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CHAPTER 11

Lived Residential Schools in Times of Crisis and Change: Debating the School for the Deaf in Borgå Through Experience in the 1930s and 1980s

Hanna Lindberg

Introduction

On 5 June 1993, three teenagers graduated from the school for the deaf in the town of Borgå (Porvoo in Finnish) in southern Finland.[1] The day was highly emotional for the graduates as well as the families and teachers participating in the ceremony. The graduation was also of national interest, and it was reported in the media. At the center of attention were not only the two boys and one girl who now closed a chapter in their lives and would continue their high school education in Örebro, Sweden. What

[1]The chapter was written with the support from the postdoctoral project Minority Citizenship in the Finnish Welfare State. The Case of the Finland-Swedish Deaf, ca 1950–2000 funded by the Academy of Finland (grant number 326560).

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drew attention was the fact that the almost 150-year-old school would now close its doors permanently, and thereby deaf education for the Finland-Swedish minority in Finland would come to an end.[2]

The closing of the school had been predated by reoccurring discussions and conflicts about the need for and quality of education for Finland-Swedish deaf people.[3] The school was one of its kind in Finland. Borgå was the site of the birth of the deaf community in Finland, as it was here that the first school for the deaf was founded in 1846. The town and the school were therefore a part of the canon of Finnish deaf history, and particularly so for the Finland-Swedish deaf community, a double minority intersecting the deaf minority and the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. Between 1932 and 1993, the school in Borgå was the only Swedish school for deaf children in Finland, and it provided comprehensive education to deaf children from Swedish-speaking homes in Finland, who chiefly live along the southern and western coast as well as on the Åland Islands. Although the percentage of Swedish-speakers in Finland was in steady decline throughout the twentieth century, amounting to approximately 6 percent of the population by the end of the millennium, the constitution declared that Finland had two national languages, and therefore education on all levels should be provided in both languages.[4] The residential school in Borgå gave rise to a particular Finland-Swedish deaf community with

[2] See, for example, Karin Kronlund-Saarikoski, Sista skolavslutningen på dövskolan i Borgå, *Dövas Tidskrift* 8/1993, 39; *Nya Åland* 22 June 1993.

[3] Throughout the twentieth century, deaf people were conceptualized in different ways. My sources from the 1930s use "deaf-mute" in reference to prelingually deaf people who communicated in sign language. The term would, however, soon thereafter become heavily criticized for, among other things, implying that deaf people lacked a language altogether, and the term was in the mid-twentieth century replaced by "deaf" in official settings. In the chapter, I use deaf-mute only when citing or translating official names. Furthermore, since the 1970s, there has been a division between writing "deaf" with a lowercase d in reference to the audiological condition of hearing loss, and "Deaf" in reference to a cultural and linguistic minority centered on sign language communication. Although I am studying a period in time when deaf people were asserting their position as a linguistic minority and their right to sign language, I choose to write deaf in the lowercase following the recommendation by Annelies Kusters and Michele Friedner, who view "deaf" as more inclusive. I am studying a historical period when deaf people seldom viewed themselves as purely "deaf" or "Deaf", but the two understandings interlinked and affected each individual differently. Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 288–99; Kusters and Friedner, Introduction, ix.

[4] For the history of the Finland-Swedish population and the role of the Swedish language in Finland, see, for example, Engman, Finns and Swedes in Finland; Engman, *Språkfrågan*; Meinander, *Nationalstaten*.

specific sets of experiences attached to the school building and the teachers and personnel that worked at the school, as well as the rules and regulations set by them. Furthermore, Finland-Swedish Sign Language was developed throughout the twentieth century in connection to the school.[5]

In this chapter, I will study how experiences of deaf education in Swedish and particularly of the school in Borgå were brought forth when claiming the right to deaf education for Finland-Swedes and fighting for the preservation and improvement of the residential school in Borgå. I will concentrate on two time periods when the school was under debate prior to its closure in 1993: the spring of 1936 when plans to enroll Finnish students in Borgå were refuted, and the late 1980s, when a public debate over the educational quality and disciplinary actions of the Borgå school arose in Finland-Swedish media. I argue that experience became a vital point of reference in the discussions and debates surrounding the Borgå school and was brought forth by all involved parties. Therefore, the two time periods can be studied as moments in time when experiences were crystallized. I ask the following questions: How were experiences of deaf education and the school for deaf people in Borgå used when arguing for the preservation of the Borgå school as a Finland-Swedish institution and for raising the quality of deaf education? How did the experiences put forward in the public debate in the 1930s and 1980s reflect changes in deaf education, the social position of deaf people and Finland-Swedes, and the ideologies surrounding sign language and deafness? A focus on experiences of the past simultaneously exposes expectations for the future, thus highlighting the dynamics of social change.

To answer my questions, I primarily utilize periodicals and newspapers where the issue of deaf education for Finland-Swedes was debated and where different stakeholders formulated their opinions and used experience as a tool when arguing for their point of view. I use both local and national newspapers as well as the periodical *Dövas Tidskrift* (previously *Tidskrift för Dövstumma*)[6] published by the Finnish Association of the Deaf. As secondary sources, I also use interviews and archival material.

[5] For the development of Finland-Swedish Sign Language, see Hoyer, The Sociolinguistic Situation of Finland-Swedish Deaf People.

[6] The periodical, founded in 1897, went through several name changes. Between 1897 and 1949, it was called *Tidskrift för Dövstumma* (spelled *Döfstumma* until 1908) and changed to *Tidskrift för Döva* in 1950, after which it merged with the Finnish periodical *Kuurojen Lehti*. In 1986, the name changed again to *Dövas Tidskrift*, thereby clearly signaling that it was not only a periodical *for* but also *by* deaf people.

In the chapter, I employ experience as an analytical tool, and I study mediation and the process of giving meaning to experiences. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Toivo understand *experience* on three interlinked levels: (1) the social reality of individuals and collectives, (2) the process of analyzing and making sense of everyday occurrences, and (3) an analytical tool to investigate everyday life and people's interpretation of it. As an analytical approach, experience provides the historian with the opportunity to study the past holistically and intersectionally and to combine top–down and bottom–up narratives, as the approach takes into account both physical realities and the discourses and ideals surrounding them.[7]

My focus on debates involving people representing different groups with different backgrounds and interests provides me with the opportunity to study how experiences were shared and appropriated from both the top–down and bottom–up. Furthermore, by studying two time periods, I can expose how a *scene of experience*, the Borgå school for the deaf in the late 1930s and 1980s, developed through changing *layers of experience*. Building on Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism as well as Koselleck's concepts of the space of experience and horizon of expectation, Heikki Kokko and Minna Harjula have developed these conceptual tools for analyzing experiences as socially shared phenomena. Kokko and Harjula define the scene of experience as a concrete situation where the space of experience and horizon of expectation interlink. The concept can be used to analyze a specific moment when social change takes place and how this moment is experienced from below. The layer of experience is a way to analyze institutionalized socially shared experiences and how different historical layers are built upon one another to form experiences in a specific historical time and place.[8]

The chapter proceeds as follows: I will first give an overview of the role of residential schools for minority cultures, especially the deaf community, and the ways in which experiences have been studied in connection to these types of institutions. The following two sections focus on the two times of crisis under study: the 1930s and 1980s. These crises are analyzed as scenes of experience that illuminate experiences and the expectations of residential schools for deaf children, and how these changed over time.

[7] Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 11–13; see also Kivimäki, Suodenjoki, and Vahtikari, Lived Nation, 10–17.

[8] Kokko and Harjula, Social History of Experiences, 31–8.

Lived Residential Schools as Sites of Community and Oppression

Experiences of residential schools have been documented and analyzed in several studies, state inquiries, and community history projects utilizing oral histories as the basis of knowledge.[9] In the history of welfare and educational institutions, residential schools have often been studied as sites of oppressive treatment and violent discipline. Especially previous researches into residential schools for Indigenous people have focused on the schools as a tool for ethnic cleansing, separating children from their birth communities in order to integrate them into majority cultures.[10]

Analyzing the history of deaf people and deaf communities, however, exposes the situationality and complexities of residential schools. Residential schools for deaf children were established in Europe in the latter part of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century and formed the basis for the development of sign languages and deaf communities. Before the advent of deaf education in the form of residential schools, geographically scattered deaf people had few opportunities to socialize with each other and form sustainable sign languages. After the foundation of the Borgå school, several other schools were established in Finnish cities during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the schools gave rise to deaf cultures and political activity channeled through local deaf clubs and a national association formed at the turn of the twentieth century.[11]

For deaf people, schools would however become ambiguous institutions, symbolizing both the foundation of deaf communities and sign languages as well as the suppression of the same. In the early phases of deaf education in Finland, instruction had been given in sign language,[12] but

[9] For residential schools in Finland, see, for example, Hytönen et al., *Lastensuojelun sijaishuollon epäkohdat*; Laitinen and Pietilä, *Vammaiset*, 173–87; Juuso, *Truth and Reconciliation Process Concerning Sámi Issues*, 32–5.

[10] Among the most notorious examples is the residential school system for Indigenous people in Canada, that was introduced in the nineteenth century and operated until the late twentieth century. See, for example, Fraser, *T'aih k'ìighe' tth'aih zhit dìidìch'ùh*; Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*; Olsen, Children and Childhood; Woolford, This Benevolent Experiment.

[11] Lindberg, National Belonging through Signed and Spoken Languages.

[12] For the ambiguous nature of residential schools among other minority groups, see also Bloch, *Red Ties and Residential Schools*; The founder of the Borgå school, Carl Oscar Malm, who was deaf, had received his education at the Manilla school in Stockholm and used the sign language he had learnt in Sweden in his instruction. For the early stages of deaf education in Finland, see Salmi, *Linguistic Turns in Teaching of the Deaf in Finland*, 17–22.

from the 1870s most educators favored oralism, that is, speech and lip-reading for deaf children.[13] According to the oralist ideology of deaf education, deaf people could be integrated into hearing society through speech, whereas sign language secluded them to a life of isolation. Furthermore, sign languages were not seen in the late nineteenth century as proper languages by linguists and educators but as a primitive form of communication. The oral method was introduced at different times in all European countries, and in Finland it was set in law in 1892 and abandoned only in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[14]

The ambiguous nature of deaf schools and the role they have played in shaping deaf people's experiences has been analyzed in oral history projects as well as by the Finnish state inquiry into human rights violations against deaf people and the sign language community from the early 1900s until the present day, which was led by Hisayo Katsui and published in 2021. The different projects have emphasized specific experiential narratives in relation to deaf schools and the suppression of sign language, and these experiences are historically situated in relation to the developments of deaf education and attitudes toward sign language.[15] For the generation born at the beginning of the twentieth century, the experiences detailed include arriving at the school for the first time often without proper skills in any language, feelings of abandonment in a strange environment, learning sign language from other students, being taught how to speak and read lips by the teachers, and being physically punished for using sign language or transgressing the rules of the school. For the generation born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, common experiences include teaching being hampered by hearing teachers' insufficient skills in sign language, as well as feelings of not being safe at the boarding house because of the staff's lack of knowledge of sign language.[16] These experiences can be

[13] Salmi, *Linguistic Turns in Teaching of the Deaf in Finland*, 16–36.

[14] Lindberg, Kohti sivistystä; Lindberg, Att värna om en minoritet inom en minoritet.

[15] See, for example, Katsui et al., *Viitotut muistot*; Homi, *Oralismin uhrit*; Hiljaisen kansan äänet, https://www.hiljaisenkansan.com/; for schools for the deaf in other countries, see, for example, Deaf New York City Spaces: https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/72ffae8f36644ce7bf78d98a64bce1eb.

[16] Katsui et al., *Viitotut muistot*, 74–6; Homi, *Oralismin uhrit*, 17, 39, 82; Salmi, *Linguistic Turns in Teaching of the Deaf in Finland*, 39; Wallvik, *Du måste vara döv*, 61, 64. Research focusing on the experience of oralist education in different European countries have exposed similar experiences of language and knowledge deprivation, as well as physical punishment for the use of sign languages. See, for example, Hesse and Lengwiler, *Aus erster Hand*; Van Herreweghe, De Meulder, and Vermeerbergen, From Erasure to Recognition, 47–8; Werner, Subverting Exclusion and Oppression.

understood as experiential layers that are constantly developing and changing but still building on previous experiences.

The experiences are common for both Finnish and Finland-Swedish deaf people, as shown, for example, by interviews collected within the project *Se vårt språk!* (See our language!) 1998–2002, where approximately 30 interviews with Finland-Swedish deaf people were conducted in order to research Finland-Swedish Sign Language.[17] However, as I will show in the following sections, some of the experiences mentioned above gave rise to public debate, which would have graver consequences for the Finland-Swedish deaf community, as the foundation for the community—the Borgå school for the deaf—was threatened.

"A Finnish Invasion": The Threat of Finnish Deaf Students in a Swedish Environment in the 1930s

By 1936, a school for deaf people had operated in the town of Borgå for almost a century. Deaf children from Swedish-speaking homes were usually sent to the school at the age of seven or eight, and as some travelled several hundred kilometers to get to the school; they lived in the boarding house and went home only during longer holidays. The school in the town had originally been multilingual, giving instruction in sign language and welcoming deaf students from both Swedish- and Finnish-speaking homes. The turn toward oral education in the last decades of the 1800s created the need to separate Finnish and Swedish students, and the decree of 1892 divided deaf schools into Finnish and Swedish schools, with the Borgå school designated to give oral instruction in Swedish. Furthermore, the division of the schools was also a part of a broader institutional separation of the Finnish and Swedish languages in areas of culture and education around the turn of the century.[18]

Approximately 40 years after the division of deaf education on linguistic grounds, the status of the Borgå school as an exclusively Finland-Swedish institution was questioned as the number of Finnish students steadily increased while the number of deaf children from Swedish-speaking families was expected to decline. Throughout the twentieth century, the percentage of Swedish-speakers in Finland decreased, but this was largely a consequence of the Finnish population's higher natality, while the number

[17] *Se vårt språk*. The interviews are stored at the Finnish Association of the Deaf, Helsinki.

[18] *Hans Kejserliga Majestäts nådiga kungörelse*; Engman, *Språkfrågan*, 176–235.

of Swedish-speaking citizens remained more or less the same.[19] For a minority within the minority, however, this meant that the number of deaf children born each year fluctuated, and the state estimated that fewer deaf children would be born into Swedish homes in the coming years. The Finnish schools, on the other hand, operated over their capacity, and as a response, the National Board of Education planned to enroll Finnish students in the Borgå school.[20] This gave rise to strong reactions both within the Finland-Swedish deaf community and in Finland-Swedish society at large.

The Borgå-based local newspaper *Borgåbladet* was the first outlet to report on the plans. With the title "A Finnish Attack under Plans on the Borgå School for the Deaf-Mute," the newspaper reported on the plans that it had learnt from sources close to the National Board of Education. According to the reporter, the plans would be detrimental to Finland-Swedish deaf people for two reasons. Firstly, the enrollment of Finnish students meant that education for Finland-Swedish deaf children would suffer, as all students would be taught together.[21] All deaf schools at the time applied a system of segregation depending on the students' proficiency in speech. Between 1895 and 1926, students who were deemed unfit for oral education were sent to Jakobstad (Pietarsaari in Finnish), approximately 500 kilometers to the north, to receive their education using writing and fingerspelling.[22] After the Jakobstad school was closed in 1932, all students attended the Borgå school, but a four-level classification of students was used.[23] The writer at *Borgåbladet* thus feared that the intellectual capacity of the A-students would be threatened.

Secondly, the reporter also feared that the mixing of Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking students would corrupt the social unity of the school.

> The school for the deaf-mute applies a boarding house system, where students and teachers make up a family, so to speak, and its members are in

[19] Meinander, *Nationalstaten*, 60.

[20] *Borgåbladet* 3 March 1936.

[21] *Borgåbladet* 3 March 1936.

[22] Hans Kejserliga Majestäts nådiga kungörelse. In reality, the ban on sign language was not always as harsh as the decree stated. The Jakobstad school also welcomed overaged students, who were excluded from the ban on sign language. Furthermore, sign language could be used at the Jakobstad school with all students when teaching Christianity, and when "otherwise seen fit." Wallvik, *Från Dövstumsbacken till Solsand*, 21–2.

[23] Helling, *Dövstumskolan i Borgå*, 83.

> constant contact with one another not only during lectures, but also in their spare time, where the common "home language" naturally must be one and the same. One is now prepared to light-heartedly abandon this principle with undoubtedly great harm for the relations between students, but also for the general comfort and well-being of the school, and its work to educate and discipline. This must undoubtedly suffer on account of the bilingualism within the school, and it is easy to imagine that the students, at least during the first years of school, will experience confusing and nerve-racking language difficulties.[24]

The reporter had presumably no first-hand experience of the deaf school environment but made presumptions about life at the school and how the students would experience the change. Therefore, the reporter's viewpoint was based on imagined experience. Written and oral histories of former deaf students have, however, told of the continued use of sign language during the oralist period among the students in social settings, such as at recess and in the boarding house.[25] Furthermore, before the 1890s, children from both language groups attended the same schools, and within the deaf clubs that were formed from the late nineteenth century onward, deaf adults from both linguistic groups socialized. Thus, a mutually intelligible sign language, with local variations, was used by deaf people from both Swedish and Finnish homes.

Borgåbladet's report on the plans by the National Board of Education gave rise to further reactions. Other local newspapers quickly reported on the plans, and the strongest reactions came from the Åland Islands. The completely Swedish-speaking islands are a self-governing region in Finland, and there were strong anti-Finnish sentiments among the population.[26] As a part of Finland, however, deaf children born on the islands were sent to the mainland to receive their education. Under the title "It is going too far!" the signature "Spokesperson for the opinion of Åland" listed the current threats to the Swedish language, the Eastern Swedish

[24] *Borgåbladet* 3 March 1936.

[25] Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 180; Katsui et al., *Viitotut* muistot, 78. However, during the most severe oralist period, in the 1910s and 1920s, the school in Kuopio also forbade signing during recess and in the boarding house. Salmi, *Linguistic Turns*, 39.

[26] See, for example, Meinander, *Nationalstaten*, 14–18.

race,[27] and the island community from Finnish nationalism and was alarmed that these attacks now had also reached deaf education.[28] Using oralist argumentation, the writer saw it as the right of deaf people to learn their mother tongue—that is, Swedish—of which the Borgå school was a guarantor. The writer was highly critical of the closing of the Jakobstad school four years earlier, as it meant that deaf children who had the ability to learn spoken Swedish had to mix with those who did not, leading to confusion and a breakdown in communication between the children. A "Finnish invasion" of the Finland-Swedish deaf school would only further deepen this confusion.[29]

The plans also angered members of the Finland-Swedish deaf community. In *Tidskrift för Dövstumma*,[30] the periodical for Finland-Swedish deaf people, the Jakobstad-based deaf man Anton Hellöre wrote of his shock about the proposed plans. Hellöre also saw it as harmful to mix Swedish and Finnish students, but not on the account of communication problems between the two groups, but as a threat to Finland-Swedish culture. He described Borgå as a beloved home that fostered the Swedish culture and spirit. As a response, Hellöre wanted to organize a mass protest from local deaf clubs against the National Board of Education, and on behalf of the Jakobstad club, he had sent a letter to beg the board to revise its plans. Like the writers of the local newspapers, Hellöre also wrote of the difficulties of merging Finnish and Finland-Swedish deaf students, as it would weaken the opportunity to learn Swedish. Simultaneously, however, he emphasized the social cohesion between Finnish and Finland-Swedish deaf people and stressed that when Finnish and Finland-Swedish deaf

[27] According to some theories of race biology in the early twentieth century, the Finnish-speakers and Swedish-speakers of Finland represented different races, the East Baltic and the Nordic (which the Eastern-Swedish belonged to), and the Nordic race was considered to be most prevalent on the Åland Islands. These theories were quickly refuted and downplayed by the Finland-Swedish political elite, but they remained prevalent among a minority of Finland-Swedes. Hietala, From Race Hygiene to Sterilization in Finland, 199–200; Meinander, *Nationalstaten*, 28.

[28] It is interesting to note that deaf people were here used in an argument relying on racial rhetoric, that is, to secure "the Eastern Swedish Race." Deafness was in other circumstances seen as a threat and included in discussions on race hygiene in Finland. The Finnish Marriage Act of 1929 prevented intermarriage between people who were born deaf. See, for example, Koivisto and Katsui, Meitä on uhattu vainota.

[29] *Åland* 14 March 1936.

[30] For more on *Tidskrift för Dövstumma*, see Lindberg, National Belonging Through Signed and Spoken Languages, 220, 226.

people met each other later in life, they were able to gather around common interests.[31]

A deaf woman called Irene Karlsson also wrote to *Tidskrift för Dövstumma* about the proposed plans. She claimed that although she hated language conflicts, she could not accept these plans. Karlsson referred to the debates over the position of the Finnish and Swedish languages that had characterized the Finnish national awakening in the nineteenth century and intensified in the 1920s and 1930s, leading in some cases to violence.[32] In her letter, Karlsson shared her experience of the school in Borgå.

> I enrolled in the school for deaf-mutes in Borgå in 1892 and remember a couple of Finnish deaf-mutes there; they were in a separate room for two years. After that the school was completely Swedish. After attending school for seven years me and my friends moved to the new school for the deaf-mute, which was so fine, grand, and comfortable […] May the Borgå school for the deaf-mute remain a Swedish school; it is the oldest in our country, and may its former students think highly of it and remember it lovingly and gratefully […][33]

She had enrolled in the school in 1892, the same year as the decree on education for people with sensory disabilities declared the supremacy of oral education and the division of deaf schools on linguistic grounds. As the students who were already enrolled in the schools were allowed to finish their education in the language and with the educational method they had begun it, Finnish students continued to attend the Borgå school for a couple more years.[34] Otherwise, Karlsson argued for the perseverance of Finland-Swedish deaf education through the mediation of warm and loving memories. She praised the warm guidance provided by teachers as well as the localities of the deaf school.[35]

[31] Anton H-e, Attack mot Borgå svenska dövstumskola. *Tidskrift för Dövstumma* 5/1936, 42–3.

[32] For language conflicts in the 1930s, see, for example, Lindqvist, Minnesbilder från trettiotalets språkstrid, 161–84. For more on the effect of the language conflicts on the deaf communities in Finland, see Lindberg, National Belonging through Signed and Spoken Languages.

[33] I. K-n, Brev från dövstumma. *Tidskrift för Dövstumma* 6/1936, 50.

[34] Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 159.

[35] I. K-n, Brev från dövstumma *Tidskrift för Dövstumma* 6/1936, 50.

The crisis of 1936 lasted for only a couple of months, and in late spring, the National Board of Education decided that the Finnish deaf schools in Turku, Oulu, and Mikkeli would accept more students. Therefore, the crisis was rather a storm in a teacup, but as such, it represents a very interesting scene of experience where experiences of the past and expectations of the future were crystallized. However, the experiences brought forth depended on the desired outcome of the crisis. As the goal of both deaf and hearing writers was the perseverance and continuation of the Borgå school for the deaf, experiences relating to the high quality of education, the warmth of the teachers, and the comfort of the school building were emphasized. This was a layer of experience common for the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, which omitted experiences of, for example, language deprivation and physical punishment that later research has exposed.[36] The interwar period can be seen as the "most oralist" era in the history of Finnish deaf education, and there were few opportunities for deaf people to criticize the oral method or residential school living. Therefore, oralism was often internalized by deaf people, affecting their sense of self and view of sign language.[37] When the writers account for their expectations for the future of deaf education should the plans to enroll Finnish students be realized, they do so by accounting for how the everyday life of the Finland-Swedish student would play out—there would be a breakdown of communication among the students as well as in the educational setting.

Education in Sign Language and the Future of Finland-Swedish Deaf People in the Late 1980s

During the course of the twentieth century, the residential school in Borgå continued to be a vulnerable institution as developments in deaf education and variations in the number of Finland-Swedish deaf children repeatedly caused uncertainties for the future of the school. For example, the number of the students dropped in the 1970s and the school building was in urgent need of repairs, which again aroused discussions on the future of the school.[38] The 1970s was furthermore a transformative period in deaf history as ideological shifts caused changes in the conceptualization of

[36] See, for example, Katsui et al., *Viitotut muistot*.

[37] Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 170–81; Homi, *Oralismin uhrit*, 43–4, 78–9.

[38] Lindberg, Att värna om en minoritet inom en minoritet.

deafness and deaf people. From the late 1950s onward, deaf people in Finland started to publicly assert their right to sign language, especially within education, and claim sign language as their mother tongue. Furthermore, research into sign language linguistics in the US, Sweden, and Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s, in combination with the deaf awareness movement that gained prominence in Finland during the late 1970s and early 1980s, strengthened the political awareness of deaf people, who positioned themselves as a linguistic and cultural minority centered around sign language.[39]

At the center of the debate was the course of deaf education and the use of sign language within it. In the 1960s, the dominance of oralism started to wane, and new manual methods were introduced and propagated by educators and deaf advocates. These methods relied on the simultaneous use of speech and signs, and although initially seen as a positive development, the problem of not using authentic sign language as well as the teachers' lack of knowledge of sign language became evident as the 1970s and 1980s progressed. Furthermore, the 1970s marked the end of state school dominance in deaf education in Finland, which in turn would lead to the weakening of the residential school model. In 1972, it was possible for municipalities to establish schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing children as well as children with speech impairments, which decreased the number of state-owned deaf schools and led to the quick rise in the number of municipal schools, where the students could live at home while attending school. The new structure was part of a global development toward deinstitutionalization and integration in special education. Both in Finland and in other countries, members of the deaf community were, however, highly critical toward the closure of residential schools, as schools exclusively for deaf students were seen as the best guarantor for the further development of sign language and the preservation of deaf culture.[40]

The number of Finland-Swedish deaf students was too small to form municipal schools, and they lived in a large and geographically scattered area. Therefore, the Borgå school remained as a state-owned residential school until its closure in 1993. The threats against the school in the 1970s had been averted through political lobbying, which secured funds for the renovation of the school, and furthermore, attendance started to

[39] See, for example, Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 302–11.

[40] Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 345–7; for more on the issue of integration, see Patterson, The Disability Rights Movement in the United States, 445–6.

rise again in the 1980s. The children came to the school usually the year that they turned six and first attended two years of kindergarten, whereafter nine years of compulsory school followed. In the 1970s and 1980s, the number of students varied between eight and 33, and therefore grades were merged to create larger groups.[41] The children came from all parts of "Swedish Finland," and many lived at the school, travelling home for the weekends and holidays. Several things had changed since the 1930s, and whereas the children in the 1930s often had no common language with their hearing family members, in the 1970s and 1980s, many parents of deaf children actively worked to learn sign language. Some parents had also chosen to relocate to Borgå while their children attended the school.[42]

A new crisis was made public in the end of the 1980s, this time involving both the school faculty, students, parents, and other members of the Finland-Swedish deaf community. This crisis continued for much longer than the crisis of 1936. While the discussion in the 1930s centered around preserving the Borgå school as it was—that is, for the continued production of similar experiences that the Finland-Swedish deaf school had thus far generated—the crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s was about change and diverging ideas about what type of change was needed.

The first signs of conflict arose in the summer of 1985, which summarized some of the main issues under debate during the years to come. The public conflict involved Ralf Mattsson, the principal of the Borgå school, and Brita Edlund, one of the founding members of the parents' association, DHBS (Döva och hörselskadade barns stödförening). Edlund, who had two deaf children, had been in different respects active in improving the rights of Finland-Swedish deaf people and had worked as a substitute teacher at the school. The local newspaper *Borgåbladet* interviewed Mattsson in response to a statement released by a working group on deaf education at the Ministry of Education, which stated that sign language was the first language of deaf people and should therefore be the main teaching language in schools for the deaf. Mattsson supported initiatives to strengthen the status of sign language in society at large but considered the line proposed by the working group, which had already been taken in Sweden where sign language had achieved the status of mother-tongue in

[41] Eriksson, West, and Hannus-Gullmets, *Dövskolan i Borgå 1946–1993*, 34; *Borgåbladet* 26 September 1986.

[42] Wallvik, *Du måste vara döv*, 57; Hoyer, "Vi kallade dem Borgåtecken," 41; Interview with Brita Edlund.

1981 and bilingual education was given to deaf students, as going too far.[43] The role of the school was to enable communication with the surrounding society, and an emphasis on sign language would steer the students away from learning how to read and write Swedish. Furthermore, all facts could not be conveyed in sign language, according to Mattsson. The following day, Edlund replied to Mattsson's comments, stating that deaf people are a linguistic minority, and that they therefore have the right to education in their own language. The school had offered one hour per week of sign language tuition to the students, but this was not enough, as all education should be provided in sign language, while Swedish should be taught as a foreign language.[44]

From the late 1960s and early 1970s onward, signing was used in the teaching of deaf students, but as stated above, not as sign language but rather as a support to speech, which meant that students continued to have difficulties comprehending the content of their education.[45] Furthermore, as sign language was not included in the training of deaf school teachers, their skill level varied greatly. This was a general problem in schools for deaf people both nationally and internationally, and it was therefore not specific to the school in Borgå.[46] However, as a residential school, where the role of the school went beyond only providing the students with an education, the lack of proficient sign language skills also had disciplinary consequences.

The disciplinary problems of the school were made public in the spring of 1988 when both the Finnish broadcasting company Rundradion and the local newspaper *Borgåbladet* widely reported on the crisis at the school. Under the title "Emotions are surging around the school for the deaf," the newspaper interviewed students, parents, teachers, and the boarding house staff about the increasing dissatisfaction with the school. The students Monika Saarikoski and Belinda Småroos described to the reporter their experience of chaos at the boarding house. Different groups of students were in conflict with each other, and due to the lack of knowledge of sign language, the employees of the boarding house had few ways to defuse the situation. One employee had even resorted to violence when

[43] For the development in deaf education in Sweden during the 1980s, see Lundström, *Kampen för ett språk*, 107–17.

[44] *Borgåbladet* 3, 4 July 1985.

[45] Salmi, Kielelliset käänteet kuurojen opetuksessa, 28.

[46] Salmi and Laakso, *Maahan lämpimään*, 351, 356–9.

unable to communicate with the students. The girls wanted staff who were proficient in sign language and able to mediate if conflicts arose. The manager of the boarding house acknowledged the problems and added that the continuous circulation of staff added to the students' feelings of insecurity.[47]

Members of the faculty also acknowledged the problems that the students raised. Birgitta Björkén-Kurki, a teacher, testified to how challenging it was to learn a new language as an adult and to thereafter use it in teaching. Björkén-Kurki also described a faculty riddled with conflict with weak loyalties amongst its members. When commenting upon the problems at the school, Gustaf Öller, the representative of the parents' organization, stressed that the parents did not blame the teachers for the conditions at the school but regarded it as a problem of the leadership by the principal, Mattsson. In a letter to the national newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* later in the spring, Öller wrote that as a parent to a child attending the school for the last five years, he had experienced widespread ignorance by the National Board of Education as well as the Ministry of Education regarding the needs and demands of the students and parents.[48]

Conflicts at the school did not only affect the students but the entire Finland-Swedish deaf community. The Borgå school was more than just a school; in the 1980s, it was the center of Finland-Swedish social activity. The local deaf club met at the school, and the meetings gave the students an opportunity to socialize with deaf adults. Therefore, Boris Kankkonen, Barbara Andersson, Kari Rautiainen, Håkan Westerholm, and Karin Kronlund-Saarikoski, all members of the local deaf club, some of whom had children at the school or had themselves recently graduated from the school, wrote a letter to *Borgåbladet* in response to the report to give their view of the conflict. The letter-writers stressed that their experience of the children differed greatly from that of the school staff; the children always behaved well at the club meetings, and therefore any form of ill behavior at the school and boarding house had to stem from communication problems and the lack of deaf awareness of the employees at the boarding house. As the children lived the better part of their time at the school, it formed their sense of self and was the main site of their childhood experiences. According to members of the Finland-Swedish deaf community, the

[47] *Borgåbladet* 5 March 1988.
[48] *Borgåbladet* 5 March 1988; *Hufvudstadsbladet* 17 May 1988.

problems could be avoided through making the school and boarding house a milieu submerged in sign language, which not only included skills in the language but also knowledge of deaf culture and the deaf world. Another suggestion by Kankkonen, Andersson, Rautiainen, Westerholm, and Kronlund-Saarikoski was to partly dismantle the residential school system and to let older children live outside the school in smaller units.[49] In addition to the boarding house, students at schools for the deaf in Finland could live in homes close to the schools, and the discussion was intensified by developments in Sweden, where this had been the norm from the 1970s onward.[50]

Whereas the crisis of 1936 had been averted through a simple decision to enlarge Finnish deaf schools, and thereby preserving the Borgå school as a Swedish institution, the conflict of 1988 was not as easily resolved and would continue for several years. Both the representatives of the parents' organization and the members of the deaf club stressed that the responsibility for improving the situation in the school lay with the school leadership and the state, as the school was state-owned. In the following years, the National Board of Education proposed a series of measures to improve conditions at the school, among them hiring a consultant to mediate between the conflicting parties. However, the hired consultant resigned after visiting the school only once, claiming that the issues first had to be worked out between the persons involved before someone from the outside could step in.[51]

The crisis of the late 1980s can also be studied as a scene of experience, exposing experiences and expectations of deaf education as well as residential school living, and thus creating new layers of experience. This time, current and former students as well as parents of deaf children shared experiences of feeling unsafe and their language and wishes not being respected. Compared to the crisis of 1936, the conflict did not expose overt forms of minority nationalism—the call for improvements in deaf education at the school in Borgå was not based on arguments of Finland-Swedishness or "the Eastern-Swedish race"—and language conflicts were by the 1980s largely in the past. However, as a layer of experience, the same ideas were partly present in the concept of the "minority within the

[49] *Borgåbladet* 29 March 1988.

[50] Birgitta Wallvik, Finland är ett trespråkigt land för döva. *Dövas Tidskrift* 12–13/1987, 30–1; Katsui et al., *Viitotut muistot*, 78–9.

[51] *Borgåbladet* 20 May 1988.

minority," which had started to be used in the 1980s as the main slogan by advocates of Finland-Swedish deaf people to stress the urgency for improving conditions.[52] There was nevertheless a change in emphasis. Of the two components included in the "minority within the minority"—Finland-Swedes and deaf people—the focus of the 1980s conflict was on the rights and experiences of the latter and on the position of sign language in education and wider society.

In the early 1990s, the loss of students at the school became once more a grave matter of concern. Ever more parents were choosing mainstream schooling for their deaf children, and the residential school system was also otherwise increasingly seen as an unattractive option. In 1989, the Peltolas from Ostrobothnia, whose son Patrik attended the Borgå school but lived with a family in Borgå with only deaf members, described their situation before connecting with the host family in an interview: they had to choose from several bad options. For the Peltola family, placing Patrik at the boarding house would not have been an option, and Patrik was described as lucky when compared to the children at the boarding house.[53] The lack of students was, however, not only a result of the dwindling interest in residential schools. In general, the number of deaf children was in decline as illnesses that had previously caused deafness were eradicated in the late twentieth century through vaccinations and better healthcare. Furthermore, by the 1990s, Finland-Swedes in general and Finland-Swedish deaf people in particular had a long tradition of emigrating to Sweden for work and education, and therefore the schools in Härnösand and Stockholm became more attractive options for some families than the Borgå school.[54]

In 1992, only a handful of students were left, and the Finnish National Agency of Education (the successor to the National Board of Education) founded a working group with members representing the school, the state, the Finland-Swedish deaf community, and the Finnish Association of the Deaf. The task of the working group was to develop a plan for the school and for deaf education for Finland-Swedes. Following the Norwegian example where state-owned deaf schools had been transformed into resource centers, the group discussed how the task of the

[52] Lindberg, Att värna om en minoritet inom en minoritet.

[53] *Vasabladet* 12 February 1989.

[54] Eriksson, West, and Hannus-Gullmets, *Dövskolan i Borgå 1946–1993*, 37–8; Lindberg, Kohti sivistystä.

school could be widened to include children with other disabilities who also benefited from sign language and other educational services for Finland-Swedish deaf individuals.[55]

In the discussion within the working group on how the Borgå school could be saved, one can find similar arguments as in the 1930s for why the school should be exclusively reserved for Finland-Swedish deaf children. Håkan Westerholm, who represented the Finnish Association of the Deaf and who was a member of the Finland-Swedish deaf community, mentioned plans to open the school for Finnish deaf students, but he did not believe that three languages in the same school would be a viable option and would weaken the educational quality of the school. Like the contributors to the debate in the 1930s, Westerholm also stressed that the school was essential for cultivating identity and culture, but instead of Finland-Swedishness he stressed deaf identity and deaf culture. Furthermore, he stressed his own experiences when discussing different educational options for Finland-Swedish students. Born in 1949, Westerholm had experience of both mainstreaming and attending the Borgå school, and he told of the difficulties he had faced as a deaf child in a hearing environment and therefore did not consider this to be beneficial for learning outcomes.[56]

The working group presented to the National Agency of Education a series of suggestions on how the school could be developed and transformed, but no steps were taken despite these suggestions, and the school closed its doors the following spring. As some of the people involved have stated, measures were put in place too late to be able to save the school. Furthermore, the era of residential schools was, by the 1990s, coming to a definitive end. Finland-Swedish parents of deaf children were no longer interested in the residential school option, and also in other countries, residential schools for deaf children were closing their doors.[57]

[55] NAF, Archive of the School for the Deaf in Borgå, Folder Aac Minutes by the working group set by the National Board of Education, Decision to establish a working group 12 February 1992 & The Working groups report to the National Board of Education.

[56] NAF, Archive of the School for the Deaf in Borgå, Folder Aac, Minutes by the working group set by the National Board of Education, 28 February 1992.

[57] See, for example, interview with Birgitta Wallvik; Moores, Residential Schools for the Deaf.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have studied residential school experiences in relation to situations of conflict and crisis and how experiences were brought forth in public debates. I have studied the school for the deaf in Borgå, a residential school for Finland-Swedish deaf students that operated between 1846 and 1993, concentrating on two times of crisis: the spring of 1936 when plans to enroll Finnish students in the school were put forward and the spring of 1988 when a conflict involving students, parents, teachers, boarding house staff, the school board, and members of the Finland-Swedish deaf community was debated in the press. The two crises are partly different in character and separated by over fifty years, but as scenes of experience, they highlight how experiences—both personal, mediated, and imagined—interlinked with expectations of the future of Finland-Swedish deaf education. Furthermore, the two crises also expose changing layers of experience in relation to deaf education, the position of sign language, and the conceptualization of deafness.

The journalists at the local newspapers who first reported on the plans to enroll Finnish students at the Borgå school in 1936 had presumably no personal experience or first-hand knowledge of life at the school. Still, the main argument for opposing the plans was that it would disturb the everyday life of the school and confuse the Finland-Swedish deaf children, who through the school learnt their mother tongue, Swedish. The writers argued from an oralist point of view, possibly ignorant of the fact that Finnish and Finland-Swedish deaf people communicated in a mutually intelligible sign language. However, oralism also affected the way members of the deaf community argued for the perseverance of the Borgå school as a Finland-Swedish institution. When Irene Karlsson wrote about her experiences of the school as a young child during a transitional period when the school was changing from a bilingual to a Swedish school, she described different spheres within the school for the students from Finnish and Swedish homes, as if they were kept apart from each other. The 1930s was furthermore a period of conflict between the language groups in Finland, and the writers wanted to stop the enrollment of Finnish students, as it would prevent the fostering of Finland-Swedish culture within the school.

In the 1980s, language conflicts were rare, but the role of deaf people, sign language, and residential schools had undergone vast

transformations. The public conflict over the teachers' and boarding house employees' lack of sufficient sign language skills—and the disciplinary and educational problems that this led to—came to a head in the spring of 1988, when different parties in the conflict were interviewed by and wrote to national and local media. While the people who had participated in the debate of 1936 resisted change and wanted to preserve the residential school in Borgå as it was, the conflict of 1988 centered around the need for change. Experiences of deaf education, residential school living, deaf clubs, and dealings with school and state officials were at the heart of the conflict, and the parties argued for change either by referencing personal experience or mediated experience, for example, as a parent with children attending the school.

Times of crisis accentuate the need to put forth experiences. The way current and former students described their experiences of Finland-Swedish deaf education in the 1930s and 1980s was affected by the desired outcome: preservation or change. The wish to preserve the Borgå school led to the mediation of positive experiences, while the need for change in the late twentieth century accentuated the problems and disarray in the everyday life of the residential school. Change would happen, but not in the way any of the conflicting parties wanted. After the closure of the school, no sustainable alternative has been found, and as a consequence, the number of Finland-Swedish deaf people living in Finland has decreased significantly.[58]

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[58] According to the latest estimation from 2015, there were 90 Finland-Swedish deaf individuals who use Finland-Swedish Sign Language living in Finland at the time. Andersson-Koski, *Mitt eget språk*, 35.

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