

The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden: Child Rearing and Schooling

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ABSTRACT: The authors have published another article, based on the same empirical material (Frisk and Nilsson 2018). This article will give an in-depth “thick description” of child rearing and schooling in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden. The first part of the article is based on interviews with children and young people in the group conducted in 2014 and 2015, and focuses on Brethren identity and socialization. The second part of the article discusses the Labora School, a non-confessional free school which was established by a group of Brethren parents and business owners in 2007. This part of the article also reflects the public debate about confessional and non-confessional free schools in Sweden. The Labora school has been criticized by both the Swedish Schools Inspectorate and the media. This section of the article is based mainly on official school inspection documents and media material. Since writing this article, the Labora School changed its name in 2019, to One School Global Nyby Campus, and is affiliated to One School Global, the Brethren schools worldwide (One School Global 2020). The third part of the article deals with parents’ and children’s experiences of the school, again using interview material.

KEYWORDS: Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, Labora School, Religion in Sweden, Religious Identity, Religious Socialization.

Introduction

The history of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (Introvigne 2018) in Sweden started in the 1870s when the Swedish civil engineer Samuel Hedman (1842–1880) came into contact with the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) while working in London. His wife, Susie (1847–1946), was the daughter of one of the British pioneers of the Brethren movement, Edward Cronin (1801–882) (Hillerdal 2007). The first meetings in Sweden took place

in Gothenburg, in 1876, the hometown of the Hedman couple. Samuel Hedman died, however, after only four years, but his wife continued the mission work (Hillerdal 2007).

Samuel Hedman initiated the publication of a series of pamphlets propagating the Brethren faith, which were sent to interested people for free. The first pamphlet was called *Lefwande watten* (“Living Water”), and was published in 1877. The movement spread to different parts of Sweden, but had at that time, as also now, its focus in the area of Småland, in southern Sweden. Other important cities where many Brethren still live are Gothenburg and Helsingborg.

Today the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden consists of about 400 members. They have been relatively successful in socializing their children to the faith, with few member children leaving the church as adults, but they also have very few new converts. The church is mostly well-known for the principle of separation from the evil world, meaning that the members have their own fellowship and should not socialize with non-members. The principle of separation is based on Paul’s *Second Epistle to Timothy* 2:19, which says that Christians should “depart from iniquity.” The interpretation of the principle has changed over the years, and from the 1960s the members are forbidden to share meals with non-members (Bachelard 2010).

Since 2007, a non-confessional free school, the Labora School, established by a group of Brethren parents and business owners, is associated with the church. All of the around 50 pupils are children of Brethren members, in spite of the fact that, in accordance with Swedish law, any child could attend the school and cannot be denied entry. This article will discuss child rearing and schooling in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden, based on interviews with children, young people, and parents in the group, as well as official school inspection documents and media material.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Brethren homes, where outside visitors are normally not invited. Musical instruments were typically displayed in the rooms, as the Brethren often sing and play together. There were, however, no televisions, as the Brethren do not watch television (Hillerdal 2007). Following the principle of separation, as members since around 1960 do not share meals with non-members (Bachelard 2010), the interviewers were not invited for meals. We were, however, offered drinks, and also in one case fruit, which was shared with the informants.

The interviews were conducted with six children (four girls and two boys) aged 12–17, and five young people (one young woman and four young men) between 19–23, and also with five parents. Following the wishes of the Brethren, most of the interviews were conducted with two informants at a time. A narrative approach was used, where the informants were encouraged to talk about their lives, childhoods, and child-rearing experiences, with focus on what they themselves felt was important. The interviewers asked complementary questions whenever necessary, to obtain a more complete picture. In all interviews, the interviewers also made sure to raise questions about the principle of separation, as this is such a specific characteristic of the group, and the Labora School, as one of the objectives of this article is to discuss schooling of the Plymouth Brethren. The interview material was analyzed thematically. The most significant themes are presented below.

The study of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden was a part of a larger project studying upbringing of children in seven minority religious groups in Sweden. The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala, Sweden. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and the informants received written and verbal information about the project, and signed a consent form. For children under 15, the parents additionally signed a consent form. The identity of the informants is confidential, and their names have been changed. In some cases, insignificant pieces of information have been altered to avoid identification of the informants.

Daily Life in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

The life of the members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church revolves around the daily meeting of the church, which takes place in the evening. No special activities for children are provided, as they take part in the ordinary service. On Sundays there are three meetings, the first one, the Lord's Supper, starting at six o'clock in the morning. For Sunday lunch the families visit each other, following a schedule of rotation, so that in the long run everybody will visit everybody else.

The daily meetings in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church are considered especially important to attend. Fredrik, who is twenty years old, says:

I would not go on a holiday to Thailand for two weeks. We just don't. We have a meeting every evening. As there are no meetings in Thailand, it would be difficult.

The Brethren members do, however, travel to places where other Brethren members live, where they can attend the daily meeting. Most of the time, they stay with other members when travelling. Our informants mention having been to places like US, Argentina, Australia, the Caribbean, as well as some countries in Europe. One informant, Petter (23 years), says that traveling has broadened his views, and that he thinks it is interesting to learn how others think and to experience different cultures.

The interviewed parents emphasize that the most important focus in child rearing is to teach the children how to be good Christians. Evening prayers are said together with the children, and passages from the Bible are read at bedtime and at meals. Children are also taught to help other people, and behave toward others as one would like them to behave toward you, based on *Matthew 7:12*. Some of our informants mention ways they try to help other people, like Petter, who mows lawns for the elderly in the congregation in his free time. One parent, Helena, likewise recounts that she opened her home for an elderly member after an operation, and took care of her for several weeks.

According to the interviews, Brethren members aim to live a God-centered life, following Christian ethics and seeking to be contributing and good citizens, for example by donating to welfare projects, or helping with common tasks in the neighborhood. It emerges, however, from the interviews, that it is not always easy to live a God-centered life. The Brethren think that everyone continuously commits sins, for example having unkind thoughts about other people. In those cases, when one feels it is difficult to live up to the requirements of the Brethren, there are strategies within the Brethren to solve the situation, like praying or reading the Bible, and it is also possible to consult the group's elders, who can give counseling and advice on appropriate reading material (interviews with David, Fredrik, Maggan, Robert, Dennis).

Brethren members often support themselves by owning small companies where they employ other Brethren members, as well as also sometimes non-members. The children often gradually start working in the family business on vacations when they grow up. Many of the children and young people state in the interviews that they aim to work in their father's business after finishing school (interviews with Kicki and Tomas; Charlotte).

Men and women are seen as having different functions, and the gender roles in the church are quite traditional (typical of conservative evangelicalism). Often the mother stays at home with the children for the first few years. There are, however, members who use preschools (interviews with Kicki and Tomas; Maggan). Women may work in the family business, often part time if they have children. Divorces are rare in the group (interview with Petter). Petter (23 years) describes his family situation when he grew up:

My mother was there when I woke up in the morning; we had breakfast together before school. I went home for lunch at 12 noon. My mother was there when I came home from school at three; my father came home from work at five, and then we went to the meeting together.

Based on *I Corinthians* 14:34–5 women sit on the back rows in the meeting hall, and men sit on the front rows. Only men and boys preach at the meetings, while the women and girls select the hymns. A female suggests a hymn out loud spontaneously, and the whole congregation start to sing. Maggan, a mother of two, reflects on gender roles in the church:

It is only in that context that a woman is subordinate to a man. In the congregation, we do not have an active role, except for with the songs. Otherwise, I think [...] I often hear that I am the boss of our house [laughs]. We have a dialogue about everything. If we are going to buy a new sofa, of course, my husband does not just buy one and says, “We will have this one.”

Her husband, Dag, says:

I think that Maggan has the last word regarding the home and what we do, and how we bring up the children. Some sisters have an immense influence. Much more than men in some families. It is very individual.

Children are expected to help with some work at home (interviews with Charlotte, Ella), but their schoolwork is also seen as very important (interviews with Tomas, Sandra). Generally, the Brethren do not keep pets like dogs and cats, but there may also be exceptions. A 14-year-old girl, Ella, says:

I think some people have cats. I have had rabbits and hamsters. My mother said that if you come to love animals, it might take away your love for people. It is difficult to love a hamster in the same way as a dog.

Brethren members frequently meet during leisure time, often arranging outdoor activities like playing games outside and having barbecues. Many Brethren are interested in music, and several of the informants play instruments. Brethren

members often practice different kinds of sport, but they play only with other members because of the principle of separation. They may also have their own gyms, either at work or at home (interview with Fredrik). In recent years, the members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church have started to use mobile telephones and the Internet. They do, however, use software to restrict access to certain web sites. Young members often spend time on their computers, and communicate with other young members from around the world. They may also play educational games on the computer, or read Brethren-filtered newspapers, as well as watch films with acceptable content.

Socialization into a Brethren Identity

Individuals become part of social groups through socialization. A good relationship between the children and parents is crucial to support this process (Maccoby 2007). Common strategies to implement socialization are routines, modeling, rewards, and punishments (Grusec and Hastings 2007), as well as reasoning.

The child rearing strategies of the Brethren were found to be varied, just as with non-member parents. Through sets of routines, young children learn culturally appropriate conduct, and learn how things should be done in different situations like during meals or at bedtime (Laible and Thompson 2007). The routine and structure followed in daily activities involve seemingly universally accepted and unquestioned repetitions of events (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Such daily routines in the Brethren are, for example, going to the meetings (interviews with Ella and Fredrik). The meetings become part of the unquestioned daily life for the children. Several informants speak of the social significance of the meetings, that they meet their friends and that they sometimes play games like volleyball together after the meetings (interviews with Ella and Fredrik; Petter). Invitations to play sports or visit are usually agreed in connection with the meetings, so the ones who are not at the meeting are not invited (interviews with Kicki and Tomas). The parents are, however, a bit flexible regarding the meetings. If the children are very tired, they can in exceptional cases stay at home. In practice, however, the children are usually eager to go to the meetings (interviews with Kicki and Tomas; Petter). The mother, Maggan, says:

It did happen, but very seldom, that one of the children did not want to go to the meeting. But most of the time, they were very positive; they met their friends there. So, rather, they would see it as a punishment if we left them at home. If the meeting was very early [like the Sunday morning meeting], it could be difficult to get them out of bed. Then you had to offer a carrot—or else, OK, you can stay at home this time. It depended on the situation. Sometimes, it was just laziness, and then I thought they would just have to pull themselves together; we are just doing this. At other times, I knew they had had a hard week or something, and then I thought, OK, this time you can stay home.

The daily and unquestioned routines in the Brethren do not include television, cinema, or socializing with non-members. Fredrik (aged 20) demonstrates how natural these routines are in the Brethren: “You do not think about doing it. Because you have never done it.”

Other significant methods of socialization are modeling and imitative processes. Children naturally want to be like everyone else, and imitation is central to develop social and moral understanding (Laible and Thompson 2007). Parents and other adults are important role models for children, and demonstrate socially acceptable behavior (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Parents may also strategically expose the child to favorable role models, and limit their access to negative ones (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Interviewed Brethren parents are aware of the importance of being a good example for the children (see e.g., interview with Dag).

Rewards and punishments are other common strategies for parents. Brethren parents seem to use both; however, rewards appear to be more common than punishments. Maggan tells about one of her children who never wanted to do his school homework, but could be persuaded to do it through rewards:

My son did not have difficulties with school, but his marks were low because he was terribly uninterested. But he loved animals. We started by buying quails. He was maybe nine years old. He built cages and was so happy. It was his life; I had to always go and look for material [to build with]. You have to compensate them with such things. If you like quails, OK; but you have to do your homework first. Then, when he was 15 or 16, it was musical instruments instead. He bought some things himself when he had earned a little bit of money, but otherwise we had to compensate with something we knew he liked.

A few parents and children talk about punishments, although this strategy does not seem to be used very often (interviews with Kicki and Tomas). Some informants talk about incidents when they had to stay in their rooms until they changed their attitudes after being disobedient, or having had a bitter substance

put on their tongues when they used foul language (interviews with Robert and Dennis).

On the other hand, reasoning seems to be a quite common strategy for the parents in the Brethren. When Tomas' son had broken a window by throwing a stone, Tomas had a serious discussion with him about how houses can disintegrate when they become damp, and how it costs money to repair a window. The son also had to wait an extra week to get an item he really wanted.

It is clear from the interviews, however, that the most important factor for socialization in the Brethren is the close relationship between parents and children. This is referred to by members by citing *Exodus 20:12*. Many parents speak about the importance of spending as much time with their children as possible. The families, often together with other families, spend time together doing outdoor activities (see e.g., interview with Dag). There is a certain emphasis on the importance of obeying the parents, based on what is written in the Bible about honoring one's parents (interviews with Fredrik, Mia). Kicki and Tomas say that the parents know better than the children regarding, for example, the necessity of eating vegetables and of going to school.

Conflicts may happen, as in all families. 13-year-old Sandra states:

If I, for example, want to go for a walk and then they say “no,” and I have been looking forward very much to the walk, then I might be grumpy and go to my room. But then, after a few minutes, I am happy again, and I go downstairs, and everything is as normal.

The Importance of the “Ingroup”

It is a primary feature for human beings to have a desire for group affiliation, and to have a natural preference for the “ingroup” (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Children innately want to act in accordance with the standards and rules of the group with which they identify (Grusec and Davidov 2007). Because of the principle of separation, in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, the ingroup is very important for the members, as they socialize almost exclusively with other members of the church. Families are constantly engaging in various activities together and having each other over for dinner. Many informants talk about the significance of the social group in daily life, and that as they know the whole family, this creates a kind of in-depth knowledge (interviews with Ella and

Fredrik: Petter). The informants say that they socialize with people of all ages, not just their peers (interview with Petter). The mutual faith creates a special sense of community (interview with Ella). Charlotte, 17 years old, states:

Those in the congregation think more like I do; they are happy and like to do fun things, like having girls' evenings, going out for picnics, or singing in choirs. We like to help other people, so some of us girls started a choir, and we have sung at many retirement homes.

Also, Petter comments upon the importance of the group:

Most of the time, we have great fun together. We play and make music together [...] the evenings and the fellowship we have are marvelous.

The Brethren group is also a global group; many informants comment upon that they have friends all over the world (interview with William). Like Fredrik says:

We can go anywhere in the world; we just make a telephone call before we go and ask if we can stay. "Yes, no problem." And as soon as you arrive, it's like coming home. You know everyone immediately. It is great fun.

The Labora School opened in 2007 and offers classes from the 3rd grade upwards. Therefore, all the young people interviewed had some experience of attending public school. For the most part, they claim that they had friends at public school, with whom they used to play football and other games during breaks (interviews with Robert and Dennis; Petter; William). The friendships, however, did not develop further. The informants talk about the fact that the sense of fellowship is much stronger with other Brethren children, and that they did not feel any need to socialize further with children from outside the group.

One of the informants, Petter, remembers that after school he either spent time with his Brethren friends, or read books. or went cycling by himself, or mowed lawns for elderly in the community—while his classmates surfed the Internet, or played computer games. The differences between the Brethren children and the nonmember children often became more pronounced when they became teenagers, as the classmates started to go to parties, smoke and/or use drugs (interview with Petter). Alcohol is not mentioned, as Plymouth Brethren are allowed to drink moderate amounts of alcohol at home. Charlotte has the experience that her previous school was great fun, and that she had many friends and that she liked the teachers:

At times, I might have thought it would have been fun to do something with them [her classmates] after school, but at home, I was with my Brethren friends and we had so many things to do that it just passed.

There were also Brethren members who sometimes played with non-member children, but almost always only outdoors, and it never developed to a deeper relationship. Maggan says:

On a rare occasion, I know there was one girl who wanted to be with my daughter. They went sledding on the slopes. I do not know if my daughter went to her home or not. I think she went there once or twice [...] but not regularly. If it is just once or twice, you do not care so much.

Maggan also remembers her own childhood:

I also visited the homes of my classmates if we had to practice a piece of theatre or do some schoolwork [...] but the friendship did not go further. I think this was mutual.

Supporting what Maggan says, several of the informants recall that they were seldom asked to visit the other children after school. According to Mia, after some time the other children come to understand how the Brethren live and accept that:

Like if a Muslim has a shawl, you might ask, “Do you need to wear that?” And then, once they have been in the class for a year, it seems very normal. You get used to it. I think Sweden is good for that, people are respected and allowed to be different.

It seems to be individual, however, exactly how the principle of separation is practiced. Some informants remember sometimes visiting the homes of their classmates, although they did not go, for example, for birthday celebrations (interviews with Robert and Dennis). Tomas says that it would anyway be difficult to find time for other parties and invitations beside the Brethren ones, as the Brethren activities are so numerous. One of the informants had experienced being bullied by nonmember classmates, but this seems to be a quite isolated case (interview with Petter).

Kicki and Tomas have two children, who are five and six years old. The older one attends school and the younger one preschool. “It’s going great. We talked with the teachers. Mostly about whether they could sit by themselves while they ate.” Kicki says. The other children asked some questions about why their child had to eat by himself: “It took two days. Now, they say to our son, ‘You should sit over there,’” reports Tomas. Tomas says that it becomes more important to be separated while eating after 10 years of age. “It is not absolutely necessary when they are younger. It is not classified as fellowship when a child needs to eat.”

About his work, Tomas says that he can drink a cup of coffee with a client, but he does not eat anything with them: “If we have a meeting and are talking about what we are going to do during the week, they have coffee, and we also have coffee.” He never invites his clients out for dinner, but instead gives them a big Christmas basket each year. The Brethren do not celebrate Christmas.

When Brethren children attend public schools, they typically go home for lunch. Other occasions when they do not participate to activities with the other children are, for example, when the class visits a church (interviews with Fredrik, William), or, when there are school excursions that involve an overnight stay (interview with Charlotte).

Most Brethren children stay in the congregation as adults. If they leave the church, the principle of separation is still maintained. Maggan (a parent) says,

I would be really sad if that happened. Both because I believe the life we live is the right one, and because it would cause great pain if my child left. I would feel they had chosen something which is wrong, and which is going to hurt them. Of course, I would try to talk to them and ask why; what have we done wrong? [...] It could not be the same fellowship as before. If they choose another way of life, then we cannot have a meal together.

Maggan continues to say that she would probably not meet with her children very often if they left the church. If the child turned up on the doorstep, of course, he would be invited in and might be served a cup of coffee, “But it would not be as it is now when we have such great times together. He would have turned his back on our lifestyle.” Maggan stressed that in such a situation she would definitely try to stay in some sort of contact with the child. This attitude is not normative in the group. Normally, you do not meet ex-members (Bachelard 2010).

Media and Mediated Culture

Mass media is normally a key socializing influence for children in our culture (Arnett 2007). The Brethren, however, do not use television, radio, or the cinema at all. The intention behind this decision is to avoid the influences of violence, sex, and vulgar language. Fourteen-year-old Ella says, “Some films are violent. If you start with one film, you might want to see more, and it may take you away from what you believe.” Fredrik states, “If you have a TV, anything could come up. So, it is easier not to watch it at all.” William says that he prefers playing

football to watching television, and that, if he had the choice, he would rather have a pair of really good football shoes than a computer game.

Also, here there seems to be space for individual judgments. Although films should not be used as entertainment, they can, in some cases, be used for educational purposes (interviews with Maggan and Dag). One of the children, Peter, says that he watches the serial *Lockie Leonard*, an Australian children's TV program. Watching television is definitely not encouraged and Brethren members do not purchase TV sets; however, watching television is not considered completely taboo, at least not in Maggan's family. This is, however, changing as some Brethren nowadays have televisions that they use on closed circuits. Maggan tells a humorous story about her children, who used to run to the TV room when visiting a retirement home:

My aunt was living at a home for retired people, and I felt it was my duty to visit her once a week. Often, I brought the children along. But they spent maybe five minutes with her; then, they were in the living room watching television [laughs]. You would need a lead dog to keep them away from such things. It is there all the time. Sometimes, I went to tell them "Stop now;" it was almost embarrassing because there was no one else watching television! They turned it on themselves. It felt very embarrassing! One of my children now says that the best thing you did, Mum, was when we went to the furniture shop and you sent us to the room with children's television and children's videos. I said that at least I knew where you were [laughs]! The reason we do not have TV is because it becomes uncontrollable. But if you watch something once in a while in a shop [...] It is not taboo. It is more that our lifestyle involves not having a TV in our houses, and we do not encourage it; there is so much that is not appropriate. But the children have probably watched many things.

It is clear from the interviews that many informants read newspapers (interviews with Fredrik, Ella, Dag, Maggan, Mia, Kate, and William), and they seem well informed about what is happening in the world. They do, however, avoid reading books with questionable content. It seems that many Brethren do read books. Peter states, for example, that he has been reading books about "The Famous Five" (by Enid Blyton, 1897–1968), and Sandra says that she is currently reading *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, a book about two boys during the Second World War. Maggan says that she had both books and comics while growing up, items which we also saw present in her home when we visited. Non-religious books are, however, discouraged among adults.

Brethren members subscribe to an Internet filter, which blocks inappropriate content (interview with Petter). Computers are used for educational purposes—to learn English or Math, for instance (interviews with Kicki and Tomas). Time for using the computer is, however, limited, because church and community activities are numerous (interviews with Ella and Fredrik). The Internet is mainly used for schoolwork, for keeping in contact with Brethren friends in other parts of the world, and for reading the news (see interview with Charlotte). Peter and Sandra play non-violent computer games.

Music is important in the Brethren culture. Many members sing in Brethren choirs or play instruments. Some share CDs of their music to their friends, and a few are professionals who sell their CDs. According to the informants, the Brethren mostly listen to the music they make themselves (interview with Charlotte).

The Labora School

The education system in Sweden has historically been run by the state up until it was privatized in 1991. The Swedish government launched the so-called Free School Reform the year after, which opened up the market for independent schools. The number of students attending free schools have steadily risen. 14.9% of students in primary schools, and 27.6% in secondary education attended free schools in 2017 (Skolverket 2016). The existence of religious free schools in Sweden has been debated over the last twenty years (Berglund and Larsson 2007). The tuition is free of charge, as is all public education, and the free schools follow the same national curriculum as the communal schools. Religious free schools in Sweden are only allowed to have a religious or confessional profile. This means that any religious content outside of the general religious studies, which includes the study of all religions, has to be voluntary, and not interfere with or substitute any other classes. In Sweden, the Labora School, together with the Studema School which is run mainly by members of the Church of Scientology, and some Muslim free schools, such as Kunskapsskolan, have been much criticized. However, neither the Labora School nor the Studema school are considered confessional schools. They are religiously independent and open to students from all or no faith, which regarding the Labora School is true in

principle but not in practice. The school boards are run mainly (and in the case of the Labora School, exclusively) by the religion's members.

The Labora School is located in the village of Långaryd, Hylte municipality. It was founded by parents in 2007. Although open to other pupils, the school is only attended by children of members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. The school teaches grades three to nine, and an economics program and an industrial program at upper-secondary level. Although run by a foundation including only members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, the Labora School has a particularly interesting policy, unparalleled in Sweden; they require that all teaching staff including the principal should be non-members. It may also be a consequence of the fact that higher education at university level is not encouraged, which gives that there are no licensed teachers among the members. The school also requires pupils to wear school uniform, something which is uncommon in Sweden. Prior to 2012, the school offered distance learning to some students living in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Helsingborg. The practice of distance learning was terminated in 2012 after a requirement from the Swedish School Inspection. Because none of the students live in Långaryd, where the school is located, they travel long hours by bus each day. In 2017, the school had a total of 71 pupils, 53 at the primary level and 18 at the upper-secondary level (Skolinspektionen 2017a).

Complaints

A former staff member as well as the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, politicians (Sveriges Riksdag 2007), and the general public have criticized the school (Aagård 2012). The Swedish School Inspectorate claims that schools which they deem as a high risk of not offering the students the education to which they are entitled are inspected more frequently than other schools (Skolinspektionen 2017b). The Inspectorate can also investigate if direct accusations are directed at a particular school, which will be detailed further in this paper.

The critique coming from a former staff member, which was publicly noted in Swedish newspapers, included a concern for the traditional gender roles of girls and boys at the school. The former staff member claimed that the girls of the school were not encouraged to continue their studies beyond the upper-secondary level and take jobs. The requirement of wearing a certain suit for gym

classes due to the prohibition on wearing trousers was also objected to, along with a general view of the girls' situation as "tragic." Further critique was centered around the school's restriction of the use of the Internet, and the selection of books prohibited on request by the parents, who felt that inappropriate material, referring mainly to sexuality, should not be used in class, or displayed in the school library. The former teacher claimed that parents had been reported to rip out certain pages of books that they found inappropriate.

The library at the school was (on our visit in 2016) quite small. The principal Alexander Tornberg admitted that there had indeed been problems with parents wanting to intervene in the schoolwork in a way not common or recommended in Swedish free schools. The Swedish School Inspectorate has concluded that the involvement of parents at the school goes beyond a "normal" level, but has also failed to detail what constitutes "normal" involvement (Skolinspektionen 2009a).

However, Tornberg added that discussions had led to the problems being resolved (interview with Tornberg). Similar complaints connected to Brethren parents' involvement in schools have been made in other countries. For instance, Stephen Bigger writes that in the 1990s in the UK, Brethren parents wished

that teaching [would] not advocate "worldly" practices such as the use of makeup or immoral actions; and that health education [would be] decently and sensitively undertaken (Bigger 1990).

Brethren schools in Australia have additionally been criticized due to questionable funding practices (Buckingham 2010, 21). However, since the Swedish education system both supports and funds free schools, this has not been the case in Sweden.

Reports by the Swedish School Inspectorate

The first complaint made by the Swedish School Inspectorate dates to 2008 and includes some minor or general objections that have been omitted in this section, as they were resolved immediately. However, criticism pertaining to lack of objectivity and comprehensiveness in the education posed a certain problem as parents, as stated above, initially censored some of the literature available in the school's library. The Inspectorate reported that teachers sometimes turned to the school board for advice as to whether certain educational materials were suitable. In an effort to come to terms with the problem, a special group selected by then

principal John Blomster, was given the task of compiling a list of acceptable literature. The group encompassed parents, students, teachers, and Professor Gunnar Hillerdal. Hillerdal has written a book on the Brethren in Sweden, but was engaged for his special knowledge of children's literature. The compiled list was however rejected by the school board, as it claimed that it restricted the teacher's professional authority as well as the students' rights to comprehensive instruction.

The school reported in 2009 to the Inspectorate that it had resolved the issue by implementing a policy on how to handle parental involvement (Skolinspektionen 2009b). The teachers claimed that occasional consultations with parents was advantageous and that it was in line with the school law. In Chapter 1, §4, the latter states that school education aims to work in cooperation with parents to promote the comprehensive personal development of children and mold active, creative, competent, and responsible individuals and citizens (Sveriges Riksdag 2010). The complaint was not repeated in later inspections (Skolinspektionen 2010).

In 2013, the Labora School was selected as one of 13 free schools to be inspected in relation to social-studies-oriented subjects. Observations, questionnaires, and interviews with students, teachers in grades 7 to 9, as well as with the principal were conducted. The current principal, Alexander Tornberg, highlights that observations were made in one teacher's class only, which was problematic (interview with Tornberg). Most feedback was positive; the atmosphere was reported as peaceful and the student-teacher relations respectful, however, the Inspectorate pointed out that the observations had revealed that classroom discussions were limited, partly due to each student studying at his or her own pace, but also because the teacher failed to engage the students in critical discussions. In the questionnaire, however, the students reported that they felt encouraged by their teacher to engage in discussions.

The report further suggested that the tuition given did not involve contemporary social and environmental analysis. Furthermore, the students seemed not to understand their own learning processes, and the inspectorate remarked that the teacher was passive as she would not encourage the students to discuss beyond answering straight questions, and failed to follow up the students' questions to open up a discussion. The result appeared to be that the students lacked a deeper understanding of the subjects, could not apply their knowledge to

other situations, and seemed unable to problematize ideas and to form questions related to history and contemporary society. The inspectorate was worried that the students lacked tools to ask questions and to reflect over the subject matter independently and critically, especially as source criticism was mentioned but not explained by the teacher. The inspectorate concluded that factual knowledge was transmitted by the teacher, but that she failed to teach the students critical reflection, and the ability to evaluate or argue (Skolinspektionen 2013a).

The Inspection also remarked that the school library lacked sufficient resources, and criticized the censorship of the Internet since the students were only allowed to visit a limited number of sites (approximately 100). Among these pages, several commonly used sites as “SO-rummet” and Wikipedia were missing. A teacher expressed the opinion that students in grades 7–9 could not assess material from the Internet critically as a reason as to why they should not be given more access.

Moreover, the inspectorate pointed out that only one political party’s website was among the allowed pages (the Liberal Party of Sweden). The teacher’s attitude towards the use of the Internet was reflected among the students. In an interview, the principal, Alexander Tornberg, stated that there had been a dispute with representatives from the Schools Inspectorate over whether or not the children should be granted free access to the Internet during breaks (which he advised against). Tornberg claims that the aforementioned teacher had guarded against using Wikipedia as the sole source of knowledge, but that this statement had been misinterpreted as a school policy against using the Internet to search for data (interview with Tornberg). According to the inspectorate, there appeared to be two parallel systems operating, revealing that “another agenda” was at play in the classroom while the school’s own documentation followed the curriculum, which states that pupils should learn to orient themselves in relation to information flows, as well as learning about source criticism, and how to use modern techniques to search for knowledge and to communicate. They also remarked on a lack from the school to follow up the student’s learning processes (Skolinspektionen 2013b). The board was given until March 2014 to implement changes (Skolinspektionen 2013a). The next report (2014), however, once more raised similar issues.

Besides the points above, the inspectorate reacted on the current lack of a career counselor—the school had one before—and the fact that students were

solely advised on one option for higher studies (the upper-secondary-level education at Labora). A specifically problematic incident pointed to one former career counselor who had allegedly advised against giving the students information about a SAT test, which would prepare for an upcoming collage entrance examination. According to the principal, this advice was given the counselor by a board member who felt that there would not be sufficient time for the students to prepare for the test (interview with Tornberg). In our interviews with students, most informants stated that they would be employed directly after finishing school, most probably within a business owned by a Brethren member (Skolinspektionen 2014). In 2015, two changes had been implemented: the students gained access to a career counselor, and they were allowed to use the Internet more freely, accessing previously prohibited material, under the watch of a teacher (Skolinspektionen 2015).

In Sweden, all schools are required to present an equal treatment plan. The plan should include policies regarding discrimination, harassment, and bullying. Although the school stated that there had been a theme day in 2008, where students had been informed about the school's policy on equal treatment, no such formal document was in place in 2009. The inspectorate required that the Labora School commenced the work with such a plan, and the process was stated by the principal in 2016 to be ongoing (interview with Tornberg). The influence of the Brethren's understanding of traditional gender roles on boys and girls in school was another cause for concern according to the inspectorate, which pointed out that the school had been informed on several occasions that the traditional gender roles must be counteracted, as they are restricting the students, especially the girls (Rydin, e-mail, 2016). An example of how the gender roles played out was given in the report from 2014. The inspectorate claimed that only the boys answered the posed questions spontaneously, while the girls answered only when addressed directly (Skolinspektionen 2014). In the 2015 report, this issue was not raised, however, which leads us to conclude that the issue appears to have been resolved.

A point of criticism has repeatedly been the lack of formal competence in the staff in the primary school and upper-secondary school. The lack has resulted in the principal having to grade students based on the teachers' recommendations. There were several employments that did not conform to the requirements of Swedish school law (for instance; a teacher would be qualified to teach Swedish

but was employed to teach English) (Skolinspektionen 2009a), although the principal stated in 2016 that 85–90% of the school's teachers were qualified. Teachers within the Swedish system of education for secondary-level schools are allowed to teach subjects for which they are not qualified, as long as they are qualified for one subject. Sometimes, some subjects are taught as part of the same lesson (for instance, history and English), which is the reason for this organization (interview with Tornberg).

The latest inspection by the Swedish School Inspectorate was carried out between October 3 and 5, 2017. According to the report, the primary school was required under chapter 6 §10 of the school law to correct noted inadequacies and submit a written report by February 26, 2018. The critique regarded the lack of home language instruction for pupils at the school who speak a foreign language at home. According to the Swedish school law, chapter 10 § 7, schools are required to ensure that pupils have at least one hour of instruction in their maternal language each week. The school inspectorate writes in the report that several of the students at the Labora School have different native tongues (primarily English), and that pupils have been observed to use English when communicating with each other outside of the classroom, at breaks. The headmaster of the school stated that, because the parents of the pupils had showed no interest in home language instruction, and rather they had expressed their concern that the pupils should learn proper Swedish, the question of home language instructions had not been discussed since 2011 (Skolinspektionen 2017b). The problem was reported to have been solved in a report from November 21, 2017 (Skolinspektionen 2017a).

In 2017, a national survey, Skolenkäten (The School Questionnaire), presented the results of four surveys studying the perceived quality of the primary schools. The questionnaire was published by the School Inspectorate. Informants were recruited from grades 5 and 9 together with teaching staff and parents. The school survey was carried out in all primary schools in Sweden at the same time. At Labora, the response rate was 2 pupils from grade 5, 4 from grade 9, 8 staff members, and 38 parents (there were at the time for the survey 53 students at the school). The survey charted the informants' contentment with the education in the form of for instance; information about the goals of the education, argumentation and critical thinking, pupil influence, prevention of offensive behavior and security. In all aspects, except when it came to conveying basic

values in the teaching, the result displayed a higher degree of satisfaction on the part of the informants compared to the general result (Skolinspektionen 2017b). No comment has been given as to why the response rate was so exceptionally low among the students. The response rate in the survey over the upper secondary level program was 100%, however, the total number of pupils was only 4, compared to the 53 on the primary level. The same survey carried out in the second year of the upper secondary level program showed an over-all higher contentment with the education by pupils, staff, and parents in all areas compared to the national average (Skolenkäten 2017).

Interview Data

The interview data reveal positive attitudes towards the school by both students and parents. When asked to define the experienced difference between the Labora School and other schools, twenty-year-old Fredrik says that the greatest difference is that you know everyone well at Labora School. Another student, Ella, who was 14 at the time of the interview, seconded Fredrik's statement, and said that she had only a few friends in public school. 12-year-old Kate states that she had only one friend in public school. Several of the informants state that bullying is not a problem at Labora, as all are best friends (interviews with Fredrik, Kate, William). Twenty-year-old Mia refers to bullying in public school, and says that her sister was bullied in public school because their parents were Brethren. She herself remembers being scared by the older students in public school, but says that at Labora, the students have respect for one another. She has fond memories of her time at Labora, and says:

It was great fun. They were the best years of my life, when I went to Labora School. I miss the social bit; having all your best friends around you.

23-year-old Robert and 19-year-old Dennis second Mia's statements about the respectful atmosphere at Labora, and add that they appreciated the system of school uniforms (interviews with Robert and Dennis; Peter, Mia). Both Peter (13) and Kate agree on the positive attitude towards a school uniform. Peter adds that he was bullied for his clothes at public school.

As stated previously, distance learning was prohibited in 2012. Peter and Sandra (both aged 13), who have a 1.5 hour's drive to school in one direction, were asked about their experiences with distance learning. The long hours on the

bus on the days when they did attend school at Labora, they say that they played with their gamepads, read books or magazines, played games, did homework, or used the time for sleeping. The distance learning was organized so that they would meet up to work together two out of five schooldays, but Peter and Sandra say that the work in these days required more work effort than their days present at the school. However, they both regret that the distance learning practices was discontinued, as the journeys to the school proved so tiring.

Helena, who has four children, acknowledges that outsiders may think that Labora School attendees only spend time with children who think like they do. However, she continues, on the contrary, Brethren children are part of a very large social community, in which they meet many people from different cultural and social backgrounds, and from different countries, in spite of the fact they are all Brethren children. Mia says that Brethren children are far from being “isolated in a barn in the forest,” as some people might think; they are always going on study trips, and attending seminars away from the school. This is, however, still in the context of the church.

Helena explained that two of her children had problems at public school. One of her daughters was diagnosed with a chronic disease around the same time that her teacher became seriously ill. As a consequence, her daughter refused to go to the school. Helena says, “It was such a relief when she could start attending a school with friends she knew. All of a sudden, she felt secure.” Now, Helena’s daughter has finished school and works in her father’s business. Helena’s son faced no difficulties at public school at first; he was a very sociable child. Slowly, however, problems developed—the other children were messy and used foul language, which made her son unhappy. The teachers also used conflicting strategies and had disagreements with one another. Helena’s son was so happy when he was told he could start attending Labora School that Helena says, “If they close the school, we will move abroad. Definitely.”

Conclusion

Rodney Stark has pointed out the importance of the socialization of the young in new religions, arguing that it is a key factor. New religions prevent defection of the younger generations by limiting the effects of socialization (Stark 1987, 13). As far as we have been told, the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Sweden

has been generally successful in its socialization of the young, as only two cases of defection in recent years are known.

In the Church, the principle of separation functions as a token of the members' affinity with the ingroup. Stark (1987) has suggested that the sense of superiority over outsiders found in similar movements is a result of ingroup socialization. Additionally, this type of socialization renders the ingroup more cohesive, especially when meaningful activities connected to the faith are arranged. Our empirical material shows how religion is an all-encompassing factor in the life-worlds of the members; the daily meetings at church as well as most social activities directed at helping others are directly connected to the faith. Even the common action of eating is sacral, which is why it cannot be shared with non-believers.

The Brethren follow the general tendency of mainstream society when it comes to limiting punishment as a disciplining mechanism. The empirical material shows that, although the authoritarian streak of lack of questioning of parents' authority by the children is present, punishment is overruled by reasoning within a close relationship between parents and children.

The perceived negative effects of the media are avoided by creating a protective environment in which the children are raised. The community serves as a socializing unity, in which a safe and secure childhood is created. The Labora School serves as another instance where the community commitment is enhanced; however, it is also isolated.

There is a price for this level of communal security. At least from the perspective of mainstream society, the individual members' freedom is compromised because of the principle of separation, which excludes deeper relationships with people outside of the church, as well as travel to places where no members live, and the experience of certain parts of cultural expressions in literature, films, and music.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) placed the longing for community that we as humans experience against the desire for individual freedom, and stated that community as we imagine it is actually a state of utopia that is not possible (Bauman 2001). Bauman's explanation is that the concept of community comes at too high a price:

The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called “autonomy,” “right to self-assertion,” “right to be yourself.” Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom (Bauman 2001, 4–5).

In the Brethren, the value of fellowship exceeds the value of individual freedom, a perspective that opposes the values found in the criticism of the Swedish School Inspectorate when inspecting the Labora School. Values such as critical thinking, equal treatment (especially in terms of gender roles), unrestricted access to the Internet, and limited parental influence over education differ from the cultural values of the Plymouth Brethren, who place fellowship at the top. It is, however, important to note that these values are neither universal nor objective; they depend on cultural and structural factors as much in mainstream society as in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.

In contemporary societies, many people experience having access to two different cultures. Such access to several cultures may influence one’s personal development positively, as one’s capacity to encompass many perspectives may increase (SOU 1998). However, the encounter of different cultures may also cause conflicts. Regarding the Brethren, separation from the mainstream culture is one of the group’s core values, and attraction of mainstream culture might potentially cause problems for an individual. For the members, there are strategies to deal with the discrepancies between the two cultures, but for the defectors, internalized Brethren values may conflict with mainstream values, thus making the process of leaving the group difficult. Leaving the Brethren means to have very limited contact with one’s family and the Brethren community, which could leave the ex-member in a social vacuum.

Our study shows that the children and young people in the Brethren normally take part in similar activities as those enjoyed by their peers outside the group—watching films, reading fiction or comic strips, surfing the Internet, playing computer games, going to gyms, and taking part in sports. The choice, however, is more limited than in mainstream culture. The Internet is restricted, only ingroup gyms are used, and only educational computer games are allowed. Friendships are deep inside the group, but also restricted to the group. Child-rearing strategies are very similar to those used by mainstream parents. Thus, the borders between mainstream society and the Brethren culture seem to some extent to be more transparent than could be thought at first sight. The

interpretation of the rule of separation could also, to a certain extent, vary between individual families.

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