

Medieval origins of debate on classroom beatings

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Wer recht bescheyden wol werden
Der pit got trumbye aufferden



A schoolmaster wields his ferula as a mark of authority - Albrecht Durer's woodcut for the ballad *Wer recht bescheyden wol warden*, 1510. Credit: British Museum.

Research by University of Leicester medieval expert Dr Ben Parsons reveals the historical discussions surrounding corporal punishment – which are echoed in debates today.

The connection between formal education and [corporal punishment](#) is a venerable and persistent one.

Although the UK abolished corporal punishment in state-run schools in 1987, the issue lingers on even now – with some still insisting schools would benefit from a return to 'the rule of the rod'.

At the other end of the timeline, beating features in surviving teaching materials from ancient Egypt and Assyria, and its commonness in Greece and Rome is attested by a string of sources.

New research looks further into classroom beating, and the reasons used to justify it, at the time when grammar schools and universities first began to appear as separate institutions.

Discipline and Violence in the Medieval Classroom is a research project led by Dr Ben Parsons, a Lecturer in Medieval and Early Modern Literature in the University's School of English, and funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) fellowship.

The project examines writing from the Middle Ages and highlights historical debates on the use of corporal punishment – many of which are echoed in discussions to this day.

The project explains how the picture of "unremitting brutality" put forward by Renaissance writers such as Erasmus, Roger Ascham and Michel de Montaigne is not consistent with medieval accounts of school discipline.

Although they were certainly more aggressive than modern schools, medieval schools did not use discipline in arbitrary and unreasoned ways as suggested by these writers.

Instead, medieval writing suggests classroom punishments such as beating, flogging and whipping were carefully regimented – and were only meant to be used to aid learning.

Medieval scholars writers in the 12th to 14th centuries - such as Alexander of Neckam, Vincent of Beauvais and John Bromyard - put forward the idea that careful limits should be placed around beating.



A typically frenzied Renaissance depiction of a birching - Hans Holbein's image of the 'tyranny of schoolmasters', from his illustrations for Erasmus' Praise of

Folly, c.1515.

Alexander of Neckam states "in truth the rod is withdrawn when things are done as required. Whips and scourges are put away, so that no form of censure might be excessive".

In addition, the punishment should be proportional to the offence committed by the student and, as John Bromyard states, only "when the ugliness of the crime is great should the weight of the penalty inflicted be bitter".

There were strict rules for when and how pupils should be beaten put forward by writers.

Vincent of Beauvais argued that beating should always be accompanied by a formal warning. In addition, the punishment should vary according to the character of the offender, and beating should always happen before an audience.

However, there was no fixed consensus about why beating was such an important part of teaching.

Among the reasons given were:

- pain helped students memorise their mistakes
- beating could be used to mould the students' bodies, just as teaching was used to mould their minds
- fear was "the origin of wisdom"
- beating could instil morality into the students
- teachers could use beating to assert control over the students – which teaches them to obey authority

Dr Ben Parsons said: "Why do schoolchildren need to be beaten? For much of the history of education, there has been a general acceptance that instruction should be accompanied by violence.

"The longstanding link between schooling and flogging is attested by a whole host of artefacts, from the whipping stools that survived in many early schools, to the Harrow Punishment Book, in which Edwardian schoolmasters assiduously recorded the punishments meted out to their charges.

"Even today the association persists. After the riots of August 2011, there were widespread calls to 'bring back the strap' or 'return to a clip round the ear culture', voiced by MPs and journalists alike.

"However, what these sources and statements fail to reveal is exactly why corporal punishment should make instruction more effective, and how exactly it assists in the acquisition of knowledge. It is the purpose of this research project to account for this strange association.

"Although their assumptions fall far outside the bounds of acceptability for us, the ways in which medieval writers treated corporal punishment is still very much to their credit.

"What is remarkable about these discussions is how methodically the subject was approached; even when in agreement that boys needed to be beaten, teachers did not take this responsibility lightly, but with a level of care and sensitivity that remains impressive."

Dr Parsons will outline some of the findings from the research project so far in an upcoming paper titled "The Way of the Rod: the Functions of Beating in Late Medieval Pedagogy", which is due to appear in the journal *Modern Philology* next year.

Painful punishments

Classrooms in the Middle Ages may not have been as unremittingly brutal as stereotypes suggest – but punishments were still pretty fierce by modern standards.

Medieval schoolchildren would often have found themselves at the wrong end of these painful items:

- The lash (scutica)
- The palmer (palmatoria)
- The birch (virgas or scopa)
- The rod (ferula or virga)

Provided by University of Leicester

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