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Between obedience and resistance: transforming the role of pupil councils and pupil organisations in Sweden (1928–1989)

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Abstract

Purpose – The overall aim of this article is to discuss the conditions and character of collective protest in schools. When do pupils as a collective gain the ability to express critical views on the policies of schools, and what is that criticism about? Using Sweden as an example, I discuss this question by studying the collective organisation of pupils from the 1920s to the 1980s.

Design/methodology/approach – The article discusses and compares two phases of pupils' collective organisation in Sweden: one dominated by pupil councils, one by national organisations. The article discusses how pupil councils at individual schools arose in the wake of the 1928 grammar school charter, and illustrates its influence using a case study of a grammar school in Stockholm. Furthermore, the article investigates how national organisations, first formed in 1952, expressed their concerns about national school policies.

Findings – The first phase (ca. 1928–1951) was dominated by the idea of discipline, and the main task of pupil councils was to help teachers in maintaining discipline. The second phase (ca. 1952–1989) was instead characterised by a heightened focus on protests and democracy. From then on, the main idea was that pupil councils and national pupil organisations should change the school, making it more suited to the needs of the pupils.

Originality/value – There is much research on university students and student uprisings. However, much of the previous research on the student voice is related to the upheavals of the long 1968. By concentrating its efforts on a limited time period when protest was more obvious, previous research has arguably not been able to discuss transformations over time.

Keywords Pupil councils, Pupil organisations, Democracy, School discipline, Social movements

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The school is an institution characterised by a division of labour between pupils and teachers. Put crudely this means that the role of the teacher is to teach, and the role of the pupil is to be taught. But the history of education also contains efforts to overcome this division. One way has been to involve pupils in the running of schools, both on a local and a national level. On a local level there have been various attempts at integrating pupils in the governing of actual schools, for instance by forming pupil councils or student councils. On a national level, pupils have formed national interest organisations aimed at influencing educational policy.

The overall aim of the article is to discuss the conditions and character of collective protest in schools. When do pupils as a collective gain the ability to express critical views on the

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policies of schools, and what is that criticism about? Focusing on the case of Sweden, I will discuss this question by studying the collective organisation of pupils from the 1920s to the 1980s. I will distinguish two major phases. The first phase (ca. 1928–1951) coincided with the rise of pupil self-government and pupil councils and was dominated by the idea of order and discipline. During this phase the main task of the pupil council was to help teachers in maintaining discipline. The second phase (ca. 1952–1989) was instead characterised by the rise of national pupil organisations and a strengthened role for pupils' collective action. From then on the idea emerged that pupil councils and their newly formed national organisations had the right to protest and that they could change the school, making it more suited to the needs of pupils. Thus, during this second phase, pupils formed a social movement. These two phases differ widely from each other, and it is a rather intriguing fact that the second phase could emerge out of the first phase. The way that much previous research has been organised has obscured such transformations. Much research on protest in schools is focused only on the second phase and fails to discuss how phases of increased conflict can emerge out of a tradition based on subordination.

Research on pupils' activism can be described as a burgeoning field. Traditionally, most research on youth and protests has focused on universities. There is a particularly large amount of research on the student uprisings that spread like wildfire around 1968 (e.g. Monaville, 2022; Burman and Landahl, 2020; Vinen, 2018; Wiley *et al.*, 2012; Klimke, 2010; Turner, 2010). While this research tradition has an obvious relevance for understanding the pupil movement, not least because pupils and students are relatively close in age and thus may have influenced each other, it has not focused specifically on schools and their pupils. Lately, there has been research on the history of pupil activism in schools and its relationship to authority and democracy (e.g. Hale, 2022; Bessant *et al.*, 2021; Levsen, 2019; Heywood and Strandgaard Jensen, 2018; Graham, 2006; Ides, 2014; Meyering, 2019; Fountain, 2015).

The ways in which pupils have been able to voice their concerns differ according to national contexts. The Swedish case, as will be discussed below, was characterised by a long tradition of formal organisation in pupil councils, a structure that was taken over and fundamentally reshaped over time as the councils became the building blocks of a national organisation. In a recent study on the Finnish school student movement, Jouhki (2021) argues that a thing that set Scandinavian countries apart from other countries like the United States and Great Britain was that activism was carried out through existing structures and school-sanctioned activities. This is a stark contrast to studies showing that underground school magazines, influential individuals or short-lived organisations shaped pupil protest.

Nevertheless, a pupil council is a form of self-government that has been applied in multiple national contexts. However, with a few exceptions (Donson, 2011; Puaca, 2009; Ajunwa, 2011), pupil councils have not been addressed by international educational history research. It is noteworthy, for example, that the standard works on progressive pedagogy lack a discussion of the role of pupil councils in school democratisation (Cremin, 1961; Zilversmit, 1993). Regarding the relatively limited research on pupil councils, it can be stated that it is primarily focused on contemporary times (e.g. Cross *et al.*, 2014; Rönnlund, 2011; Deuchar, 2009; Gilljam *et al.*, 2010; Alderson, 2000; Parker and Leithwood, 2000).

Regarding Swedish educational history research on pupils' democratic influence and collective action, Lundberg (2022) has analysed pupils' involvement in charity work. Landahl (2022) has examined the pupils' protests against rules of conduct and against grades. Landahl (2013: Chapter 3) has also studied pupil councils' more disciplinary role at a grammar school in Stockholm. Tholin (2010) has studied pupils' influence over the grade debate. There are also relatively brief descriptions of the pupil movement as part of the more general radicalisation and rebellion against authority in the 1960s and 1970s (Östberg, 2002; Bjereld and Demker, 2005). When it comes to the school student movement as part of the more general radicalisation and rebellion against authority in the 1960s and 1970s, Lövheim has written

about the experimental school *Experimentgymnasiet* in Gothenburg (Lövheim, 2020, 2021), and in an ongoing PhD project, Johansson (in press, 2023) explores the role of the national pupil organisations in Sweden.

To summarise, much of the previous research on the student voice – whether it deals with university students or school students – is related to the upheavals of the long 1968. There are just a few studies which cover a longer time frame (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2016; Roselius, 2021; Hale, 2022). Arguably, this focus on a limited time period when protest was more obvious has prevented an understanding of transformations over time. This article, in discussing a period from the 1920s to the 1980s, is intended to shed light on such changes. On a more general level, the article can contribute to the discussion on how social movements emerge. In particular, the long time period that includes a prehistory when pupils hardly can be considered a social movement, enables a less movement-centric perspective than usual in social movement theory (McAdam and Boudet, 2012).

Methodology and sources

In order to analyse transformations over time, I focus on how pupils have been organised collectively, first on a local basis, and later on a national basis. A key argument is that those two forms of organisation were interrelated. At first, there was organisation in actual schools, in the form of pupil councils or similar associations. Later, those individual councils joined forces to create a national organisation: *Sveriges elevråds centralorganisation* (SECO) [The central organisation for pupil councils in Sweden]. Since the latter organisation was partly constructed out of pupil councils, it is relevant to follow how pupils were able to express their voices in the different forms of organisation. In the following I will first introduce how the idea of self-government was introduced in Sweden. Then I will illustrate how the idea was realised in one of the more prestigious and influential grammar schools, Norra Latin in Stockholm. After that I will explore how the idea of self-government was radically transformed when SECO, the national pupil organisation for pupil councils, was formed in 1952. The sources used for the respective phases differ somewhat. Concerning the first phase, I will make use of the archive of Norra Latin, where annual reports and minutes from the pupil council are central sources. Regarding the latter phase I will use sources from the archive of SECO as well as from the national press.

Self-government: the pupil council governing the school

The idea of pupil councils as a means of maintaining discipline has its roots in discussions on self-government in schools in the early 20th century. In 1928, a Swedish dissertation in pedagogy argued that the recent decades had seen a global epidemic in the idea of self-government (Åstrand, 1928, p. 35). In America, William R. George founded his George Junior Republic in the late 19th century, an institution that also became known and discussed in Sweden. In Great Britain, E.A. Craddock published his book *The Class-room Republic* in 1920 which described a school class where the teacher had abdicated from disciplinary power, letting the pupils govern themselves. One of the alleged advantages of the system was that surveillance was facilitated as the pupils watched themselves. Craddock argued that self-government was a highly effective method that could revolutionise schooling. Among the results described were better discipline, better learning in schools and better relationships between pupils and teachers (Craddock, 1920).

Soon the ideas of self-government were to affect educational policy in Sweden. Most evidently it was in the grammar schools (*läroverk*), by tradition exclusive schools aimed at educating social elites, that the idea had its first breakthrough. In 1928, a new grammar school charter was launched. In terms of school discipline, the new grammar school charter

introduced two important changes. First, all corporal punishment was abolished. Second, a system of self-government was recommended. However, the charter of 1928 also showed continuity with a more teacher-centred past. The exact meaning of self-government remained to be clarified and other paragraphs under the headline "order and discipline" still described the teacher as the disciplinary centre of the classroom. Hence, it was still said that the teacher should be shown respect and be obeyed, and the pupils should not show resistance when the teacher punished them (1928 års läroverkstadga, 1928).

After a few years, in 1935, the actual meaning of self-government became clearer, as the Royal Board of Education issued methodological advice for the curriculum of the country's grammar schools. Regarding the issue of self-government, it was argued that it would be possible to give pupils more responsibilities, such as monitoring other pupils during break hours and during morning prayers. They could also supervise the library, the sports field, the breakfast room or the bicycle shed. Finally, and most important for the present study, the methodological advice mentioned the possibility of a "firmer organisation" of self-government, in the form of an "order council", "pupil council" or "board of order". Such organisations could be given "tasks of a more demanding, moral kind, such as punishing swearing among the pupils or taking over a certain responsibility for disciplinary issues." This advice was clearly an attempt to strengthen the position for self-government, but at the same time it was argued that the changes had to be slow and gradual (Metodiska anvisningar, 1935, p. 6). Nine years later, a governmental report found that the actual impact of the ideas of self-government had been limited (SOU, 1944:20, p. 57).

The case of Norra Latin

The arena in which pupil councils and the system of self-government was supposed to be applied was the individual school. We will now turn to one of the schools that claimed that it used a system of self-government. Drawing on archival sources from the school's system of self-government I will describe to what extent and how the pupils were involved in maintaining school discipline. I will also demonstrate how the system subsequently started to be questioned, thereby paving the way for new ways of understanding the meanings and functions of pupil self-government.

Norra Latin was a grammar school located in the city centre of Stockholm. Originally built in 1880 it was a prestigious school that attracted the social elite. Like all grammar schools it was inevitably a conservative institution responsible for reproducing the Western cultural heritage, but it was also a school with a somewhat experimental touch that introduced or experimented with a variety of educational changes. This is exemplified by its work on self-government.

At a relatively early stage some of the staff showed an interest in the idea of involving pupils in the maintenance of discipline. A clear example of this is from 1923, when a translation of Craddock's *The Class-room Republic* was published in Swedish. The translation was made by a Latin teacher from Norra Latin, Frans G. Blom, and the foreword was written by the headmaster of Norra Latin, John Kjederqvist. In the foreword, the headmaster expressed an unreserved admiration for Craddock's relatively radical ideas (Kjederqvist, 1923). In the afterword the translator Frans G. Blom mentioned that the ideas of the *Class-room Republic* resonated with the praxis of his school, Norra Latin. At the school there had been a lively interest in the issue of self-government, especially shown by the headmaster, but also among many of the teachers. Blom said that several attempts at introducing the method had been made, albeit not to such a large extent as recommended by Craddock (Blom, 1923, p. 132). Blom does not describe these attempts, but in the archive of Norra Latin there is one example from 1918 that he might have been referring to. In that year one school class formed an association entitled: "The anti-swearing association of Norra Latin". As indicated by the name, the goal was to counteract bad language among the pupils, and the association could

issue punishments in the form of fines. This was in other words an association which was built upon the idea of self-government. However, it seems as if it did not last very long. In the archive, there are only a couple of documents about the association, all of them from 1918 [1]. Therefore, the association indicates the obstacles in introducing a system of self-government rather than its triumph.

But the ideas lived on, and as we saw, the headmaster and at least one teacher were highly enthusiastic to the system of self-government. When we follow what later happened, we get the impression that the headmaster was biding his time. In 1928, his ideas seemed ripe. Following the new grammar school charter, which introduced a recommendation for the use of self-government, the situation had partly changed. Now the headmaster was backed up by a national document, and he made new attempts to convince the other teachers about the excellence of the method. However, he failed to convince the staff, and in 1929 he retired. To the bitter end, he fought for his ideas. At his last morning prayer, he is said to have given a speech that advocated the idea of self-government (Svenska Dagbladet, 1935). Apparently, the ideas were deemed too radical by the principal to introduce them without support from the staff.

But after a few years, the new principal, Axel Ahlberg, decided to try the new system after all, and this time there was no documented resistance from the staff. In January 1934, he decided that the pupils should be given the responsibility for maintaining discipline in school. The name of the organisation became "the Board of Order" [2]. Later, in 1945, it would change its name to "the Pupil Council", but it would remain a predominantly disciplinary tool even throughout the 1950s.

The Board of Order consisted of pupils that had been elected by the pupils themselves by secret ballot in each class. The main task for the Board of Order was to maintain discipline outside classes. Monitoring punctuality for the morning prayers was one responsibility, another was to maintain discipline in the schoolyard. During break hours, a central norm was that the pupils should evacuate the school as swiftly as possible. The Board of Order had an advanced system for making this happen. There were certain pupils responsible for emptying the classroom, as well as guards in the corridors and in the vestibule [3]. Another of the tasks of the Board of Order was to prevent homework being done during the break. To do homework at school between the lessons was forbidden. A system of self-government facilitated the control of such rules since pupils from the Board of Order, in contrast to teachers, were always present in the schoolyard during the breaks (and occasionally also outside the schoolyard). Incidences of homework being done were reported several times in the 1930s when the Board of Order was newly established. For example, in 1936 the Board of Order reported that some kind of mischief had taken place at a nearby yard. The exact nature of the behaviour was unclear, pupils had been caught "smoking or doing homework" [4].

Thus, the Board of Order and the early Pupil Council was a system for letting pupils monitor themselves. This meant that, in total, the degree of monitoring increased, since it was not dependent on the gaze of teachers. Furthermore, self-government could sometimes significantly increase the monitoring power. This is exemplified by the year 1945–1946, when the Pupil Council decided to intensify the struggle against late arrivals to the morning prayers. The new method that they used was to check the reasons for late arrivals. Given that some pupils blamed their late arrival on the allegedly late arrival of the local trains, the Pupil Council decided to extend their surveillance to the railway. "The control of morning prayer attendance has this year been made more effective. One representative of the Pupil Council has phoned the reception of the railway station, thereby making it possible to establish whether the train was late or not" [5].

Occasionally the Board of Order faced resistance and problems with its legitimacy. The clearest example of this is from 1945. In November 1945, a crisis meeting was arranged. It was clearly a meeting considered important, as it included not only pupils but also teachers and

the headmaster. At stake was what can be described as a legitimation crisis of the Board of Order. A point that was repeatedly made in the meeting was that many pupils lacked confidence in the Board of Order since it was seen as too much of a police force. It was important that the Board of Order received new, more positive tasks, it was said. It was mentioned that pupils sometimes screamed "Gestapo" after the Board of Order [6]. Other discussants were less critical about the disciplinary tasks, and what the meeting actually resulted in is unclear. However, it exemplifies that the Board of Order had some problems with its legitimacy, and this might be an explanation for what was soon to happen.

Just 19 days after the crisis meeting, the name "Board of Order" was changed to "the Pupil Council". This change of name coincided with a new, more democratic, system for electing the chairman, making the pupils in school rather than the Board of Order responsible for the election [7]. While the short-term impact of this change is unclear it signalled a change of direction that would be obvious in the following decade. During the 1950s, annual reports give far fewer details about the disciplinary work, indicating that the importance of the disciplinary role and the pride in it were fading. In the protocols we can see that the Pupil Council was starting to become self-critical regarding its role. It started to object to its role as the police of the school in a number of ways. Between 1953 and 1958 it protested against some disciplinary tasks: to keep control of such things as smoking, the throwing of snowballs and punctuality at morning prayers [8]. This indicates that a change was going on, and that a new kind of pupil council was unfolding. A document from 1961 shows that the disciplinary methods of the school had changed: from now on it was teachers who checked that the pupils left the school building during the break and that they were on time for morning prayers [9].

As the Pupil Council was released from the duty to maintain discipline, its role could significantly change. Gradually, it became an organ that to a greater extent worked for the benefit of pupils, rather than for the school and the teachers. As this tendency grew stronger the role of pupil councils was reversed. Instead of maintaining discipline, pupil councils started to offer resistance against things they disliked at school. How this remarkable mutation came about is an interesting question that we will now turn to.

Protests, pupil councils and national pupil organisations

It is in the 1950s that we can see indications of a more critical pupil voice in Sweden. As the case of Norra Latin illustrates, pupil councils gradually stopped policing other pupils and increasingly started to criticise aspects of life in schools. One major condition making protest possible can be found in the formation of a national organisation for pupil councils. I will therefore concentrate my discussion on the criticism that was articulated on a national level.

The first national organisation for pupil councils was formed in 1952: Sveriges elevråds centralorganisation (SECO) [*The central organisation for pupil councils in Sweden*], later renamed as "The central organisation for pupils in Sweden" [10]. SECO had its origin in an organisation for pupils in Stockholm – SEO – formed in 1948. In 1952 this Stockholm-based organisation took an initiative to create a national organisation. Pupil councils from schools in different parts of Sweden were invited to a conference where the national organisation was formed. Representatives from 45 pupil councils – mainly from bigger towns in Sweden – were present (Söderberg and Östberg, 1981, pp. 10–13).

With the national organisation the pupil collective became bigger, creating new possibilities for resistance. Collective action and collective protest were facilitated as pupils came to form what might be labelled a social movement or a social movement organisation (cf. Davis *et al.*, 2005). In 1957, a national magazine was launched, *SECO-aktuellt*, which was subsequently followed by several magazines for pupils. Thereby, a sense of collective identity as pupils was nourished, and criticism against schools could be disseminated between schools in an easy manner. Another crucial step was when SECO in

1959 created the so-called "Pupil Parliament". The Pupil Parliament, designed after the model of a regular parliament, was meant as a democratic forum where representatives of pupil councils from different schools could meet for a couple of days to discuss and make decisions about school-related issues. It attracted a lot of media attention, and Swedish television broadcast live from the first Pupil Parliament in 1959.

Against rules

The creation of a national organisation made it possible for pupils to express their views on educational policy in general, and protest against things they disliked. However, for the organisation to identify such struggles was not as easy as one might assume. Arguably, two conditions had to be fulfilled to make a successful struggle possible. First, it had to be a struggle that was, at least potentially, possible to win. Too unrealistic struggles would possibly weaken the legitimacy of pupil organisations. Second, the struggle had to unite pupils. This was not a task that was easily achieved, since many issues – not least religious ones – were controversial and therefore threatened to divide rather than unite pupils.

During the early years of SECO, between 1953 and 1965, a struggle was found with the potential to unite pupils: the protest against some schools' rules of conduct. In grammar schools, rules of conduct, by tradition, often regulated even the leisure of the pupils. In the 19th century there were detailed, national, regulations, with explicit prohibitions against certain activities. In the school law of 1878 the section on school discipline included behaviour outside school. Hence, pupils were told to keep their room clean, not to visit taverns, play cards or play dice. During the 20th century these kinds of prohibitions gradually faded away, but the process took several decades. On a national level a shift occurred in the grammar school charter 1905, which did not explicitly mention any of the old prohibitions. But since the formulations in the national documents were of a vague character, there was still space for individual schools to regulate the leisure of their pupils, and even to exemplify which behaviour was considered wrong. This kind of regulation lasted in some schools into the 1960s.

SECO directed attention to the existence of these rules repeatedly in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s (Landahl, 2022). The issue was discussed in their own magazine and in the Pupil Parliament. The campaign lasted for more than ten years, from the early 1950s to 1965. The first documented evidence of the struggle against these rules is from the school year 1953/1954 when SECO decided to chart the extent to which schools had prohibitions that regulated pupils' leisure time. SECO did this by collecting rules of conduct from a great number of secondary schools – grammar schools, municipal gymnasiums and girl schools. The results showed that 75% of the schools had rules that dealt with the leisure time. (An exception was Stockholm, where only 33% had such rules.) The rules were about such things as smoking, alcohol, visiting dance events and being out late at night. To arrange gatherings in public or leased premises was prohibited in 17% of the schools (Furhoff, 1956, p. 226). This statistical survey must be seen as a milestone in two respects: it presented national data about rules of conduct, and the data were gathered by pupils. A new tactic for expressing resistance had been born.

The data were accompanied by arguments about what was wrong with the rules. An important argument was that pupils should not be treated differently than other youths. The problem was not merely that the rules were problematic, but also that pupils were discriminated against:

> Outside of the school there are general laws. We cannot understand why there should be specific rules for youths in schools regarding what is allowed in the private sphere. Is it, for example, reasonable that 18–19-year-old pupils in the gymnasium should be considered as unruly for smoking in the street when working people of the same age or younger do the same thing without having to worry about being watched by teachers (Centralstyrelsens propositioner till Elevriksdagen, 1959, p. 13).

In the 1960s, the struggle against these rules was intensified. In 1963, the campaign "Operation rules of conduct" was launched by SECO. Once again, data were gathered regarding how rules of conduct were formulated in various schools, showing that approximately 40 schools had rules about the leisure time of the pupils. In addition, another more aggressive strategy was added this time: SECO actively tried to influence the schools which had rules that governed the leisure time. They did this, first, by contacting the schools, by phone or by letter, requesting the schools abolish the criticised rules. Most schools accepted, but there were still five schools that declined to abolish the rules that the pupil organisation had criticised. Therefore, in a second step, SECO decided to report these schools to the Parliamentary Ombudsman (*Justitieombudsmannen*). Such a report had previously been made successfully by the pupil organisation, thus constituting a part of its repertoire of contention (Tilly, 2004). What we see here is a social movement that uses legal methods to push through its issues. Such strategies are common but have traditionally received relatively little attention in research, while other forms of protest, such as demonstrations and strikes, have received more attention (Boutcher and McCammon, 2019). The legal strategy proved effective even this time. In 1965, the magazine of SECO was able to report that the "Operation rules of conduct" had resulted in a "complete victory for the pupils". A struggle that had lasted for some ten years had resulted in a triumph: "The last phase in what perhaps was the most successful school political action of SECO is over. The Parliamentary Ombudsman has finally announced that schools are not allowed to decide what the pupils do in their leisure time" (Wästberg, 1965, p. 15).

Against grades

This "total victory" was probably an inspiration for the pupil movement, instilling self-confidence and a willingness to reach new goals. But at the same time it created a potential crisis. What was to be the next step? What issues were important to fight and how would it be possible to identify a struggle that was as capable of uniting pupils across the nation? After all, the protest against rules of conduct had been a fairly uncontroversial one. It was not connected to the question of teaching, and it was an issue that most pupils could easily agree on. What proved to be the next major fight was an issue that was more controversial and at least indirectly connected to the actual teaching in schools: grading.

SECO was critical of the norm-referenced grading system and its idea of grades following a normal distribution. Since 1969, SECO had been actively condemning this system, arguing that it encouraged excessive competition between pupils. As an alternative, they proposed a grading system that was based on the actual learning targets, a system that supposedly would make it possible for more pupils to succeed in school. An early example of the resistance against grading was that standardised tests were boycotted. These boycotts were organised on a local level. SECO, which was a national organisation, did not explicitly support the movement, but argued that it was up to each individual school to decide if it wanted to implement a boycott or not. Still, they showed great interest in the boycotts, and devoted an issue of their magazine *Elevfront* [Pupil front] to the topic. A total of 85,000 copies were printed (Plate 1).

During the 1970s, a more radical stance was developed: that all grades should be abolished. At a speech given in 1978 the chairman of SECO said that it was fantastic to see that the organisation had been able to unite on the issue of grades. Looking back, he said that just three years before, the organisation had been severely fragmented albeit dominated by the view that grades should not be abolished. He described this period as "a dark parenthesis" in the history of SECO, a period when pupils associated with the right-wing party *moderaterna* ruled SECO. But now that SECO had once again become more left oriented and was protesting against grades, the situation had significantly changed. The chairman therefore expressed a firm belief in the future, and argued that the fight against grades had to

Source(s): Dagens Nyheter, 24/1 1970

Plate 1.
SECO's magazine *Elevfront* discussed the phenomenon of boycotts against standardised tests. With 85,000 copies printed, it was expected to reach pupils in a large number of schools

continue. If the pupil organisations succeeded in their fight against grades, the result would be an internationally unique achievement: "We will be the only country in the world to have a school without grades, a school that creates conditions where all pupils thrive and learn meaningful things" [11].

The struggle against grades also introduced new techniques for protesting, new repertoires of contention. SECO, along with Elevförbundet [the Pupil Association], developed a kind of criticism that combined intellectualism and activism. It was intellectual in the sense that pupils were encouraged to take part in the debate. This included both the consumption and production of texts. Thus, the pupil magazines published summaries of governmental reports, and pupils were even encouraged to read governmental reports themselves. Pupils also took part in the debate by themselves writing debate articles, books and appearing on TV. Journalists showed a great deal of interest and representatives of the pupil movement were repeatedly in the media (Tholin, 2010).

But, apart from fighting with their pens, pupils included demonstrations and strikes in their protest repertoire. In 1977, a magazine called *Learn for life – abolish grades*, of which 600,000 copies were printed, was distributed to all pupils in secondary school and upper secondary school, in a campaign that was described as "the biggest political manifestation since the Vietnam demonstrations" (Slaget om betygen har börjat, 1976, p. 1). In 1978, a demonstration against grades attracted 4,000 participants, the biggest demonstration against grades so far, and in a newspaper article covering it, the head of the Pupil Association said that public opinion was becoming increasingly sceptical towards grades: "A growing number of people are joining the fight for a school without grades" (Dagens Nyheter, 1978, Plate 2).

Source(s): Dagens Nyheter 14/5 1978

Plate 2.
Pupils protesting against grades in Stockholm

Taken together, this meant that pupils as a collective were highly visible in the public sphere in the 1970s. They were part of the public debate, and thereby seemed to illustrate the advent of a more democratic school.

Pupils fall silent?

In the 1980s the tide turned. After a decade of intense media coverage, the pupil organisations suddenly became a relatively silent voice (Tholin, 2010). The silence did not fall overnight, and there were countertendencies. For example, a major protest march with 10,000 pupils was organised in 1989, in protest against cuts in the national education budget (Dagens Nyheter, 1989). But the overall tendency was that the pupil voice was becoming less heard in the public sphere. Pupil organisations were still critical towards grades, but they were no longer organisations that attracted major media attention for their struggle. Subsequently, even the struggle against grades came to a halt. In 2000, the Pupil Parliament decided that the pupil organisations should no longer be opposed to grades. Later, this acceptance of grades was strengthened, which was demonstrated by the fact that the pupil organisations did not even protest when the grade system was changed recently, making it possible to give pupils grades earlier. In 2012, the grading system in Sweden was changed. Before that, grades used to be given from school year 8, when pupils were approximately 14 years old, but from then onwards on they were given from school year 6 when pupils are about 12 years old. There have also been suggestions from some right-wing political parties that grades in the future should be given from school year four. Given that the pupil organisations have a history of trying to abolish grades, we might expect that this quite radical change would be protested against. However, there have been few signs of protest against the proposed changes. In fact, in 2010 when the grading system was about to change, the pupil organisations were asked for comments on the government bill circulated for consideration, but declined (Prop 2009/10:219, p. 35). This silence testifies to the radical changes that have occurred since the 1970s regarding the pupil organisations' relationship to grades.

Discussion

The history of pupils' collective organisation is about attempts to change schools in a dramatic way. It is a history of how role reversals were considered to be the key to a more successful school, placing pupils in positions that normally were occupied by staff members or politicians. This utopian ambition to change the school can, as I have shown, be divided into two phases, characterised by two opposite ideas about why and how a strengthened role of pupils might benefit the school. The first vision was primarily driven by staff at schools and was aimed at instilling discipline through the cooperation of pupils in the form of self-government. The second vision was primarily driven by the pupils themselves and was aimed at democratising the school by giving pupils an opportunity to influence decisions on schools on local and national levels. While both these visions gave pupils a central role, they differed widely in their view of what the goal of pupil participation was. The first was about maintaining discipline (e.g. by monitoring punctuality for morning prayers), the second was about being critical against the system (e.g. by criticising the whole idea of morning prayers; see Landahl and Samuelsson, 2020). This shift implied a new view of pupils and their role in school. Pupils were increasingly seen as entitled to a democratic right to express their opinions and influence the schools. By forming their own national organisation, as well as a magazine and a kind of parliament, pupils could make their voice heard to a greater extent.

The contrast between these two visions might be overstated. More detailed analyses on the local actual school level would probably reveal continuities between the first "disciplinary" phase and the second critical and democratic phase. Nevertheless, the shift from a disciplinary towards a more democratic system was a radical transformation that calls for explanation. Certainly, the social context was of immense importance, given that this was a time when protest movements started to emerge in many Western societies, particularly in the wake of the student movements of 1968. This had an impact on the pupil movement in the late sixties and the seventies, but the radicalisation of the sixties is not a sufficient explanation for the emergence of protests made in schools. The explanations also have to be sought inside the educational system itself. After all, the emergence of protesting pupil organisations and pupil councils precedes the rise of the radical sixties, which indicates that schools should not just be seen as a mirror for an increasingly anti-authoritarian society. Rather, schools could be seen as a laboratory where new ways of challenging power relations were first tried out. With such a focus on the educational system we can discern two factors that stand out as possible explanations for the changed role of pupils around the middle of the 20th century. The first has to do with the national organisation of the pupil councils, the second with the democratisation of the educational system.

The national organisation of pupil councils was important in many ways. An important aspect was that the national organisation had no clear connections to the earlier, disciplinary phase. Put simply, it was born as a protest movement. This meant that it did not have to change to the same extent as the local, school-based pupil councils. There was no need to break with the tradition, since it lacked a tradition. Furthermore, in contrast to local, individual schools, a national organisation made it possible to organise large-scale resistance. By printing posters, writing manuals about the art of protesting, arranging demonstrations, publishing books and magazines and so on, the national organisation taught other pupils the art of protest.

The democratisation of the educational system is another possible explanation for the changes in the pupil movement. This process consisted of at least two significant components. First, democracy was an overarching value in the discourse of schooling in the wake of the Second World War, and affected ideas on how schools should be permeated by democratic relations (SOU, 1948: 27). A growing criticism against authoritarian tendencies made the early kinds of pupil councils increasingly anachronistic and in need of change. Second, the school system was democratised in the sense that education was being made less

exclusive. The comprehensive school reform transformed secondary education in Sweden from an elite institution to a mass institution during the 1950s and 1960s, resulting in a common, nine-year, compulsory school for all. It is likely that this process weakened the legitimacy of earlier disciplinary rules. These rules could previously be legitimised by the fact that they were given to an exclusive elite. Like in boarding schools for the social elite, this meant that the subordination and regulation of the school could be seen as a symbol of future power. Subordination could be seen as a transitory stage of life, a step towards a brighter future as adults in the social elite. As schools became less exclusive, this way of reasoning lost its credibility, and subordination became reduced to being just sheer subordination. This provided the seed for a more critical pupil organisation.

Puaca argues that post-war democratisation in West Germany to a large extent was learned in schools. It was through different kinds of self-government and school magazines that the pupils learned the basic ideas of democracy. In the long run, these lessons in democracy proved important for society in general since they provided the seeds for the student movement of the 1960s. The student movement was thus not a phenomenon that emerged *ex nihilo*, but had its roots in changes that had occurred in schools (Puaca, 2009). Whether a similar connection exists in other national contexts, including the Swedish case, is an interesting question. However, further research is needed to explore whether such a connection exists.

There are indications that the influence of pupils on national policy was weakened in the 1980s. It must be stressed that this was something that happened on a national level, and does not necessarily mean that local pupil councils on individual schools were necessarily weakened at the same time. No research has been done on whether their influence has increased or decreased during recent decades. What is known is that pupil councils are still commonly found in many schools. It has also been argued that their influence on the core issue of schooling – teaching – is low, and that many pupils regard them as rather unimportant. The role of the pupil councils tends to be limited to such things as influencing the school lunch. Among pupils there is a criticism towards the very form of the pupil council as a forum through which pupils can have an influence on schools (Rönnlund, 2011). Although we cannot establish how this is affected by the relatively weak role of the national organisations, it is probable that there is a connection. The absence of a visible, national arena, where the voices of pupils are heard, probably affects the engagement of pupils even regarding smaller issues in individual schools.

Notes

1. Norra Latins Antisvordomsförening. Norra Latins gymnasium [NL], Stockholms stadsarkiv [SSA], Ö1H:1.
2. Staff protocol 11/1 1934, A1A:2, NL, SSA.
3. Annual report Norra Latin 1933–1934, A1A:2, NL, SSA.
4. Protocol from the board of order 5/2 1936, A5:4, NL, SSA. However, the prohibition against doing homework at school was controversial, and during the 1940s there were proposals about legalising it, and ultimately this was achieved in the 1950s. It has not been possible to establish exactly when this happened, but at the latest it was around 1957, according to rules of conduct that most probably are from 1957. Protocols from the Pupil Council 1955–1964, Ö1A:1, NL, SSA.
5. Annual report Norra Latin 1945–1946, p. 20, B2:6, NL, SSA.
6. Protokoll fört vid konferensen mellan representanterna dels från kollegiet dels från elevkåren i Norra Latin angående skolans självstyrelse. 7/11 1945. Ö1 A:1, NL, SSA.
7. Elevrådets protokoll. 26/11 1945, Ö1A: 1, NL, SSA.
8. Elevrådet, 18/9 1953; 24/11 1953; 27/1 1954; 13/1 1956; 15/11 1958. Ö1A:1, NL, SSA
9. P.M. För kollegiets medlemmar F10:3, NL, SSA.

10. A national association that only encompassed pupils from technical grammar schools was formed in 1938. Since it did not represent pupils from other schools its broader influence on general educational policy was at the outset limited. Later on, the organisation came to include also pupils from other schools. Under the name of Elevförbundet (*The Pupil Association*) it was during the 1970s, along with SECO, the leading organisation for Swedish pupils. The history of the Pupil Association, including its emergence during the 1930s, will be covered in Victor Johansson's ongoing PhD project on national pupil organisations (Johansson, in press 2023).
11. Anförande av SECO:s ordförande Johan Rådmark vid öppnandet av 1978 års Elevriksdag. SECO, A1:20, Riksarkivet.

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