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## **Corporal Punishment, Disciplinary Regimes and the Irony of History**

### ***What Happened to the Progressive Vision of the New School?***

After the Second World War, the vision of a single comprehensive school definitively asserted itself in Swedish educational policy. The existing system of parallel schools with its several forms of elementary school and secondary school was to be superseded by a single compulsory comprehensive school for all children. This reform, however, involved much more than merely a reorganization of the school system; it was an expression of the grandiose post-war times political ambitions aiming at nothing less than a new kind of society founded upon science and democracy.<sup>1</sup> An important role in this drama was played by the 1946 Schools Commission. In its final report, *Guidelines for the Development of the Swedish School System*, the Commission claimed that the existing school system had not kept up with the on-going development in society and argued for a foundational shift from an old authoritarian and bureaucratic system to a modern and democratic one. The Commission viewed its guidelines as a major contribution to this process.<sup>2</sup>

In order for the school to fulfill its new progressive role in society, a radical redefinition of its character forming task became necessary. The traditional emphasis on *obedience* and *good manners* were exchanged by modern and progressive concepts such as *democracy*, *independence* and *individual freedom*. The primary duty of the school system should no longer be to produce useful citizens for the common good of society, but rather to stimulate the growth of a free and democratic spirit among the pupils, characteristics that would be essential for the new society.<sup>3</sup> However, the Commission's progressive agenda soon came into conflict with the very practical

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<sup>1</sup> Lundgren 1979, Richardson 1983, Englund 1986, Isling 1988, Qvarsebo 2006.

<sup>2</sup> SOU 1948:27, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> SOU 1948:27, p. 2f.

problems of lack of discipline and order in the school, which were the pressing issues for the teachers. Many teachers looked upon the new political rhetoric as overly idealistic. They feared a situation where they simply would not be able to uphold the order in the classroom. These conflicting ambitions were perhaps most noticeable in the issue of whether teachers should have the right to administer corporal punishment in the school. In the preparatory school, such punishment had long been banned and in the girls' school it had never been introduced.<sup>4</sup> However, in the elementary school, which was attended by the majority of the children, corporal punishment was permitted under certain circumstances, namely 'when the child did not show improvement through any other correctional means.'<sup>5</sup> Even though many, especially liberal and socialdemocratic politicians and molders of public opinion, were strongly opposed to corporal punishment in school, many wanted to keep it as a 'last resort' when nothing else helped.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I analyze and problematize this progressive vision of the new school in relation to the school's character forming task. More specifically I focus on how this vision was formulated, its conditions of possibilities, what kind of resistance it faced and what kind of disciplinary regimes that was finally inscribed in the documents regulating the new comprehensive school. The time period covered in this study is 1946-1962, from the appointment of the 1946 Schools commission to the establishment of the comprehensive school in 1962. Inspired primarily by Michel Foucault and his genealogical method, I want to problematize and destabilize certain dominant ideas of the present by viewing them in light of a complex, and somewhat ironic, historical process; particularly the notion that the discourse of character formation in school during this period changed from stern and disciplinary to soft and understanding, and that this was the result of a progressive political agenda.<sup>7</sup>

### **The School's character forming task and the Bright Future**

Central to the political programs of the post war period - the comprehensive school included - were certain constructions of time and societal progress. In fact, it was

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<sup>4</sup> Corporal punishment was banned in secondary school in 1928.

<sup>5</sup> *Folkskolestadgan* (regulations for the elementary school) § 29 (4)

<sup>6</sup> Richardson 1983, Sjöberg 2003, Qvarsebo 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For the genealogical method, see Foucault 1997.

against the backdrop of specific descriptions of the past and the future that these programs were even made possible, reasonable and convincing.<sup>8</sup> In light of certain taken for granted descriptions of societal changes during the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup> - described with the buzz words industrialization, urbanization and democratization - this rhetoric of the past and the future laid the very foundation for legitimizing the progressive political visions of a new and modern society.

The references to time and societal development, however, could be joined to opposing narratives and thus be used for quite different purposes. In the 1940's and 1950's it was primarily two narratives that became dominant - one basically dark and gloomy in which the sudden break-ups, lack of stability and moral corruption that modernity supposedly had brought with itself were lamented, and one basically bright and optimistic narrative in which progress, modernization and humanization were the key words. These narratives can be seen as basic frameworks for the articulations of specific problems and the suggested solutions in connection to the issue of character formation and discipline during the period.

The Schools Commission unreservedly advocated the future-optimistic narrative. They took upon themselves the responsibility of 'lifting out the burdensome and outdated and replace this with elements which are in line with societal progress and that point forward'.<sup>9</sup> In these and similar formulations, a specific construction of time surfaced; Society, the school, the teaching methods and the character forming task were described against the backdrop of a dark past and a bright future. The school of the past was depicted as 'a product of other societal forms than democratic ones' and was seen as 'standing in opposition to the very society it is supposed to serve'.<sup>10</sup> The school of the future, on the other hand, was described as founded on the noble principles of democracy, which per definition made it superior to old school forms. The present was depicted as the breaking point where the past finally could be done away with and the glorious future could be realized. With an almost prophetic tone of voice, the Commission announced that 'The time has come to give to the school the possi-

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<sup>8</sup> See Qvarsebo 2006. For a theoretical discussion of the use of 'the future' in political documents, see Hultqvist 2006.

<sup>9</sup> SOU 1948:27, p. 2

<sup>10</sup> SOU 1948:27, p. 2

bilities in this respect [the democratization process] which it until now have been lacking'.<sup>11</sup>

The school should no longer be characterized by practices such as obedience, memorization and authoritarian methods. Old methods of character formation and discipline that were built on the principles of power and force should be exchanged by new democratic ones that could boost the individuality and freedom of the school children. Modern science, rather than religion and traditional morality, should form the base for the school's character forming task. A new kind of truth-training thereby established itself; it was a critical and scientific thinking that should characterize the new citizens. Routinely made generalizations, over-belief and habitual thinking should come to an end; according to the Schools Commission the task of the school should be to train the children to separate truth from falsity in all its different shapes: ideologically, religiously and politically. As it was expressed in the Commission's guidelines:

In this way the school also opposes the tendency to fall prey for mass suggestion and routinely made generalizations, oversimplified propaganda, habitual thinking, prejudice and spiritual malady.<sup>12</sup>

The science with capital S was psychology. The Schools Commission held that the mental health of the school child had until then been overlooked at the expense of a medical and narrow-minded care of the child's body. Admittedly, the soul of the child had been the object of care also in earlier times but from a traditional moral and religious perspective. This older care of the soul was disqualified by the Commission, the knowledge of the soul that was to guide the school's character forming task was scientific psychology. This psychologising of the school's character forming task also put new demands on teacher education. In order to train and mold the children in the right way - in accordance with the psychological wisdom of the day - the teachers must acquire the fundamental psychological insights into the development of children's development and learn the right methods for adjusting unwanted behavior. The growth of new professional groups in school was another result. School psychologists and school counselors now became depicted as the new experts on children and char-

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<sup>11</sup> SOU 1948:27, p. 1

<sup>12</sup> SOU 1948:27, p. 27

acter formation, now defined in terms of professional care rather than discipline and order.

The future optimistic narrative and the scientific perspective were not only advocated by the Schools Commission, these were ideas that became dominant in many areas of society during this period and thus had many adherents. One of these was the sociologist and child worker Joakim Israel who spread the new progressive gospel through both books and articles. Israel viewed the societal changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the gradual realization of a democratic and progressive society that was characterized by nothing but positive sounding concepts such as *enlightenment*, *equality* and *civil rights*. According to Israel this positive transformation of society had not included the children to the extent that it should have:

But while the individual receives greater freedom and better conditions for personal development, and while the authoritarian bonds within societal life are loosened, we still practice character forming methods suitable for the authoritarian agricultural society, which nowadays are not only inappropriate but flat out harmful for the individual and even, under certain conditions, a risk for every democratic society... Our ideals of character formation have not developed like the social and economic structures.<sup>13</sup>

Israel's understanding of the societal development was, as the quotation above shows, founded upon a bright narrative of progress which had brought with it better social and economic conditions, a greater freedom for the individual and the dissolving of authoritarian and oppressive societal relationships. But, just like the Schools Commission, Israel held that certain rests of the old authoritarian society still existed and that needed to be done away with in order for the new progressive society to take form. Traditional ways of handling children, both in the home and in school, were seen as evidence for this.

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<sup>13</sup> Svensk Skoltidning (Swedish School Journal) 1950:40

## **The School's character forming task and the Dark Shadow of Decay**

The dark and gloomy narrative also had its advocates in the public sphere, especially among the teachers. Elementary school teacher Evald Fransson, who was an important player in the school discussion throughout the period, wrote many articles about the sense of uprootedness that according to him had followed upon the societal development of the first centuries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the old peasant society with its three-generation-family, village, county and church, Fransson saw stabile structures which had provided a sense of security and order for generation after generation. Thus, it was imperative to keep as much as possible of these structures intact when society were going through dramatic changes. The discipline problems in school were viewed in a different way within this narrative framework. As Fransson put it in a teacher journal from 1949:

That these thoroughgoing changes of society must affect the mentality of the growing generation is obvious.... The psychological tiredness makes entrance earlier in the pupils and is stronger than before.... The childish period with an attitude of fun and play has been prolonged and can nowadays be seen in older children. The superficial attitude to life has spread, the ability to concentrate and persevere is weakened... The demands for fun rather than work are much stronger...nervous jerkiness... more impulsivity, a lack of restrain... respect for elders has almost vanished completely as well as concern and respect for the property of others. Rules of conduct are not adhered to, the same goes for obedience.<sup>14</sup>

That the behavior of the school children had become worse and worse as a result of the societal changes was a recurring theme in the teacher journals and were advocated by a number of authors. The teachers also felt that their intimate knowledge of the school and the pupils made them better equipped to judge in matters of school discipline, in comparison to politicians and journalists. Thus, the conflict soon developed from the abstract level of ideas to encompassing two rather well defined opposing sides of the discussion, the teachers on one side and the reform friendly politicians on the other.

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<sup>14</sup> Folkskollärarnas Tidning (Elementary School Teachers Journal) 1949:24

## **The Teachers' Opposition**

Already in the beginning stages of the School's Commissions work, its chairman Josef Weine, spoke out on the issue of corporal punishment and made clear that he was against this practice which according to him stood in opposition to the very idea of modernity and democracy. Thus he appointed a subcommittee to look into the practice of 'rebuking and punishing pupils in compulsory school and related issues'.<sup>15</sup> Based on the report of this subcommittee, the Commission tendered a proposal to ban corporal punishment in the compulsory school. However, banning corporal punishment was not as easy as Weine and the Schools Commission had thought. The teachers' associations strongly opposed the proposal. The main reason for this? Corporal punishment was for the elementary school teachers intimately connected to the school's task of character formation, a task which they felt would be very difficult to carry out if corporal punishment suddenly became illegal. The teachers, instead, stressed the need for effective means of discipline; if corporal punishment should be banned it was deemed as absolutely necessary that the teachers were given new and equal effective methods of discipline. The teachers also expressed worries concerning their authority in the classroom and their legal status in case of a ban on one of their instruments of discipline.<sup>16</sup>

The teachers' resistance to the ban made a new commission necessary. Thus In September, 1947 the Commission of Inquiry on School Discipline (CISD) was appointed. The fact that this committee consisted only of members with strong ties to the school system was a concession to the teachers and indicated a hegemonic strategy intended to reach consensus on the matter by including the opponents in the decision rather than deciding over their heads. The CISD's report was handed in to the Schools Commission in 1950. However, the CISD did not result in the expected proposal to ban corporal punishment. Instead they highlighted the problem of discipline in school as such and argued for the need of new and effective methods of discipline, which meant that they sided with the teachers on the matter. The ethical problems with physical punishments were toned down by the CISD, corporal punishment was depicted as one disciplinary tool among many and, even if it should be used with

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<sup>15</sup> SOU 1950:3, p. 7

<sup>16</sup> Qvarsebo 2006.

care, was not to be banned.<sup>17</sup> Thus the CISD did not agree with the Schools Commissions view on corporal punishment; in fact they rejected the description of corporal punishment as a form of violence and tried to reformulate the practice as a legitimate pedagogical tool that had its place in school. Thus, by appointing the CISD the Schools Commission succeeded in their ambition of winning over the teachers but at the price of losing the battle over the main issue.

The reformulation of the practice of corporal punishment is also understandable in light of the teachers' self image that was strongly tied to the noble ideas of enlightenment and democratization. To accept the Commission's view on corporal punishment as a form of violence would mean that the teachers more or less would plead guilty to have used violence as a pedagogical tool, which did not correspond to their view of themselves as democratic educators of the nation's children. It was therefore necessary for the teachers to depict corporal punishment not as violence but as a legitimate pedagogical tool, though it should be used with thought.

### **Changes in the Penal code and the Abolishment of Corporal Punishment**

It was thus not possible to ban corporal punishment on the basis of the CISD report. The discussion on discipline and corporal punishment therefore abated around the mid 1950's and the Schools Commissions visionary portrayal of a new school where physical abuse was banned appeared to be left on the drawing table. In 1958 a ban was nevertheless issued, but not as a direct consequence of the discussions on the school political arena but rather as part of a modernization of legal practices that until then had been regulated by a penal code from 1864, i.e. before the Swedish industrialization phase.<sup>18</sup> The change in the Penal Code meant that all forms of physical punishment could be equated with assault and battery. And corporal punishment had by this time been abolished from most institutions in society, including the preparatory school as mentioned above. The right to administer physical punishment had also been taken away in the Code relating to Social Services from 1956. In the Code relating to Parenthood and Guardianship from 1949 a changed view on physical punish-

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<sup>17</sup> SOU 1950:3, p. 50f.

<sup>18</sup> Proposition 1957:170, p. 5, 17.

ment was expressed by replacing the word 'tukta' (discipline) with the milder word 'förmana' (admonish).<sup>19</sup>

To lift out a paragraph in the Penal Code that drew a clear line between corporal punishment and physical abuse where the former was legitimate - and the latter illegitimate - thus was in tune with this broader societal development. Even if many teachers, and some institutions closely tied to the school, tried to exclude corporal punishment in school from this process, in the long run it became impossible to keep a distinction between different forms of physical punishments. This broader process then resulted in the ban on corporal punishment in school in 1958, and the same formulations later was imported to the curriculum for the 1962 comprehensive school.

### **To Discipline Without Corporal Punishment**

How then did the opponents to the ban view the situation after 1958? Many teachers seemed to have been confused as to what the new legislation meant; what should be labeled as corporal punishment and what exactly was now forbidden? Pure and simple beatings was one thing – a slap in the face, pulling of the hair, using the stick etc. – but how were milder forms of corrections to be viewed? What kind of authority did the teachers have after the ban, what measures could in reality be taken to uphold the order of the class room and what measures were in danger of being labeled as criminal? Around these and similar questions the discussion revolved among the teachers after the ban in 1958.

This anxiety over the discipline and order in school had consequences for how the school's character forming duties were defined after 1958. A strong emphasis on the need for new and more effective means of discipline that could replace the practice of physical punishments becomes discernible in the discussion. The National Board of Education (NBE) was leading the way in this. In order to support the teachers in their character forming work the NBE in 1959 published a manual with detailed instructions for the new situation.<sup>20</sup> At first glance the manual has many similarities with the Schools Commission's guidelines and the influence from the Commission when it comes to vocabulary is clear. But when it comes to the actual handling of the

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<sup>19</sup> Proposition 1957:170, p. 15

<sup>20</sup> *Allmänna anvisningar för undervisning och fostran på skolans högre stadier.*

discipline problems in school it becomes obvious that the inspiration came from an older discourse where the value of order and discipline was highlighted. Rather than following the Schools Commission and emphasize democratic methods, the NBE's guidelines stressed the problems of concrete discipline problems that had to be solved. The instructions to the teachers, therefore, were more about upholding order and forming useful citizens than molding democratic personalities.

A certain holistic view on the school's character forming task was advocated in these guidelines. This meant among other things that the school should not be satisfied with only influencing the pupils in school, it was also imperative that the pupils' parents and families came under the school's moral influence. The home and the family were portrayed as a potentially dangerous place where the child was in danger of taking up many negative patterns of behavior. Parents were in general portrayed as ignorant and as lacking the resources that were needed for giving the child a proper upbringing. It was therefore important that the norms of the school were transferred to the home, something which demanded different kinds of techniques: parent-teacher meetings, contact books, information material, personal counseling etc.<sup>21</sup> The criticism that had been leveled against old authoritarian methods of discipline in school, however, meant that all disciplinary practices had to be reformulated in order to be accepted. It was important to block accusations from the public of being stern and heavy handed and as practicing an unwarranted control over children and parents. The ideal form of discipline was when the pupils disciplined themselves and the teachers simply monitored and directed the process.

The new disciplinary discourse was not formulated by the NBE alone; in the teachers own forums, especially the teacher journals, 'the discipline issue' was at the center of the discussion even after 1958, and new creative ideas in the discipline area were unleashed. The disciplinary methods suggested in the new regulations for the elementary school from 1958 - detention, exclusion and relegation - were of course discussed, as was a proposal from the NBE that the system 'observation classes' and 'special teaching' should be expanded. But other suggestions than these were also discussed. A general tendency to abandon the old emphasis on rules and regulations in favor of peer influence, self regulation, expert counseling and parental enlightenment becomes discernible. There is no decrease of disciplinary practices during this period

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<sup>21</sup> The National Board of Education, 1959, p. 11.

but rather a transformation of the forms and techniques of discipline. The teacher's role in the disciplinary process became more passive and took on a more administrative form - the teacher was not to carry out the discipline measures himself but should rather concentrate his efforts on planning, monitoring and observing the process. This administrative role came to encompass also the different expert groups that had connections to the school system, i.e. school psychologists, counselors, school medical doctors and school nurses. All the good forces of society should now be mobilized and joined together to ensure the good and proper behavior of the school children. The character forming work of the school was primarily to be carried out in the form of counseling, information and enlightenment campaigns rather than outright moralizing and control. The disciplinary measures should ideally be carried out by the pupils themselves.

The so called character formation campaigns were also an expression of the creativity that accompanied the school's character forming task after 1958. The point of these campaigns was to try to capture the pupils own energy and channel it in the right direction. Elementary school teacher Erik Sverud suggested no less than ten different "Campaigns for Character Improvement" to be carried out on a yearly basis:

- Kindness and respect
- Order and punctuality
- Cleanliness and neatness
- Courtesy
- Care of the school property and own belongings
- Refined speech and quiet voice—campaign against noisiness
- Maintenance of parks and gardens – care of nature.
- Traffic rules
- Anti-tobacco, anti-sweets, and anti-littering
- Young people with good taste, etc. (Folkskolan 1962:7-8)

Sverud's ideas were in no way unique but seemed to have been viewed as interesting and creative ways to deal with the discipline problems. This was not just ideas however, they were also realized. An example of this is the 'Courtesy Campaign' that was

carried out in the schools of Karlstad during 1959 and that was seen as exemplary by many teachers.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Progressive Vision and the New School – What happened?**

What then were the results of the discussions of character formation and discipline in school during the 1940's and 1950's? What became of the grand vision of a democratic school system based upon humanitarianism, democracy and individual freedom? And what kinds of methods for influencing and forming the school children were actually articulated in connection with the establishment of the new comprehensive school in 1962? As I have shown above, the texts produced within the CISD differed from the Schools Commissions formulations in that they were influenced by an older pedagogical heritage where discipline and order was highlighted. The first curriculum of the new comprehensive school (lgr-62) was an expression of this heritage rather than the progressive ideas of the Schools Commission. This curriculum was in many respects basically a product of the NBE, an administrative body which had its historical roots in the older Elementary School Board and that was closely tied to the elementary teachers. The guidelines in the new curriculum, therefore, had strong connections to the ideas and norms of character formation within the NBE. This is obvious when it comes to the instructions on how to handle specific discipline problems. The curriculum includes a section entitled 'School Problems'. The bulk of this section had simply been copied from a section with the same title in the NBE manual from 1959, which has been discussed above. The difference is that the guidelines in the curriculum are far more detailed. Undesired behaviour such as aggressiveness, shop-lifting, insufficient truthfulness, cheating, truancy, sexual relations, alcohol, tobacco and so on is discussed in far more detail than in the former text, and concrete ways of 'combating' this kind of behaviour is presented (lgr-62, p. 83-88).

The importance of transferring the norms of the school to the family was also highlighted in the new curriculum. The same tendency to be thorough and detailed that has been observed in NBE's manual is again discernible. The teacher was to find out as much as possible about the pupils from the parents, and the home environment

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<sup>22</sup> Folkskolan (The Elementary School) 1959:5

was to be influenced with the help of everything from personal talks and contact books to class meetings, big hearings, parent-teacher meetings and parent organizations.<sup>23</sup> Scientific psychological knowledge, which had been strongly emphasized by the Schools Commission, was mentioned in the text, which at first glance creates the impression that the views of the Schools Commission were acknowledged. However, the rhetoric of democracy, individuality and independence which was at the center of the Schools Commission's guidelines is absent. Besides a few introductory references to 'active participation', the importance of 'critical and independent observations' and to 'consider the pupil's individual potential', the emphasis of the curriculum is on discipline and order thus reflecting the older tradition rather than the Schools Commission's progressive agenda.

Thus, the Schools Commission's intent to ban corporal punishment - as an important step in the humanization and democratization of the school system - ironically resulted in a widened, increased and more detailed discipline in school. To describe the result of the Schools Commission's vision just in terms of modernization and democratization of the schools character forming task is therefore far from unproblematic - even if the actual ban of corporal punishment certainly can be described in these terms. To view this process from the perspective of changing disciplinary regimes presents an alternative view of this process. With the help of the Schools Commission the whole issue of character formation and discipline came within the gaze of experts, professionals and politicians, thus creating a field of power and knowledge where the whole issue could be formulated and constructed as a political and pedagogical problem. The political and pedagogical discussion then became the catalyst for new and creative discourses of character formation and discipline. The effect of this process was the development of new disciplinary regimes in school based on new and acceptable notions of discipline and order, and new kinds of disciplinary techniques that could take the place of the former physical punishments.

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<sup>23</sup> Lgr-62, p. 25-28.

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