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Scribner, C. F., & Warnick, B. R. (2021). *Spare the rod: Punishment and the moral community of schools*. University of Chicago Press.

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The issues involved in student actions and school punishment are not new. Indeed, one of my very first books was *Schooling and the Rights of Children* (Haubrich & Apple, 1975b), a collective effort whose aim was “to establish a new perspective on the extension of liberties and rights of children within the confines of the public schools” (Haubrich & Apple 1975a, p. ix). Like *Spare the Rod*, it too was deeply concerned with repressive forms of punishment, with the history of these forms, with worries that too often students lose their rights when they enter the school, and with what educators who were committed to creating more democratic schooling might do about such things. That early book certainly bears the mark of the period of time when it was published. But it is helpful to understand that *Spare the Rod* is actually a continuation of a set of issues that have been thought about for a long time.



Decades before *Schooling and the Rights of Children*, I was introduced to the world of punishment in formal educational institutions in an even more personal way. This occurred on my very first day of kindergarten. Located in an inner-city neighborhood of a city on the East Coast known for its history of textile mills, the school I attended served a poor and working class population of largely immigrant and African American families. I had just turned 5 the week before and entered a classroom of 36 children. After a snack that morning, I made a serious mistake. I burped loudly; not on purpose, but loudly nonetheless. There were a few giggles from the children nearby, but nothing raucous. The teacher looked directly at me and directed the 35 other children to pay attention to what was about to happen.

Looking at the seating chart of her first day's pupils, and enunciating every word very slowly and very clearly, she said "Michael Apple, was that you? You are very impolite. Come with me." She led me to the front corner of the classroom, told me to face the corner, and adjusted my body and my nose so that the front of my face was nearly touching the walls of that corner. "Michael Apple, you will stand there for 15 minutes without making a sound." This was not only a lesson for me, but also for all 36 children. Bodies are to be kept under control. It need not be said that at age 5 I did not need Foucault (1995) to understand that to breach this rule is to face consequences.

As might be expected, the lessons of bodily control — part of what has been called the hidden curriculum of schooling — continued for the schooling of that classroom and for many other children (Apple, 2019). A second example lives vividly in my memory and has had effects to this day. I was born left-handed. However, the early lessons in this educational institution that served a poor and working class population regularly included instruction in "penmanship" and on how to write. Teachers expected — actually demanded — that each child should learn to write with one's right hand. Perhaps I should thank the school for this, since in my later basketball playing days, I could dribble and shoot (and miss?) with either hand.

Both of these examples have a history of expected behavior, especially for poor children. Both would be harder to find in today's schools, often having been replaced by newer forms of control. Yet as I write these words, I almost stop in my tracks and consider deleting them since repressive control of children's bodies certainly continues to exist and is unequally experienced by students according to race, gender and sexuality, "ability," and other markers of "difference" in all too many classrooms. The effects of these experiences both on the social fabric of the school as a community and on the present and future lives of the students are all too often profound.

These effects and the processes and assumptions that produce them are worthy of truly substantive reflections. This is where *Spare the Rod* enters and is what makes it a very worthwhile contribution. Scribner and Warnick's analysis is grounded in a simple but quite accurate claim: "School punishment is broken" (p. 117). In elaborating on this claim, the authors offer a thoughtful history of various periods of punishment in schools and how these varying forms were justified. At the same time, they engage in a detailed conceptual analysis of the conditions under which varying kinds of punishment can be considered legitimate.

Given my own background in analytic philosophy, I appreciate the clarity that Scribner and Warnick bring to these questions. But it is not only my personal preference that is important here. All too much of educational argumentation and the language used to carry it out is rhetorical. This is certainly fine in many ways. However, it often smuggles into the argument unexamined assumptions that need to be brought to light and critically examined. Analyzing what this means for school "punishments" and the policies and practices associated with them is a key part of the authors' agenda.

Scribner and Warnick state the aims of the book in the following way:

The goal of this book is to give readers a sense of *perspective* on school punishments by exploring the various meanings of punishments in schools, how these meanings have changed over time, and how a deeper understanding of these meanings can shape schools in the future. (p. 2)

As they go on to write,

Part of our discussion will investigate punishment as a general human phenomenon and ask how it might be applied (or misapplied) to the particular setting of schools and to children, who are still developing judgment and character. Another part of our discussion will look at schools in the past, exploring how teachers administered punishment and how their actions were a response to larger cultural forces. Finally, we will consider contemporary data about schools and punishment, how punishment affects children, and what unintended consequences punishment might have. (pp. 2-3).

To them, punishment is a symbolic act and serves a communicative function. What is communicated and in what ways — and what these messages can and should say about the “moral community” of the school — has, of course, changed over time. Among other things, changes in what were seen as “appropriate” punishments are linked to changes both in religious understandings and in visions of the child. The material and ideological realities associated with major economic transformations played a significant role, as did who became a teacher. As the labor of teaching became increasingly women’s paid work, the project of increasing the professionalization of teachers became a key part of how teachers saw their work and how they were perceived. More might have been said about the political nature of the demand by women teachers to be seen as “professional” and how it was grounded in the larger struggles for person rights (Apple, 1986). However, what the authors give us is still quite useful.

Scribner and Warnick are not just concerned with such changes and the ideological, cultural, and economic transformations and assumptions that underpin them. They go further, by providing a detailed set of arguments for “fixing the broken system” of school discipline. Their own position is grounded in the theories, policies, and practices of *restorative justice*. For them, restorative justice “emphasizes the roles of mutual recognition, dialogue, problem-solving, and community involvement and does justice to the notion of children as growing moral agents” (p. 7). To support their ethical and educational arguments, the authors also bring together data that document the very real racial inequalities of punishment. In the process, they raise crucial substantive issues about the uses of suspension and expulsion. This section on the realities of the “broken system” and how restorative justice constitutes a pedagogically and ethically wise response is one of the more interesting parts of the book, something that makes it useful to a wider audience. In forcefully advocating for restorative justice, the authors join a growing body of educators who are

committed to more democratic and participatory forms of discipline and who are employing restorative justice practices to interrupt such things as the disgraceful school-to-prison pipeline and the deeply unequal results of existing school discipline policies and practices such as zero tolerance (see, e.g., Winn & Winn, 2021; Burch, 2022).

However, while strongly supportive of it, Scribner and Warnick are also honest about whether restorative justice has the ability to deal with all aspects of the issues faced by schools and other institutions. They lay out a number of possible problems that need to be taken seriously. The cautions are wise, but they must not stop educators from putting in place more participatory and democratic forms like restorative justice in schools.

There are a number of questions I am left with after engaging with *Spare the Rod*. One of the areas they do not pay much attention to is the politics of official knowledge. In what ways does the denial of oppressed groups' right to learn about one's history and culture constitute a punishment that has lasting and damaging effects (Apple, 2014, 2019)? In Bourdieu's (1984) terms, this is a form of symbolic violence that reproduces dominant social and cultural assemblages.

Scribner and Warnick largely focus on K-12 schooling, and rightly so. One wonders what would be discovered if we were to expand our attention to include teachers and students at institutions of higher education and especially to the vexed issue of content. How would we interpret the increasingly censorious legislative attempts by right-wing groups to remove critical race theory not only from elementary and secondary schools but also from the university curriculum? Banning particular forms of content, and even specific words such as "systemic racism," and then applying sanctions to those educators and their institutions such as reducing funding and levying fines for disobeying these legislative prohibitions, are also forms of punishment that are increasing being normalized in many states: Texas, Florida, Virginia, to name only a few. Other examples abound in those nations where students and faculty members at all levels face criminal charges and imprisonment for "saying the unsayable." The list of counties engaged in such repressive actions is distressingly large (see, e.g., Verma & Apple, 2021).

These examples of curriculum content and speech raise difficult analytic as well as political and educational questions. What does one do with *absent presences*? What is *not* there is often just as important as what is there. Is the conscious denial of honest historical and current material on, say, systemic racism, a denial that prevents students from connecting their lived experiences to powerful moments, people, and movements that continue to debase one's personhood in crucial ways also a form of truly damaging punishment on a collective as well as individual level? What does that do to the school as a moral community?

The concern with the school as a moral community is obviously a crucial one for Scribner and Warnick, and rightly so. But I want them to go further. The book details what the authors see as the key characteristics of schools as moral communities. One of these characteristics is the school as a site of civic understanding and experience. This is an important claim. It counters the

increasing power of what Paulo Freire called “banking education” in which the role of education is reduced to filling the heads of students with what dominant groups assume is “legitimate knowledge.” Here schools are certified as successful in their functions if standardized high stakes test scores meet “acceptable levels.”

I agree with the book’s emphasis on the civic. However, I wish that the authors had said more about schools as places of *social action*. A fine example of this can be found in the actions of largely minoritized students in Baltimore in the Algebra Project. They used their mathematical knowledge to research and then successfully mobilize against the construction of a new juvenile prison in their community. This is a paradigm case of the organic connections that can be made among community knowledge, reconstructed “official” curriculum knowledge, and youth activism both inside and outside the school (Apple, 2013; Baldrige, 2019).

The proposed extensions of Scribner and Warnick’s arguments I have made above should not detract from what they have accomplished in *Spare the Rod*. All authors make choices about what to emphasize. What they have given us is valuable, both in its clarity and thoughtful arguments, and in the nature of its proposed solution to a system that is deeply flawed. It is a book definitely worth reading.

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