

## “Every other Swedish pupil has experienced collective punishment”

**More than half the girls suffer from stress at school. Almost half the pupils in Swedish schools are subjected to collective punishment. This is despite the fact that Swedish law prescribes that a person need only be accountable for his or her own actions. Detention, withdrawn privileges, collective reprimands and closure of shared amenities are common collective punishments for something someone else did.**

*From: Dagens Nyheter*

All of 49% of pupils at compulsory school and upper secondary school suffer from stress at least once a week – for girls alone the figure is 53%. Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and excessive achievement demands are common in children's and young people's sport. It would be reasonable for the Government and a new Education Act to put a stop to this, writes Children's Ombudsman Lena Nyberg.

What is it like to be young in Sweden today? The Children's Ombudsman will submit her annual report, this year entitled “Sweden rules! Children and young people talk about their country”, to the Government on Monday. The report describes how 1,060 pupils in the our contact classes, from the intermediate grades of compulsory school to upper secondary school, view their everyday life.

School is the most important social arena when growing up. When the pupils were asked to name two good things about school, they ranked teachers and other staff first, closely followed by friends and school subjects. If they were to be given the right of decision in school matters, the main things they would change would be school food and the dining room, school hours, the physical environment, teachers' pedagogical aid, planning and school rules.

When asked “If you had the right of decision in the whole of Sweden, what two things would you change?”, one in five answered “don't know” and 13% took up issues like “immigration, integration and racism”. About half of those who took up immigration are positive to immigrants while the other half are negative. Other things that pupils want to change include school, crime and punishment, the environment and the climate.

The proportion of children with a foreign background is growing in Sweden, especially in the counties with big cities. Many young people have an open attitude towards other people today, but they feel that adults have abdicated and laid much of the responsibility for combating racism on the country's young people. This is apparent from the interviews with young people in the Children's Ombudsman's report.

In general, the pupils in our contact classes feel well and are happy with their lives. Almost one child in five suffers from headaches every day or several times a week, roughly the same proportion as five years ago. Girls suffer from headaches to a greater extent than boys. Fewer pupils suffer from stomach-ache than five years ago.

Stress is still pronounced, especially among the girls. 49% feel stressed at least at least once a week; 53% of all girls and 41% of all boys. In 2002, 42% answered that they felt stressed; 45% of the girls and 38% of the boys.

Many adults consider that we talk too much about children's rights and that we should focus on their obligations instead. But children and young people do not know as much about their rights as many people might think. Approximately 70% of the pupils in our contact classes have never heard of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (the CRC) or are uncertain about whether they have. One in three say that they do not know of any right that is important. They have only a vague idea about the right to be heard – one of the fundamental principles of the convention.

It is worrying that many of our society's youngest members do not know that they have the right to be heard on issues that concern them. The national strategy for implementing the CRC decided by the Government in 1999 is still unknown to the majority of people. In order to realise the intentions of the convention the strategy should therefore be supplemented with a long-term strategic plan for how the knowledge is to be disseminated to children and young people. If more children and young people are made aware of their rights, this will increase the pressure on the adult world to heed and take the rights into consideration in different ways. We suggest that clear information about the CRC be included in pre-schools' and schools' steering documents and that Teacher Education programs contain a compulsory course in the CRC.

Schools must treat everyone equally. But in answer to the question "Is children's and young people's equal value respected in school?" only 44% of the pupils in our contact classes answered 'yes' while 32% answered 'no'. Pupils at the upper level of compulsory school and those born outside Sweden report a greater feeling of inequality than others. It is chiefly other pupils who consider that others in their school are inferior; a quarter of the pupils answered that both pupils and teachers consider that others are inferior. Who, then, are worth less? Most answer "don't know", followed by "those who are different", "the lamebrains", and "people of low status".

It is disheartening that many pupils answer that they do not know what school should do about everyone's value not being respected or that it is impossible to change anything. Others comment that school must work harder to combat prejudices and injustice, that there must be more – and more visible – adults in school, and that the pupils themselves must take responsibility for treating each other well.

The pupils say that communication between pupils and teachers needs to improve and that teaching needs to change and provide more discussions and theme days, more dialogue, and more co-operation practice than today.

Almost half say that they have been punished for something that someone else did in school. They have experience of detention, cancelled breaks, withdrawn privileges, money being taken from the class's funds and collective reprimands, and of computer rooms, libraries and cafés being closed.

Collective punishment occurs in Swedish schools despite the fact that an important fundamental principle in Swedish law is that a person need only be accountable for his or her own actions. It is permitted to give a pupil detention if he or she has behaved in an unacceptable manner or committed some minor offence. But when such action affects

innocent pupils, it conflicts with our sense of justice. The new Education Act should contain a rule clearly prohibiting collective punishment. Adults would never accept being punished at their place of work for something a colleague did.

When it works properly, sport can help bring children's equal value to the fore. It can unite people from different countries, cultures and groups. Children's and young people's sport can contribute to greater respect for differences and the sports movement represents a fundamental outlook well in line with important parts of the CRC.

Unfortunately, we often get signals from children and parents that children's rights are not respected in children's and young people's sport. It would seem that children and young people often have only very limited possibilities to influence the sporting activities. Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and excessive achievement demands and expectations from adults are common.

The sports movement is in many respects a non-profit activity that the Government and local authorities have only limited possibilities to control. The Swedish Sports Confederation is the organisation that distributes the funds that the Government makes available. The confederation has appropriations directives and some duties similar to those that authorities have. It is therefore reasonable that the Government put demands on the sports movement to work actively to promote the application of the principles of the CRC throughout children's and young people's sport.

The Government would then have a good foundation for driving development in the direction of a greater child perspective and activities in the spirit of the CRC. In practice, the Government contributes vast sums of money each year to activities that it has elected to exert no control over. By making the CRC a guiding principle in children's and young people's sport, it could be a spearhead for children's influence, involvement and integration.

A greater child perspective means that we should primarily consider children's and young people's own experience and knowledge to a greater extent than today. We need to make a concerted effort to improve everyday life and raise quality levels in activities that concern all inhabitants below the age of 18.

**Lena Nyberg**

Children's Ombudsman