would not work and the under-statements that would go unnoticed unless beefed up. Most telling was his constant correction when I used rather de-humanising phrases like 'the working class' or 'the poor'. You will see that it is 'working class people' or 'poor people'. These are not just subtle changes but important if respect for all is to be present throughout. Paul Welsh could spot a factual error in relation to the local scene, having a history in the

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

area's education arrangements that goes back decades. He had insights into the unmoving, even unmovable, ills of Thanet as well as into the political forces at work.

My biggest debt is to Stephen Steadman who read every word more than once. He put several weeks' full time equivalent work into just tidying up my words and my thinking and even more in commenting wisely on the shape of the final product and visual presentation. He has been a key influence in my publications over 30 years and it is rare to get that good humour and intelligence always so freely given. I am grateful to him for that.

Finally, I must thank Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Greenwich for the intellectual environments and the interest and support colleagues.

GLOSSARY

ADHD	Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
ASBO	Anti Social Behaviour Order
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
AST	Advanced Skills Teacher
BTEC	Business and Technical Education Certificate
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CAT	Cognitive Abilities Test
CCTV	Closed Circuit Television
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EBD	Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
FE	Further Education
FIFA	Federation of International Football Associations
FLO	Family Liaison Officer
FSM	Free School Meals
FSP	Foundation Stage Profile
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate [of Schools]
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
KCC	Kent County Council
KS 3	Key Stage 3 – curriculum and assessment 11–14
KS 4	Key Stage 4 – curriculum and assessment 14–16
LEA	Local Education Authority
LM	Learning Mentor
L/O	Learning Objective
MAAC	Marlowe Assessment and Achievement Centre
NEETs	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD	Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PCSO	Police Community Support Officer
PIP	Parents in Partnership
PSHE	Personal, Social and Health Education
SCC	Schools in Challenging Circumstances
SEBD	Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
SFECC	Schools Facing Extremely Challenging Circumstances
SEF	Self Evaluation Framework
SEN	Special Educational Needs

GLOSSARY

SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SMT	Senior Management Team
SOA	Super Output Area
TUPE	Transfer of Undertakings ~ Protection of Employment
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

PREFACE

Carl Parsons' book is an important contribution to the education debate and fills one of the most salient and significant voids in much of the policy making of the current government. Although he evokes the origins, evolution and location of what was once The Conyngham School, became the Ramsgate School and began again as the Marlowe Academy, he places this historical trajectory in a wider context.

This book is important because it addresses a vortex in the current educational discourse. The callous disregard of poverty is currently being vividly illustrated by the attempt to change child poverty statistics. Parsons' book asks us once again to confront the continuing issue of how poor people are given substandard education. It was to address concerns such as this that welfare states were constructed and educational policies following the post-war settlement sought to provide equality of opportunity for all. In the current conjuncture, inequality is being massively sponsored and the pursuit of decent education for disadvantaged people is falling to the bottom of the ladder of priorities. Parsons' book eloquently shows how, in his words, 'the punitive "driving up standards" policy in England and the refusal to address family poverty as the root of underachievement of poor children' is displacing any systematic attempt to provide decent education for poor people.

Through a painstaking analysis of one school we get a sense of how a particular neighbourhood can be systematically deprived of reasonable educational opportunities. What is most important about the book is the way that Parsons moves beyond this local and particular study to provide a series of more broadly applicable criteria and procedures for pursuing social justice. In his final chapter, he pulls together a set of policy proposals and guidelines which are of enormous import for those who continue to pursue social justice.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons for writing this book. One motive for taking my pension from my post as Professor of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University was to pursue this particular passion – no one would pay me to do it! The Conyngham/Ramsgate School and the Newington estate in Thanet, Kent saddened me, but I had an affection and respect for both. They battled in circumstances of inequality and neglect which were not of their making.

I grew up on a council estate in the 1950s and 60s. I went to the grammar school 12 miles away, stayed on to the sixth form and went to university, not knowing quite what either of those two steps involved. They were different times but there was still the strangeness for the working-class child joining with, and being relatively successful at, the education game.

At Canterbury Christ Church, still largely a teacher education college in the 1980s, The Conyngham School in Ramsgate was legendary as a really tough assignment for any secondary student teacher on placement. It was no less of a challenge in the 1990s when it became The Ramsgate School, but I had no direct experience of it until 1999 when we had a small project working with French university colleagues comparing provision for children *at risk* in Thanet and Lille. In 1997 and 2003, The Ramsgate School was in the national press as the worst secondary school in England with 1%, then 4% of pupils achieving the government benchmark of 5 A*-C GCSE grades.

My first encounters with The Ramsgate School and the Newington estate left me with profound concerns for these children, the provision that failed them and for the estate that failed to thrive and did not get the investment, support and service it should have had. For two years from 2006, we had a much larger international project which attempted to address some of the needs so evident in this pupil population. It is a sad reflection that, six years later, it would be difficult to detect any impact that our project made, despite what amounted in total to £1 million of resources.

The concerns, the worries, even the guilt, and increasingly the anger stayed with me and were part of the impulse to study and write about what became The Marlowe Academy. The book examines from a historical perspective why a school should fall to such depths and how schools in such deprived circumstances are developed and sustained over time to the detriment of the communities they should serve. This is not inner city but outer urban in a rich county. It is but one example of the estimated 100 plus secondary schools in England, out of nearly 4,000, that face extremely challenging circumstances.

The book is a sociological study but written, I hope, in such a way that anyone concerned with the provision of education in poorer communities might relate to it. The book has three main levels of focus: firstly, the community and the families

CHAPTER 1

who should come first in any thinking about the provision of government-funded services designed to meet the needs and further the interests of the populace; secondly, the school and its history, looking at how it started out in 1963 full of hope to serve what was partly a mining community on the edge of a relatively new estate; thirdly, the political environment run by whichever political party and their failure to make the lives of the people living in these communities better able to benefit from what schooling has to offer.

Schooling of the Estate Kids is a title adapted from Pat Thomson's *Schooling the Rustbelt Kids* (2002) which, as Pat herself said, was taken from Paul Corrigan's 1979 title, *Schooling the Smash Street Kids*. All three, mine and these two, are different, yet joined by the fact that sociologists have over all these years enjoyed (I mean that) reporting on the underachievement of the poor in education. Make no mistake, this is a tragedy and a scandal. The existence of such schools leads to diminished life chances of children attending them and these schools are allowed to persist through a collusion of those who want to blame poor people and the vested interest of those higher up the scale in not losing resources to those lower down the scale.

The grammar school system is as divisive now as when the original arguments were put forward for comprehensivisation and the common school. In Thanet, the existence of three grammar schools has been a significant contributor to the gradient of popularity of schools and enabling the quasi-market in Thanet education all the more easily to direct the needier young people to the schools with the most problems. It might be said that those who have attended grammar schools, as I and my children did, have been 'bought off' or had a critical edge dulled, content to wallow in life's advantages that this early selection bestowed.

Figure 1.1 below, sets out a timeline of some key events at the level of the school and nationally. It presents in compressed form the history of the Conyngham School which became The Ramsgate School and, in 2005, The Marlowe Academy. Across four defined periods Labour, Conservative or Coalition governments there has been decline and rebirth, improvement and further distress attributable to the disregard and largely misdirected effort of politicians. The Education Reform Act, free competition in education and the publication of league tables contributed to difficulties faced by the school, bringing it to awful depths in the late 90s and early 2000s. Then six years of improvement as an academy was blasted again by unhelpful national targets and a lack of understanding of and sympathy for the largely vocational curriculum designed for the school.

Researching this book has been a delight because of the people that I have encountered at the community centre, the Sure Start centre, the primary schools or the secondary school itself. The families have been a particular joy to work with, revealing as they did their problems, hopes and achievements. The book covers a span of local educational history from 1963 to 2011.

Throughout that period there has been a concern for, first the early leavers, then the under-achievers and latterly the disaffected and the deprivation-related attainment gap. With separate school types until the 1960s there were also separate examinations systems: Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) and General Certificate of Education (GCE), reinforcing difference with the CSE only coming in

1965 to give some certification to children who would previously have had none – and did not until the raising of the school leaving age in 1973.

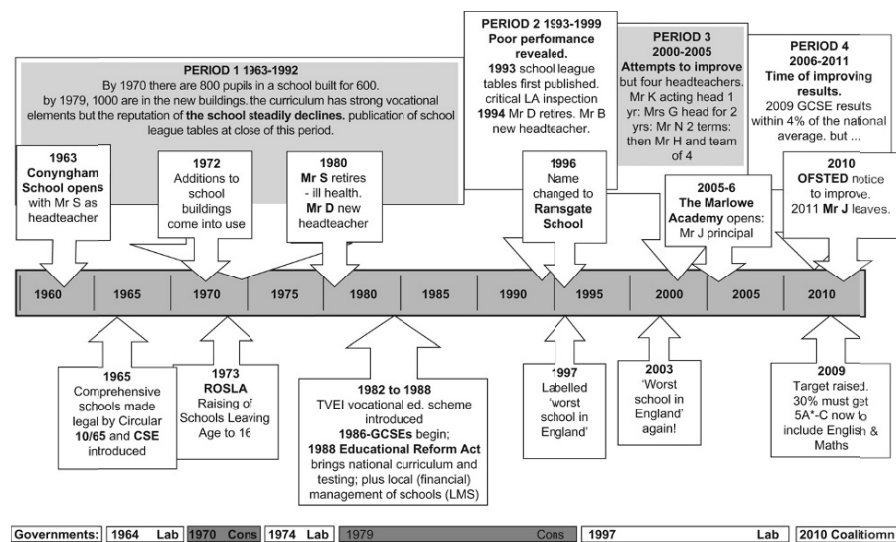


Figure 1.1. Timeline 1963 to 2011 Secondary schooling on Newington Estate, Thanet, Kent. Three school names; eight headteachers.

The school went through four defined periods. It could be regarded as experiencing decline after its first decade but for 30 years it functioned adequately enough in this divided Kent education system while being the least popular school. In a period of seven years (1992–9), during which time it changed its name from Conyngham to Ramsgate, it felt the harshness of the publicised league tables at the same time as there was increasing deprivation in the local estates and increasing pressures on it as the ‘receiving school’ – for newcomers, excluded pupils and any without a school place. It was a period when older staff left and recruitment, never easy, became a real challenge.

While it had been inspected and found to have ‘serious weaknesses’ in 1997 it soon bounced back but in the 2000–5 period the school faced huge difficulties not least having four headteachers during these six years. This was a bumping along the bottom and barely surviving period, lifted out in the final year by extreme measures seldom seen in schools. The Marlowe Academy opened in September 2005 and showed year on year improvements, scuppered by changing targets set for schools and it, too, found itself with a notice to improve in 2010.

The book looks, in Chapter 2, at the area and the particular issues it faces in relation to prosperity and educational progress. Chapter 3 focuses mainly of three families as illustrating their lives, struggles, character and achievements. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 follow the school’s progress through the periods, changes of headship, changing demands and, mostly, declining fortunes. Chapters 7 and 8

CHAPTER 1

examine the establishment of the Marlowe Academy and how it functioned in an inclusive fashion to give an ever-improving education to the neighbourhood's children. Chapter 9 takes lessons from this one school and sees how they apply to the enduring problems of improving schools in extremely challenging circumstances. Chapter 10 deals with students and parents and what they want and think they get from education while Chapter 11 makes the charge that schools like the Conyngham, Ramsgate and Marlowe are made and sustained by national and local political will. Insufficient resources and resolve nationally are allocated to these areas which suffer from so many social and financial ills.

The postscript adds an account of the 2011/12 school year after the Marlowe's Principal of six years had departed, the results were deemed too poor and Ofsted had given the Academy a 'notice to improve'. In brief, this section looks at the pressures the Academy was under, the changes that were made and the GCSE results that were achieved and published in August 2012.

I hope the book does justice to the time and access that so many people gave me and will persuade others to share the anger and channel it in ways to ensure that children who come from backgrounds which did not best dispose them towards education get the early and continued support to increase their social mobility and improve life chances, whatever the socio-economic status of the family into which they were born.

Reducing child poverty, narrowing the gap and increasing social mobility will not happen with the policies in place in 2012. The UK is a long way from being a fair society, much less fair than most of our European neighbours. An academic might coolly conclude that it should not be so. An ordinary person might be embarrassed by it. A wise citizen should be angered by it.

Schooling the Estate Kids tries both to recognise the local and particular but also to place the school and its neighbourhood in a wider historical and national context. The book's message is that deprived communities do not happen by accident: they are deliberately created and sustained and the schools serving them are under-resourced. Some of the causes lie with the selective disregard of international comparisons, especially with regard to child poverty and social mobility. Together with the ridiculous emphasis on narrow school improvement, they are malign political and intellectual deceptions which sustain tragic and unjust outcomes for poorer people.

CHAPTER 2

AN ESTATE OF MIND

WHERE ARE WE?

The Marlowe Academy, which is the focus of this book, is in Thanet, tucked away in the north east corner of Kent, its coast washed by the Thames in the north and the Channel on the East. It is isolated, with its own variety of 'Estuary English'. The local population fondly refers to the place as 'Planet Fannit'.

No one ever stumbled across Thanet as they travelled to another destination. In an atlas, if Kent may be pictured as a roast turkey facing west to Greater London and Surrey, Thanet would be the parson's nose. Nevertheless, the area has some well known landmarks. In the Second World War, fighter pilots reached for the skies from RAF Manston. North Foreland regularly features in the BBC's shipping forecasts. Charles Dickens' Bleak House is on the north side of Broadstairs, in the far north-east of Thanet, where you can also find John Buchan's 39 steps. And there are two other old seaside resorts, Ramsgate and Margate whose faded glory, despite recent efforts at revival notably encouraged by Tracey Emin when the £17M Turner Contemporary Arts Centre opened in 2011, have long since been spurned by fickle holidaymakers lured by more youthful, warmer continental charms.

Thanet has been home to other famous names. The Marchioness Conyngham – whose family name was given to the first school on the site of the Marlowe Academy – was George IV's favourite mistress. She achieved an interesting degree of notoriety.¹ Pugin, architect of the Victorian Gothic Palace of Westminster in the 19th Century, lived in Thanet, and much earlier, St Augustine landed there on a papal mission to bring Christianity to England.

Although the area still hangs onto some light industry, it has lost many of its traditional sources of employment. The shell fish industry has all but disappeared, and the coal mines have all closed, eliminating the 'aristocrats of the working class' as a group, although some households still receive the coal allowance which, when taken as cash, amounts annually to £500, helpful to any ex-miner or their widow. The oil-fired power station at Richborough, has been decommissioned and its cooling towers demolished. From 1988, Pegwell Bay housed the one-time famous Hovercraft port, which closed for lack of business after five years. The port of Ramsgate has found it hard to flourish in competition with Folkestone and Dover only 20 kilometres south and the Eurotunnel option has taken away passenger and freight traffic. At the time of writing, the huge Pfizer's pharmaceutical plant, which once employed 7,500 in the Thanet area, is also in the process of closing down.

In the towns of Thanet – Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs – the large Victorian houses, once good for the bed and breakfast, bucket and spade holiday makers, now serve small businesses that house children sent out of London's