

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Rebecca Raby**, *School Rules: Obedience, Discipline, and Elusive Democracy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, 332 pp., \$32.95 Paperback (978-1-4426-1041-5)

**I**n *School Rules: Obedience, Discipline, and Elusive Democracy*, Rebecca Raby challenges common-sense thinking about school regulation and implementation. The book builds from a series of qualitative research projects undertaken in one metropolitan and one semi-rural district of Southern Ontario, between 2002 and 2006. The collected data includes 76 codes of conducts, 18 focus group transcriptions, and 31 transcriptions of individual interviews with teachers and school administrators.

Raby establishes her original approach to the topic by bringing together five sets of literature dealing with distinct dimensions of school rules: classroom management, moral education, critical pedagogy, governmentality studies, and the sociology of childhood. This broad theoretical framework provides a solid base to Raby's lines of inquiry and analysis, which are concerned with social justice and participatory democracy in school settings.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first introduces the reader to the topic, summarizes the research and its methodology, and concisely overviews the key questions and themes addressed in the book.

Chapter Two, "No hats!' and Other Conventional Rules", shows that conventional rules are not as straightforward, logical and consistent as they are commonly believed to be. For instance, the 'no hats' rule (during the national anthem, in classrooms and at dinner tables) is embedded in a patriarchal catholic tradition which requires subjects' obedience of the state and social organizations. Similarly, gang-related ban policies, which often ban bandanas, are difficult to implement and enforce, since the definition of a gang-related style is subjective and can be disputed. Further, clothing rules are not devoid of values: they are embedded in gender- and class-based definitions of taste and appropriate behaviour. The way in which class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality intersect with regard to school codes of conduct is attentively developed in chapters six and seven: 'The Contexts of Class, Ethnicity, and Racism' and 'Regulating Sexualized and Gendered Bodies'.

Chapter Three, 'Big Rules and Big Consequences' focusses on taken-for-granted safety rules such as 'no fighting', 'no carrying guns', and 'no drug possession'. In this section, Raby highlights the role context plays in shaping how 'big rules' are understood by students and school staff. Although the young research participants are more likely to justify the disobedience of 'minor rules', which they usually treat as given, some of them argue that rule-breaking of safety regulations may sometimes be deemed a legitimate behavior (e.g.: breaking the 'no fighting' rule for self-defense). Further, Raby's findings indicate that in their enforcement, some 'minor rules' are likely to be elevated to the status of 'big rules'. For example, repeat offenses to dress and punctuality regulations can result in a similar consequence to the breaking of safety regulations: suspension. This indicates, according to Raby, that big rules 'are not always understood in the same way by all, despite the serious consequences of breaking them' (73). Given that suspension is used disproportionately against male students and marginalized youths, Raby calls for educators and policy-makers to 'grapple with the mixed and sometimes clashing responsibilities of the school' when considering the creation and implementation of safety rules (73).

Chapter Four, 'The Rules and Their Underlying Beliefs', explores staff members' and school administrators' underlying beliefs about and goals for school rules through discipline. Interestingly, discussions with teachers and school administrators about the purpose of rules and the reasons why students should follow them disturb the clear-cut distinctions often offered in the literature on discipline and student governance. In this literature, discipline is envisioned as something to master, an order to ensure learning, an independent good, and/or a cultivated self-discipline (see 76). From the interviews conducted with school staff, Raby stresses a *future-oriented* approach which sees students as adults in the making and treats them as future workers. Such a view, reminds Raby, reflects a cultural conception of age and adolescence that is embedded in a deficit model of human development.

Based on empirical data, Raby contends there is 'a large gap between student and staff views, quite likely exacerbating conflicts between student and staff over rule infraction themselves, conflicts which then foster frustration for everyone in the school' (48). Chapter Five, 'Consistency and Context', provides some explanation for this situation, addressing the issue of consistency with regards to rule implementation—one of the most important concerns raised by both students and staff. If staff is concerned with consistency in the implementation of school rules, students' sense of fairness is connected to an implementation of rules that is sensitive to context, thus flexible. Raby argues that these differ-

ing perspectives cause tensions in their respective understandings 'about which rules are important to enforce across all contexts and which can and should be addressed more flexibly' (133). Furthermore, Raby's analysis sketches with great detail the inherent tensions and contradictions staff and teachers face in their daily routines within school organizations. On one hand, consistency is necessary to ensure the meaningfulness of school rules and to avoid favouritism. On the other hand, flexibility is sometimes necessary to 'fairly recognize the different, unequal circumstances of students' lives' (133).

Chapter Eight, 'Acceptance and Challenge', addresses the issue of rule-breaking from a critical, post-structural perspective. Rather than blaming young people for this common behaviour among students, Raby reframes the ongoing conflict over rules through the lenses of resistance and negotiation. This chapter illuminates the complex and diverse ways in which young people engage with school rules, as well as their frustration at (usually) being unable to change the rules they feel are arbitrary, pointless or unfair. In the following chapter, 'Students Having a Say', Raby discusses the sense of disenfranchisement that may result from top-down decision making about school rules. She goes on to suggest that a human rights approach could foster democratized decision-making processes that would be more inclusive of young peoples' voices. This approach, she argues, would be more effective and more coherent with the notion of youth citizenship.

*School Rules* is an important contribution to the sociology of education as well as to the public conversation about school governance, student rights, and democracy. The author successfully destabilizes common-sense assumptions as she debunks, in one chapter to the next, the belief that school rules are a mere reflection of neutral values and the embodiment of effective school management. The inherent political nature of school rules, Raby argues brilliantly, runs the risk of implementing authoritarianism rather than democracy, if they are not critically assessed, discussed and debated within and outside of school settings. Chapter Ten, 'Conclusion and Practical Implications', concludes with an insightful discussion about 'possibilities for doing things differently (...) [in order to] develop better lines of communication between all those involved in the school communities' (251). This leaves readers not only with thoughtful insights, but with practical suggestions for improving school communities and young people's well-being as citizens in the present.

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