



## Educationalising Death: The Emergence of Traffic Education in Swedish Elementary Schools

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**Abstract** • When a social problem is educationalised, i.e. formulated as a responsibility for educational institutions, knowledge becomes a solution for societal ills. This article examines the history of traffic education in Swedish elementary schools as a particular form of knowledge. Focusing on the three first decades of traffic education, the ambition is to delve deeper into the issue of what constituted traffic knowledge during a period of mass motorisation. In teaching about traffic, what were the main things that had to be conveyed? What were the main challenges in teaching the essentials of traffic, and what techniques were used to make traffic possible to understand for an audience of children? Drawing on handbooks for teachers and textbooks in traffic education, the article discusses five forms of knowledge that were used in traffic education: knowledge about risk, juridical knowledge, visual knowledge, moral knowledge, and practical knowledge.

**Keywords** • traffic education, educationalisation, history of knowledge

Mass education and mass motorism were two major societal trends that coincided during the twentieth century. The increase in compulsory schooling and the steep development of motorised traffic are two modern features that scholarly literature typically has discussed as separate phenomena. Still mass motorism and mass education were related to each other as the former created a problem that the other became involved in solving. The rise of car traffic involved a large number of traffic accidents, some of them deadly, and education in schools and other places became one of the means to make traffic safer. In the history of education, this is a familiar phenomenon that has been described in terms of *educationalisation*, a concept that highlights how social problems have been formulated as educational problems.<sup>1</sup>

This article discusses the introduction of traffic education in Swedish elementary schools between 1936 up to the early 1960s. During the early twentieth century, suggestions for introducing traffic education were heard in numerous countries, and when the discussion reached Sweden, international role models were invoked.<sup>2</sup> In 1934, a national organisation for the promotion of traffic safety (*Nationalföreningen för trafiksäkerhetens främjande*, NTF) was formed, and it came to be heavily involved in traffic education in schools as it produced much teaching material and organised

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1 Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe, eds, *Educational Research: The Educationalization of Social Problems* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008); Daniel Tröhler, *Pestalozzi and the Educationalization of the World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2013); Marc Depaepe, *Between Educationalization and Appropriation: Selected Writings on the History of Modern Educational Systems* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012); David F. Labaree, “The Winning Ways of a Losing Strategy: Educationalizing Social Problems in the United States,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008), 447–60.

2 A Danish example was presented in “Køpenhamnsbarnen læras trafikultur i alla skolor,” *Dagens Nyheter*, February 25, 1924. An American example was presented in “Se efter först,” *Dagens Nyheter*, February 14, 1932.

courses in traffic education for teachers. In 1936 it was decided that all schools in Sweden should teach traffic education.

Traffic education was not only conducted in schools. In a society which saw the rapid rise of the car, traffic knowledge became an urgent need, felt in society at large. Traffic knowledge involves both theoretical and practical knowledge, relevant for the majority of citizens, from motorists to pedestrians, who are all part of the same traffic system. It is a type of knowledge that is communicated both informally (in daily life in traffic) and formally (driving schools, school traffic education, traffic propaganda for young children). It is also a sort of knowledge that has been associated with security thinking: knowledge has ultimately been mobilised in order to save lives. Studying the relationship between traffic and knowledge might appear as a rather specialised endeavour, but in fact traffic is a fundamental part of modern society that few people are untouched by. With an expression from Marcel Mauss, it might be described as a “total social fact” of relevance to all sectors of society.<sup>3</sup> During the twentieth century, the car became a prominent part of public life. Roland Barthes suggests that because cars are both used and “consumed in image” by the whole population they should be seen as “the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals”.<sup>4</sup> On one point, however, the parallel fails. The solid, stable and permanent structure of the cathedral stands in sharp contrast to the movement and vulnerability that is associated with traffic accidents. As the traffic system involved an increasing number of people and the car came to dominate the streets, the issue of knowledge became important not least because of the uneven distribution of traffic knowledge in society.<sup>5</sup>

This article puts the focus on a social category that has been seen as particularly important when it comes to traffic education: children. The vulnerability of children has been invoked in numerous contexts, most memorably perhaps in the short story by Stig Dagerman, “To kill a Child,” published in 1948 and made into a short film with support from insurance companies.<sup>6</sup> In focusing on the role of children in traffic education, the relationship between knowledge and risk comes to the fore. There are some aspects of adult life that have been considered risky and perilous, but that have been hard to teach children about. Sex education, alcohol and tobacco, are examples that young children have been kept away from rather than taught about, although there are variations to it. Traffic is a factor that children, however, cannot be altogether separated from. It is a part of life where children and adults intermingle, where they actually share a life form, and where learning thus has to start early.

The role of children in traffic has involved at least two interrelated dimensions of knowledge. The first dimension has to do with educating children about traffic. Basically it is about conveying knowledge about traffic and its rules in ways that are easily understood for children, for example by using education in schools. The second dimension, by contrast, is about developing knowledge on the limitations of educating small children, and disseminate that knowledge to society at large,

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3 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002 [1950]), 100.

4 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang), 88.

5 Fredrik Barth, “An Anthropology of Knowledge,” *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2002), 1–18.

6 Stig Dagerman, “Att döda ett barn,” *Aftonbladet*, April 22, 1948. The short film was directed by Gösta Werner and premiered in 1953. “Att döda ett barn,” <https://www.filmarkivet.se/movies/att-doda-ett-barn/>

affecting attitudes among motorists, and ultimately shaping the material design of roads and neighbourhoods. This article focuses on the first dimension.

Analysing schools in relation to traffic knowledge does not give a complete picture of how traffic became an object of learning and instruction. Public campaigns and driving schools are two other significant contexts, but their position is in a sense more obvious. To explore the role of traffic education in schools is to point out a less obvious context which can shed light on how a given society gives weight to certain forms of knowledge. The fact that schools managed to adopt it, despite lacking a tradition of traffic education, reflects the urgency felt about the rising numbers of traffic accidents.

The present article works at the intersection of the history of knowledge, history of education and traffic history. More precisely, the history of knowledge and education provides the perspectives under which the phenomenon – traffic – is understood. Traffic has recently received a great deal of interest, not least in the field of mobility studies.<sup>7</sup> The cultural history of the car,<sup>8</sup> the history of roads,<sup>9</sup> the governance of drivers and of traffic<sup>10</sup> and the future of the car system<sup>11</sup> have been studied. Of particular interest for this article is research about risk, road safety and traffic accidents. The history of the car is intimately connected to deadly risks. In 2018, WHO reported that 1.35 million people died in traffic that year. Some scholars have argued that this is a kind of mass death that has been made invisible in public debate: “automobility ‘works,’ because its accidents are denied.”<sup>12</sup> While this mechanism of denial is central, there is a long history of attempts to control traffic in order to make it more predictable and less dangerous.<sup>13</sup> The historiography of these attempts has not systematically focused on the issue of knowledge, but still there are several studies which discuss the role of education in combating traffic accidents. Road safety associations, traffic safety campaigns, schools and other institutions have become involved in educating citizens.<sup>14</sup> One of the more interesting findings

7 Mimi Sheller, “From Spatial Turn to Mobilities Turn,” *Current Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2017), 623–39.

8 Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

9 Massimo Moraglio, *Driving Modernity: Technology, Experts, Politics and Fascist Motorways, 1922–1943* (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

10 Peter Merriman, “‘Mirror, Signal, Manoeuvre’: Assembling and Governing the Motorway Driver in Late 1950s Britain,” *The Sociological Review* 54, Suppl. 1 (2006), 75–92.

11 Kinsley Dennis and John Urry, *After the Car* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

12 Jörg Beckmann, “Mobility and safety,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4–5 (2004), 81–100, 94.

13 Jonas Anshelm, *Rekodarens tbc: debatten om trafiksäkerhet i Sverige 1945–1965* (Linköping: Linköpings universitet, 2005); Bill Luckin, “Motorists, Non-Drivers and Traffic Accidents between the Wars: A Provisional Survey,” *Transfers* 2, no. 2 (2012), 4–21.

14 Peter D. Norton, *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), ch. 8; Peter D. Norton, “Four Paradigms: Traffic Safety in the Twentieth-Century United States,” *Technology and Culture* 56, no. 2 (2015), 319–34; Nurit Guttman, *Communication, Public Discourse, and Road Safety Campaigns: Persuading People to be Safer* (London: Routledge, 2014); Chris A. Williams, “Risk on the Roads: Police, Motor Traffic and the Management of Space, c. 1900–50,” in *Governing Risks in Modern Britain*, ed. Tim Crook and Mike Esbester (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 195–219; Stève Bernardin, “‘Taking the Problem to the People’: Traffic Safety from Public Relations to Political Theory, 1937–1954,” *Technology and Culture* 56, no. 2 (2015), 420–39; Kai Nowak, “Teaching Self-Control: Road Safety and Traffic Education in Postwar Germany,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 41, no. 1 (2016), 135–53; Keith Laybourn and David Taylor, *The Battle for the Roads of Britain: Police, Motorists and the Law, c. 1890s to 1970s*

is that education has been a strategy that has replaced other, arguably more effective, methods to improve road safety. A striking example is how representatives of the car lobby in the UK were strongly critical of legal regulations on drivers, and instead stressed the importance of education and urban planning.<sup>15</sup> As these studies indicate, education has been seen as an important antidote to traffic accidents, but the concept of education and knowledge has been left largely unproblematised.

Therefore, the ambition of this article is to delve deeper into the issue of what constituted traffic knowledge during a period of mass motorisation. More specifically, the focus is on traffic knowledge as conveyed to a particularly vulnerable and unexperienced social category – children – and the institution – school – supposed to take up the responsibility to teach about the perils of modern traffic. In teaching about traffic, what were the main things that had to be conveyed? What were the main challenges in teaching the essentials of traffic, and what techniques were used in order to make traffic possible to understand for an audience of children? The starting point for my investigation has been a curiosity about what constituted traffic knowledge and how the features of that very knowledge affected the introduction of it in schools. As we will see, traffic knowledge should not be understood in the singular, but as consisting of a variety of knowledge forms.

The 1936 introduction of compulsory traffic education in Swedish schools can be followed through a range of sources. In this article, handbooks and textbooks on traffic education constitute a central source. Among the textbooks, a central actor is the elementary school teacher Hjalmar Rimby, who wrote a number of publications about traffic, most notably *I trafikvimlet*, which was published in at least 26 editions, between 1930 and 1960, and *Skolornas trafikbok*, printed in four editions between 1937 and 1953.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, three handbooks for teachers, published in 1937, 1953 and 1963, have been used. They were all produced in collaboration between the Royal Board of Education and the national traffic safety organisation, NTF. Over time the handbooks demonstrate how traffic knowledge became an established part of school education. The first book has NTF as the first author, the second and third have the Royal Board of Education as the first author, a shift that indicates the institutionalisation of traffic education in the educational system. Moreover, a clear development occurs between the first and the second handbooks. In contrast to the first handbook, the 1953 and the 1963 handbooks are full of concrete advice on how to teach children about traffic in the different school years. In doing so they send a clear message that traffic is a topic that can be taught.<sup>17</sup> Using textbooks and

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(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), ch. 6; Laura Drummond, “How the Car Won the Road: The Surrender of Atlanta’s City Streets, 1920–1929,” Dissertation (Georgia State University, 2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57709/22643233>; Martin Emanuel, “Controlling Walking in Stockholm During the Inter-War Period,” *Urban History* 48, no. 2 (2021), 248–65.

15 Sean O’Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender, and Motoring, 1896–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

16 Hjalmar Rimby, *I trafikvimlet: Några vägråd för barn och ungdom i anslutning till 1930 års vägtrafikstadga* (Borlänge: Utgivarens förlag, 1930); Frithiof Hællquist and Hjalmar Rimby, *Skolornas trafikbok* (Stockholm, Hugo Gebers förlag, 1937).

17 *Trafikundervisning: handbok för lärare*. Utgiven av Nationalföreningen för trafiksäkerhetens främjande med bidrag av statsmedel och i samråd med Kungl. Skolöverstyrelsen (Stockholm: Kungl. Boktryckeriet, 1937); *Handbok för lärare i trafikundervisning*. Utgiven av Kungl. Skolöverstyrelsen i samarbete med Nationalföreningen för trafiksäkerhetens främjande (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen,

handbooks has been a useful way of getting an overview of different ideas about how to teach children about traffic. Other source materials have been used as a complement, mainly to provide context and additional information about traffic education; these include press material, instructions and information from the national agency for education, articles in teacher magazines, and governmental reports about traffic safety.

### Forms of knowledge

The introduction of compulsory traffic education came with courses for teachers, textbooks and other teaching materials for schools and handbooks for teachers. Since the handbooks and textbooks were about education, it is not surprising that they expressed a firm belief in the power of education. The 1937 handbook for teachers about traffic education shows this clearly in a discussion about reasons for traffic accidents. According to the handbook there were four main factors that could affect the number of accidents: roads, vehicles, traffic rules and people. The handbook somewhat downplayed the role of the three first factors, and instead emphasised the role of the human factor. Many persons, drivers and pedestrians alike, were simply too ignorant about traffic. To create safety in traffic was therefore “a question of adaptation and education.”<sup>18</sup> In a later handbook, published in 1963, a slight reduction of the number of children killed in traffic over the last few years was explained as an effect of intensified traffic propaganda and traffic education.<sup>19</sup> This belief in the power of education indicates that the handbooks became an instrument of educationalisation. Traffic education rested on a transmission of responsibilities which gave schools an elevated role, albeit in alliance with other actors as well. Collaborations between schools, the home and the police were seen as of paramount importance.<sup>20</sup> Handbooks for teachers gave detailed advice in the form of a model letter to the parents in which schools informed about the importance of traffic education and the need for cooperation by the parents.<sup>21</sup>

To more fully understand what traffic education could mean in the context of schooling, I will in the following analyse some central themes that can be detected in early handbooks and textbooks about traffic education. What kind of knowledge was it that they wanted to convey, what techniques for conveying knowledge were advocated, and what could knowledge achieve in relation to traffic safety?

### Knowledge about risk

The *raison d'être* of traffic education was the risks of modern traffic. Part of the content in the courses was to teach about those dangers. One way in which this was

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1953); *Handledning i trafikundervisning. Utg. av Skolöverstyrelsen i samarbete med Nationalföreningen för trafiksäkerhetens främjande* (Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen, 1963).

18 *Trafikundervisning: handbok för lärare* (1937), 52. See also Hællquist and Rimby (1937), 10. The strong emphasis on education was criticised in SOU 1940:33, *Principbetänkande i trafiksäkerhetsfrågan* (Stockholm: K.L. Beckmans boktryckeri, 1940), 135.

19 *Handledning i trafikundervisning* (1963), 171.

20 *Handledning i trafikundervisning* (1963), 9–17.

21 *Handbok för lärare i trafikundervisning* (1953), 171–72; *Handledning i trafikundervisning* (1963), 13–14.

done was through statistics. A booklet to be used in traffic education from 1930 cited the numbers of persons killed in traffic per year, and addressed the reader directly: “These are horrible figures. A large proportion of those killed in this way are children [...]. You are too good to be sacrificed unnecessarily in this way, and therefore I wanted to teach you how to go about protecting yourself as much as possible.”<sup>22</sup>

A diagram that showed the dramatic increase in deadly accidents was used in the first major textbook for traffic education, in 1937. It showed a steep rise in accidents beginning with three casualties in 1908 and ending with 410 deaths in 1936.<sup>23</sup> By conveying information about the number of deadly accidents the textbook gave a reminder not only about the dangers of traffic, but also about the historical changes and ultimately the risky nature of modernity. Another way of indicating a historical shift was by describing the role of play in the streets. Citing an alleged idyllic past with calm streets where the children could safely play, the textbook emphasised the dramatic change that came with the car, reminding the readers that the streets were no longer suitable for play.<sup>24</sup> What they tried to do here can be seen as the educational aspect of a larger conflict about how to view the street itself. Whereas the street used to be seen as a public space where commerce, play, and socialising coexisted with non-motorised traffic, the dawn of the motor age created a clash between motorists and pedestrians. In order to make space for the car, pedestrians and other people had to disappear from the street. Education was one way of achieving that momentous change.<sup>25</sup>

The rise of modern traffic made accidents into daily, almost routinised events, and textbooks were by no means alone in describing modern traffic as hazardous. Other media forms, especially newspapers, reported frequently about the dark side of modern mobility. Of interest in this context is that these media reports also had an influence on traffic education in schools. This is particularly evident during the very first years of compulsory traffic education in Sweden. The 1937 handbook for teachers recommended that traffic education should try to harness pupils’ interest in collecting things by encouraging them to keep newspaper clippings about traffic accidents. A clipping could, for example, be used for joint discussions, and drawings on the blackboard could further explain the passage of events.<sup>26</sup> A similar tendency to incorporate media logic in the classroom can be discerned in the textbook for traffic education that was published the same year. It put the newspaper at the very centre of the text, as it included news items on almost every page.<sup>27</sup> By discussing actual events reported in the media, the textbook came to function as a sort of bridge between two media formats that were often kept separate. This use of newspaper clippings as a didactical tool was, as one reviewer pointed out, an unprecedented approach.<sup>28</sup> Later textbooks and handbooks would not use newspaper in the same

22 Rimby (1930), 6. Similar formulations in Rimby (1958), 5–6.

23 Hællquist and Rimby (1937), 7.

24 Hællquist and Rimby (1937), 5.

25 Peter D. Norton, “Street Rivals: Jaywalking and the Invention of the Motor Age Street,” *Technology and Culture* 48, no. 2 (2007), 331–59.

26 *Trafikundervisning: handbok för lärare* (1937), 80.

27 Hællquist and Rimby (1937).

28 John S. Ericson, “Trafikundervisningen obligatorisk – läroboken kommen,” *Svensk läraretidning* (1937), 1029f.

conspicuous manner, but overall, mass media was important in making traffic into a societal problem. This position of the media was also evident in a 1948 governmental report about traffic safety. The report argued that the media was better than statistical facts at making information feel important, and used 3.5 pages to cite newspaper notices about traffic accidents during one summer week in Sweden.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that traffic education pointed out risks raises the question of what the ultimate message was. What does it mean to teach people to avoid dangers? Traffic education belongs to the category of school subjects which mainly have a negative motivation. The closest equivalent is probably the teaching about alcohol, tobacco and narcotics, which became common in the 1960s, and sex education, made compulsory in 1955. Avoiding dangers, in the case of sex and drugs, was often synonymous with temperance: recommending pupils to avoid realms of social life considered inappropriate for their age. In the case of traffic, the strategy was different. Modern traffic was impossible to avoid, its incremental influence over society could not be escaped. To avoid the dangers of traffic was therefore tantamount to confronting the danger by training.

### *Juridical knowledge*

One way in which pupils were trained to avoid risks was by education about the actual rules that guided the traffic system. This feature was prompted by the emergence of the first traffic act, launched in 1923, leading up to a stricter juridical regulation of motorised traffic. Its pedagogical implication was that learning about traffic came to include learning about the law. An early example of this juridical knowledge is a booklet produced by the elementary school teacher Hjalmar Rimby, published in at least 26 editions between 1930 and 1960. The booklet was an introduction to the 1930 Road Traffic Act, and can be described as an attempt to translate the somewhat obscure knowledge of the traffic act for a readership consisting of young children. “The 1930 Road Traffic Act contains a lot of new provisions, which you have no idea about, and to help you adjust so that you do not violate the provisions out of ignorance, I have had this little book printed.”<sup>30</sup> The booklet introduced the juridical matters in a mix of styles: direct quotations from the traffic act were presented and followed by more popular comments.<sup>31</sup> The first royal circular about traffic education, produced in 1936, expressed a similar idea: the aim of traffic education was to “convey knowledge about the most important traffic rules,” as well as to give advice on how pedestrians and bicyclists could avoid traffic accidents.<sup>32</sup> In 1960, the Royal Board of Education listed literature and teaching materials that could be of use in traffic education.<sup>33</sup> Among the publications aimed at pupils, three were partly or mainly about traffic rules.<sup>34</sup>

29 SOU 1948:20, *Betänkande med förslag till åtgärder för höjande av trafiksäkerheten. Avgivet av 1945 års trafiksäkerhetskommitté* (Stockholm: Emil Kihlströms tryckeri A.-B., 1948), 9–12.

30 Rimby (1930), 5.

31 Rimby (1930).

32 SFS 1936:583, Kungl. Maj:ts cirkulär till skolöverstyrelsen, domkapitlen, folkskolinspektörerna samt rektorerna, föreståndarna och styrelserna för de under skolöverstyrelsens inseeende ställda läroanstalterna rörande obligatorisk trafikundervisning.

33 *Aktuellt från Skolöverstyrelsen* 14, no. 2 (1961), “Hjälpmiddel vid trafikundervisningen på skolans högre stadier”, 31f.

34 The three publications mentioned were *Rätt och vett i trafiken: Vägtrafikförordningen till vardagsbruk* (Stockholm: Nationalföreningen för trafiksäkerhetens främjande, 1952); Knut Norström, *Mopeden:*

In relation to other school subjects, this is a feature that really stands out. While some elements of juridical knowledge have featured in school subjects such as social studies, juridical knowledge is not a dominant part of what learning is about in elementary schools. The fact that traffic knowledge had such a clear connection to the juridical sphere is an example of the kind of knowledge that traffic education concerned. To a large degree it was about separating right from wrong, about following instructions that were meant to be unambiguous.

### *Visual knowledge*

A similar tendency to strive toward a clear and orderly understanding of traffic can be seen in the visual dimensions of traffic education. Traffic is, as pointed out by John Urry, a multisensory experience in which the noise and smell of cars and other vehicles can easily overwhelm the visual sense.<sup>35</sup> But in traffic education the visual sense has dominated, the pedagogical principle can be described as ocular-centric. Books on traffic education generally contained a large selection of traffic signs as well as instructions about traffic lights. Conveying knowledge about such things is a logical consequence of how traffic came to be regulated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century: with traffic signs, traffic lights, and also the traffic police, who used body language to regulate traffic. These silent ways of communicating represented an attempt to regulate drivers and pedestrians alike. As such they were, ideally, quite powerful tools. Traffic lights for instance are, in Clay McShane's words, systems that "attempt to impose a strong social control over the most fundamental of human behaviours, whether to move or be still."<sup>36</sup> The visual knowledge associated with these signs was connected to the above mentioned juridical knowledge, in the sense that they warned against dangers, recommended specific actions, or forbade certain behaviour.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, traffic lights and other signs communicated in a way that was meant to be simple to decode. As Lefebvre has stressed, signals are designed to be unambiguous. They should always be possible to read with one single sense organ, to mix sound with visual information would be confusing.<sup>38</sup>

Still, the ability to interpret signs as unambiguous can often require a process of learning. The visual vocabulary of traffic signs as conveyed in textbooks was arguably encompassing much more info than the regular pedestrians, especially children, had use for, since many signs were directed towards drivers of motorised vehicles. Nonetheless the signs were taught, along with information of what traffic lights meant, and in early examples also how the signs of the traffic police should be interpreted. This emphasis on the visual had implications for how textbooks were designed. In a time when many textbooks were still printed in black and white, traffic

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*trafik, juridik, teknik* (Stockholm: Fylgia, 1960); Knut Norström, *Trafikreglerna i ord och bild*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Stockholm: Fylgia, 1960).

35 John Urry, "Inhabiting the Car," *The Sociological Review* 54, no.1, supplement (2006), 22.

36 Clay McShane, "The Origins and Globalization of Traffic Control Signals," *Journal of Urban History* 25, no. 3 (1999), 370.

37 Frank Schipper, "Unravelling Hieroglyphs: Urban Traffic Signs and the League of Nations," *Métropoles*, no. 6 (2009), 4.

38 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, vol. 2 (London: Verso, 2002), 278.



education textbooks somewhat stood out with their bright colour images of traffic lights and traffic signs.

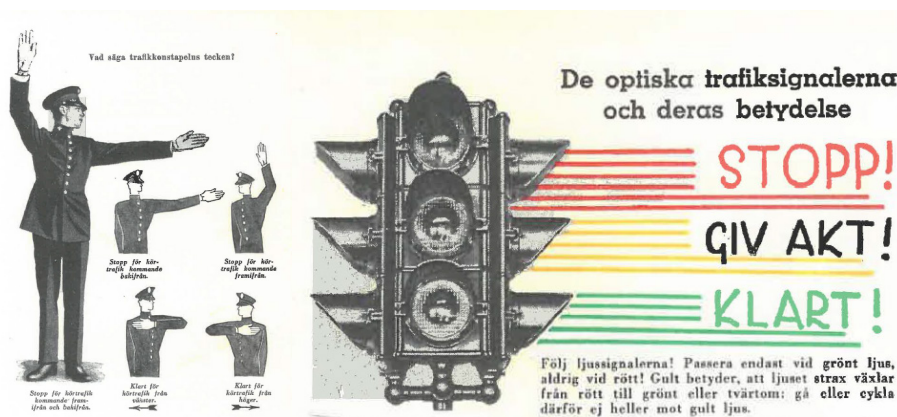


Image 1. The meanings of different visual signs, such as traffic signs, traffic lights and the signals given by the traffic police, could not be taken for granted and were communicated in textbooks. Source: Trafikundervisning: handbok för lärare (1937), 75–76.

### *Moral knowledge*

Another dimension of traffic education that can be distinguished was arguably more complex and had to do with self-control, character and morality. Whether it should be labelled a form of knowledge can be discussed, but in terms of education it was definitely something that was taught. However, the techniques for conveying moral knowledge were not simple. A 1948 governmental commission about traffic safety argued that teaching pupils the traffic rules was a comparably easy task. The next, and more crucial step, was to apply the rules, and this ability to use knowledge in real-life situations was dependent on good character: on a sense of responsibility, decency, judgement and caution. It could be encouraged in different ways, for example by different kinds of competitions to make the pupils more interested in traffic security, or – as in the American system – by using the school safety patrol.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that the invention of motorised traffic demanded a high level of self-control has been stressed by Norbert Elias who attempted to apply his theory of the civilising process to the realm of traffic. Focusing especially on drivers, he discussed their need to regulate themselves in order to avoid serious accidents.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, traffic education in schools was focused on another social category. There, it was pupils – i.e. non-drivers – that had to learn self-regulation. A frequent complaint in this respect concerned ways that children used the roads. It was stressed that roads were not suitable for play. In the old days, before motorised traffic, streets might have

39 SOU 1948:20, *Betänkande med förslag till åtgärder för höjande av trafiksäkerheten. Avgivet av 1945 års trafiksäkerhetskommitté* (Stockholm: Emil Kihlströms tryckeri A.-B., 1948), 258–59.

40 Elias points out that this ambition has only partly been realised, as the number of deaths in road accidents is tantamount to a decivilising process. Norbert Elias, “Technization and Civilization,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 12, no. 3 (1995), 7–42.

been compatible with play, it was said, but nowadays such behaviour had become dangerous.<sup>41</sup> Such advice was based on the radical transformation brought by cars, making traditional ways of living outdated. The streets had once been conducive to play, but those days were now long gone, and play in the streets had to be avoided. In addition, another kind of – more modern – play in the streets was castigated. The advent of new vehicles, especially bicycles and cars, had created new possibilities for play in the street: hanging onto a moving car, cycling on the street like a circus artist, breaking into a parked car and accidentally making it move. Such behaviours were repeatedly pointed out as something to avoid.<sup>42</sup> For children and other pedestrians the street had but one function: it was a space to cross, swiftly and safely. Detailed instructions on how to cross the street were given.<sup>43</sup> To cross the street was an ability that had to be learned and was connected to developments such as the emergence of the zebra crossing.<sup>44</sup>

### *Practical knowledge*

While theoretical knowledge – conveyed through books, films, brochures and posters – was deemed important it was clearly not seen as offering sufficient protection from accidents. As we saw earlier, there were complaints that pupils had good knowledge about the traffic rules, but that they were bad at applying it. That criticism was partly centred on the idea of a moral character, but had also to do with the sheer ability to learn, regardless of character. In the following I will discuss two attempts to further practical knowledge in schools: simulations and school safety patrols.

### *Simulations*

Traffic accidents represented a growing societal problem during the studied period. The antidote – traffic education – rested on a contradiction: how do you teach children about dangers without exposing them to dangers? One way of dealing with the problem was to design a multitude of simple, practical exercises where pupils were taught how to move through traffic space. This could be done through the use of simulated environments that in different ways recreated real-life situations. It could for example be achieved by using some of the spaces in or close to the school buildings, such as the school yard or the gymnastics hall. The school yard could be used to create a simulation of a block with roads, traffic signs and pedestrian crossings. In the school yard, pupils could get the opportunity to train themselves how to walk, stop, turn their heads, look for vehicles, cross the street, and overall how to move in a manner appropriate to a modern city where cars constantly circulate. It was a distinctly modern way of moving, illustrating Marcel Mauss's thesis that every society invents specific techniques of the body that have to be learned.<sup>45</sup> The principle of simulation could also take other forms. The art of bicycling could be practised in the simplest possible way, by using a stick as a stand-in for bicycle handlebars,

41 Hællquist and Rimby (1937), 5.

42 E.g., *Trafikregler för skolorna. Utarbetade av Kungl. Automobilklubben* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1924), 2, 9; Hællquist and Rimby (1937), 20, 23, 35; Thorson (1955).

43 E.g. Hællquist and Rimby (1937).

44 Moran (2006).

45 Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society* 2, no.1 (1973), 70–88.

making it possible for small children to get lessons in bicycling.<sup>46</sup> In some places a more permanent and realistic structure was constructed, in which the school yard was painted with pedestrian crossing markings, facilitating traffic lessons in school. Another strategy was to build a miniature environment with streets and houses, which made the simulation even more realistic. The 1963 handbook that described this simulation also recommended that a uniformed policeman should direct the lessons, since it made it all more realistic.<sup>47</sup> The use of such simulations can, in the broader sense, be seen as an example of how learning about hazardous situations can be done in a totally safe environment. As a strategy it has been used also in other contexts, for example in military training, as exemplified by the simulated town of Yodaville, used as a bombing range.<sup>48</sup>

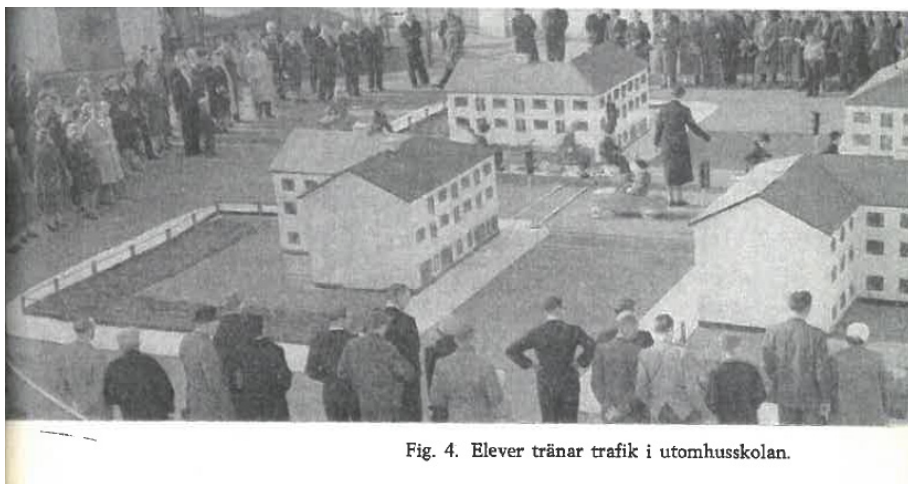


Fig. 4. Elever tränar trafik i utomhusskolan.

Image 2. Pupils practising traffic in a simulated environment. Source: *Handledning i trafikundervisning* (1963), 23.

#### *School safety patrols: the pupil as teacher and police*

Traffic education was, as we have seen, associated with learning the rules and obeying the authorities, and this socialisation involved contacts with the police. Children learned how to interpret the signals of a traffic policeman, and were urged to listen to the police. The role of children was mostly passive. Learning about traffic occurred in controlled areas, and the uses of simulations for practical lessons demonstrate that real traffic was to be avoided if possible. However, a change was on its way that would give children a more active and didactic role in conveying knowledge about behaviour in actual traffic.

Beginning in the 1950s, children were given a new task with the emergence of so-called school safety patrols, or what later became known as the school police.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Handbok för lärare i trafikundervisning* (1953) 175.

<sup>47</sup> *Handledning i trafikundervisning* (1963), 23.

<sup>48</sup> Dylan Mulvin, *Proxies: The Cultural Work of Standing in* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2021), 1–4.

<sup>49</sup> For international examples, see discussion in Crook (2016) on “school crossing patrols.”

The first school to introduce the system was a newly built elementary school in Stockholm, Skanskvarns folkskola. The introduction occurred in 1950 and was reported in one of the leading newspapers as a success.<sup>50</sup> The system spread to more schools in Stockholm, and three years later, in 1953, the National Board of Education sent out information about school safety patrols in their publication *Aktuellt från Skolöverstyrelsen* that provided information on what was going on in the educational system. The board recommended that schools with a clear need should introduce the system, and referred to positive experiences of the system, both from abroad and from some individual schools in Sweden. School safety patrols, which consisted of older and more mature pupils who helped younger children to cross the street safely, had two major aims according to the board: to make the journey to school safer and to help with traffic education. The second aim illustrates the educational motives for the reform: this was about learning as much as it was about safety.<sup>51</sup>

The introduction of the school safety patrol constituted a shift in the role of pupils, from relatively passive recipients of knowledge to active partners in the regulation of traffic. This shift not only resulted in pupils becoming “teachers” of traffic rules, but can also be understood in relation to the role of the police. Directing traffic had traditionally been the responsibility of the traffic police. That there was a similarity between the two actors was emphasised symbolically by the dress of the safety patrol, and by the informal name they were given: “school police.” Furthermore, the police were involved in educating the school safety patrol, and could also have the responsibility to keep an eye on the activity. Pupils involved in the safety patrol were also given a certificate that showed they were part of the safety patrol, a document that was signed by the police.<sup>52</sup> Legitimised by the actual police, the school police came to play a role in directing traffic for many years.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

How do societal problems become reframed as educational problems? This article, using Sweden as an example, has discussed how traffic education in schools came to be seen as an important strategy to deal with traffic accidents. This process – in effect an educationalisation of road death – has primarily been analysed in relation to the different knowledge forms involved in traffic education.

My motive for such a focus on knowledge is that it can enhance our understanding both of how traffic education was introduced in schools and what that education consisted of. In doing so I have used a broad concept of knowledge, in line with more cultural-historical understandings of the history of knowledge, and in contrast to more narrow perspectives on knowledge that we sometimes associate with the history of science. Like Lässig, I think that a new history of knowledge should be

50 *Aftonbladet*, “Barnens egen trafikpolis,” April 22, 1950.

51 *Aktuellt från Skolöverstyrelsen*, 6, no. 10 (1953), 119f. See also *Handbok för lärare i trafikundervisning* (1953) 15–17; SOU 1948:20, 103–104.

52 *Handledning i trafikundervisning* (1963), 36–37; *Aktuellt från Skolöverstyrelsen* 13, no. 45 (1960) “Anvisningar för sammanhängande kurs rörande trafikundervisning för lärarkandidater vid folkskoleseminarierna,” 802–03.

53 In Stockholm the system with pupils operating the traffic safety patrol was stopped in 2013. Stefan Lisinski, “Beslut idag: skolpoliserna försvinner,” *Dagens Nyheter*, December 20, 2012.

understood in the plural, as histories of knowledge, and that it should take “a broad spectrum of forms of knowledge into consideration.”<sup>54</sup> The five forms identified – knowledge about risk, juridical knowledge, visual knowledge, moral knowledge and practical knowledge – can be used as a characterisation of what constituted traffic knowledge during its first decades as a school subject. While not an exhaustive list the forms demonstrate that traffic knowledge should not be understood in the singular, and that it was actually quite a complex set of knowledge forms that was supposed to be taught in schools. As such, the different knowledge forms had different functions. Knowledge about risk created emotional motivation as well as historical awareness of how traffic and its related accidents had proliferated during recent decades. Juridical knowledge was about the actual rules that had to be obeyed, whereas visual knowledge was needed to navigate among traffic signs and traffic lights, and moral knowledge was about self-control. Practical knowledge was about meeting traffic in real-life situations, an ability that was trained in semi-real, simulated situations, or in the form of more active guiding of traffic as traffic police.

The different dimensions of knowledge further raise the question of how the specific nature of traffic education was related to the institutional character of schools. Was the complexity of the various knowledge forms compatible with the normal character of school or not? The question is relevant for an understanding of the preconditions for educationalisation but perhaps it is wrongly put, since traffic education in schools was only partly conducted using the traditional method of teachers teaching pupils. In fact, traffic education appears to have been conducted partly in the form of cooperation with new actors: the police, the traffic safety association and also the students’ own participation were important. One way of interpreting this is that the knowledge forms used in traffic education were partly compatible with traditional ways of teaching in schools, while in other respects they required collaboration with actors traditionally outside the teaching profession. In order to enter schools, traffic education needed to be conducted in collaboration with professions and associations outside schools. While much more research is needed to get a more nuanced view on how these different knowledge forms related to different actors, they serve to remind us that the process of educationalisation is a complex one that cannot be taken for granted. Beneath the surface of educationalisation lies a myriad of knowledge forms that might or might not be possible to apply in the context of schooling.

Being aware of this complexity holds the potential for a revamped and more nuanced discussion of the whole idea of educationalisation. Previous research has mainly been interested in discussing the factors that explain why all kinds of social and individual problems are formulated as educational ones. Educationalisation has been described as a more or less unstoppable, automatic force, even a syndrome.<sup>55</sup> Less scholarly interest has been devoted to understanding failed attempts to educationalise social problems. I believe that our understanding of educationalisation can be developed if we also try to understand the factors that stand in the way of

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54 Simone Lässig, “The History of Knowledge and the Expansion of the Historical Research Agenda,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 59, Fall (2016), 45.

55 David F. Labaree, “School Syndrome: Understanding the USA’s Magical Belief that Schooling Can Somehow Improve Society, Promote Access, and Preserve Advantage,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012), 143–63.

introducing a topic in schools. A final example might suffice to illustrate my point.

To understand why certain social problems are educationalised, the severity of the problem plays a role. Changes in the curriculum are more easily legitimised if they appear to address a serious and urgent social problem. However, the nature of the problem is not the only factor that matters, and it would be erroneous to see educationalisation as a logical, inevitable consequence of social problems. A contrasting example can be used to illustrate how educationalisation is anything but a homogenous process and that we need to make more fine-grained analyses of how attempts to impose certain tasks on schools can both fail and succeed. The contrasting example is swimming education, a case that in many ways shows striking similarities to traffic education. In the 1930s, there were demands that Swedish schools should make swimming education a compulsory school subject. Some schools already taught swimming, but it was not compulsory to do so. The motive to introduce swimming was the perils of water: the high number of drowning accidents. The demands were formulated by an association that promoted the importance of swimming safety, the Swedish Life Saving Society, formed in 1898 in response to a staggering number of drowning accidents (over 1000 a year).<sup>56</sup> However, in striking contrast to traffic education the proposals to introduce compulsory education were formulated as a long-term goal and it ultimately failed. One of the obstacles – perhaps the main obstacle – was the relative absence of swimming facilities close to the schools.<sup>57</sup>

The failure in introducing swimming education illuminates one of the fundamental preconditions for the successful introduction of traffic education in schools: the ubiquity of roads and streets. Unlike the more uneven distribution of water, roads of various kinds are a universal phenomenon in modernity. One might say that all roads eventually lead to a school. This dense network of roads has arguably served to legitimise traffic education. The constant presence of roads, and the daily use of them by children to reach schools, was a daily reminder of the risks of traffic and the merits of traffic education.

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56 “Simning på skolschemat landet runt inom tio år,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, July 18 (1939); “Simundervisning bör lagstadgas,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 30 (1940).

57 “Simning på skolschemat inom 10 år,” *Svensk lärartidning* 58, no. 29 (1939), 853.

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