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Inconsistencies in everyday patterns of school rules

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate and explain inconsistencies within the social constructions of school rules as they take shape in everyday interactions between teachers and students, and to explore how students interpret these inconsistencies. An ethnographic study is conducted in two primary schools in Sweden. According to the findings, implicit rules, i.e., unarticulated supplements or exceptions, can, at least in part, explain inconsistencies in teachers' efforts to uphold explicit school rules to the explicit rules. Nevertheless, rule inconsistency and unarticulated implicit rules appear to create rule diffusion, which, in turn, creates a prediction loss among students. They cannot always predict what will be appropriate behaviour in particular situations, and how teachers will react to their behaviour. Furthermore, this appears to result in a negotiation loss for students. They cannot openly discuss and negotiate on rules if they are unaware of such rules.

In the classroom as well as in other school contexts, there are school rules aimed at regulating student behaviour. According to Buckley and Cooper (1978), rules 'specify appropriate student behavior and are established verbally, either orally or in written form, by an authority figure' (p. 256), who, according to them, is usually the teacher. In this paper, school rules are defined as prescriptions, legitimised by teachers, about how to behave in school situations, standards by which behaviour in school is officially judged to be appropriate, right and desirable, or inappropriate, wrong and forbidden. They are guidelines for action and for evaluating action in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, according to teachers. Classroom rules are seen here as a subcategory of school rules. They frame the interaction in the classroom by identifying permissible and desirable behaviour, as well as impermissible or undesirable behaviour, in line with the view of the teachers (Brint et al., 2001).

Rules in school are often intended to regulate or prevent all kinds of student conduct that are likely to disrupt activities, cause injury, or damage school property (Doyle, 1990). Their function is to regulate and control the students' behaviour in the classroom in order to create and maintain an environment conducive to learning (McGinnis et al., 1995). However, there is an emerging view of school or classroom rules, which sees them as more than just regulating order in the classroom or in other school contexts. According to Boostrom (1991), rules also define a way of life in the classroom. He argues that 'as students embrace rules, they take part not only in short-term behaviours but also in far-reaching ways of thinking about themselves and the world' (p. 198). Hence, rules are a part of the moral messages students are exposed to in school, which also has been described in empirical research (e.g., Jackson, 1968; Jackson et al., 1993; Brint et al., 2001; Fenstermacher, 2001; Johansson & Johansson, 2003; Thornberg, 2006a,b). School rules, the social climate, disciplinary procedures, teachers as role models, teacher interventions, and many other teacher behaviours can be viewed as parts of the so-called hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968; Halstead, 1996; Schimmel, 2003). According to Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (1997), the hidden curriculum is 'all the things that are learnt during schooling in addition to the official curriculum' (p. 66). The problem with the hidden curriculum is, Broady (1987) argues, that the teachers often think that they teach math, English, geography, etc., and that is it, and do not investigate what the students learn in classroom or in school above these topics. The hidden curriculum refers to implicit moral messages embedded in everyday school life, influencing children to develop values which may be different from those the school officially intends to uphold and foster (Halstead, 1996). With reference to McGinnis et al. (1995), classroom rules are often established, without any other management plan, in the hope that appropriate behaviour will follow. Thus, to carry out research about school rules and related teacher behaviour is highly relevant from a classroom management and school discipline perspective, as well as from a moral and socialisation perspective.

The social construction of rules and its meanings through social interactions

This study has its theoretical basis in a broad interactionist perspective. However, interactionism can mean several things in the discourse of social sciences (for a further discussion, see Atkinson & Housley, 2003). The term can refer quite narrowly to the tradition of symbolic interactionism (cf. Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007). In this study, however, it is

used more broadly and more inclusively to refer to 'the sociological study of social interaction and social encounters, the investigation of micro-sociological phenomena such as face-to-face interaction, the social construction of selves and identities, the structures of everyday knowledge, and the ordinary routines of mundane activity in social groups and institutions' (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. 37). According to Gordon et al. (2001) a great deal of the ethnographic educational research during recent decades has its theoretical basis in social interaction studies influenced by symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and phenomenology.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), everyday life and the knowledge, arrangements, habits, norms, and values it contains are social constructions, maintained by the social interactions and the language we share with our fellow human beings. Socialisation never ends and everyday life is maintained by its manifestations in routines and by on-going confirmations in people's social interactions. Furthermore, teachers as well as students are constructive meaning-makers (Hargreaves, 1984) of their everyday classroom and school life. While the meaning of things is formed in the context of social interactions and is derived from these interactions by the actors, the use of meanings by them occurs through a process of interpretation (Blumer, 1969). 'In most situations in which people act toward one another they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and of how other people will act. They share common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the actions of the participants, and accordingly each participant is able to guide his own behavior by such meanings' (Blumer, 1969, p. 17). Hence, teachers' efforts in classroom management and school discipline are dependent on students' interpretation work on school and classroom rules. Moreover, classroom management and discipline issues cannot be confined to student behaviour and psychology. From an interactionist view, classroom management as well as 'appropriate' and 'disruptive' behaviour among students are socially constructed within a complex pattern of interactions in which both teachers and students play active roles, influencing each other with their actions and interpretations (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969). Thus, to understand student behaviour, it is also important to consider teacher behaviour, how teachers organise and manage classroom activities in general, and their efforts to establish and uphold rules in particular, as well as to investigate the local social construction of school rules.

Inconsistencies in the system of school rules

Duke (1978) argues that many of the discipline concerns in school are related more to how adults handle problems than to actual student misconduct. In his study, he identified and developed six categories of adult behaviour in school that create a lot of student discipline difficulties: (a) inconsistent rule enforcement, (b) noncompliance with discipline policies, (c) insensitivity to students, e.g., exhibiting little patience for students' concerns and the 'teach the best, forget the rest' philosophy, (d) lack of disciplinary data, i.e., none or very little accurate data related to discipline being collected and shared on a routine basis, (e) lack of classroom management skills, and (f) inadequate administration of disciplinary policies. Several teachers in the study admitted to being inconsistent, and justified their behaviour by saying that there were too many school rules for any individual to enforce effectively. Nearly

70% of them acknowledged that they actually did not know how many rules there were. According to Duke (1978), 'this finding makes it a little easier to understand why teachers seemed to be inconsistent in rule enforcement; it is likely that few of them could have been aware of all the rules in the first place' (p. 523). Moreover, most teachers reported that they had poor formal training in classroom management. They justified their inconsistencies and failures to deal effectively with student misbehaviour by their lack of classroom management skills. Jackson et al. (1993) enacted an ethnographic study about the moral life of schools by carrying out extensive observations in 18 classrooms in elementary schools and high schools. In light of their observations, they developed two main categories that capture the moral life in classroom: (a) moral instruction, which are deliberate attempts to promote moral instruction and to encourage moral behaviour (e.g., classroom discussions about moral issues, posters with moral messages on the classroom walls, and spontaneous moral comments on students' behaviour during the lesson), and (b) moral practice, i.e., activities that embody the morality, such as classroom rules and regulations, and hidden morality in the structures of curriculum and its contents. According to Jackson et al., classroom rules function like miniature constitutions or codes of law. Even if the rules, at first glance, seem to be simple and clear, Jackson et al. point to the problem of inconsistency.

Yet as simple and as direct as rules sound when they are put into words ('Pay attention at all times', 'No fighting', 'Raise your hand when you want to speak'), they turn out to be quite complicated when we try to understand their enactment. This is partly because most such rules seem, at first, to be inconsistently enforced. (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 13)

In their study, teachers sometimes overlook inattention and sometimes not. Students who call out answers rather than raise their hands are not always corrected. Sometimes they even receive praise. However, Jackson et al. (1993) argue that many of these inconsistencies are not instances of rules being ignored. 'Instead, they reflect refinements of the rules that are clearly understood by almost everyone present except the observer' (p. 13). Hence, these explicit classroom rules turn out to be general maxims to which there are many exceptions.

According to a study by Tattum (1982), in which 29 disruptive students were interviewed, these students reported their experiences of schooling, including giving their version of why they misbehave in the classroom. They described their disruptive behaviour as a natural response to circumstances. One of the most frequently and most generally used explanation and justification for their behaviour was inconsistency in the teachers' rule application, even if other motives also were reported, such as being treated with disrespect, just having a laugh, and blaming the teachers as being uncaring, lacking control or giving inappropriate work. They were critical of rule inconsistencies and unfair treatment, and claimed that they were picked on. According to them, the inconsistency of rule application is a major source of dissatisfaction and disaffection, and breeds a sense of grievance and precipitates confrontations. However, with reference to Merrett and Jones (1994), very little research has been conducted in order to examine the nature of the complex systems of school rules. The study presented in this article intends to carry out some exploration into this matter. The aim here is to investigate and explain inconsistencies within the social constructions of school

rules as they take shape in everyday interactions between teachers and students, and to explore how students interpret these inconsistencies.

Method

The study is based on ethnographic research in two primary schools in Sweden. Fieldwork was conducted three to five days each school week, from October 2002 to May 2003, in the first school, and then from November 2003 to May 2004 in the second school (with an exception of two school weeks). The schools are located in different areas in a medium-sized Swedish town. Two pre-school classes, two classes in Grade 2, and two classes in Grade 5 (i.e., six classes) participated in the study. In total, 141 students and 13 teachers participated. The amount of teaching experience varies among the teachers, but most have worked as teachers for many years. By using participant observations and audio-recordings, issues of values and norms were identified and documented in everyday life of school. Moreover, qualitative interviews with the teachers were conducted in order to examine how teachers reason about the practice and the content of everyday values education, discipline and school rules. In addition, qualitative group interviews with 139 students (in total, 49 groups with two to four students in each group) were conducted in order to examine how students reason and make sense of school rules and teachers' discipline and values education practice. The qualitative analysis of the fieldwork data was accomplished by procedures influenced by the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and by Dey's (1999) revised versions of the Grounded Theory. Coding of relevant indicators, indicator sorting, systematic comparisons of differences and similarities, concept and category-system construction, and finally, theoretical descriptions, were central aspects of the analysis process.

Inconsistencies in the system of school rules

During a science lesson in fifth grade, the class is doing an experiment with water, and is divided into two groups. In both groups, the children stand around a table on which there is a glass bowl with water. The students have made paper flowers and coloured them with crayons. They have placed the paper flowers in the water and are now watching their flowers to see what will happen. Simultaneously, many students are also talking to each other.

“May I speak now?” the teacher asks.

“Yes”, some of the students answer.

“Good! Then you have to listen! It's a-”, the teacher become silent and stares at students who are still talking. She looks very serious. “May I speak?”

“Yes”, many students in the class answer.

“Good! Then you have to listen”, the teacher replies.

The students become silent. They look at her. She starts to speak about the phenomenon that takes place in the glass bowls and asks the students questions.

“Why do you think the flowers are changed by being opened?”

Some of the students put up their hands.

“Fabian?”

“I think-”, Linus begins to say but is quickly interrupted by the teacher.
“No, Linus! Is your name Fabian?” she asks and looks at him.
“No”, he answers.
“Exactly, and if I ask Fabian, then it is his turn to answer, not yours. You know that, don’t you?” The teacher turns to Fabian. “Fabian?”
“Because we have coloured them with crayons”, he answers.
“Do you think so?” teacher asks the class with a doubting expression.
“No”, a lot of them answer.
(Field note, Grade 2, in the classroom)

This excerpt illustrates a typical disciplinary practice of rules in the six classes- reactive (one or more students break a rule and the teacher respond with a corrective act), ongoing, and embedded in everyday school life. One particular main classroom rule that is transgressed in the excerpt is the rule about not speaking without permission. Other school rules can also be added to this rule: speak one at a time while the others are quiet, raise your hand and wait for your turn if you want to speak, do not talk during lessons when teacher is talking, and do not talk during lessons when the teacher has given another student permission to talk. When Linus begins to talk at the same time as the teacher has given Fabian permission to talk, she quickly reprimands Linus. However, in the very same excerpt, many students answer the teacher with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ simultaneously as a response to some of her questions, and without being rebuked, told to put up their hands and wait for permission to speak. More inconsistencies can be seen in the continuing interaction pattern of the lesson:

“Hey! Stop it!” Daniel suddenly shouts at Emil who is picking at one of the paper flowers in the water.
Patricia moves her position to see better.
“Move!” Linus shouts at Patricia. “I can’t see!”
“It’s so very tiring”, the teacher says. “You know very well that we have this rule about how to be towards each other”. She points to the wall where a set of school rules has been put up. “Look at the first rule: We are nice to each other. We use civilised language. And I don’t think it is a nice way to be to each other. All this about speaking in an angry way. You say: “Stop it!”, “Don’t do that!”, and “Don’t do it like that!” The teacher talks in a loud voice and imitates the students in a way making her voice sound angry and irritated. Then she lowers her voice again and begins to speak in the way she usually does. “You are so big now, so you don’t have to talk to each other in that way, do you? Try to think that you have to talk to each other in a nice way. “Would you like to move over a little bit so I can see, please?” for example. It sounds much nicer, doesn’t it? And thus, no one needs be angry with each other”.
The teacher continues to ask questions about what is happening in the glass bowls and about why these things happen. She asks the class a question and a lot of the students raise their hands. Marcus begins to speak without putting up his hand and without permission from the teacher.
“I think that-”, Marcus says but is quickly interrupted by the teacher.
“Raise your hand and wait for your turn if you want to speak, Marcus. We don’t just speak without permission. If everyone speaks at the same time, we won’t be able to hear what anyone says”, the teacher explains.

After a while, Daniel puts his hand in his group's glass bowl and picks at one of the paper flowers.

“Hey! Don't pick at it”, Jenny says to Daniel. “It's not your flower”.

Daniel goes on picking.

“Hey! Daniel!” Alexandra shouts.

Daniel does not respond to the reactions from his classmates, but keeps on picking at the flower.

“Daniel! Stop it!” Jenny shouts at Daniel. She looks at him angrily.

“Now you have to listen to your classmates, Daniel! If you get any more complaints, then you have to go and sit in your place”, the teacher exclaims with a loud voice looking angry.

(Field note, Grade 2, in the classroom)

In the excerpt above, the teacher also refers to another main school rule, which stipulates that you should be nice to each other. When Daniel shouts at Emil who is picking at one of the paper flowers in the water, the teacher rebukes Daniel about his angry tone by referring to the rule of being nice to each other. However, when Jenny shouts at Daniel for doing the same thing that Emil was doing just a minute ago, the teacher responds to Jenny's angry tone in a totally different way. Instead of correcting her, the teacher actually confirms her behaviour by supporting her and Alexandra's statements: ‘Now you have to listen to your classmates, Daniel! If you get more complaints, then you have to go and sit in your place’. Moreover, by the way the teacher says this to Daniel, she appears to break the rule about being nice as she just put it when she corrected Daniel earlier, i.e., that it is wrong to use an angry tone of voice to others and if you are going to correct someone, then do so in a nice way instead of in an angry manner. Furthermore, both Alexandra and Jenny begin to talk without raising their hands and waiting for their turn, and, thus, break the talking rules in the classroom. In addition, they also break the following school rule: if you talk in the classroom (or indoors in general), then use your ‘indoor-voice’, i.e., do not shout or talk loudly, but in a low voice. They are nevertheless not corrected for doing that. Instead, the teacher gives them support and is doing the same. At first sight, the teacher's efforts to uphold school or classroom rules in the everyday school life seem to be inconsistent, contradictory, and hard to interpret, especially if we try to take a student role in these daily interaction patterns. Are you allowed to talk without putting up your hand and waiting for your turn or are you not? Are you allowed to speak to another person in an angry and loud voice or are you not?

The hidden dimension of implicit rules

A deeper analysis indicates however that some of these inconsistencies can be explained in terms of implicit rules, which are unarticulated supplements or exceptions to the explicit rules. This unspoken set of rules can be interpreted as unnoticed background features of everyday life. These rules are patterns or regularities of social interactions in classroom or other school contexts, produced by teachers' corrections (often in forms of disapproving face expressions or commands) of students' behaviour in the everyday stream of activities. By analysing a large quantity of field observations parallel with a detailed study of teachers and students' everyday talk and interaction, some of these implicit and unnoticed regularities have been detected and analysed. My classroom observations in the two schools show that if

the teachers ask yes/no questions to the class, then it often appears to be permitted to collectively and in chorus answer 'yes' or 'no' without putting up their hands and waiting for their turn. A student who speaks in the classroom with the aim of correcting a rule-breaking student, but without raising the hand and waiting to be permitted by the teacher, runs a smaller risk of being rebuked by the teacher than a student who answers the teacher's question without raising his or her hand and waiting for his or her turn when other students are quiet and have raised their hands, or compared to a student who is just sitting and making loud inarticulate sounds. However, these implicit rules are not always consistent either. If the student, who is talking without first putting up his/her hand and waiting for permission to talk, keeps to the subject, then s/he runs a smaller risk of being rebuked by the teacher compared to if s/he does not keep to the subject. The following excerpt describes an incident from a circle time in one of the pre-school classes in the study. One of the students, Fredrik, has been given the task of tearing a number off the calendar, and the teacher helps him to read.

"Today, it's Monday the fourth of November", the teacher tells the class.
"And is there anyone who-, perhaps you can read about name day?" She looks at Fredrik.

"Sverker", Fredrik answers.

"Sverker", the teacher repeats.

"And I know a guy whose name is Sverker", Simon says without raising his hand and waiting for his turn.

"You do?" the teacher says and looking at Simon. "I don't".

"He works at the hospital", Simon says.

"He does?" the teacher says in a question-like tone.

(Field note, pre-school class, circle time)

Simon breaks the explicit rule of not talking in the circle time without first getting permission to talk. According to this rule, you must raise your hand and wait your turn. However, his rule transgression does not appear to be treated as a rule transgression judging by how the teacher manages the situation. On the contrary, his behaviour results in receiving the turn to talk. The secret of his success seems to be that he keeps to the subject. I have observed a lot of incidents in which students receive the turn to talk and positive attention from the teacher by talking without raising their hands and waiting for permission to talk first by keeping to the subject. At the same time, I have also observed many incidents in which the teachers ignore as well as correct or tell them off when students behave like this. A little bit later, during the same circle time, the following conversation takes place:

"Because it's a new month, we have to see which one of you has your birthday in November". The teacher looks at the notice board on the wall. "Now, let's see".

Some of the children raise their hands. One of them is Hanna.

"Evelina", Joel calls out.

"Shhh! You have to raise your hand", the teacher says. "Hanna?"

“Evelina”, Hanna answers.

“Yes, Evelina has her birthday in November. And there is actually someone else who has their birthday in November”.

(Field note, pre-school class, circle time)

Also in this excerpt a student calls out without raising his hand and at the same time keeps to the subject, but now is corrected by the teacher as a result. Therefore, it is unclear if you are allowed to call out (without raising your hand) or not when you keep to the subject. According to the explicit rule, you are not allowed to call out, no matter what you are talking about, but teachers do not appear to enforce this rule in a consistent manner. Furthermore, some students run a higher risk than others of being rebuked if they call out without raising their hand, but simultaneously, the same student can be rebuked in one situation but get a positive and confirmatory teacher response in next situation. If the teacher asks the class a question, and if you call out without raising your hand, then it seems more likely that you receive a positive and a confirmatory teacher response if no one else has raised her or his hand compared to if many students have raised their hands. In other words, there is a set of implicit rules, which are never verbalised by the teachers. Therefore, the students have to discover them by themselves in order to successfully interact in the classroom. These implicit rules appear to consist of a set of probabilities that are not consistently upheld by the teachers either.

Confusion and criticism among students

In some of the group interviews and informal conversations with the students, we discuss this phenomenon, i.e., teachers sometimes rebuke and sometimes not when students call out without raising their hands. The students tell me that they are critical of this teacher behaviour and they also express confusion. ‘Well, but then you don’t know what to do’ (boy, fifth grade). ‘No, if you don’t need to put your hand up or if you have to put your hand up’ (boy, fifth grade). Thereby, the teacher actually creates unfairness, some students reason.

Alice: It’s unfair when she [the teacher] gives them the question, though they haven’t raised their hands.

Robert: What do you mean? Why is it unfair?

Alice: That they still get the question. And those kids who have raised their hands don’t get it, although we have this rule.

(From a group interview with two girls, fifth grade)

When the students reason about this subject during the interviews, they refer to explicit rules, not to any implicit rules. In light of this, they appear to perceive the teachers’ behaviour as inconsistent, confusing, and unfair. Their difficulties in making sense of this can, in part, be explained by the fact that the implicit rules, which partly create these inconsistencies in how the teachers enforce explicit rules, remain unarticulated in everyday teacher-student interactions. Only the explicit rules receive attention and are verbalised.

Thus, inconsistencies and perceived injustices in the rules system and in the teachers' intervention behaviour result in criticism and negative attitudes from students. For example, many students are critical when teachers intervene in a way that is interpreted as unfair (e.g., being stricter with boys than with girls regarding the same rule-transgressions) or when teachers break school rules, such as being indoors during the breaks, using bad language, or chewing gum. 'The teachers should understand that too. They are the ones who have made those rules. So they should follow them too' (boy, fifth grade). These inconsistencies can, at least in part, be explained by the existence of implicit rules in terms of unarticulated supplements to explicit and official school rules.

Another source of inconsistencies among school rules are rule conflicts, i.e., when they are in conflict with each other in different situations, which creates moral dilemmas to students: which one of the conflicting rules or duties should I follow and which one should I not? One common strategy that teachers use to maintain the classroom rule of silence or low noise is, according to classroom observations, to hush. Often these reactions from the teachers have a collective and indiscriminate character, i.e., they do not have an explicit addressee and do not take into consideration the differences in the content of the conversations. The following excerpt is from a peer conversation that occurred along with other peer conversations in the classroom during a mathematics lesson.

Daniel: Well, how did you do that one?

Erik: Which one?

Daniel: Number fourteen?

Erik: I did it like this [points to something he has written in his open sum book]. I put.

Teacher: Shhhh! [It becomes silent in the classroom.]

Erik: [Turns back and starts to do his own school work again.]

(Sound-recorded field-note, mathematics lesson in the classroom, fifth grade)

By helping the fellow student, the student acts in accordance with school rules such as you should be helpful, you should take care of others, and you should be nice to each other. However, when helpful students are exposed to teachers' indiscriminate hushing, and thus being reminded of the classroom rule of silence, school rules come in conflict with each other, as in the excerpt above. On one hand, you should be pro-social, take care of and be helpful to each other. On other hand, you should comply with teachers' commands and with the classroom rule of silence. So how do students act in this situation of rule conflicts? In some cases the students stop speaking when the teachers hush, as in the excerpt above. In other cases, they continue their conversation but in an even quieter way (usually they are already talking quietly). Many students are, however, confused and critical. One common reason students mention, as a reason for not helping their classmates any more, is to avoid getting a telling-off.

Victor: Well, so that Marianne doesn't hush me up.

Robert: How does it feel when you stop helping someone?

Victor: Bad.

Robert: Why does it feel bad?

Victor: Well, it isn't right not to help.

Robin: No, you want to help, you know.

(From a group interview with three boys in fifth grade)

Sometimes students appear to make this kind of egoistic retreat, but at other times, as mentioned above, students defy the teacher's hushing and continue helping their classmate. They go behind the teacher's back, lower their voice and leer at the teacher, or they stop and wait for a while, and then go on helping again. Thus, they express a covert moral resistance to rules and power, i.e., to disobey or not comply with the teacher's request or with a specific school rule in order to follow a moral idea or imperative, and at the same time try to hide this disobedience or non-compliance from the teacher.

Jennie: I don't want Marianne telling me off.

Robert: You don't want Marianne telling you off?

Jennie: No.

Maria: It's a bit crazy.

Robert: Why is it crazy?

Maria: You should be allowed to help.

Jennie: Yeah.

Maria: It's a good thing, you know. Not bad.

Anna: If she says "shhhh" like this, if someone is helping someone else then it all goes quiet. After a while everyone starts chatting again.

Jennie: And after a while it gets louder and louder.

Anna: And then you can go on helping.

(From a group interview with three schoolgirls in fifth grade)

In interviews, students express criticism of this inconsistency and confusion about how to act in these situations. They are negative to these contradictions of teacher behaviour in relation to school rules and they express uncertainty in rule application. 'They say that you are allowed to help if you whisper or talk quietly, but then, when you do that, then you ...' one student in fifth grade for example begins to say and his fellow student continues: 'Then you get a telling off' (for a deeper description and analysis of teachers' indiscriminate hushing and its moral dilemma, see Thornberg, 2006a). A similar dilemma that some students describe taking place in the dining hall in which a rule states that the students are not allowed to get milk or other drinks for their fellow students; you are only allowed get it for yourself. They are critical of this rule and describe it as a rule conflict or moral dilemma, e.g., 'I think: aren't you allowed to be nice to another?' (boy, fifth grade). There are students who say that they still often go for milk or other drinks for each other, despite this rule. For many students, these kinds of conflicts between school rules seem to prevent them from making sense of some of the rules. Furthermore, implicit rules, supplementing these explicit rules (e.g., if you help a fellow student during deskwork, you are more likely to be exposed to teachers' indiscriminate hushing or rebukes if there is a lot of loud talking among students than if it is quiet in the classroom), remain unarticulated in the everyday interactions between students

and teachers, which further hinders students from making sense of the rules. Taking all this into account, the criticism and confusion among students about these conflicting rules are not hard to understand.

The complex and difficult role of teacher

Many teachers in the study tell me that parts of their practice of school discipline and values education are more or less unconscious, but that they at the same time hope that they mediate those values and norms they want to develop among the students (e.g., ‘Well, it’s conscious to some extent, but many things also happen unconsciously, and I hope that I mediate those values I want to’). They know that they act as role models, but also that they influence students without always thinking about it. ‘How to talk to students, what you say, how you solve conflicts, how you treat them, how you listen to them and so on. Things you just do without thinking a lot about it. And of course these things have an influence on them. You are a role model as an adult even if you do not always think about it’ (Kristina, teacher in fifth grade). Moreover, according to observations as well as interviews, the teachers typically work with school rules and misbehaviour in a reactive manner rather than in a proactive or preventive manner (e.g., ‘I actually don’t have a conscious strategy, that I will do this or that, but instead I deal with a lot of things as they happen’). Thus, things often just happen with few opportunities for deep thinking and planning strategies about rules and rules enforcement. Inconsistencies in school rules (and in teacher behaviour in relation to school rules) in everyday school life can at least be explained in part by (a) implicit school rules within the system of school rules, which attract no attention and create conflicts or inconsistencies in a lot of situations, and (b) the more or less unconscious nature of routine in these everyday interaction patterns. Teachers have to make many day-to-day decisions in classroom situations with all their complexities. Furthermore, these decisions have to be made in a split-second, i.e., there is a problem of lack of time. A main obstacle to their efforts in values education and discipline, according to many teachers, is that they have too little time.

This is also about those hundredths of a second, meaning that you actually don’t have the time to reflect upon things. This is something you just manage with a sort of gut feeling. You don’t have the time to think. So, there is no doubt that it may be different from day to day*/what you point out one day you don’t point out the next day. (Marianne, teacher in fifth grade)

One of the teachers tells me that, as a consequence of lack of time, she now and then forgets to manage conflicts that she has told the students she would do later. Some teachers also report that they sometimes experience conflicts among values in different situations, are critical of some of the rules in the school, and experience a conflict between subject teaching and morally educating the students. They also talked about temporally personal deficits, e.g., that they sometimes are tired, off balance, or have a ‘bad day’. It is very likely that all these factors can, in part, explain why teachers at times behave inconsistently regarding students’ rule transgressions. Other difficulties, according to teachers, are that they have not had enough teacher faculty discussions and reached consensus about which rules will be enforced

in which situations, teachers have different views, and the problem of not having an overview of all rules by themselves. Some teachers also argue that they missed this topic in their teacher training. 'It's strange that you don't get any help from the teacher training. I mean, we have to deal with students everyday who won't take responsibility, break rules, don't listen to adults, are violent to each other, get into conflicts, call each other names. And we get no training in these issues' (Karin, teacher in fourth and fifth grades). The teachers are trapped in a situation characterised by a lack of time, high level of complexity and overload of implicit as well as explicit rules. They have to deal with a lot of different rule transgressions among students, and, thus, make many fast decisions in the constant stream of everyday interactions with students. Moreover, at least some of the teachers perceive that they have received poor training in classroom management and school discipline as well as in values education, and thus, lack professional tools in these teacher practices.

Rule diffusion, prediction loss, and negotiation loss

Rule inconsistency and unarticulated implicit rules appear to create rule diffusion among students (and even among teachers to some degree), i.e., uncertainty and interpretation difficulties regarding which rules are in force and how they should be applied. This seems, in turn, to create a prediction loss among students. They cannot always predict what will be appropriate behaviour in particular situations, and how teachers will react to their behaviour or fellow students' behaviour. Hence, there seem to be some learning difficulties among students about rules, which probably counteract or threaten the explicit socialisation project of school rules. Furthermore, a hidden curriculum via rule inconsistency and implicit rules can be detected: the prediction loss makes students more dependent on teacher power and authority, and more vulnerable to teachers' rebukes and corrections, because they are not sure about the rule system and cannot sufficiently guide nor defend themselves by referring to it. Moreover, because of not being able to see these implicit rules, students are not given any opportunity to join teachers in an open discussion and decision-making processes for developing or revising them. They remain unarticulated and invisible for the students, and, thus, manifest a negotiation loss for students. They cannot negotiate on rules they are not aware of. Their only alternative to more or less blind obedience to inconsistent teacher power and rule application, is therefore resistance, which they now and then engage in, often behind teachers' back. Thus, this study indicates a clear connection between rule inconsistency and students' subordinate position in school. The daily social process of rule inconsistency and implicit rules in school is obviously one of the sources by which the power relation between teachers and students is manifested and maintained.

Discussion

According to earlier research (Duke, 1978; Tattum 1982; Jackson et al., 1993), teachers seem to enforce rules in an inconsistent manner, but with reference to the study of Jackson et al. (1993) a closer look shows that many of these inconsistencies are not actually instances of rules being ignored, but reflect refinements of the rules that are clearly understood by almost everyone involved. In my study, I have observed inconsistencies in how teachers maintain and apply rules too. Furthermore, I have also shown how some of these inconsistencies can

be explained by a set of implicit rules, which constitute additions to or exceptions from the explicit rules. Nevertheless, in contrast to the conclusions made by Jackson et al., in my study, many students do not understand all these inconsistencies and implicit rules. Instead they express confusion and uncertainty on issues such as why the teacher does not always correct students who call out without first raising their hands.

One possible explanation for the difference between these conclusions can be that I have actually interviewed the students, while Jackson et al. (1993) did not. With reference to my observations, these implicit rules were never verbalised and made explicit to the students. Therefore, it does not stand to reason that they would discover them and make sense of them. Besides, teachers did not always enforce these hidden rules in a consistent manner. It is reasonable to think that this would make it additionally difficult for the students to discover and make sense of them. The interview study of Tattum (1982) with 29 disruptive students indicates that they clearly did not understand those implicit rules or refinements of the explicit rules - these are even not discussed in the study. Instead they were critical of inconsistencies in rule application, which is also the case with many students in my study. The problems or difficulties that the teachers themselves report during the interviews could surely explain a part of this: teachers work under pressure, are now and then tired, off balance, or have 'a bad day', act unconsciously to some extent, have to make a lot of split-second decisions, and do not always know all the rules of the school. In the study by Duke (1978), teachers explained their inconsistent behaviour by saying that there were too many school rules for any individual to enforce effectively. Furthermore, my study shows that there are a lot of implicit rules, which create inconsistencies in rule enforcement and teacher corrections. It is likely to assume that teachers often have problems being aware of and considering these kinds of hidden and implicit rules in many situations, because of their unconscious and unarticulated routine nature. Moreover, some of the teachers report that they did not get any training in classroom management and school discipline skills during their teacher training. This can be compared to Duke's study (1978), in which inconsistent rule enforcement as well as lack of classroom management skills are some of the categories of teacher behaviour that actually create a lot of student discipline difficulties.

The rule system and teachers' interventions to maintain rules in everyday school life are complex, hard for students as well as teachers to overview, and contain inconsistencies which create some difficulties for students when trying to make meaning of rules and teachers' expectations of appropriate behaviour. By being implicit and unarticulated, hidden rules lead to many unexplained exceptions, which evoke confusion and criticism from students. Teachers and students are constructive meaning-makers (cf. Hargreaves, 1984), but the students appear to lack sufficient understanding of how to act and how teachers will act in many school situations. Shared common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the actions of the participants, and which they are able to use to guide their own behaviour, as Blumer (1969) puts it, are, at least in part, not constructed among them.

Even if the interactionist approach in ethnographic studies in everyday school and classroom life has been criticised for its tendency to obscure relationships between schooling, local culture, and local social structure (see Delamont & Atkinson, 1995), Gordon et al. (2001)

argue that the political implication and contribution has been to interpret and give a voice to those who lack power, and to describe some of the negative consequences of control in classroom and school. Furthermore, 'the notion that interactionist studies ignore power can be challenged by exploring the practices associated with its manifestation, e.g., resistance, subcultures, mundane practices of discrimination and prejudice' (Atkinson & Housley, 2003, p. 88). In this study, a voice has been given to students as the subordinated group in the power relation asymmetry between teachers and students, concerning their perspective on rule inconsistencies. However, a voice has also been given to teachers in terms of their explanations as to why they act inconsistently on rule issues. The power relation between teachers and students as it is maintained in and through their social interactions regarding rules can, in part, be understood in students' as well as teachers' interpretations of the school rules, and why these are inconsistently upheld. In particular, students' perceptions of rule diffusion and prediction loss seem to weaken their position in relation to teachers. If rules are unarticulated and invisible, then this hinders students from reflecting upon them, from verbalising arguments, formulating proposals, and openly negotiating about them. Hence, rule diffusion and prediction loss make students more dependent on teachers' guidance, commands, and corrections. Furthermore, implicit rules and hidden meanings of regulating patterns, as these are constituted in and through social interactions between teachers and students, show how power as well as resistance is manifested and maintained in everyday life in school.

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