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Values education as the daily fostering of school rules

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Values education refers to pedagogical practice in which young people learn values and morality, and acquire knowledge of this domain about relating to other people, together with the ability and disposition to apply the values and rules intelligently (Aspin, 2000). In this article ‘values education’ and ‘moral education’ are used interchangeably, defined as the aspect of the educational practice which entails that moral or political values as well as norms, dispositions, and skills grounded in those values are mediated to or developing among students. Within the field of values education, two general approaches are usually described in the literature (e.g., Halstead, 1996; Solomon *et al.*, 2001). The *traditional* approach emphasises adult transmission of the morals of society through direct teaching, exhortation, and the use of rewards and punishments (cf. Durkheim, 1961). The aim is to create conforming and nice people. The *progressive* or *constructivist* approach ‘emphasizes children’s active construction of moral meaning and development of a personal commitment to principles of fairness and concern for the welfare of others through processes of social interaction and moral discourse’ (Solomon *et al.*, 2001, p. 573). Reasoning and explanations, deliberative discussion upon moral dilemmas, and participation in decisionmaking processes are viewed as typical methods in this approach (e.g., Power *et al.*, 1989). However, according to Sanger and Osguthorpe (2005) this distinction simplifies the field, and educational programmes or approaches can, for example, fall between a traditional and a constructivist approach (Narvaez, 2006). Furthermore, a third approach or position in the field of values education is discernible—a *critical* approach which claims that moral influence in school, especially in the practice of school discipline and in hidden curriculum, can be questioned and has far-reaching effects without being noticed (e.g., Giroux and Penna, 1983).

Mainstream empirical research on moral education is usually quantitative, typically focusing on (1) implementation effects of moral educational programmes or methods constructed by researchers (e.g., Narvaez, 2006; Power *et al.*, 1989; Solomon *et al.*, 2001), or (2) children’s moral development deduced from pre-conceptual theories (e.g., Nucci, 2001; Nunner-Winkler, 2007). Qualitative ethnographic studies on how values education takes place in everyday real life in schools are still rare. However, Jackson *et al.* (1993) perform an ethnographic study (but without any interview data) about the moral life of classrooms. They found that it was expressed as (1) 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 wall, and spontaneous moral comments on students’ behaviour, and (2) 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 content. However, because Jackson *et al.* (1993) did not interview the teachers, they cannot conclude what moral education and the intentions behind the moral instructions and practice were according to the teachers. Moreover, no data on students’ views and reasoning were collected. According to a teacher survey study by Powney *et al.* (1995), the teachers’ main focus in their values education was on students’ behaviour. Behaviour seemed to be so essential to these primary teachers’ understanding of values that they in fact listed certain types of behaviour as ‘values’. Nevertheless, Powney *et al.* did not observe how teachers performed values education in their real-life interactions with students. Neither did they

interview students to investigate their views of their teachers' everyday practice of values education.

In this article an overview of the findings from a research project with the aim to explore values education that takes place in day-to-day interactions between teachers and students is reported (Thornberg, 2006a, b, 2007, 2008a, b, in press a, b, in prep.). A main research question is: what are the most salient features of values education, as it is defined by teachers, and how do teachers and students reason about this practice and its content? In the discussion section the findings in this study, in addition to those of Jackson *et al.* (1993), Powney *et al.* (1995) and some other moral education literature will be related to non-values education research and literature in which some of them focus on children's culture, voices and experiences in relation to educational settings more broadly (e.g., Corsaro, 2005; Devine, 2002; Thomson and Holland, 2002) and others more specifically on discipline and school rules (Cullingford, 1988; Williams, 1993).

Theoretical framework

A broad interactionist and social constructivist perspective is used as a theoretical framework of this study. Thus identity, social life, and morality are seen as inescapably social and cultural processes, which are constructed and reconstructed in day-to-day social interactions (Atkinson and Housley, 2003). Everyday life and the knowledge, rules, values, practices, and habits it contains, are social constructions, maintained by the social interactions and the language the actors share with each other (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In line with this perspective, I have investigated how teachers interpret or define values education and make meaning of its practice, but also observed how this practice is constructed and maintained by everyday interactions between teachers and students. Furthermore, according to the new sociology of childhood, children are subject to many sets of power relations, at home and at school, and are positioned as minors with few decisionmaking rights (James *et al.*, 2001). Nevertheless, children are not just passive recipients but active agents in their socialisation process. They are both constrained by structure and active agents acting in and upon structure (Corsaro, 2005; Prout and James, 1997). Thus, in accordance with the interactionist and social constructivist perspective, how students view and make meaning of the salient content of teachers' defined values education and of teacher behaviour and interventions in relation to this content is investigated too.

Method

The study is based on ethnographic research in two Swedish primary schools. Fieldwork was conducted three to five days each school week from October 2002 to May 2003, in the first school (school K-9), and then from November 2003 to May 2004 in the second school (school K-6). Two kindergarten classes (6 year old children), two classes in grade 2 (8 year old children), and two classes in grade 5 (11 year old children) participated in the study. In sum, 141 students and thirteen teachers participated. Participant observations and audio recordings were conducted. Moreover, interviews with the teachers and group interviews with 139 students (in sum, forty-nine groups with two to four students in each group) were conducted in order to examine how teachers and students reason about the practice and the content of values education. Interview data from teachers and students as well as local school documents and observational data from classrooms and other school settings were used in the analysis. The qualitative analysis was accomplished by procedures influenced by grounded theory (e.g., Dey, 1999; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Data collection and analysis took place simultaneous and guided each other. 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.

Teachers' main focus on students' behaviour in everyday school life

Teachers' main concern in their practice of values education is to attempt to influence or teach students to be nice and kind to others, to behave well, and to understand and follow rules. They view values education as an everyday informal and ongoing process rather than as formal curriculum aspects of school subjects.

It is all those small things all the time in everyday life. All the talking to the children. We tell them that 'we don't do that', 'we speak nicely to each other'. We manage and control them the whole time and explain to them what you should do and what you shouldn't do. And praise them when they do something good. [A teacher]

According to observations as well as teacher interviews, this practice is primarily reactive and unplanned. Values education happens without the teacher thinking a lot about it. It has more or less been a taken-for-granted pattern of habits or an implicit structure in everyday life (Thornberg, 2006b). Because the main focus is on students' behaviour in everyday school life, the further analysis has been of school rules, teachers' strategies in encouraging students to comply with rules, and how students reason about this.

Rules for school and for life

The analysis of the rules in the two schools and the six classrooms resulted in five rule categories (Thornberg, 2008a). *Relational* rules refer to rules about how to be and how to behave in relation to other people, e.g., don't fight, don't bully, show others respect, and be nice. *Structuring* rules refer to rules with the aim of structuring and maintaining the activities that take place in school or the physical milieu—including physical properties—in which the activities take place. Examples: don't interrupt classmates in their seated work, no talking during the seated work, raise your hand if you want to speak, don't all speak at the same time, and clean up. *Protecting* rules refer to rules about health and safety, e.g., don't eat candy, don't run in corridors, be careful when you play on ice, and don't cycle or roller-skate in the playground. *Personal* rules refer to rules which call for self-reflection upon one's own behaviour and taking personal responsibility for oneself and one's actions. Examples: do your best, think before you act, don't lie about your actions or throw blame on someone else. Finally, *etiquette* rules refer to rules which manifest customs or traditions in school or in society about how to behave in social situations, and which are not included in the concept of relational rules. Examples: don't wear your cap in classroom, don't swear or use bad language. According to all teachers in the study, the relational rules are valued as the most important rules to teach and to maintain in school.

The meaning of the rule system, according to the analysis (Thornberg, in press b), is to construct *order* in school and to *foster* in the students a moral sense. The rule system mediates the moral construction of *the good student* to the children, which includes *the benevolent fellow buddy* who conforms to the relational rules, and *the well behaved student* who conforms to the whole rule system. On the basis of teachers' defined values education and all the rules this practice comprises, a picture of a final goal of this values education emerges: *the good citizen* who (1) does good to others and does not harm others (2) functions well in society and lives by its law and norms, and (3) takes responsibility and does her or his

very best. However, critical thinking and the opportunity to question, critically discuss, and abolish explicit rules are not part of this picture. Instead, rules come from above, i.e., from the adults, and the children are expected to conform to them. This could be interpreted as a third moral construction embedded in the rule system—the construction of *the student lacking in moral autonomy* who cannot manage without explicit rules, which to a great extent are made by authorities.

Teacher strategies

According to the findings (Thornberg, in prep.), four main *intervention strategies* are used by teachers in their work with rules in their interaction with students. *Assertion* is the most frequent strategy and includes strategies that aim at getting others to follow a specific rule or getting a rule transgressor to stop her or his transgression without negotiating or articulating reasons for the rule. Examples: commands or orders like ‘Stop!’ ‘Take your cap off!’ or ‘Don’t do that!’, facial expressions like angry gazing, wrinkling one’s forehead, a serious-looking facial expression, etc., physical interventions like touching, seizing a person by the arm, carrying away or physically removing a person, threats, bribes, punishment, reward, and articulating the rule but without explaining or articulating reasons for the rule, like ‘Philip, you know we don’t run in the classroom,’ ‘No one is allowed to kick someone else in our school’ and ‘It’s wrong to tease.

Explanation includes strategies that attempt to get students to understand or recognise the reasons behind rules, either by direct mediation or by asking questions. Explanations are usually expressed as consequence descriptions, e.g., the teacher asks, ‘How do you think Isabella feels when you tell her that?’ and then the following conversation will describe some harming or negative consequences of the rule transgressor’s action in the actual situation. *Negotiation* refers to incidents when the teacher allows or creates some space for negotiation concerning rules in school. However, open and explicit negotiations between teachers and students about explicit rules are rare in everyday school life, and when they take place, they usually manifest the power asymmetry between teachers and students, such as temporary deviations-from-the-rule negotiations (e.g., ‘Please, can’t we stay indoors? It’s raining hard outside’) which function as asking-permission rituals. *Preparation* is the fourth main intervention strategy and refers to strategies that attempt to teach or develop rule skills among students, i.e., skills to cope (think or act) in ways that promote rule-following behaviour in different situations. An example of this is when teachers instruct students to ignore it or to not react when someone teases or calls them names.

Students’ meaning making of school rules

According to the analysis of group interviews and informal conversations with the students (Thornberg, 2008b), they think that many school rules are good—without them the school would not be a pleasant place. However, *how students make meaning of rules varies across the rule categories*. Relational rules are explained and justified by the students in terms of relational explanations. (Transgressions have negative consequences in terms of harming others; rule conformity has positive consequences in terms of the well-being of others and a secure social environment in school.) Structuring rules are usually explained and justified in terms of structuring explanations. (Transgressions result in interrupting or destroying ongoing activities or interrupting or hindering those who are participating in the activities.) Protecting rules are usually explained and justified by the students in terms of protecting explanations (preventing accidents and ill health). While the students seem to make sense of such rule

categories with ease, it appears to be more difficult for them to explain and justify, and hence make sense of, etiquette rules. Often they do not know the point of these rules. They often tell me that 'it's just a rule' or just something the teachers have thought up. (Personal rules were not discussed in the group interviews and therefore students' meaning making of these rules is not analysed.) Students sometimes reason in a way that reflects overlapping of rule categories, e.g., to explain and justify the classroom rule against shouting or the classroom rule against running with both structuring and protecting explanations at the same time.

Furthermore, *the meanings students make of the rules appear to affect how students value the rules*. The relational rules are, according to the students, the most important rules in school. They exist to prevent students from harming each other. A transgression of a relational rule is judged to be wrong even if they imagine a situation in which their teachers have cancelled the actual rule. It is judged to be wrong to harm others no matter whether the rule exists or not. Many students also value some of the protecting rules as among the most important rules in school, and refer to their function of preventing students from getting hurt by accidents. According to students, both relational and protecting rules have the function of (1) protecting from injury and pain, and (2) making school a pleasant and secure place. Apart from this, many students claim that structuring rules are important because they prevent the activities in school from being interrupted or spoiled. A lot of students would judge transgressions of protecting rules as well as of structuring rules to be wrong even if those rules were cancelled. Nevertheless, according to some students, transgressing certain protecting or structuring rules would be okay even if the rules were gone. In contrast to the other rules, etiquette rules are normally valued as least important or unnecessary. This could, at least in part, be explained by the students' problems in making meaning of these rules. In addition, students often hold a negative view of etiquette rules. Thus, *if teachers want students to accept a rule it seems to be important that students can make sense of the rule*, i.e., perceive or recognise the reasons behind the rule. Moreover, *it appears to be an important component of rule acceptance that students also believe in the rule explanations*, i.e., that the reason behind the rule is perceived as reasonable and trustworthy. Nonetheless, even if a rule is valued as positive and reasonable by the students, that is no guarantee that it will always be followed. The students verbalise a lot of justifications for not following rules, such as being angry, loss of control, loss of reflection, forgetting the rule, social influences, other personal motives overriding it, etc.

Flaws in the legitimacy of the rule system

The rule system and teachers' interventions to maintain rules in the daily life of the school are complex, hard for teachers and students to survey, and contain *inconsistencies* which create some difficulties for students when trying to make meaning of rules and teachers' expectations of appropriate behaviour. A deeper analysis indicates that some of these inconsistencies can be explained in terms of *implicit* rules, which are supplements to or exceptions to the explicit rules (e.g., if the teacher asks the class a question it often seems to be okay after a short period of silence to call out without raising your hand if no one else has raised her or his hand). However, according to the interviews, students do not seem to be especially aware of these implicit rules, but are mostly confused by the inconsistencies of explicit rules and teachers' intervention behaviour. In my observation, these implicit rules are never verbalised in teachers' and students' everyday interactions. Therefore students are not given an opportunity to join teachers in open discussion of decision-making processes for developing or revising these implicit rules. They remain unarticulated and invisible for the students and thus manifest a *negotiation loss* for them. They cannot negotiate over rules they are not aware of. Furthermore, all these inconsistencies in the rule system and in teacher

behaviour may obscure or contradict some of the values teachers intend to mediate to their students (Thornberg, 2007). In addition, some of the inconsistencies also create moral dilemmas for students, e.g., should I help my classmate (i.e., be helpful and take care of others in need) or should I be quiet (i.e., comply with the classroom rule of silence or teacher's indiscriminate hushing) during classroom seated work? (Thornberg, 2006a).

Moreover, inconsistencies and *perceived injustices* in the rule system and in teachers' intervention behaviour result in criticism and negative attitudes among students. For example, many students are critical when teachers intervene in a way that is interpreted as unfair (e.g., to be more severe on boys than girls in relation to the same rule transgressions) or when teachers break school rules, such as being indoors during break, using bad language, or chewing gum. In addition, many students, especially older students, are critical of some of the rules and some of the rule explanations delivered by teachers. Hence a lot of students reflect on and judge their teachers and their school rules in relation to fairness or justice, consistency, reasonableness, and credibility. However, their critical arguments, to judge by my observations, are never articulated in front of their teachers. Many students never or almost never express disapproval of those rules or teacher behaviours which they criticise during the interviews. Hence there is some *false acceptance* and *hidden critique* among students (Thornberg, in press a). *Obstacles to or difficulties in teachers' efforts in values education and discipline*, according to teachers themselves, are that they have too little time, sometimes experience conflicts among values in different situations, are critical of some of the rules in the school, experience a conflict between subject teaching and values education, temporary personal deficits (e.g., they are sometimes tired, off balance, or have a 'bad day'), lack of teacher faculty discussions and reaching consensus about which rules will be enforced in which situations, different views among teachers, and the problem of not having an overview of all rules by themselves. Some teachers also report that they missed this topic in their teacher training, and thus lack professional tools in the matter. It is very likely that all these factors can in part explain why teachers at times behave inconsistently regarding students' rule transgressions (Thornberg, 2007).

Discussion

A main theme in the teachers' description of their practice of values education is their efforts to influence students' behaviour in day-to-day school life, and thus to impose and uphold all kind of school rules, especially relational rules. This finding confirms other studies which indicate that school and classroom rules are an essential part of values education in schools (Jackson *et al.*, 1993; Powney *et al.*, 1995). Nevertheless, in research and the literature, school and classroom rules are usually associated with classroom management and discipline rather than values education (e.g., Cullingford, 1988; Evertson *et al.*, 2003). However, according to Boostrom (1991), '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). Inevitably, school rules have to be linked with the concept of values education, as the teachers in my study actually do. Among the findings, the rule categorisation, the moral constructions of the school rules, students' meaning making and acceptance of school rules linked with rule categories, and students' negotiation loss as a result of rule inconsistencies and implicit rules are new insights here in comparison with previous research.

Because of the dominance of assertion and the low frequency of authentic and open negotiation in everyday school life, teachers' main practice of values education can be related to the traditional approach of moral education (cf. Durkheim, 1961), and to the power

asymmetry between adults and children (James *et al.*, 2001). At the same time, in my study teachers sometime use explanation as an intervention strategy, which can be associated with a progressive or constructivist approach of moral education (Solomon *et al.*, 2001). Hence the teachers' practice appears to be a hybrid of traditional and progressive/constructive approaches to values education, but with the former predominant, i.e. traditionalism with some elements of constructivism. In addition, no elements of a critical approach (cf. Giroux and Penna, 1983) have been found in the data material. The values and practice of values education appear to be taken for granted by the teachers. The main focus on rules can also be criticised for (1) reducing values education to discipline and classroom management, and (2) diminishing the complexity of ethics. Behavioural rules, for example, can be contrasted with complex moral reasoning, the ethics of care, deliberative discussions, human and children's rights, participation in decision making, critical thinking, and so on.

In order to achieve greater sensitivity to the multifarious complexity and social reality of school rules and school life, the analysis uses a prototypical rather than classical model of categorisation (see Dey, 1999). A prototype is presented as a set of typical characteristics of a category. Membership of a category is thus a question of degree of family resemblance to the prototype rather than sharing the full set of common features. Hence overlaps between categories are possible, which explains why the five rule categories actually overlap to some degree, which in turn reflects the complexity of school rules as well as the meanings students make of them. (For a further discussion see Thornberg, 2008a.)

Even if students to a great degree accept and have confidence in school rules and teachers' way of upholding them (cf. Cullingford, 1988), the findings also show that many of them are critical of some teacher behaviours and rules, which confirms earlier studies (e.g., Devine, 2002; Thomson and Holland, 2002; Williams, 1993) and supports the view that children are not just passive recipients but active agents in the socialisation process (Corsaro, 2005; Prout and James, 1997). Furthermore, rule and teacher inconsistency and implicit rules, as these are constituted in and through social interactions between teachers and students, show how power as well as mental resistance is manifested and maintained in everyday life in school. The power play in school actually co-produces school rule-breaking behaviour and mental resistance among students and has significance for their lives in society beyond school (Lai-yee Leung and Wing-lin Lee, 2005). Hence a large part of values education appears to be left within the domain of the hidden curriculum, and thus with very little awareness and control over what values students actually learn in school.

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