#### Long-term perspectives on school climate

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Abstract

A number of identical survey questions were asked of Year 8 students and their teachers at a number of schools in Sweden on four occasions - 1969, 1979, 1994 and 2023. The comparison over the past half century shows that the students in the latter part of the Swedish comprehensive school have a somewhat more varied school day in the early 2020s than was the case during the latter part of the 20th century. Over the past half century, it has also become more common for students to work individually but also to participate in regular in-class discussions. However, pupils' influence over schoolwork is still severely limited. Their independence in school has become lower and teachers' expectations of students' independence have decreased. In addition, teachers’ preferred instructional styles have changed little, in spite of consistent policy expectations to make classrooms less teacher-centered.

Key Words

School climate, social development, longitudinal, policy goals.

## Introduction and aim of the study

Research on school quality and school improvement is a well-established component of educational science, which initially emerged in the 1950s as a consequence of debates about space race between the Soviet Union and the USA. In those discussions policy analysts pointed fingers at both the scientific community, and also to weaknesses in the American school system. One of the studies that fed the discussion was *The Adolescent Society*, in which Coleman (1961, 1996) pointed to the importance of understanding students as well as policy goals. Coleman’s sociological vision was that changing the inner life of schools, including peer relationships, was a necessary complement to curriculum and instruction if school failures were to be avoided. Other seminal studies following Coleman affirmed that the inner life of school contributed to the development and success of young people (Miles, 1964; Rutter, et al., 1979), which accelerated a shift from studying curriculum and instruction to studying schools as an essential component that demanding improvement. In the beginning of the 1980s, OECD entered the emerging community, and rallied international experts in this research field and reviews were made on school improvement research (van Velzen, et al, 1985, Miles, et al 1987) that stimulated new engagement by scholars and policy makers around questions of school effectiveness (investigating how school conditions affected student learning outcomes) and school improvement (examining how schools engaged with change). By the end of the 1980s social scientists within these strands jointly established ICSEI (International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement), which remains vital space in which research, policy, and practice convene to examine the inner life of schools.

Research within this tradition, and of its importance for the educational system has increased steadily since the end of the twentieth century (Hargreaves, et al, 1998, van der Kleij, et al, 2023). With the exception of an emerging body of research tradition examining student voice and sense of belonging in schools (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002; Riley, 2003; Mitra, 2018; Walls & Louis, 2023), most studies focus, less on Coleman’s starting point – understanding the goals, interests, and activities of students – than on the relationships and attitudes of teachers and school leaders on what happen in school dominates over the perspectives that Coleman had as his starting point for his study where the goals, interests and activities of the students were in focus.

Virtually none of the recent studies of student life examine changes over time, although policies and external environments for adolescents have changed enormously. This paper, however, focuses on how the inner life of schools, as experienced by students and their teachers, has remained stable or changed over a long period of time in response to policy and social change. Using student and teacher survey data, collected in 1969, 1979, 1994 and 2003, we can see which response patterns have endured, and which are shifting.

**Analytic Framework**

Schools are work places that affect all people in modern society at some point in their lives. They are also social institutions that tend to be highly regulated, both to protect vulnerable children and youth and to guide them to achieve social priorities. Thus, one of the characteristics of schools is that they appear, at least on the surface, remarkably similar across cultural and political boundaries. Some of these regularities are similar across schools (adults have responsibilities for teaching a group of students that are usually of the same age/learning level). Other regularities exist in fewer schools or vary within and between countries (mandatory or voluntary attendance, expected duration of schooling, systems to assess schools, teachers, and students, curriculum content beyond basic subjects). There are known variations between schools in the way teaching are conducted as well as in what way discipline and order are maintained. There are also variations between schools in the way one changes and develops the inner work of the school.

These regularities and variations have been a topic for research for almost a century (Waller, 1932; Mort & Cornell, 1941, 1945) and by the beginning of the 1970s, models of school climate emerged (Ekholm, 1971; Hoy, 1972; McDill, Rigsby & Meyers, 1969). In his theoretical model of school climate Ekholm argued that the core of school climate consists of the relationships between students and between students and their teachers, which is influenced by the approaches to teaching and learning that are the basis for many interactions. How frequently different ways of working together occur in the daily life in a school leaves marks on the climate. Since the advent of compulsory schooling, what this core of teaching and learning opportunities should look like, has been a topic for discussion among both educational professionals and those who control the resources for schooling. While the focus varies, the discussions invariably include both the content of the schoolwork, and the pedagogical approaches. If these function well, students will be motivated to learn.

In Ekholm’s model, the climate of Swedish schools is seen as surrounded by several “frame factors”: cultural, economic and political. The climate of a school is also seen as a major contributor to the cognitive, emotional, social and physical development of its students, which is manifested in the achievements of the students and in their engagement and wellbeing at school. The school climate is, thus, dependent on demands and expectations that, in Sweden, are expressed in regulative texts like the school law and the central curriculum. It also depends on local factors, such as how many teachers and students there are at the school, the physical design of the school, and the socio-economic demographics of the student body. The school also generates regulative texts governing sanctions, rewards, as well as the power and decision-making systems that influence the climate of the school. Typically, more informally, so do the choice of working methods that teachers and students use as well as the openness that the people in the school show towards the world outside the school (Ekholm, 1971). This model has been further developed in subsequent years, with the most recent mapping appearing in Ekholm, Forssten, Seiser, & Söderström (2021). The current model is shown below.



The model assumes that all forces that influence learning and teaching and relations between the humans in the school are interconnected, but each has an impact on the character of the school climate.

Many scholarly resources contributed to the development of the model, drawing on the work of the many scholars who have tried to clarify in what way the climate for work and for personal connections that exist in a school contributes to the development of the students. Interactions with many researchers—both in person and through their published work, have contributed to this model’s choice of concepts that are essential to the understanding of the inner lives in schools (B-E Andersson, 1982, Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Coleman, 1961, Hargreaves, 1972, Miles, 1965, 1998, Sarason, 1980 and Schlecty, 1976, 1990). The different components that influence the school climate are also consistent with older and more recent literature reviews focused on school climate (C. S. Anderson, 1982, Boocook, 1966, Thapa et al, 2013, van der Kleij, 2023).

One of more recent reviews (Thapa et al., 2013), which examined more than 200 published texts shows the methodical variations and limitations. Almost half of them are studies of covariance and 20% are experimental studies. The remaining studies are descriptions of school climate, sometimes within a qualitative research tradition. The vast majority of studies that have been made of school climate and its importance for the development of students are cross-sectional, and those that are not cover a short duration.

In their review, Thapa, et al. (2013) identify five core dimensions in the way research approaches school climate: (1) relations between those who work and learn in the school, (2) the experience of trust and safety, (3) the characteristics of the buildings and the surrounding, (4) learning and teaching processes, and (5) school improvement work at the local school. In this review it is evident that school climate researchers find that the forces that causes the climate are invariably intertwined with each other. In both quantitative and qualitative studies examining the role of school climate on student learning, multiple components that influence the climate need to be addressed and their intwined relations detected to make it possible to understand the outcome of the schooling.

In the study reported here attention addresses only part of the theoretical model for school climate. Work routines of students and teachers and some parts of their interaction are in focus together with the system for power and responsibility that are important to the social development of the students. While this may seem narrow, in contrast with the comprehensive framework outlined above, our goal is also to address the significant limitations of the largely cross-sectional methods in most published research. To investigate if and in what ways the inner life of schools varies over time it is necessary to make recurrent measurements or observations in the same or comparable settings. While this has been done in educational psychology (Terman & Oden, 1959), and to a lesser extent in organizational settings (Podsakoff, et al., 2009) there is a tradition of multi-year investigations in educational policy settings. In Sweden, for example, this strategy was used at large scale to study the effects of the national system of education. From the 1960´s Statistics Sweden (SCB) collects data about intelligence, school achievement and educational career for a random sample of students at strategic intervals. It starts when the students enter grade three of the (basic) school and continues until the end of gymnasie (upper secondary) school (Emanuelson, 1979). over a long period of time, researchers at Gothenburg University have analyzed surveys, results of cognitive tests and school achievement tests, all rich data that have helped them to detect the effects of the educational system (Svensson, 2011).

Studies of organizational behavior often have a short-term longitudinal design, usually about 2-5 years (Maughan, et al 1990; Kim & Change, 2018) which is also true of schools. An exception is the American High School and Beyond study, which surveyed individual participants nested within schools and has been used for many analyses (e.g., Ehrenberg & Brewer, 1994; Lee, Holland & Bryk, 2009).

Despite the purported focus of school improvement research on development and positive changes, studies within this research tradition are rarely designed with a longer time perspective (see for example Gross et al, 1971, Giacquinta, 1998). Even when school development processes are followed over a longer time, the period of study is rarely more than a few years (Huberman and Miles, 1984, Miles, 1998).

Some of the longer studies of change and improvement of the inner work of schools have been made in Sweden. Sandström and Ekholm (1984) followed the inner lives within three schools using direct observations, interviews and surveys over four years. Later, the inner lives of thirty-five schools were illuminated through interviews at four occasions spread out over twenty years to clarify in what way political initiatives were accepted by school leaders and teachers and mirrored in the local organization of the schools (Ekholm, Fransson & Lander, 1987, Blossing, 2004, Blossing & Lindvall, 2003). In 2003 the Swedish National Agency for Education repeated the national evaluation of the grund schools made in 1992 and 1995 (Skolverket, 2004; Ekholm & Kull, 1996).

This study is another example of in which way repeated investigations can illuminate stabilities and changes in the inner lives of schools. It suggests that patterns of teaching and learning have been consistent over twenty-five years, further supporting Sarason’s (1971) observation that the regularities of schooling are not easily changed. Swedish studies with long perspectives on the inner lives of schools confirm Miles, Ekholm and Vandenberghe’s observation that to say something about institutionalized change in schools requires following schools over a long time.

**Methods**

In the spring of 1969, school climate was investigated in fifteen schools in the southwest of Sweden (Ekholm, 1971). The study had its starting point in the national regulative text, the school charter, that described in what way the work in a grund school[[1]](#footnote-1) should be arranged:

The work in the grund school must be adapted to the age of the pupils and each pupil's own conditions. In the work, the feeling of belonging between students and teachers should be promoted. Students should be encouraged to seek to jointly solve appropriate tasks. Through its climate and environment, the school should nurture students to self-reliance and independent judgement, and accustom them to honesty, consideration, attention to others and well-mannered behavior. (SFS 1962:439; School Charter 1962, ch. 5, § 1, Work arrangements)

A survey instrument for grade 8 students (fifteen years old) and their teachers was designed to identify characteristics of the school climate. The questions covered most of the areas of the theoretical model presented above. The questions asked students and the teachers to choose between different descriptions of their behavior and how often they worked in different ways. Another item construction consisted of a description of a critical incident in which the respondent had to choose between different alternatives of action. Other items dealt with attitudes towards achievement, popularity and different rewards that could be obtained at school. The surveys that were used among students and teachers are fully presented in Ekholm (1971) and the survey for the students only in Ekholm (2022).

Data collection using the same items were repeated at the sampled schools four times. All questions that were used for the students and the teachers in the 1969 study were used again in 1979. At that time three of the original fifteen schools had closed. Results from the twelve schools that participated in the ten-year study were reported by Ekholm (1982, 1984) and by Lindvall (1985). In 1994 the data collection was repeated among students and teachers at nine of the original schools (two additional schools had closed, and another was under repair with its students and teachers temporarily distributed to other schools). Results from this study were reported in multiple outlets (Ekholm;1995 a and b; Ekholm & Kull,1996; Ekholm, 2022).

The procedures for data collection were somewhat consistent across the data collection period. The 1969 data collection occurred in meetings between Ekholm and the students at the fifteen schools. At the same time, teachers were given a personal letter in which the purpose of the study and the handling of the answers were described. The same procedure was used for data collection among teachers in 1979 and 1994, but on these occasions, student surveys were collected with the assistance of the teachers. In all cases, individual and school confidentiality were promised.

By returning to the same schools and repeating the same questions to 15-year-olds and their teachers, it is possible to identify what remains stable and in what areas changes take place within the schools. Regularities (Sarason, 1980) that persist regardless of the shifting pedagogical or political trends, become clear. When the questions are answered by cohorts separated by years, it also becomes possible to compare the extent to which the schools have lived up to the national policy ambitions that were set for the schools.

In the autumn of 2023, Ekholm agreed to contribute to an in-service training for teachers responsible for the older students of four grund schools – with one condition: Students in grade 8 and their teachers would agree to answer some of the previously used questions so that the actual views could add to the cumulative perspective from the previous studies. The condition was accepted, and four school leaders took care of the collection of answers from students and teachers on a subset of questions from the original study (attachment 1). Teachers and students responded to the questions via computers. The selection of questions focused on the use of a variety of different pedagogic strategies, student influence, and in what way students would behave in situations that allowed independent work. A limited number of questions were used in order not to distract too much from other in-service activities.

During the in-service training occasion, the teachers and Ekholm discussed the questions that had been used. The teachers indicated that the questions were still relevant in the learning environments that they and their students were currently experiencing, although the questions were constructed more than a half century previously. During this discussion, it was also evident that a few phrasings of the questions were somewhat old fashioned, but it was the teachers’ opinion that the way in which questions were expressed would not prevent them or the students from answering them reliably.

The research began in 1969 with 15 schools, while by 2023 there were respondents from only 4 schools. In presenting results from the 2023 material together with results from the schools that participated in 1969, 1979 and 1994 studies., Ekholm acknowledges the inevitable challenge of comparability, but submits that it allows insight into change patterns that is valuable. Table 1 summarizes the number of students and teachers that have answered the questions at the schools in each previous administration of the surveys, together with the number of students and teachers that answered the questions at the four schools that participated in 2023.

***Table 1.*** Number of students in grade 8 and their teachers that have answered the same survey questions on four occasions spread out over 54 years.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1969  15 schools | 1979  12 schools | 1994  9 schools | 2023  4 schools |
| students | 1 274 | 1 318 | 1 036 | 411 |
| teachers | 218 | 186 | 185 | 71 |

Two of the schools where students and teachers have answered the questions in 2023 have participated on all four occasions. The third school that participated in 2023 was the school that was under renovation in 1994. It participated in the surveys in both 1969 and 1979. One school that is included in the 2023 database has not previously been included in the survey. The schools of 2023 are located in a kommun[[2]](#footnote-2) with almost 60 000 inhabitants. A closer description of what kind of local societies that the other participating schools are placed in is found in Ekholm (1971). The non-response rates among the students and teachers have been similar on all four occasions, which means that roughly ninety percent of the students in year 8 answered the questions on all four occasions. Absence due to illness or truancy on a normal school day are reasons behind the non-attendance among the students. Among the teachers educating the 15-year-olds, the dropout was greater than among the students. Sixty-seven, fifty-eight, seventy, and sixty percent, respectively, of the teachers who taught the eighth-grade students answered the questions on the four occasions. That the drop-out rate is larger among the teachers has to do with the different situations that the two groups face when answering the questions.

For the students the survey is an element in the daily routine in which teachers present tasks for the students that they solve. The teachers asked to answer the survey may regard it as an extra duty that takes time from other personal and professional priorities.

## Data Collection and Analysis

More than a century ago Brandell (1913) concluded that the content of schoolwork and the monotony of schoolwork routines in Sweden at that time did not attract students. Active student engagement in knowledge acquisition together with varied work methods was the recommended prescription (Bergqvist, 1923). In 1919, his studies resulted in the first central curriculum for the country, which has been revised several times since then. During each revision, national policy has clarified that school-based educators are expected to organize the work to engage student interest using varied activities that will help young people become better prepared for their lives as adults. A focused summary of this expectation appears in the 2010 Education Act:

Education within the school system aims for children and students to acquire and develop knowledge and values. It must promote the development and learning of all children and students, as well as a lifelong desire to learn. The education must also convey and anchor respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values ​​on which Swedish society rests. (SFS 2010:800, School Act, Chapter 1, § 4).

During subsequent years, in-service training of school leaders and teachers also reflected these ideas and expectations (Ekholm, 2005, 2015, 2022). It is therefore possible to assume that work in schools would become more varied over the years in the studied schools and that more student active work-methods would be used there in the end of the half century.

### Working methods in regular use

In the subsequent data collection on which this paper is based, students and teachers answered one question about how often five different working methods were used in their school. The working methods were described in these ways to the two groups:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Students | Teachers |
| The class sits and listens while the teacher talks. | You yourself deliver the material while the class listens. |
| The teacher talks and asks questions. Individual students answer. | You yourself deliver the material while the class listens and asks questions, students answer and listen. |
| The teacher and the class discuss together. | You and the class discuss the material and related questions together. |
| Group work with special tasks. | The students work in groups with specific tasks and you are at their disposal. |
| The students work individually with special tasks | The students work individually with specific tasks. You are at their disposal. |

To tap the response of schools to the consistent national expectation, both groups were asked to choose between five descriptions on how often the work methods were used. The options were *never or almost never*, *once a month*, *once a week*, *once a day* and *several times a day*. In order to reflect eventually changes of how frequent these methods were used the percentage of students and teachers are put together for the alternatives *once a day* and *several times a day* – that the work method is used daily. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students and teachers at the four occasions who assess that the five working methods are in daily use.

***Figure 1***. Percentage of students in grade 8 and their teachers that have assessed that five work methods are used every day in their school at four occasions spread out over 54 years.

Between 75 and 85 percent of students, responses point to teacher-dominated ways of working that occur daily throughout the entire fifty-year period. The traditional regularities of school routines – teaching takes place by the teacher telling, explaining and illustrating, and teacher's presentations are interrupted by the teacher asking questions – have persisted, at least according to students. However, over the fifty years, a steadily growing proportion of students also indicate that teachers and students engage in daily discussions with each other. The proportion of students has risen from twenty to more than sixty percent. In the early 2020s, working individually on special assignments is reported to occur with the same frequency as traditional teacher-dominated lessons. This method of working is the one in which the percentages of students have varied the most at the four measuring points. The proportion of students who assess that work in groups occurs every day, as well as the proportion who assess that discussions occur daily, has also increased steadily increased over the half century. The percentage of students who experience group work daily is 26 percent in 2023, which is significantly higher than on the three previous occasions. In addition, the proportion of students that say that they have group work every week has also increased. Working in groups, as required by the 1969, 1980 and 1994 national curricula, seems to have finally found its way into everyday school life judging by the patterns of student responses.

Figure 2 presents the data for the three schools that were part of the study over the entire period. Data does not exist for School A in 1994 (temporary closed for repairment). The overall picture of in what way the students´ assessments have changed over the fifty-four years shows similar patterns to those for the larger sample presented in Figure 1, but also some differences. There are high proportions of students in all years in all three schools reporting teacher-focused instruction. Similarly, there are increases over time in all three in the use of less teacher-focused methods. Figure 3, which presents teacher responses in the same schools, suggests that teachers believed that they were introducing less teacher-focused methods much earlier than students reported experiencing them. While it is difficult to interpret the difference between student and teacher perceptions, it is possible that teachers tried to respond to the national mandates for engaged teaching from the beginning but were, perhaps, less proficient in the earlier years of the study. Alternatively, it is possible that students adjusted slowly to the changing expectations of their teachers.

***Figure 2***. Percentage of students in grade 8 at three schools that have assessed that five work methods are used every day at four occasions spread out over 54 years.

***Figure 3***. Percentage of teachers at three schools that have assessed that five work methods are used every day at four occasions spread out over 54 years.

Student influence

Expectations of students, especially in the latter years of the grund school, are complex. They must acquire many kinds of knowledge within fifteen subjects, learn to respect others and understand in what way democratic coexistence works. They are expected to become responsible, to be creative in active ways and they have to accept that they will continue to learn also after ending school. In the national governing documents, the importance of students learning to participate in democratic processes has been emphasized throughout the fifty-year period covered by the repeated questionnaires. In the Education Act that was adopted in 2010, the government stipulates that

Children and students must be given influence over education. They must be continuously stimulated to take an active part in the work of further developing the education and be kept informed on issues that concern them. The information and the forms of the children's and students' influence must be adapted to their age and maturity. The students must always have the opportunity to take the initiative on issues that must be dealt with within the framework of their influence over the education. The students' and their associations' work with issues of influence must also be supported and facilitated in general. (SFS 2010:800, School Act 2010, ch. 4, § 9)

Survey questions explored the extent to which school life reflected these policy aspirations. One concerned the extent to which students were allowed to be involved in decision making around ten commonly occurring phenomena at schools. The questions were formulated as follows:

* How often are the students at your school allowed to be involved in decision making around the following? (teacher)
* How often do you think you and your classmates usually participate in decision making around what is written below? (pupils)

Teachers and students decided whether the students *always or very often*, *quite often*, *not very often* or *never or very rarely* were involved in decision making about the events, ranging from social (class parties, furnishing in leisure areas) to instructional policies (homework policies, study visits).

The students' assessments of the areas in which they had influence at the four occasions are shown in figure 4.

***Figure 4.*** Percentage of students who assessed that they *always or very often* and *quite* *often* participated in decision making on ten different events in the schools on four occasions.

The response patterns are similar over half a century. Less than a third of the young people who perceive themselves to have had influence regarding such everyday phenomena as food[[3]](#footnote-3), homework, rules of order, toilets, where to go on study visits, the furnishing of leisure rooms and exams. The proportions of students who make this assessment vary little between the four points in time. The majority of students in year 8 have thus at various times during the half-century, assessed that the opportunities available to them to participate in decision making were not a major feature of their practical learning opportunities at school. In 2023 the proportion of students who assessed that they participated in decision making increased in two areas - what they are allowed to do in the school yard and homework. Increases in other areas (school meals) are modest.

The view of the teachers on the way students have influence in their schools confirm the assessments made by the students for most of the covered areas. The assessments that students and teachers have done show that areas in which active student participation in determining the life of the school is rather limited. Schools continue to be organized so that adults make decisions and students follow them. The consequence is that there are few situations in which students might experience what it is like to participate in practical democracy.

A simple index of student influence was calculated by adding the response values 4 (*always or very often)*, 3 (*quite often)*, 2 (*not very often*) and 1 (*never or very rarely*), and the average calculated so that the index varies between 1 and 4. In table 2 this index is shown for students and teachers at the three schools that participated in the study over all 54 years when they answered in 1969 and in 2023.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Students | 1969 | 2023 | Teachers | 1969 | 2023 |
| A school | 1.74 | 2.02 | A school | 2,53 | 2.07 |
| B school | 1.96 | 1.99 | B school | 2,33 | 2.35 |
| C school | 1.78 | 1.78 | C school | 2.28 | 2.18 |

**Table 2**. Average student influence index for students and teachers in three schools in 1969 respective 2023.

In one school (A) the student influence index has increased among the students at the same time as the index had decreased among the teachers. This suggests that the two perspectives may be converging in their understanding of what goes on in their school. In the other two schools the index of student influence appears more stable over the years. Overall, teachers continue to overestimate the influence of the students in school situations.

Using the same response scale, another question was used to capture collaborative or shared decision making among students and teachers in joint activities. The percentage of students and teachers who chose *always or almost always* and *often* is presented in table 3 for the four occasions.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1969 | 1979 | 1994 | 2023 |
| Year 8 Students | 28 | 34 | 43 | 32 |
| Teachers | 40 | 58 | 41 | 24 |

***Table 3.*** Percentage of grade 8 students and teachers who assess that one *always or almost always* and *often* decide together when doing joint activities in 1969, 1979, 1994 and 2023. Data for 15, 12, 9 and 4 schools at the four occasions.

For students, the proportion who judge that they and the teachers decide together more frequently peaks in the mid-1990s but returns to the 1960s and 1970s level at the last survey administration. The percentage of teachers who assess that they and the students often decide together increased in the late 1970s. At the beginning of the 2020s, it is barely one in four teachers who assess that they and the students make decisions more frequently, which is a clearly lower percentage than among the students.

Self-reliance

The goal of promoting student self-reliance and independence has been a consistent element of the national policies governing the grund school. The assumption is that participating in the work in a grund school the young ones will be prepared for adulthood. In the school charter of 1962 it was stated:

The work in the grund school must be adapted to the age of the pupils and each pupil's own conditions. In the work… the school should nurture students toward self-reliance and independent judgement, and accustom them to honesty, consideration, attention to others and well-mannered behavior. (SFS 1962:439; School Charter 1962, ch. 5, § 1, Work arrangements)

In the 2022, the language was a bit different, but the aspiration the same:

The school must stimulate students' creativity, curiosity and self-confidence, as well as their willingness to try out and put ideas into action and solve problems. The students must have the opportunity to take initiative and responsibility and develop their ability to work both independently and together with others. (Skolverket, 2022; Curriculum for grund school, pre-school and after-school classes, Lgr 22, p. 8)

The signals have been consistent: schools should help to young people’s independences so that they are well prepared for their lives as adults in future society.

Several questions in the 1969 survey were intended to reflect this aim by presenting students with situations in which they could choose to act more or less independently. One of these was also used in the 2023 survey . A situation is described in which the student must choose how they respond to a request by a teacher to go to the library. Three alternative responses were presented, which are shown in table 4.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1969 | 1979 | 1994 | 2023 |
| Do as your teacher asked you to do and go to the library | 12 | 11 | 7 | 26 |
| Ask your teacher if you can do what you would prefer to do | 75 | 75 | 77 | 66 |
| Do as you preferred without first asking your teacher | 10 | 12 | 15 | 8 |
| (No answer) | (3) | (2) | (2) | (-) |

***Table 4.*** Percentage of students in year 8 in 1969, 1979, 1994 and 2023 respectively who chose to act in three different ways in a task given by the teacher. Data for 15, 12, 9 and 4 schools at the four occasions.

While there were variations, what is clear is that in all four survey administrations the majority of students responded that they would ask their teacher if they could do something that they preferred rather than simply complying or acting without consultation. During the end of the 20th century, there was slightly fewer students who choose to fully follow the teacher's directives and slightly more who choose the independent option, but it is possible that this might reflect a change in the variety of activities available in a technology-enhanced school library.

One of the many possible explanations for the fact that students' independence in schoolwork is heading in an undesirable direction in relation to the governing documents can be sought in the norms that exist among teachers and that are expressed in their expectations of students. In table 5 it is shown what the teachers expected students to do when they had got a task to solve by going to the school library.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1969 | 1979 | 1994 | 2023 |
| Do as you asked the student to do and go to the library. | 2 | 3 | 0 | 7 |
| Asks you if the student is allowed to do as he/she has imagined | 76 | 64 | 58 | 85 |
| Do as it intended without first asking you | 19 | 32 | 40 | 8 |
| (No answer) | (2) | (2) | (2) | (-) |

***Table 5.*** Percentage of teachers in 1969, 1979, 1994 and 2023 respectively who believe that the student should act in three different ways when solving a task given by the teacher. Data for 15, 12, 9 and 4 schools at the four occasions.

During the first twenty-five years the changes in the expectations of the students' actions that the teachers' hold go in the direction that can be expected in the light of the content of the governing documents. There were more and more teachers, almost every second in 1994, who wanted the students to choose to try an independent path. In 2023, only a very small proportion of teachers have this expectation of their students. The teachers no longer expect the students to act independently in the school situation, they are expected to consult with the teacher before taking their own initiative. The norm wind among the teachers have blown in another direction than the leading politicians had hoped for.

The response pattern that runs in the broader material is repeated for A, B and C school. The teachers at A school differs as there is a larger proportion among them that expect the students to act more independent than at the other schools.

School A

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Students | Do as asked | Ask for permission | Act independently | Teachers | Do as asked | Ask for permission | Act independently |
| 1969 | 10 | 77 | 11 | 1969 | 3 | 74 | 19 |
| 1979 | 9 | 75 | 13 | 1979 | 0 | 64 | 34 |
| 1994 | - | - | - | 1994 | - | - | - |
| 2023 | 12 | 23 | 4 | 2023 | 10 | 50 | 50 |

School B

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Students | Do as asked | Ask for permission | Act independently | Teachers | Do as asked | Ask for permission | Act independently |
| 1969 | 18 | 76 | 4 | 1969 | 7 | 94 | 19 |
| 1979 | 6 | 73 | 20 | 1979 | 3 | 81 | 32 |
| 1994 | 9 | 73 | 16 | 1994 | 1 | 45 | 40 |
| 2023 | 33 | 59 | 8 | 2023 | 14 | 85 | 8 |

School C

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Students | Do as asked | Ask for permission | Act independently | Teachers | Do as asked | Ask for permission | Act independently |
| 1969 | 15 | 73 | 11 | 1969 | 0 | 77 | 22 |
| 1979 | 11 | 74 | 13 | 1979 | 0 | 58 | 41 |
| 1994 | 11 | 77 | 12 | 1994 | 0 | 65 | 34 |
| 2023 | 17 | 74 | 9 | 2023 | 7 | 80 | 13 |

***Table 6.*** Percentage of students who have chosen to act in three different ways when they got a task to do from the teacher and percentage of teachers that have expected the student to act in these three ways at four occasions in school A, B and C.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Repetition of surveys in the same schools on four occasions spread out over fifty-four years provide a rare opportunity to examine changes of some core components of school climate. Fifteen-year-old students and their teachers have assessed in what way five work-methods have characterized the daily routines. Some elements appear quite stable over time while others show greater variability. For example, direct instruction by teachers combined with teacher questions to students has stayed as a stable element of education over decades, and student and teacher perspectives on this element of the school’s practices are converging. We also see that there is increasing variation in daily instructional practices, as assessed by both teachers and students. This may imply that the policy expectation to use pedagogies that motivate students has become increasingly a part of regular practice in in the studied schools. In particular, over time it has become common that individual work and discussions occur daily. This may, of course, reflect an increasing access to pedagogical resources, especially digital ones, that facilitate individualization. However, they might reflect a more regularized instructional practice among Swedish teachers, in which a lesson is expected to contain a teacher-focus introduction, a middle where the students work individually with the content, and an end where there is a teacher-controlled discussion of what has been learned. The ways in which the five pedagogical approaches occur within the limited number of schools that have been part of the school climate studies is confirmed by national evaluations of the Swedish grund schools which took place in 1992, 1995 and 2003. The same questions that were used in this study were included in the national studies of grade nine students in 101, 131 and 120 schools that assessed how often the five working methods were used (see Skolverket, 1993 and Ekholm 2022 for details).

Larger proportions of students and teachers that use daily discussions might be a consequence of decreased social distances between the two groups. In the 1980s, quarterly meeting that included teachers, students and their parents became compulsory. The “quarterlies” rapidly became redefined as developmental meetings. Since the 1990s these meetings always include students, together with their parents, as active participants, with a teacher assuming a mentorship role. Both students and teachers have become used to discussing school questions which might have affect the student’s engagement with the daily work-life in school.

Taken all together the results of the repeated surveys given to students and teachers suggest that teachers slowly start to adopt to the expectations that politicians have defined as goals for life in schools and its outcomes, with the consequence of a richer variety in the daily life of schools.

Underlying the policy aspirations is the intention to shift the way in which influence and responsibility contribute to the quality of school climate. The fifteen-year-olds and their teachers have at four occasions assessed to what extent the students can influence what goes on in the school environment. In most areas there are few students and teachers that say that the students have significant opportunities to influence what happens in the school. The climate of the studied schools has in this respect continued to be characterized by a limited willingness among teachers to share classroom control with the students. And they have continued to give signals that what happens in school is responsibilities of teachers. The proportion of students and teachers reporting joint decision-making is low, and group work, where students have more control, is sparsely used. All this indicates that the development of age-appropriate responsibility is not a priority, in contrast (for example) with the teacher’s responsibility to cover the national subject-matter curriculum. The discrepancy between policy and the praxis of schools is significant. Because the school charter and central curriculum require that students participate in democratic core processes and decision making about shared matters limits the many possibilities to experience democracy that can exist in the schools. The pedagogic expertise that is a hallmark of professional teachers when they lead students in such subjects as mathematics or language has not been extended to the demanding subject of democracy.

Nor is there much evidence that the expectations that students be increasingly self-reliant in their school and learning have been met. The repeated questions show a weakly increasing tendency among students to act more independently in relation to a directive given by a teacher that was noted in the end of 1900 has possibly declined in the 2020s. In schools, fifteen-year-old largely expected to choose safe behavior (doing what the teacher asks, suggesting a preferred alternative) before the uncertain opportunities. Among teachers there was a strong increase in the proportions that expected the students more independently through the mid 1990s, a tendency that appears to be fading. In other words, school is not the setting in which students learn to act in an independent way. That learning takes place somewhere else and outside school hours.

In Sweden, it is possible that teachers´ expectations for student independent behavior have shrunk concurrently with the strong emphasis laid on assessment of achievement in the fifteen detailed school subjects. When the relation between student, parent and teacher is stressed by the increased emphasis assessment, in addition to increased attention to marking decisions are made, it is, perhaps, not surprising that space for independent student action is curtailed, but also time and energy for teachers to guide the ways that students try to be independent or to practice co-operation. While the policy language remains, the aims for social development have fallen in priority.

During the half century that has passed during which the four investigations were made, the educational policies have continued to present expectations that grund schools will develop a wide behavioral repertoire among students of including many personal and social competencies that extend beyond the subject matter. Results from this study covering 54 years show that the schools that have participated not fully lived up to those expectations that covers participation in democracy, in which cooperation and independence are important components. Research over the long term is necessary to show how the multiple expectations of the progressive ideals of the grund school system are challenged when “harder” messages dominate and other important expectation are given less attention.

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**Attachement**

**Student Questions**

3. How often do you think that you and your classmates usually participate in decision making on the following?

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | always or very often | rather often | not very  often | never or most seldom |
|  | 1. | Where to make study visits |  |  |  |  |
|  | 2. | Class party |  |  |  |  |
|  | 3. | How the rules of order should be |  |  |  |  |
|  | 4. | Homework |  |  |  |  |
|  | 5. | How the leisure areas should be furnished |  |  |  |  |
|  | 6. | What to do in the school yard |  |  |  |  |
|  | 7. | School meals |  |  |  |  |
|  | 8. | Knowledge tests |  |  |  |  |
|  | 9. | What it should look like at the toilettes |  |  |  |  |
|  | 10. | Collections |  |  |  |  |

4. Imagine that you are given an assignment by your teacher. You must find out as quickly as possible how an item is manufactured. The teacher has told you how to do it. You should go to the library and read about this in a book. You can think of a way that is faster. You may be able to obtain information from someone you know that works with such manufacturing, call a factory or something. *How do you act in this situation?*

1.  Do as your teacher asked you to do and go to the library

2.  Ask your teacher if you can do what you thought to do

3.  Do as you thought without first asking your teacher

5. At school you have many different subjects and teachers. The class works in many different ways. How often do these different ways of working occur in your class? **Make a mark for each working method.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | Several times a day | Once a day | Once a week | Once a month | Never or almost never |
|  | 1 | The class sits and listens while the teacher talks |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 2 | The teacher talks and asks questions. Individual students answer. |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 3 | The teacher and the class discuss together. |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 4 | Group work with special tasks. |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 5 | The students work individually with special tasks |  |  |  |  |  | |

6. In school, it is often the case that teachers and students do things together, for example going on field trips, reading joint books, etc. When you in your class do something together, how often do you - teachers and students - decide together?

1.  We always or almost always decide together
2.  We often decide together
3.  We decide together at some point
4.  We never or almost never decide together.

**Teacher questions**

2. How often do you use the following working methods in your daily teaching? **Make a mark for each working method.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | Several times a day | Once a day | Once a week | Once a month | Never or almost never |
|  | 1 | You yourself prefer the material while the class listens |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 2 | You yourself prefer the material while the class listens and asks questions, students answer and listen. |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 3 | You and the class discuss the material and related questions together. |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 4 | The students work in groups with specific tasks and you are at their disposal. |  |  |  |  |  | |
|  | 5 | The students work individually with specific tasks. You are at their disposal. |  |  |  |  |  | |

3. Imagine that you have given an assignment to one of your students in the eighth grade. The student is asked to find out, as quickly as possible, how an item is manufactured. You have told the student what to do. The student should go to the library and read about manufacturing in a book. However, the student can think of another way that is faster. The student may be able to obtain information from someone who works with such manufacturing, call a factory or something else. **How do you think the student should act?**

1.  Do as you asked the student to do and go to the library

2.  Asks you if the student is allowed to do as he/she has imagined

3.  Do as it intended without first asking you

4. How often are the students at your school allowed to be involved in decision making around the following?

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | always or very often | rather often | not very  often | never or most seldom |
|  | 1. | Where to make study visits |  |  |  |  |
|  | 2. | School dances |  |  |  |  |
|  | 3. | How the rules of order should be |  |  |  |  |
|  | 4. | Homework |  |  |  |  |
|  | 5. | How the leisure areas should be furnished |  |  |  |  |
|  | 6. | What to do in the school yard |  |  |  |  |
|  | 7. | School meals |  |  |  |  |
|  | 8. | Knowledge tests |  |  |  |  |
|  | 9. | What it should look like at the toilettes |  |  |  |  |
|  | 10. | Collections |  |  |  |  |

5. In school, teachers and students do things together, for example going on field trips, reading joint books, etc. When you and your students do something together, how often do you also decide, for example, what to visit or read for something, together?

1.  We always or almost always decide together
2.  We often decide together
3.  We decide together at some point
4.  We never or almost never decide together.

1. In Sweden grund schools are compulsory for all young people aged from 7 until 16. There is no streaming or tracking until students choose a specialization for their upper secondary education. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sweden is divided in 290 kommuns that among other things are responsible for the grund schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Sweden students are served a daily meal free of charge during the school day. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)