

Industrial School

c. 1864 – 1970s

Details

Industrial Schools were institutions where children could receive industrial training. It was a model borrowed from England. The central idea was that neglected children with living parents needed to be taught to be industrious and able to support themselves in the future. Notions about poverty in the nineteenth century saw poor people as lazy and immoral. Industrial schools provided a way to address the perceived threat that neglected children would grow up to be dependent on government support (Swain, 2014).

The first British legislation to establish 'schools of industry' for workhouse children was passed in England in 1857. Australian colonies followed suit, passing similar laws to establish industrial schools for neglected, destitute and orphaned children, and reformatories for criminal children. Tasmania passed a law to establish Industrial Schools in 1863, followed by another 2 acts in 1867 that clarified the distinction between neglected and criminal children (Musgrove, 2013, p.26). The Colony of Victoria passed the *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act* in 1864. In New South Wales, the Destitute Children's Act of 1866 has been described as the colony's first "caring" legislation, but it is hard to imagine that an act that caused children to be 'charged' with their own neglect, poverty and abuse could be considered caring.

The colonial government took parental responsibility for children admitted to such institutions, who, in most jurisdictions became known as wards of the state. The emphasis on industry meant that they were less likely than orphanage children to get anything but a very basic education.

Industrial school children were more likely to be deprived of contact with their parents who nevertheless remained liable to contribute to their maintenance. Separated from their families, they were more likely to be sent to employment on their release-boys most likely to farm labour, girls to domestic service-with the state the official custodian of their wages.

The nature of industrial schools varied considerably between colonies/states. In Victoria, where industrial schools were central to providing for state children, the government dominated the field, although industrial school divisions were also developed within some existing Catholic orphanages.

South Australia had little enthusiasm for the industrial school model, but in the other colonies the concept created opportunities for an assortment of denominational bodies, with the recently arrived Salvation Army playing a particularly important role. Organisations that had their origins in Industrial Schools survived well into the twentieth century, although not without adapting to changing patterns of provision over time.

In the mid nineteenth century, neglected children were often talked about in terms of the future threat they posed to society. When Governor Hotham laid the foundation stone for the Melbourne Orphan Asylum in Emerald Hill (South Melbourne) in 1854, he warned that it was not just a matter of supporting the 'innocent victims of misfortune', but the citizens of the colony had another political duty. 'Remember,' he said, 'that these orphans, if not carefully looked after, will shortly go upon the town and become pickpockets. Of the prospects of the female portion, I need say nothing: I leave that to your own understandings' (see Musgrove, 2013, pp.13-14).

In Western Australia in 1899, the Superintendent of Poor Houses and Charitable Institutions described the purpose of industrial schools as to train the inmates “to habits of industry imparting them an education of a plain and useful character; and endeavouring to bring them under the influences of religious principles” (Annual Report, 1899).

Children did not always come to industrial schools from the court, as wards of state. Sometimes, parents could place their children in industrial schools, usually having to pay a fee to contribute towards their upkeep.

Conditions in industrial schools were often very harsh for the children, experiencing overcrowding problems and outbreaks of infectious diseases like measles and ophthalmia (an eye disease) Some industrial schools were located on board ships (*The Vernon* in NSW was a reformatory and industrial school, as was the *Sir Harry Smith* in Victoria. Another industrial school in Victoria was located on the *Nelson*. In South Australia, children who entered the Magill Industrial School in 1869 had previously been housed in the Grace Darling Hotel in Brighton.

In Victoria, the 1872 Royal Commission on Industrial and Reformatory Schools condemned the industrial school system for its ‘care’ of ‘neglected’ children, on the grounds that:

- the deprivation of all the natural domestic associations injuriously affected the health and spirits of the children
- bringing together large numbers of children exposed them to dangers of ‘contagion, both physical and moral’
- the number of children in the schools made any individual attention impossible, this being ‘the only effectual means of bringing moral and religious influences to bear’
- the trades taught in the schools encouraged children to settle in town and cities ‘with their inevitable snares and temptations’
- that children in industrial schools were not able to form any kind of family or domestic ties

The Commission concluded that ‘the whole system of congregated charitable schools is based on a wrong principle, which, in its practical development, is injurious alike to the interests of the children brought up in them and to the state’.

Industrial schools fell out of favour as a model of institutional ‘care’ in the late nineteenth century. Other preferred models included boarding out (foster care), orphanages and children’s Homes. However, many institutions that had their origins in Industrial Schools survived well into the twentieth century, although not without adapting to changing patterns of provision over time.

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[Magill Industrial School, Adelaide]

Description: This photo is incorrectly labelled by the National Library of Australia as St Vincent de Paul Orphanage, Adelaide.

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- [St Joseph's Industrial School \(1865 - c. 1895\)](#)

Resources

- Parry, Naomi, ['*Such a longing': black and white children in welfare in New South Wales and Tasmania, 1880-1940*](#), 2007
 - Scrivener, Gladys, ["*Rescuing the rising generation*" : industrial schools in New South Wales, 1850-1910](#), 1996
 - Evans, Caroline, ["*Protecting the Innocent: Tasmania's Neglected Children, Their Parents and State Care, 1890-1918*](#), 1999
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