

Review of

Spare the Rod: Punishment and the Moral Community of Schools

by Campbell F. Scribner and Bryan R. Warnick, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021

BRUCE MAXWELL
University of Montreal

Nothing, perhaps, illustrates better the absurdity of current punishment practices in schools and the urgent need for reform than the events surrounding the murder of Samuel Paty, the French teacher who was shot and beheaded for showing controversial religious images in his civics class. The online smear campaign that led to the attack was eventually traced back to one student who, it turned out, was not even at school that day. Why? Because she had been suspended for truancy. As that punishment was handed down by the principal, that student must have almost died laughing. That punishment practices in schools have become disjointed from the educational mission of schools is the central thesis of Campbell Scribner and Bryan Warnick's book, *Spare the Rod*. The book, which is part of the University of Chicago's highly regarded history and philosophy of education series, has an easily discernable argumentative structure. From the early colonial period to the late 19th century, punishment practices in American schools coalesced into three primary forms: corporal punishment, public shaming, and "moral suasion," or leveraging students' allegedly natural propensity for sympathy to encourage good behaviour by appealing to the negative impact of their wrongdoing on others. According to the book's narrative, these forms of punishment emerged successively in historical terms and each was embedded in a sort of *Weltanschauung* comprised of basic assumptions about human nature, authority, and the reasons for obeying moral obligations. Being conceptually embedded in this way, punishment had meaning and coherence as much for those meting it out as for those receiving it.

Scribner and Warnick document how, through the first half of the 20th century, as the unprecedented expansion of the education system and the professionalization of teaching and administration rapidly and radically transformed American schooling, the same basic punishment practices persisted in schools but became gradually detached from the conceptual frameworks that had once given them meaning. Instead of being aimed at instilling in young people such things as unconditional obedience to established authorities (corporal punishment), internalizing social expectations (public shaming), and awakening natural sympathies (moral suasion), punishment came to be seen as serving an overarching and singularly bureaucratic goal: creating a school environment favourable to the delivery of instruction. This is a deeply

impoverished conception of punishment, Scribner and Warnick suggest, because it neglects the educational role that punishment typically plays in human communities. Punishment is not just a tool of social control, the authors insist. It also has an important symbolic function of communicating messages of strong disapproval of certain actions in a way that cannot be captured adequately by mere verbal expressions of disapprobation. The challenge for American schools, then, is to reinvest punishment practices with meaning by finding and prioritizing a new paradigm for punishment that aligns with the moral aims and purposes of contemporary schooling. Just such a paradigm can be found, Scribner and Warnick argue, in the “restorative justice” approach, which, as the label indicates, emphasises repairing the damage done to relationships by transgressions through dialogue, mutual recognition, and the involvement of both victims and perpetrators in solving a community’s problems of justice.

Given the emphasis that the authors place on the need to consider the historical context of punishment practices in schools to fully understand them, it is ironic that the book’s presentation of the historical shift in the way punishment practices are conceived of in American schools is somewhat historically decontextualized. The book is centrally concerned with portraying how the massification of educational systems and the professionalization of teaching have elicited a groundswell movement away from educators viewing the pursuit of more noble goals like civic mindedness, respect for others, and fairness as the point of punishment towards one in which the imperative to ensure safe and efficiently operating schools is the only imaginable justification for punishment. Indeed, in most North American schools today, functionalist language in relation to punishment is a shibboleth, its use distinguishing progressive educators from those stuck in some pre-progressive past. Student behaviour is “inappropriate,” “disruptive,” or “aggressive,” never “wrong,” “hurtful,” or “forbidden.” Absent from Scribner and Warnick’s account, however, is the fact that the expansion of the public education system over the middle decades of the 20th century coincided with a sweeping counterculture movement in the United States. Consistent with this movement’s characteristic distrust of public institutions, among its demands was that public schools divest from their historical mission of “moralizing” the children from poor and working-class families, and focus instead on giving them an equal chance by helping them develop the intellectual and social skills they would need to compete in the job market. In this view, one subscribed to as much by parents and members of the public of a liberal bent as by teachers themselves, moral education in the Durkheimian sense of socializing young people into some imagined societal thick consensus of norms and values lies outside the legitimate mandate of public schooling. This contextual oversight is far from banal, as it papers over what, for many educational progressivists, may be an uncomfortable truth: the functionalist approach to punishment that has come to be dominant in schools may in fact be best understood as the product of liberal progressivism rather than the exogenous infection of the American public school system by neoliberal ideology.

Another perceptible tension in the book relates to the authors’ ambivalence about whether the historical *change* in punishment practices in schools constitutes moral *progress*. In true historian style, the book urges us to see the successive approaches to punishment observed in American schools – corporal punishment, public shaming, moral suasion, and behaviour management – as manifestations of conceptually different but not essentially morally better or worse ways of punishing young people. At times, however, it is not clear whether the authors themselves even buy their own historical account about the lack of moral progress that has been made with regard to punishment practices in school. Speaking of the various approaches to punishment inspired by the behaviourism that was in vogue in schools in the 1970s, for example, they note that “some

of these methods marked a step forward from punishments rooted in vengeance or physical pain” (p. 70). Be that as it may, ultimately their argument seems to be that the veneer of moral progress with respect to punishment, most notably that it has become markedly less violent in recent decades, hides the amply documented fact that, regardless of the form it takes, punishment in American schools has always been meted out disproportionately to children of colour, children with disabilities, boys, and children experiencing poverty. In that respect, not much appears to have changed since the days of the rural schoolhouse.

Even if Scribner and Warnick deny that little meaningful moral progress has been made in punishment practices in American schools so far, they do believe that moral progress is possible. In proposing restorative justice practices as the way forward, they build a convincing case that such approaches are a good fit with the compelling vision of schools as “moral communities” that they advance in the book. Seeing through the legalistic language of the “special characteristics of the school” that they use to make this case, the authors’ point is simply this: if we accept that the central purpose of schools is to educate – as opposed to produce (like a workplace), enforce (like the police and the courts), or enculturate (like the family or religious communities) – then the right approach to punishment in schools is one that is itself educational. With its emphasis on dialogue, and personal and collective growth, the restorative justice approach, the authors assert, has the potential to “transform school discipline into an educational process, capturing the idea that schools should be focussed on teaching and learning” (p. 7).

As attractive as the argument is, it is definitely one that we have heard before. Think of A. S. Neill’s Summerhill and Lawrence Kohlberg’s Just Community schools. A hard lesson from these experiments in educational, whole-school approaches to discipline and punishment is that they are notoriously difficult to implement in all but the smallest schools, and they are even harder to sustain over time. The obstacles are as formidable as they are utterly predictable: they require extra time commitments from teachers who have anything but extra time, and they demand allocating time on the school schedule to discussion and dialogue whose educational purpose is frequently not fully understood or valued. Most of all, the authoritarian culture of mass schooling has proven very difficult to change. Scribner and Warnick do acknowledge the obstacles in the way of going to scale with restorative justice initiatives, but remain optimistic. Is such optimism warranted? There is a comparison to be made here between hydrogen fuel and community-based approaches to school punishment. If we could make it work, hydrogen fuel would solve all our green energy problems. But making it work is just the problem. In the meantime, like hydrogen fuel, community-based approaches to punishment are now and will remain the solution of the future.

About the Author

Bruce Maxwell is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Montreal. A former humanities teacher at the college level and ethicist by training, he teaches courses on education law, professional ethics, and the history of educational ideas. He has produced a number of written works on these topics including, most recently, the coauthored book *Professional Ethics and Law in Education* (Canadian Scholars Press, 2022) and, as editor, *The Importance of Philosophy in Teacher Education* (Routledge, 2019).