

School rules: Obedience, discipline and elusive democracy by Rebecca Raby
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Rebecca Raby is interested in young people's experiences, their perceptions about adolescence, gender, race, class and sexuality. Her new book on school rules provides a critical investigation of contemporary codes of conduct and rules, their creation and enforcement, and staff and students' understanding of these rules. The author focuses primarily on the rules themselves rather than on the issues related to classroom management and school administration. She argues that school rules are not simply common sense; rather they reflect and create cultural, developmental, gendered, racialized and class-based beliefs about human nature, adolescents, and the purpose of schooling. In her analysis of creation and enforcement of school rules and resistance to them, Raby draws on diverse theoretical perspectives including critical pedagogy, governmentality studies, concepts of cultural and social capital, and sociology of childhood. By challenging assumptions about rules, authority, control and governance, she invites readers to examine their own ideas about adolescence, school discipline, and student behavior and resistance.

She discusses school rules by relying on existing research and employing original data from numerous Canadian school districts. More specifically, Raby has examined codes of conduct and provincial education policies, interviewed teachers and administrators, and conducted focus groups with secondary students from two Ontario school districts. Considering that student voices are seldom heard in the creation and implementation of school rules, this book gives readers an opportunity to learn how school rules and codes of conducts are perceived by students and what impact they have on their daily life.

The book is divided into ten chapters addressing the issues of obedience, authority, discipline and students' participatory rights. The author starts her discussion with the in-depth examination of codes of conduct from seventy Ontario schools, pointing out a number of common features found in codes of conduct across North America. Codes of conduct typically include academic stipulations, safety concerns, dress codes and behavior policies. School rules contain "big" and "minor" rules. While big rules that ensure the safety of students and staff are considered 'givens' by most students; it is the minor rules, especially those related to etiquette, dress codes, and obedience, that are often criticized and challenged by students. Raby analyzes the contested nature of the rules themselves, reminding us that certain rules are not value neutral; they reflect the dominant Western, middle class ideas about 'proper' behavior and morals. These ideas are explicitly articulated in the Ontario Education Act (1990) which requires teachers "to inculcate by precept and example respect for religion and the principles of Judaeo-Christian morality and the highest regard for truth, justice, loyalty, love of country, humanity, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, purity, temperance and all other virtues."

In chapters five and six, using students' and staff comments, Raby illustrates the complexity arising from a seemingly simple idea of consistent enforcement of school rules. She identifies a significant gap between the views of staff, who often idealize and attempt to enact consistency of rule enforcement, and students, who recognize and value flexibility of their application. By drawing on the concept of cultural capital and focusing on class and ethnic differences, Raby describes how school rules and their application produce discrimination and reproduce inequality. She concludes that staff understand students' rule breaking without

considering the context; “by focusing on students’ obedience and disconnecting discipline issue from those of pedagogy, discrimination and structure schools fail to consider the underlying institutional problems and conflicts that affect student behavior” (p.106).

In chapter seven, Raby focuses on how school rules and their enforcement produce and manage gender and sexuality. She argues that although certain rules pertain to gender and sexuality (e.g., ‘no revealing clothes’; ‘no sexual harassment’) these issues remain underexamined and are particularly difficult for staff to deal with. In her critique of school rules and embedded cultural, class, gender and race biases, Raby recognizes the complexities of the school system and the responsibilities of staff who must follow provincial and school board direction, enforce the rules and “maintain, under the direction of the principal, proper order and discipline” (Government of Ontario, 1990).

In the final chapters of her book, Raby advocates for genuine student involvement and democratic participation in schools. She acknowledges that “there is little room within school and staff philosophies of rules, or broader understanding of adolescents, to recognize that young people can and should have formal venues to challenge school rules, or that they may have legitimate reasons to do so” (p. 105). Throughout her book, the author describes how school rules foster compliance through punishment and obedience without student input into the matters that concern them the most.

This issue of democratic practice in schools is often discussed in Canadian literature on school law and teachers’ responsibilities. A recurring question is: How can we teach young people to respect the law and rights of others, and to participate in democratic processes, when our schools do not follow these same principles? As Young, Levin, and Wallin (2007) contend “if students are treated arbitrary, subjected to rules they neither support nor understand, and denied avenues for the peaceful expression of their opinions, then surely there is something educationally wrong” (p. 138). Raby suggests that to change the situation and foster critical thinking and young people’s democratic skills, educators need to reflect on the hidden curricula behind rule enforcement, take students’ views into account, and openly discuss moral dilemmas with students. She includes three sets of recommendations on how to improve school climate, re-evaluate the rule-making process and apply the rules. She stresses the importance of caring about students, listening to their concerns and seeking positive options for dealing with problem behavior.

This book is successful in engaging the reader in broader questions about human nature and purposes of education. It helps us think about theory and practice in deeply critical ways that attend to personal and professional ethics and ideas of democracy and social justice. In the past, educators and philosophers questioned the purpose of education and authority. J. S. Mill argued that state education was an instrument for moulding people to be exactly like one another. “And as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the dominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, an aristocracy, or a majority of the existing generation; in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body.” These arguments still resonate with educators today. At the time of growing concerns about school safety triggered by tragic incidents in North America and Europe, teachers and administrators are in a difficult position to find a balance between appropriate school discipline and students’ democratic rights.

School Rules. Obedience, Discipline and Elusive Democracy is intended for pre-service and in-service teachers as well as administrators and policy makers. Raby hopes to reinforce and/or challenge beliefs and assumptions about students, discipline and the teacher’s role. While

some of the theoretical perspectives used in this analysis may be difficult to follow for those without some prior knowledge, her book raises many questions that ought to be addressed in teacher education programs. Faculties of education could use this inquiry in courses dealing with classroom management and ethics and the teaching profession. In addition, this book should become an essential reading for policy makers at the school board and provincial levels. This book presents a serious introduction to a complex subject and would make a useful addition to a professional book collection. It is engaging, well-referenced and has an extensive and helpful index.

References

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