

People's History of Schooling: A 'Listening' Guide

The People's History of Schooling Archive is a collection of everyday people's experiences and knowledge of schooling.

Past, present, and future experiences of primary education across generations are in the archive.

This archive is not an official history written in textbooks, but rather a history rooted in the everyday and ordinary lives of former pupils, parents, school staff, families, and communities.

These testimonies capture a wide range of primary school experiences as well as the feelings people carried and the community stories that shaped their sense of place and the testimonies of racial and class injustice that sit alongside everyday life.

Some stories are joyful, others are difficult. Together, they show how schooling has shaped and been shaped by past and present structural inequalities.

This guide offers suggestions for how to listen with care and reflection. Just as an art guide helps a visitor engage with a painting or sculpture, this listening guide invites you to slow down, notice details, and consider connections between individual memories and broader histories to better understand and interpret the pasts, presents, and futures of schooling in the city of Bristol.

Access the archive here: www.repair-ed.uk/stories
or scan the QR code below.



How to Listen

Listening is an active practice.

These testimonies deserve attention, not as background noise but as living testimony. Allow yourself to focus on the words, images, or the speaker's voice, rhythm, and pauses. Notice what stands out, what colours catch your attention and how tone, laughter, or hesitation add meaning. Listen for what is said and for what might be left unsaid.

Try to imagine yourself in the scenes described, for example: the classroom, the after-school conversations had over dinner, the playground. What sounds, sights, or feelings can you picture?

Testimony often sparks empathy by placing us in someone else's shoes, even if only for a moment.

As you listen, notice:

- How testimonies begin. Why do people's memories start in particular places such as schools, parks or libraries? What does this reveal about how memories are shaped?
- Pay attention to the emotions that come through: pride, embarrassment, fear, joy, and resistance. How do these feelings guide the way the testimony is told?
- Listen for people in these memories. What do mentions of teachers, friends, siblings, or classmates reveal about belonging, friendship, or exclusion? How did relationships shape the teller's experience of schooling?
- Notice the systems beneath the surface. What references to segregation, testing, language, rules, or resources show the impact of wider structures on everyday life? How do these systems shape the choices and limits in the testimony?
- Listen not only for what is said, but also for what is not. Where do you notice silences, pauses, or hesitations? What might these gaps or unfinished thoughts reveal?
- Now turn towards yourself. What kinds of experiences did you have at school? Did you enjoy school? Where does your story meet with or depart from the testimonies you see and hear?
- Finally, sit with the meaning. Is there an entry that makes you uncomfortable? Why might that be? What new meaning do you give to these images, texts and audio recordings as you listen?

What's Missing

Every archive is shaped by choices: who we reached out to, who had the time and trust to share, and what questions were asked in interviews. This means some voices are more represented than others. For example, we may have more stories from certain languages or generations and fewer from others. Experiences of migration may be underrepresented. Testimonies from Black and Brown participants could also easily have been made less visible if quotes were not selected and placed with care, as context matters in ensuring these voices are heard.

The way we edit, describe, and organise images, text, and audio recordings also shapes how they are heard. These decisions affect what stands out, and what may be overlooked: Emotive or clearly articulated language often catches attention, but people also express themselves in subtle or coded ways. These quieter forms of expression may be harder to notice, and risk being overlooked in the archive. Not all entries are framed in the same way either. Some titles highlight everyday experiences, others refer directly to race and class, while some make no mention of these at all.

By highlighting these gaps and decisions, we hope to invite listeners not to treat the archive as complete, but as open-ended. Listening with this awareness means hearing both the stories that are here and imagining the silences where stories are absent. These testimonies carry meanings that extend beyond what we as curators have drawn out. Listeners are encouraged to attend closely and to consider what else might be present that sits outside our framing. The archive grows stronger as new voices are included, and your reflections can help us notice what or who is missing.

Curatorial Choices

Alongside these absences, there are curatorial approaches worth naming:

- The archive includes images, texts and audio recordings, and testimonies were chosen because they tell important stories about schooling.
- We were especially drawn to language that carried strong feelings or clear messages.
- Some entries have been anonymised while others have not; this decision was left to participants. All school staff have been anonymised to protect the anonymity of our participating schools.
- Where possible, we have situated extracts in relation to participants' class and ethnic identities so that their contexts are visible.
- We also made decisions about where to pin testimonies on the map. This was done to protect the identity of schools while keeping the place-based knowledge that gives meaning to these stories.
- Maps can suggest a sense of linearity. We invite you to use the map as a tool for interpretation, while also remembering that the stories themselves are fluid and in motion.

Above all, our aim is to share stories without closing them off. Readers and listeners are invited to find further meanings and to make their own connections. In this way, the archive remains a living space, one that grows as different voices, perspectives, and interpretations are included.

Reflection and Connection

After listening, take a moment to reflect.

- What memories from your own schooling surfaced while you listened?
- What felt familiar, and what felt completely different?
- How do these testimonies confirm or complicate what you thought you knew about the history of primary school experiences in Bristol and beyond?

Using the archive

The archive is not only for researchers. This archive is for anyone curious about schooling in Bristol, past, present, and future and how these stories can help us imagine reparative futures of education. Teachers might use a recording to spark classroom discussion. Community groups might connect stories of past struggles to present-day organising. Families might find echoes of their own histories in someone else's testimony.

Above all, the archive is an invitation: to listen, to remember, to connect, and to imagine what reparative futures of education could be.

References

If you wish to learn more about listening and our archival practice, we suggest the following texts:

Back, L., (2007) *The art of listening*. Oxford: Berg.

Campt, T.M., (2017) Introduction. *Listening to Images: An Exercise in Counterintuition*. In: *Listening to Images*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp.1-12.
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Sriprakash, A., Willatt, A. & Stewart-Hall, C., (2025). Reparative histories of schooling. *Paedagogica Historica*, 61(4), pp.491-507.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2025.2453841>

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