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School children's reasoning about school rules

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Abstract

School rules are usually associated with classroom management and school discipline. However, rules also define ways of thinking about oneself and the world. Rules are guidelines for actions and for the evaluation of actions in terms of good and bad, or right and wrong, and therefore a part of moral or values education in school. This study is a part of a larger ethnographic study on values education in the everyday life of school. Here the focus is on school rules and students' reasoning about these rules. Five categories of school rules have been constructed during the analysis: (a) relational rules; (b) structuring rules; (c) protecting rules; (d) personal rules; and (e) etiquette rules. The findings show that the students' reasoning about rules varies across the rule categories. The perception of reasonable meaning behind a rule seems to be - not surprisingly - significant to students' acceptance of the rule. According to the students, relational rules are the most important in school. Students also value protecting and structuring rules as important because of the meaning giving to them. Etiquette rules are valued as the least important or even unnecessary by the students.

In order to coordinate, regulate and organise the individuals and their activities in school, classroom rules and other school rules are constructed and upheld by an ongoing social process. They are parts of the daily life of school in Sweden (e.g. Johansson and Johansson 2003; Evaldsson 2005; Thornberg 2006b) as well as in other countries (e.g. Jackson 1968; Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen 1993; Brint, Contreras, and Matthews 2001). School rules are here defined as prescriptions, legitimised by teachers, about how to behave in school situations, standards by which behaviour in school is judged to be appropriate, right and desirable, or inappropriate, wrong and forbidden. School rules are usually associated with classroom management and school discipline in terms of establishing and maintaining an environment conducive to learning in the classroom as well as order, non-violence, and safety in the playground, corridors, dining hall and so forth in school (see e.g. McGinnis, Frederick, and Edwards 1995; Malone and Tietjens 2000).

However, rules in school also define ways of thinking about oneself and the world (Boostrom 1991). They are guidelines for action and for evaluating action in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, and are therefore expressions of morality. According to ethnographic studies, school rules are aspects of moral influence or values education in schools (Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen 1993; Brint, Contreras, and Matthews 2001; Fenstermacher 2001; Johansson and Johansson 2003; Evaldsson 2005; Thornberg 2006a, b). Furthermore, an interview study conducted by Powney et al. (1995) indicates that to a great extent values education deals with classroom management. Teachers list good classroom behaviour or desirable behaviour as 'values'. Furthermore, some researchers also associate school rules with values or moral education (e.g. Halstead and Taylor 2000). Because school rules are an ongoing moral influence embedded in everyday life at school (e.g. Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen 1993), how students reason and make meaning from them is essential knowledge to consider in relation to research on and practice in moral education. This study is a part of a larger ethnographic study on values education in everyday life at school (Thornberg 2006b). In this article, the focus is on school rules and students' reasoning or meaning-making about these rules.

Children and their conceptions of rules

Students are not just passive receivers in their socialisation process. Children as well as adults interpret their experiences and reflect on them: some social norms or rules will be accepted while others will be questioned or doubted, or even rejected by them (Neff and Helwig 2002; Wainryb 2006). 'The active stance of individuals in relation to their social environment results in both shared and non-shared aspects of culture, both within and between individual members of society' (Neff and Helwig 2002, 1431). Children as well as adults can have different views on the meaning of social practices and of values and norms regulating these practices. They can even develop critical attitudes to different aspects of the social milieus they live in, and oppose or even try to change them (Wainryb 2006). According to Neff and Helwig (2002), it is important to consider and study how cultural practices are valued or judged by individuals as well as the concepts they use when they interpret, value or judge their social reality. Research indicates that students expect schools to have rules (e.g. Laupa and Turiel 1986; Kim 1998), and to a great degree accept and have confidence in school rules and teachers' ways of upholding them (Cullingford 1988; Sherman 1996), but at the same time students also judge school rules and teacher interventions (e.g. Weston and Turiel 1980; Elliot et al. 1986; Killen 1990; Williams 1993). They judge their teachers in terms of

worthiness and they are critical of disrespectful and unfair treatment and of inconsistencies in the school's rules system (Williams 1993; Thomson and Holland 2002; Thornberg 2006b).

In reference to Domain Theory (Turiel 1983; Nucci 2001), different forms of social knowledge develop within the children because they experience different kinds of social interactions. Children draw different inferences from these social interactions. They construct and organise them in domain-specific ways. According to Domain Theory, morality refers to conceptions of welfare, justice and rights. Morality is structured around considerations of the effects that one's actions have upon the well-being of other persons (moral domain). In contrast, social conventions are nothing more than social norms and expectations, agreed rules or conformity in social behaviour determined by the social system in which they are formed. They are based upon authority, traditions or customs (conventional domain). According to empirical findings (for a review, see Nucci 2001), children judge moral transgressions as wrong regardless of the presence or absence of rules. In contrast, they judge conventional transgressions as acceptable if there are no rules about them. Furthermore, children consider moral transgressions to be generally wrong to a greater extent than conventional transgressions. They also justify judgements of moral issues in terms of the harm or unfairness that actions might cause, while they justify judgements of social conventions in terms of norms and expectations of authority.

In addition to developing social knowledge of moral and conventional constraints of the social world, children also actively seek to make space for personal issues (Nucci 1996, 2001). 'The personal is the set of actions that the individual considers to be outside the area of justifiable social regulation, subject not to considerations of right and wrong but to preferences and choice' (Nucci 1996, 8). Children's construction of what is personal (personal domain) will vary as a result of the norms or rules of the group or culture in which the children operate and the degree to which they have successfully established an area of personal authority (Nucci 1996, 2001). Children are less accepting of adult constraint when it is used to control their actions in the personal sphere than they are when adult authority is applied to conventional or moral actions. As long as their behaviour in the personal sphere does not harm themselves, they think they, and not the adults, should make the decisions (e.g. Tisak and Tisak 1990; Nucci and Weber 1995; Nucci, Killen, and Smetana 1996). Research within the domain tradition also shows that students discriminate between school rules, reason about them and value them differently in accordance with moral, conventional and personal domains (e.g. Nucci 1981; Smetana and Asquith 1994). Even if Domain Theory, as formulated by Turiel (1983) and his colleagues (e.g. Nucci 2001), could be problematised in some aspects (e.g. the view of morality - see, for example, Campbell and Christopher 1996), it is relevant in this study since it describes and explains socialisation processes and children's constructions of social knowledge. Because values education is a formal part of such processes, this theory is used towards the end of the study as a theoretical tool to discuss and further analyse the results.

Method

The data for this article are derived from an ethnographic study conducted in two primary schools in Sweden, from October 2002 to May 2003 in the first school, and then from November 2003 to May 2004 in the second school. The schools are located in different areas in a medium-sized Swedish town. Two kindergarten classes (six-year-old children), two classes in Grade 2 (eight-year-old children), and two classes in Grade 5 (11-year-old

children) participated in the study. In total, 141 students and 13 teachers participated. By using participant observations and audio-recordings, values education in general and teacher-student interactive rule practice in particular were identified and documented in the 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. Qualitative group interviews with 139 students (in total, 49 groups with two-four students in each group) were conducted in order to examine how students reason and make meaning of school rules and teachers' discipline and values education practice. For example, the interviewer asked them to identify rules in school, and to describe why these exist. In relation to some or many of the rules mentioned in each group interview, students were also asked to evaluate transgressions in the absence of these rules (e.g. suppose the teacher one day says to you that 'we teachers have now decided to remove this rule about running in corridors, this rule doesn't exist anymore in the school'; and then, later in the day, you see a student running in a corridor, would you think it would be okay or not okay that s/he runs in the corridor ...how come ...). This question technique is inspired by the research tradition of Domain Theory (see Tisak and Turiel 1984; Nucci 2001), and is here used to further examine how students reason about, value and create meanings of school rules. The qualitative analysis of the fieldwork data was accomplished by procedures influenced by Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998) and by Dey's (1999) revised version of 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.

Categorisation of school rules

The analysis of the rules in the two schools and the six classrooms was based on teacher interviews as well as ethnographic observations on how rules work in the everyday school life and how teachers talk about them in their daily interactions with their students. This analysis resulted in five rule categories:

- *Relational rules* - refer to rules about how to be and how to behave in relation to other people - for example, don't bully, don't tease others, and be nice.
- *Structuring rules* - refer to rules aimed at structuring and maintaining the activities that take place in school (activity rules) or at structuring and maintaining the physical milieu - including physical property - where activities take place (milieu rules). Examples: no talking during deskwork, raise your hand if you want to speak, and be careful with school property.
- *Protecting rules* - refer to rules about safety and health - for example, don't run in corridors and be careful when you play on ice.
- *Personal rules* - refer to rules which call for self-reflection on one's own behaviour and taking personal responsibility for oneself and one's actions - for example, think before acting and do your best.
- *Etiquette rules* - refer to rules which manifest customs or traditions in school ('school etiquette') or in society ('society etiquette') about how to behave in social situations, and which are not covered in the concept of relational rules. Examples: don't wear your cap in classroom and don't swear or use bad language.

In accordance with the prototype model of categorisation (see Dey 1999), these five rule categories overlap to some degree. So for example, the banning of swearing is an etiquette rule in regard to swearing when, for example, talking about a movie or telling a story, but a

relational rule in regard to swearing at others. The classroom rule against running around in the classroom can be seen as a structuring rule (structuring and maintaining work activity and preventing students from disturbing or disrupting self or others in this activity) as well as a protecting rule (preventing students from accidents such as running into furniture or other students, slipping, and unintentionally harming self or others). By its overlapping characteristics, this category system reflects the multifarious complexity of the school rules and school life.

Students' meaning-making of school rules

According to the analysis of group interviews and informal conversations with the students, they think that many school rules are good - without these rules, the school would not be a pleasant place. However, how students make meaning of rules varies across the rule categories. Their meaning of school rules is here interpreted in the way they explain the points behind the rules and justify them. During the group interviews, school rules from four of the five rule categories were taken up during the interviews, usually by the students, and therefore further analysed in relation to students' meaning-makings: (a) relational rules, (b) structuring rules, (c) protecting rules, and (d) etiquette rules. These categories were, as mentioned earlier, based on teacher interviews as well as ethnographic observations on rules, how they function in the daily school life, and how teachers talked about the rules in their interactions with the children. Thus, these categories were constructed by an analysis before analysing the student interviews. The category of personal rules was excluded because no rules within that category were mentioned and discussed during the student group interviews.

Relational rules

Analysis of the group interviews revealed a range of relational rules identified by the children, some of which recurred in all or most interviews, whilst others were mentioned less frequently. These rules are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Relational rules identified by children.

Relational rules mentioned in all or most group interviews	Relational rules mentioned in some or a few group interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • don't fight • don't hit or kick other • don't tease • don't swear at others • don't call others names 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • don't push others down • help others up • don't laugh if someone makes a mistake • be nice to each other • don't be unfair to other • take care of other • take care of others' property • don't steal others' property • don't exclude any student who asks if he or she can join your social activity • don't bully • show others respect

All these school rules are included here in the analysis as relational rules. As for the reason why these school rules exist, students primarily and most frequently explain these rules with reasons about preventing students from harming or hurting other students, or from making other students upset, unhappy, frightened, or feeling left out.

Jonathan: You are not allowed to hit anyone.

Interviewer: You aren't? How come?

Jonathan: Because the other person can get hurt.

Alex: Yes, and becomes upset.

(From interview with three boys in second grade)

Hence, when students explain why relational rules exist in the school, they most often refer to *harming consequences* transgressions have on others. In addition, some of the students also explain these rules in terms of *promoting everyone's welfare in school* with statements such as 'because all the children should feel good' (second-grade boy) and 'everyone has to feel secure at school' (fifth-grade girl). Furthermore, some students argue that one reason for prohibiting hurting others (e.g. don't tease, hit, kick, swear at or call others names) is that these rule transgressions can lead to pay-back behaviour - that is, the other one hits, kicks, teases, or calls names back. This can in turn result in pay-back behaviour from the first person, and therefore lead to an escalating conflict or fight between the students involved. In other words, they explain these rules in terms of an *aggressive spiral*. Hence, there is, according to some of the students, a risk that transgressions of relational rules result in *retaliation consequences* - that is, negative or harmful consequences that rebound on the rule transgressor.

If for example someone starts to fight with someone else, then it's easy that the other one fights back, and then it's easy that the other one gets hurt, the boy who started it. (Second-grade boy)

Everybody who is in a fight may get hurt or harmed, some students argue. Other forms of retaliation consequences mentioned by some of them are social exclusion - that is, other children do not want to be with you or you can lose your friends if you tease, fight, name-call and so on - and a sense of guilt or bad conscience - that is, self-retaliation consequences. A few students also explain relational rules by arguing the following: rule transgressions create negative feelings, which become widespread, and result in a *negative social climate* in class or at school. 'Everyone feels sulky and so on, so, well, there will be a bad atmosphere' (fifth-grade boy). In that way the promotion of everyone's welfare in school is counteracted. In some cases, students explain the meaning of relational rules by *referring to relational values and other relational rules*. This usually means to abstract to some degree. Examples of relational values - that is, values about how social relations or interactions should be constituted - are respect, care, people's equal value, and so forth. To refer to other relational rules is often about considering a more abstract rule - for example, show others respect, be nice, or help others up. 'If you bully a person, then you don't show that person any respect' (fifth-grade girl). Thus, students spin a web of rules and values, which are associated together in their meaning-makings of relational school rules: if you break a certain rule, then you also break another rule, or violate a specific value. In sum, students primarily explain and hence

make meaning of relational rules by *relational explanations* - that is, rule transgressions have negative consequences in terms of harming others, and rule conformity has positive consequences in terms of others' welfare and secure environment, including a positive social climate in school.

Structuring rules

The structuring rules mentioned in all or in many group interviews are mainly *activity rules* - that is, rules aimed at structuring and maintaining the activities that take place in school, for lessons and circle-times in classrooms (i.e. working rules). These are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: *Structuring rules identified by children.*

Structuring rules mentioned in all or most group interviews	Structuring rules mentioned in some or a few group interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • don't talk during lessons/circle-times when teacher is talking • don't talk during lessons/circle-times when another student who the teacher has given permission to speak is talking • speak one at a time while the others are quiet • raise your hand and wait for your turn if you want to speak • don't speak or answer without permission from the teacher • don't run around in the classroom • be quiet in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raise your hand if you want to get help • stay in your place (and don't stroll around in the classroom) • don't throw paper balls or erasers or in other ways play around in the classroom

All these school rules are included in the analysis as structuring rules. As for the reason why these school rules exist, students usually explain these rules with reasons about *preventing activity from being interrupted or disrupted*, preventing students who are participating in the activity from being interrupted or disturbed, and instead *promoting the activity*, often in terms of peaceful surroundings conducive to work. According to many students, rule transgressions reduce or destroy these peaceful surroundings conducive to work.

Interviewer: Why do you have to be quiet?

Ida: Because then you get peace and quiet.

Jessica: And then you can work much better, you get a lot more done in the book, and you can think much better in your brain.

Ida: Otherwise it's just like: 'Hey, quiet, quiet! I can't spell!'

(From interview with three girls in second grade)

The most frequent explanations for the rule about not talking during lessons such as deskwork is to get peaceful surroundings conducive to work and to prevent interruptions.

Other common explanations are to provide conditions for concentration and working better. Some students also say that the rule exists so that they can hear teachers' instructions, 'so our teacher can tell us what we have to do' (second-grade boy). As regards not running around in the classroom during deskwork, many students argue that this rule exists to promote peaceful surroundings conducive to work and prevent interruptions too. Furthermore, some students point out that students running around accidentally may bump into other students so they make a mistake, bump against tables and pull down books, papers and pens on to the floor, and that the lesson cannot go on in the classroom. The work disruption also affects those who are running around. 'Then you get less time to do the school work, yeah, you need more time to work than to run around in the classroom' (fifth-grade boy). The rules about not speaking without the teacher's permission but instead raising one's hand and waiting for one's turn, not speaking all at once, not speaking when the teacher or another student, who has the teacher's permission to speak, is talking, are usually explained by the following logic: if students break these rules, then they interrupt the lesson or the circle-time and then the participants cannot hear what is being said.

Interviewer: You have to raise your hand? How come?

Rasmus: Otherwise, everyone might speak at the same time, and then you can't hear who is who, who is speaking.

Jesper: You can't hear. You can't hear the person who is speaking.

(From interview with three boys in kindergarten class)

Students also mean that these kinds of rule transgressions result in a mess and that you could neither hear the teacher nor other classmates, and no-one will be able to hear. Nor will the teacher be able to hear the students. In addition to all these *structuring explanations* (transgressions result in interrupting or disrupting ongoing activities or interrupting or hindering those who are participating in the activities), some students also use *protecting explanations* - that is, motivate or explain some structuring rules by referring to injury or risk of accidents. 'You may crash and hurt yourself or bump into others so they fall and get hurt' (fifth-grade boy). Especially in regard to the rule about not running in the classroom, some students use protecting explanations besides structuring explanations, which reflect some overlaps between the two rule categories, structuring rules and protecting rules. A few students also use *relational explanations* as motives for some structuring rules: rule transgressions have harmful consequences for others, rules contribute to everyone's welfare; or they refer to relational rules and values. 'Sometimes Philip and Lucas are sitting and talking to each other about completely different things than what we are supposed to do during the lesson. It's rather disturbing. And in that way they don't show us any respect when we are trying to work' (fifth-grade girl). If someone is sitting and talking when another student who has been called on to speak by the teacher is talking to the class, than that is 'not so fair' (girl in kindergarten class), and 'it's not so much fun for the one talking' (fifth-grade boy). Furthermore, some students also argue that transgressions of some of the structuring rules may result in *retaliation consequences* - that is, negative consequences that rebound on the rule transgressor, such as 'if you talk like this, then you will not be ready with your work in time' (second-grade girl), if you do not listen to the teacher, you do not know what to do, you do not learn anything - that is, the context 'kicks back' or retaliates as a result of these rule transgressions. All in all, students usually explain and hence make meaning of structuring rules (here activity rules) by structuring explanations. To some extent protecting

and relational explanations are used by some students, which reflect the overlapping nature of the category system.

Protecting rules

The interview data revealed a set of rules identified by the children which have been included in the analysis as protecting rules, outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Protecting rules identified by the children.

Protecting rules mentioned in all or most group interviews	Protecting rules mentioned in some or a few group interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • don't run in corridors or indoors • don't throw snowballs in the playground • don't cycle or roller-skate in the playground • don't eat candy in school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no high sticks in floor ball games during the breaks • don't drive mopeds in the playground • wear a helmet on cycle trips • don't shout indoors but use an 'inside-voice' • don't throw wooden sticks or stones in the playground

As for why these school rules exist, students usually explain these rules with reasons about *promoting health* or *preventing accidental injury*. Transgressions of these rules result in ill health or risks of accidents where the transgressor and/or others unintentionally get hurt. For example, when students explain why it is not permitted to cycle or roller-skate in the playground, they often use reasons like you can accidentally run into others, collide, accidents may occur, and you can accidentally hurt others or yourself.

Interviewer: How come it's not allowed to cycle in the playground?

Amanda: Playground? You have no control. People may come up behind you or something, and from the side, and then maybe you can run into them.

(From interview with two girls in fifth grade)

It is bad to shout indoors because people may get a pain in their ears or can get hearing damage, according to some students. The meaning behind the ban on candy is, according to students, that if you eat too much candy then you can 'get holes in your teeth' (second-grade boy). Throwing snowballs in the playground may result in injuries to the head, in the face or the eyes, especially if there happens to be ice or gravel in them. You can get hurt, harmed or in the worst case go blind, many students reason. When students explain why it is not allowed to run in corridors (or indoors) they usually give reasons like you may collide, slip, fall and get hurt, and run into an opening door. Moreover, some students also explain that some of the protecting rules exist in school because they *promote security and safety* in school. For example, if they were allowed to throw snowballs or cycle or drive mopeds in the playground, it would be unpleasant and unsafe to be on the playground. Some of the students also use *structuring explanations* as motives for some protecting rules - for example, that they also exist because students who are working should not be interrupted or disturbed. If

you shout in corridors you may disturb other students who are working in adjacent classrooms. If you shout in the classroom 'you definitely can't have a lesson' (fifth-grade girl). All in all, students usually make meaning of protecting rules with *protecting explanations* - that is, by viewing them as 'protecting' their health or preventing accidents that result in unintentional harm or pain for students, but some meaning-makings also reflects overlapping effects between rule categories.

Etiquette rules

In the interviews, the children identified a set of rules categorised as etiquette rules, listed in Table 4.

Table 4: *Etiquette rules identified by the children.*

Etiquette rules mentioned in all or most group interviews	Etiquette rule mentioned in some or a few group interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no caps in the classroom • no fingerless gloves in classroom • use decent language • don't swear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no chewing gum (including fluoride chewing gum) in school

While the students seem to make sense of the other three rule categories with ease, it appears to be more difficult for them to explain and justify, and hence make sense of, etiquette rules. These rules result in *meaning-making difficulties*. Usually, the students do not know or do not see the point of these rules. They often say that 'this is just a rule' or this is something that teachers have decided. 'Some kinds of chewing gum are actually good for your teeth, protect your teeth. So I really don't understand this' (fifth-grade girl). As a response to the question about why it is not allowed to wear caps in the classroom, the students usually say that they do not know why and it is just something their teachers have decided. 'They have never told us why / .../ They just have that rule' (fifth-grade boy).

A lot of the older students (and even some younger students) express the opinion that they *view etiquette rules as arbitrary*. They argue that transgressions of these rules do not have any negative effects. They do not interrupt, disturb or harm others. 'The thing about caps that actually don't disturb anyone and you don't start fighting because of them or anything. Why can't you wear them? I really wonder' (second-grade girl). Many of them make a distinction between swearing at others (this is actually a relational rule), which they think is wrong, and swearing when it is not aimed at others, which they think is okay. 'Well, listen to this. If you swear at someone, well, he can then be upset or angry and so on, and that's bad. But if you don't swear at anyone but you just say "Damn, what a good pass you made", then no one will be upset' (fifth-grade boy). To swear when you hurt yourself like accidentally running into a chair or other objects does not matter, they argue, because 'things have no feelings' (fifth-grade boy) and 'we don't make them upset' (fifth-grade boy). In addition to judging these rules as arbitrary, many students also *judge etiquette rules as unnecessary* or worthless.

Simon: I actually think it's a rather unnecessary rule.

Interviewer: Why?

Simon: Well, what does it matter if you have a cap on or not in the classroom?

Johan: Yeah, I wonder too.

Simon: Yes, what's the problem if - well, it's just like deciding a rule that says no long-sleeved clothes or something like that are allowed indoors.

(From interview with three boys in fifth grade)

Some of the students actually express the opinion that they feel insulted by those rules because they think they are being treated like little children. 'Well, we have to respect each other, but I don't think they respect us / .../ they treat us like little kids, as if you aren't allowed to decide these things for yourself' (fifth-grade girl). A few students make meaning of etiquette rules by *referring to manners*. 'It's about manners / .../ or something like that. How to behave. You don't have caps on indoors' (fifth-grade girl). Concerning bad language and swear words, a few students *refer to taste or opinion* - they do not like it or they think it sounds foul. Moreover, two students motivate the swearing ban by *referring to religious explanations*. A girl in fifth grade says that she is a Christian and motivates the rule by saying, 'it's like worshipping the Devil'. According to some students, etiquette rules exist because *teachers do not like the kind of behaviour* which the rules forbid - that is, referring to the tastes or opinions of the teachers. Wearing caps indoors is not allowed because 'Marianne (the teacher) doesn't like it' (fifth-grade girl).

However, many students, especially the older students, *criticise teachers' motives or reasons* for etiquette rules. First, a lot of them argue against etiquette rules by referring to their own taste and opinions. Even though teachers think swearing sounds foul, students themselves do not think so. Some of them even think swearing sounds 'cool'. Other students think it is comfortable or good-looking to wear caps indoors as well as outdoors. According to some students, their teachers have told them that caps are outdoor clothes - that is, clothes to use outdoors and not to use indoors, but they are sceptical. 'A lot of people do actually wear caps indoors - well, not in school because it's not allowed, but in other places like McDonalds and places like that' (fifth-grade boy). And another boy in the same interview group replies: 'The people working there, actually wear caps!' Many students view the distinction between indoor clothes and outdoor clothes to be arbitrary as a basis for a rule.

Eric: Yeah, what difference does it make if you wear a cap indoors? Who cares?

Interviewer: What is really the point of the rule about not wearing caps in the classroom?

Eric: I know, I know! It's an outdoor-thing. Actually, I think trousers are outdoor-clothes too. We should go around with just our underpants on in the classroom.

Philip: (laughing)

Eric: But we should. They're outdoor-things too, aren't they?

(From interview with four boys in fifth grade)

According to some students, perhaps the teachers have made up this rule against caps during lessons because they think that the students would not be able to concentrate but would just sit and play with their caps. These students then criticise the teachers for drawing hasty conclusions and of having low confidence in their students. They also view this low confidence as being treated like little children. Of course they can work with a cap on. It makes no difference, they argue. According to them, it does not bother you or classmates near you. Another explanation teachers mediate in relation to the cap ban in classroom, according to some students, is that they want to be able to see the faces of their students.

Maria: And then there is the thing with caps, and they (the teachers) say like this: 'Yes, but it's just because we want to be able to see your faces.'

Interviewer: Mm, what do you think about that then?

Maria: It's a poor answer.

Interviewer: It's a poor answer?

Maria: Yes, because-, well, why do you have to see the whole face? And, if you are going to say something, then you sometimes look at the person. And then you usually still see the whole face, though they are wearing a cap.

Samira: Yes, maybe it's a small part of the forehead that you can't see, but does it matter?

(From interview with two girls in fifth grade)

Samira, Maria, and other students do not buy the teachers' arguments that they 'want to see the whole face'. Finally, a few students seem to *try to construct own meanings* of etiquette rules - for example, in regard to the cap ban indoors a student reasons: 'But, it can - can't you get lice if you wear your cap indoors the whole time?' Another student thinks that this rule exists because students may hurt others with the hard peak of their caps if they crash into each other. A few students construe some meaning of the cap rule by relating it to the risk of getting overheated in the head or brain, which could affect their work negatively. In sum, students usually have problems with construing meaning of etiquette rules. They can not see the point of these rules. These are just rules or something the teachers have decided. Many students also view etiquette rules as arbitrary and unnecessary, and they are critical of teachers' motives or reasons for these rules. However, a few students construe meaning of these rules by referring to taste, opinion or religion, or trying to construct their own meaning of them.

The relation of meaning-making and valuing

Furthermore, the meanings students make of school rules appear to affect how they value them. The *relational rules*, according to the students, are the most important rules. Transgressions of relational rules are judged to be wrong even if these rules have been cancelled or removed.

If we pretend that Urban and Annika (their teachers) decided Interviewer: that 'as from today, we teachers have decided that we will take away this rule about not kicking others'. And then, later, when you are outdoors during the break, you see a classmate kicking another classmate on the leg or in the stomach. Do you think it would be okay or not okay if he did that?

Alma: Not okay.

Heidi: Not okay.

Interviewer: Not okay? Why not?

Alma: Because it will harm the other kid. And maybe he will fall and begin to cry a lot.

(From interview with two girls in kindergarten class)

A boy in the fifth grade says about the kids who are being bullied that 'they will still be upset, even if there was no rule'. The acts are regarded as wrong because the harmful consequences will remain even if the rules do not. Besides, some of the students also claim that the teachers would be wrong if they took away these kinds of rules from the school. Some of the students also value some of the *protecting rules* as the most important rules in school, and refer to their function of preventing students from getting hurt in accidents. According to students, both relational and protecting rules have the function of (a) protecting kids from injury and pain, and (b) making school a pleasant and safe place. Many students reason that it would be wrong to do actions that some of the protecting rules forbid, even if the rules were taken away. According to some students, all or almost all protecting rules (which were discussed during the actual group interview) are good and it would be wrong to do the things they forbid, even if the rules were gone. A girl in fifth grade says that it would not be okay to run in the corridors because 'you can still crash into others, even if the rule didn't exist anymore'. However, there are some students who think the question of right and wrong depends on the situation. 'If they just don't cycle where there are a lot of kids and like, people you know, yeah, so they don't run into others and like that, then it would be okay for me' (fifth-grade boy). If students judge that there is actually no risk of accidents or ill-health, then they appear to think that it would be okay to do the forbidden act if the rule is rescinded. Another example of that is to think that one's competence is enough to avoid risking accidents in the situation (e.g. 'I don't crash into other people. I look where I'm going'). Hence, how students value protecting rules depends on how they perceive risks and skills.

If the students perceive that the forbidden act would result in ill-health or may lead to unintentional injury (accidents), then they judge this act to be wrong independent of protecting rules. Many students think and reason in this way. However, some students do not. Those who think that it is okay to run in corridors, to cycle or skate-ride in the playground, and so forth, if the rules against these actions were removed, often use reasons such as 'because there is no rule any more' and 'because it's allowed to do it now'. Those students interpret the question about whether these actions are right or wrong as rule-dependent. Furthermore, they usually argue that the risk of accidents or ill-health is very low or non-existent (hence, they do not believe in the actual protecting explanation being linked to the actual rule). Therefore, they think it is okay to do these actions if the actual rule is taken away. Besides relational and protecting rules, many students claim that *structuring rules* are

important, since they prevent the activities in school from being interrupted or spoiled. A lot of students judge transgressions of structuring rules to be wrong even if these rules were removed.

If we say that Christina and Karin (their teachers) told the Interviewer: whole class that 'as from today, we have removed this rule about no talking in the classroom', yes, the rule doesn't exist anymore, and then, later on the same day, when you have maths, some classmates are sitting and talking about a movie they watched yesterday, do you think it would be okay or not okay that they do that?

Samira: I would not think it was okay.

Interviewer: Why not?

Samira: Because it wouldn't be peaceful and quiet so we could work then. They would interrupt others who are trying to work, and besides, they wouldn't get anything done either, and then they wouldn't learn anything.

(From interview with two girls in fifth grade)

The students point out that the actions that violate those rules interrupt work in the classroom and the children who are busy with these activities. Hence, these acts are perceived as wrong independent of existing rules. In contrast, some students think that acts that transgress these rules would be okay if the rules were removed. They give reasons like if the rule is gone, then you are allowed to do those things and then it would be fun.

Interviewer: Why you think so?

Mehdi: It's fun to talk. I would like to chat.

Interviewer: But what happens with the lesson?

Mehdi: It will be break down.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Mehdi: Good.

Interviewer: Why?

Mehdi: Maths is boring. Just sitting and working is boring. Dreadfully boring. Talking is much more fun.

(From interview with three boys in fifth grade)

The value of the activities (deskwork in the classroom, circle-time or such like) that structuring rules support and uphold competes here with how students value other activities (e.g. playing or talking with classmates). Those who think that they would gladly do what is not allowed if the rules disappeared seem to value other activities more than those initiated by teachers (e.g. circle-times and lesson work).

In contrast to relational, structural and protecting rules, *etiquette rules* are normally valued as least important or unnecessary. This could, at least in part, be explained by students' problems in making meaning of these rules. Many children say that they do not know why these rules exist. They are 'just rules' and something the teachers have decided. A lot of them think that acts that break these rules would be okay to carry out if these rules were removed. Here they use reasons like the rule is gone and you are allowed to do it now, no one would care or be hurt. Moreover, some students claim that they think it would be good if the teachers removed the etiquette rules.

Interviewer: The thing about not being allowed to wear caps? If the teachers removed this rule, would you think it would be okay or not okay then if someone wore a cap in the classroom?

Everyone: Okay [in chorus].

Interviewer: Why?

Linus: Because it wouldn't disturb anyone.

Babak: No, and you were allowed to wear your cap if they removed this rule. Then you are allowed to.

(From interview with three boys in second grade)

One girl in fifth grade says about swearing, as long as it is not directed at other people, that it would be okay to swear if the rule was removed because 'no one gets hurt'. 'I think they should remove the rule because sometimes you want to swear, say "damn" and so on', another girl in the same group replies, and then the first girl admits, 'yes, and we already swear, but not when the teachers are nearby'. A few students do not think it would be okay to swear even if the rule were cancelled because they think it sounds foul or that you should not worship the Devil.

Discussion

In accordance with Neff and Helwig (2002) and Wainryb (2006), the findings in this study confirm that children are not passive receivers in their socialisation process, but actively interpret their experiences and reflect upon them, whereby some rules will be accepted while others will be questioned or doubted, or even rejected by them. This study supports other studies showing that students expect schools to have rules and to a great degree accept and have confidence in school rules (see Laupa and Turiel 1986; Cullingford 1988; Sherman 1996; Johansson and Johansson 2003), but are also critical of some rules (see Williams 1993; Thomson and Holland 2002). Even if the rule categories developed in this study do not entirely correspond with the domains described in Domain Theory (Turiel 1983; Nucci 2001), they support as well as problematise and challenge this theory tradition. The relational rules are about preventing people from harming other people and promoting people's welfare. Hence, these rules can be related to the so-called moral domain. The results in this study show that the students view the relational rules as the most important rules among the school rules. Furthermore, they view them as rule-independent and most often explain them by pointing out that acts that break them have harmful consequences to others. If relational rules

are interpreted as moral rules in the way Domain Theory uses the concept of morality, these findings support the research within the Domain tradition: children judge moral transgressions as wrong regardless of the presence or absence of rules, and justify them in terms of harm or unfairness that any transgressions would cause (see Nucci 2001). At the same time, this study generates a more complex description of how school children make meanings of relational rules. In addition to harmful consequences of transgressions, some students claim that they exist to promote everyone's welfare and a safe school, to prevent retaliation consequences and aggressive spirals (i.e. to avoid anger and fights), to prevent a negative social climate, and to uphold relational values and other (often more abstract) relational rules.

In the light of the category system of school rules, developed and grounded in data, and how students reason about and value school rules, the conventional domain within Domain Theory could be challenged, problematised, and further developed. What Turiel (1983), Nucci (2001), and others mention as social conventions appear, in the light of the results in this study, to be a fusion of two rule categories: structuring rules and etiquette rules. With regard to the latter set of rules, most of the students reason about and value them in a way that resembles how children, according to Domain Theory research, reason about social conventions: (a) these rules are valued as less important than the relational rules; (b) acts that are regulated by them are perceived as rule-dependent; and (c) these rules are usually explained by referring to teachers'/adults' decisions (authority) or by saying that these are just rules (social norms). This could be compared to how students reason about structuring rules. Many of them think that these rules (here specified as working rules - i.e. a sort of activity rules, which are a subcategory of structuring rules) (a) are less important than relational rules, but more important than etiquette rules, which in turn are seen by most of the older students as unimportant or unnecessary; (b) acts that are regulated by them are often perceived as rule-independent; and (c) usually these rules are explained in terms of preventing interruptions of activities and of those who are participating in the activities, and also in promoting or upholding activities. If the activity that a specific structuring rule upholds is valued by students as more important than activities that compete with this activity, then the structuring rule appears to be valued as important. Many students also think that transgressions of structuring rules are wrong, even if the rules are removed, because the transgressions still interrupt or disrupt the activity, in these cases deskwork, circle-time or other school-working activities. However, some students think it would be okay to commit this transgression if structuring rules were cancelled, because they value these other activities (chatting, play, and so forth) more than school-working activities.

An essential difference between structuring rules and etiquette rules is that to a considerably greater extent the students seem to make meaning of the former rule category, while they usually have difficulties in doing that concerning the latter rule category. The structuring rules are defined by students as functional, whereas the etiquette rules are viewed as arbitrary. Moreover, many older students argue that their teachers treat them like 'little kids' as a result of the etiquette rules. Here they think that they, not the teachers, should make the decisions. In the light of Domain Theory, this can be interpreted as a domain overlap between the conventional domain and the personal domain (see Nucci 2001). Children are less accepting of adults' constraint when it is used to control their actions in the personal sphere than they are when adult authority is applied to moral or conventional actions (e.g. Tisak and Tisak 1990; Nucci and Weber 1995; Nucci, Killen, and Smetana 1996). According to this study, domain overlaps between conventional and personal domains appear to be typical concerning etiquette rules, but not in the case of structuring rules. In conclusion, it seems to be relevant

to divide or construct subcategories within the concept of 'social conventions' in terms of structuring conventions or rules and etiquette conventions or rules in relation to how the students in this study reason about and value different school rules, all of which can be defined as social conventions. Hence, the results indicate that the theoretical construction of 'conventional domain' needs to be developed and that distinctions within this domain probably would improve the theory by giving greater importance to school children's reasoning about school rules.

Several notes of caution, however, need to be sounded regarding the transferability of these findings. First, it is important to recognise that this is a qualitative study and that statistical analysis of structured and individual interviews or questionnaires should be conducted in order to test the conclusions in this study. However, one of the strengths of qualitative interviews is the opportunity to explore the depths of students' conceptions. Second, the particular examples of rules within the four rule categories limit the membership variation of the categories. Hence, it would be urgent to seek other rules within those categories to better generalise the findings. Third, the sample of participants in the study also limits the transferability, because they are sampled from only two schools in a Swedish town. Fourth, even if there are 139 students, they are interviewed in 49 groups, and hence exposed to group pressure and other social influences (see e.g. Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther 1993; Carey 1994). On the other hand, there are many examples in the interview material when students disagree or express different views. However, the risk for group processes bias will still be there. Therefore, individual interviews or questionnaires should be conducted in further research.

Moreover, the findings can be problematised in terms of overlaps between categories. This is a consequence of Dey's (1999) version of Grounded Theory regarding categorisation, which plays an important role in the analysis. With the aim of being more fair and sensitive to the multifarious complexity of the social reality of school rules and school life, the analysis uses the prototypical model instead of the classical model of categorisation. A prototype is seen as a set of typical characteristics of a category. Membership of a category is thus a question of degrees of family resemblance to a prototype rather than all members sharing the total set of common features. Therefore, overlaps between categories are possible. Hence, if categories are defined only by properties that all members share, then no member should be a better example of the category than any other member. However, research within cognitive psychology as well as linguistics has shown the prototype effect - that is, certain members of a category are judged as being more representative of the category than other members, which shows that the prediction of the classical model has failed (see Lakoff 1987). Also in Domain Theory, overlaps between different domains (moral, conventional and personal) have been found (see Nucci 2001), and thus it is faced with the same problem as the result in this study. However, by clearly making explicit which rules are sorted under which categories regarding the analysis of how children reason about them, communicative validity - that is, testing the validity of knowledge claim in a dialogue (Kvale 1995) - is met by giving the reader the possibility of judging the reasonableness of how I have sorted the school rules among the categories as a base of the analysis of the student group interviews.

Implications for practitioners

The present findings have implications for practitioners in educational settings. How students make meanings of rules seems (a) to be related to rule category, and (b) to affect how they

value rules. Hence, teachers should be more conscious and reflective concerning variation and differences among all these rules in school, and how students reason about them. To discuss and explain why different school rules exist also appears to be an important pedagogical strategy. If students do not see the point of a rule, they probably have a negative attitude towards it. Moreover, if they do not believe in the point (the rule explanation), they also probably have a negative attitude towards the rule. Furthermore, in the view of moral education and the concept of hidden curriculum, teachers have to consider the learning effects of school rules on students. An authoritarian approach rather than a democratic and a pedagogical approach to school and classroom rules can, according some theorists, undermine the goal of fostering self-discipline, critical thinking and democratic skills in children. Instead, it could lead to superficial order, blind compliance and false consensus (see Schimmel 2003). 'In such a case, moral education does not appeal to students' reasoning, feelings and participation, but to authority and power, and it reduces morality to the valuing of obedience and respect for authority' (Thornberg 2006a, 91). One way of organising classroom management and school discipline in order to conduct a democratic moral education is to listen seriously to the students' views and more significantly involve them in a deliberative decision-making process of classroom and school rules.

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