The Nature and Functions of Classroom Rules*

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at classroom rules—what they are and how they work. It begins by proposing that classroom rules are not the merely instrumental tools of management they are often taken to be, but rather that they are structures of meaning used by teachers and students to make sense of the world. Two functions of classroom rules are examined: how they embody a way of life and how they shape instruction and subject matter. As students embrace rules (or reject them, for that matter), they engage not only in short-term behaviors but also in far-reaching ways of thinking about themselves and the world. The article also examines how teachers' beliefs about the nature and functions of rules bear on the quality of classroom life. The belief that rules are merely instrumental separates them from the "real" business of the classroom and undercuts the teacher's ability to reflect on practice. A vision of rules that separates them, as mere means, from ends separates them also from meaning. Students can do (or not do) their work without ever seeing how it touches them. An alternative is to seek out the meaning of rules and to rely on, rather than mistrust them.

RULES, DISCIPLINE, AND INSTRUCTION

My account of classroom rules begins with a street scene. A group of eight three-year-olds were walking down the sidewalk with two adults. The adults were holding a rope—one at the front, one at the back—along which were four pairs of loops at intervals. Each child was clinging with a little fist to one of the loops. As they walked, their eyes moved in all directions, and they talked and laughed. They hardly seemed to be thinking about hanging onto the rope, but their fingers held tight.

This scene provides a metaphor for one way of thinking about rules and how they work. If a rule could be seen, it would look like that rope with its loops—not a harness, nor a leash, but something that must be

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held. This metaphor expresses the view of classroom rules I seek to limn in this article.

In the first section I will begin by explaining what sort of phenomena I have in mind when I talk about classroom rules. Then I will look at what my metaphor for rules implies—namely, that they are structures of meaning we use to make sense of the world around us—and I will consider why this view of rules is not the typical view in educational thinking. In the following three sections, I will discuss two specific functions of classroom rules—embodying a way of life, and shaping instruction and subject matter—and will look at how teachers' beliefs about the nature and functions of rules bear on the quality of classroom life.

By “rules” I mean the do's and don'ts of classroom life—all those guidelines for action and for the evaluation of action that the teacher expresses or implies through word or deed. These do's and don'ts may take many forms. As Collett (1977) says there are various kinds of rules. . . . Not only are there legal rules, moral and religious rules, linguistic rules, social norms, rules of etiquette, rules of games and rules of institutions, but there are also recipes, instructions, formulae, canons, principles and maxims (p. 9).

All of these kinds of rule-like phenomena (and many more, such as advice, commands, and mnemonic rhymes) can be found in classrooms and are of potential interest to this paper. The paper is not concerned, however, with every sort of constraint in the classroom. Instead, it focuses solely on those rules that the teacher establishes through word or deed. I am concerned with what might be called the “official” rules of the classroom, and it is this focus that distinguishes my work from the work of Marsh, Rosser, and Harré (1978). They, too, believe that rules are meaningful, but while their interest “lies in the principles employed by the pupils themselves to fit the actions they describe into a meaningful framework” (p. 30), mine lies in the rules employed by the teacher. The focus of the paper is limited also by my concern with what might be called “successful” classrooms, those in which rules are for the most part followed. I am not dealing with the clashes that arise from competing rule systems, but rather with how a teacher's rules express a way of seeing the world. Finally, the focus of the article may also be limited by my having spent far more time in elementary than in secondary classrooms. I am writing mainly with young children in mind, and my examples reflect that.

Classroom rules may be roughly classified into four categories (similar to the categories of rules suggested by Black [1962]). There are (a) rules about nonacademic procedures (“Stay in your seat while you eat lunch”); (b) rules about how to do classroom work (“Read the directions carefully before you begin”); (c) rules about relationships with others in the classroom (“Don’t be rude”); and (d) rules embedded in the subject matter (“Begin your sentences with a capital letter”).

This classification is, of course, imperfect and tends to obscure the realization that rules usually cannot be neatly categorized. For example,
when we hear a teacher say, “Don’t raise your hand while someone is talking,” are we witnessing a rule about a nonacademic procedure, about how to do work, or about relations with other people? Such a question does not show that these categories are futile; rather, it reminds us that much is left unanswered by an analysis of the language of rules and that, to understand rules, we must examine them in practice.

It is in the context of everyday life that the significance of rules is revealed. Rules—all sorts of them—structure how we see the world and our place in it. This view of rules is in keeping with what Douglas (1973) calls “a recognizable epistemological viewpoint, working through European literature, philosophy, linguistics, and sociology.” According to this viewpoint, societies construct reality by making meaning, and “there can be no meaning without rules” (p. 9). Douglas gives voice to this vision of rules in her collection of forty-five readings, showing that the construction of meaning is a local affair. In societies from the Nuer of northeast Africa in the 1930s to the “headworld of San Francisco” in the 1960s, rules about such matters as where the cattle sleep or which sorts of shoes are hip are revealed to be meaningful fixed points in a social cosmography.

By locating events in a system of belief, rules define reality. Douglas compares the process to the law, which is continually involved in defining such realities as marriage, life, death, indecency. “At less public and weighty levels,” she says, “the same assessment and drawing of boundaries proceeds through the whole social process” (p. 113).

The same line of thinking can be found in Geertz (1983), who focuses on the theme of “the constructional role of law.” His essay on “legal sensibility” in three cultures finds that “notions about the interconnections of norms and happenings” truly are notions, that is, meanings. Events do not come marked with the labels of predetermined categories. Law construes as much as regulates; it creates society as much as reflects it. For Geertz, “an instrumental view of law . . . will simply not do.” What will do is a shift toward meaning rather than machinery, toward thinking about law as a “mode of giving particular sense to particular things in particular places” (pp. 231–232).

The concept of law as one sense-making social process among many provides a way for thinking about classroom rules. Whether or not they are instances of law [Gordon (1983) argues that the classroom is a “pre-legal” society], they nevertheless represent local efforts to put local events in their proper place. In them is inscribed the “moral bias” (Douglas 1973) of a particular construction of reality.

This expansive view of the significance and meaning of rules is not the usual way that educational researchers and practitioners think about classroom rules. In fact, this way of thinking questions a widely held assumption about what teachers do. The assumption is concisely phrased in Finkelstein’s study of nineteenth-century teaching practice, Governing the Young, where she says, “Teacher behavior can be studied by focusing on the two important functions which the teacher performed: instructing and disciplining” (p. 37). This splitting of the teacher’s func-
tion is taken for granted, even though, as Finkelstein shows, the division has not always been seen, and the categories are not neatly divided. For many nineteenth-century teachers, “The two—learning and deport-ment—were seen as coexistent, concomitant forces, so dependent one on the other as to be almost undifferentiated.” And when the two are differentiated, it is not according to our twentieth-century views:... “teachers in the period under discussion seemed to regard the problem of motivation as a disciplinary rather than an instructional task” (p. 96).

Despite the fluidity of the categories of instruction and discipline, teaching continues to be seen as consisting of those two separate purposes. Delamont (1976) says that

much teacher behavior is in accordance with the role expectancies held for them by their pupils and society at large. They attempt to control their classes and then to teach them something (p. 99).

The belief that teaching is a two-phase process encourages educational theorists and practitioners to write about classroom rules—the teacher’s rules—almost exclusively as a feature of the first phase, a feature of a teacher’s management technique, as part of the program for discipline and deportment, as an instrumental mechanism. This view is most often and most clearly expressed in articles and books written to assist teachers and administrators in their everyday practice (Reis 1988, Lescault 1988, Curwin and Mendler 1988). In this literature, rules are strictly instrumental and their content largely irrelevant. All that really matters is that students toe some mark. Their cooperation will result in discipline, in the orderliness of correct deportment, after which, presumably, instructing can begin.

The reasoning behind this two-stage process is outlined by Mary Hay-wood Metz:

If academic learning is to occur, students must either already have or else be taught a minimal attachment to acceptable social behavior. They must learn to be reasonably still and quiet, to wait their turn, to be at least somewhat polite to one another and the teacher, and so on. If children do not learn these basic elements of courtesy and social responsibility, the result will be disorder in the classroom sufficient seriously to interfere with academic education (p. 42).

According to this line of thinking, the importance of rules has to do with how they help teachers manage classrooms and maintain discipline. The place of rules in instruction is incidental and their influence on learning indirect. In fact, an important concern of some educational theorists is that too much emphasis on rules can create too orderly an environment and can undermine learning. Gaddy (1988) writes that “many approaches to external order that consist of the heavy-handed application of rules and regulations may foster a superficial order that is detrimental to the ultimate aim of self-discipline” (p. 513).

Brophy and Everston (1976) argue that the successful teachers they observed avoided having too many rules (pp. 58–59). And at a different unit of analysis, Cusick, Martin, and Palonsky (1976) attributed the success of one of the schools they observed to “a number of organizational
characteristics,” one of which was the students’ freedom from rules, their “large measure of freedom to come and go as they pleased” (p. 11). That is, students were better off because they were freed from bureaucratic constraints. Fewer rules made a healthier school.

The same mistrust of rules is voiced by Grant (1988), who stresses the legalistic nature of rules and complains that “the moral order of the typical public school” is notable for its “reliance on written rules.” He condemns the “bureaucratic legalism” that is the “primary expression of the moral order of the school.” He feels that having too many rules hamstrings the efforts of students to learn and teachers to teach (pp. 182–183).

This mistrust of rules is highlighted in Render, Padilla, and Krank’s (1989) criticisms of Canter’s “assertive discipline.” The dangers in Canter’s approach, they charge, lie in an unthinking regimentation that eliminates choice. “The goal of education in a democracy should be to produce self-disciplined, responsible persons who never blindly comply with the demands of an authority figure” (p. 627). While this objection to Canter’s aims suggests that rules may have far-reaching effects on how we think and act, it does not allow that rules have intrinsic, substantive meaning. The objection does not criticize what Canter’s rules say (because Canter himself is not concerned with content), but rather criticizes the act of obedience. Nor does the objection dispute Canter’s notions of what rules are and of how they work. Ironically, Render, Padilla and Krank seem to agree with Canter that rules are instrumental, highly effective tools for establishing what might be called (depending on one’s point of view) either “order” or “regimentation.”

Packed into all of this talk about rules are three propositions that build on one another: first, that rules are instrumental and that their importance lies in how they enable a teacher to manage a classroom and to maintain discipline; second, that the relationship of rules to instruction and learning depends entirely on the contribution of rules to orderliness in the classroom; and finally, that too much attention to rules undermines the instructional aims of schooling by inhibiting the development of self-discipline. These statements point to a paradox of schooling that Metz sums up like this:

Public schools have a paradox at their very heart. They exist to educate children, but they must also keep order. Unless the children themselves are independently dedicated to both these goals, the school will find that arrangements helpful for one may subvert the other (p. 243).

Metz’s paradox elaborates on the assumption that instructing and disciplining are separate functions of teaching by finding that the functions may, in some schools, actually be contradictory. At the heart of this line of thinking is an image of rules quite different from the one with which I began. Seeing a contradiction between instructing and disciplining puts rules in an educationally ambiguous position and can lead to seeing a rule precisely as a leash that yanks a student back from the fullest play of curiosity.
To show why I have come to a different view, I will deal in the following sections with two functions of rules—how they embody a way of life and how they help to shape instruction and subject matter—and will look at how teachers' visions of rules can either promote conviction in the work of teaching or encourage an atmosphere of mechanical busyness.

**RULES AND A WAY OF LIFE**

In this section I will argue that the instrumental view of rules obscures their function as the embodiment of a way of life in the classroom. In addition, I will try to show that as students embrace rules, they take part not only in short-term behaviors but also in far-reaching ways of thinking about themselves and the world.

To say that rules are the means of creating an orderly environment for learning sounds so reasonable that it might seem that only someone desperate to pick a fight would argue the point. But consider what is being said. Rules are a "means" rather than an "end," and as such, they are not desirable for their own sake. In fact, rules are often made out to be a somewhat unsavory means, almost a necessary evil, to be taken only for medicinal purposes, only so far as order is threatened, so that in the best of all possible classrooms, rules are unnecessary. Even Canter (1989), who would like to see "take charge" teachers issuing clearly stated rules with strictly enforced punishments, says that he advocates rules only reluctantly. "In an ideal world," he says, "there would be no need for classroom rules or consequences" (p. 636).

What image of rules is held by a person who says that rules are the appropriate treatment for a case of deficient order? What seems to be in mind is that rules are neutral or void of content, so that they function primarily by causing people to coordinate their activity. For example, a second-grade teacher whose children eat in the classroom has them eat at their desks; that is the rule. But he could just as easily have them eat on the rug. A similar example of the apparent arbitrariness in the content of rules could be drawn from rules for leaving the classroom to go to the restroom. In the same second-grade classroom, the children sign out on the chalkboard; in a third-grade classroom room, they take a pass. What these rules specify about eating lunch and about going to the restroom is less important than the fact that eating lunch and going to the restroom are rule-governed activities. At least, so the argument would seem to go. If classroom rules are simply instruments for creating orderliness, tools to be used as needed, ways of causing individuals to function harmoniously, then the harmony is more important than the specifics of the procedures.

There are a number of objections to this line of thinking, beginning with the implication that rules are generally arbitrary (not in the sense that they are capricious, but in the sense that they express a choice that could just as easily prescribe one way of proceeding as another).
testimony of a third-grade teacher about the origin of her classroom rules suggests that she takes their content seriously. In her room, three of the rules are posted over the chalkboard: “Follow directions,” “Be quiet, work quietly,” and “Respect others and property.” She said of them,

They come from about three years ago when both my partner [the other third-grade teacher at the school] and I really worked with our third graders about rules. We took the rules that they’d set up . . . and put them into categories. Then this year we decided that we weren’t going to go through that process of having the class establish their own rules. Because we both felt that we’d taught long enough . . . that we knew which basic rules we needed to operate with . . . And we chose to present the rules to the children as what we saw as necessities in order to have a successful year in third grade.

For this teacher, classroom rules are prefigured by her (and her partner’s) skill and experience. Her knowledge of how to “operate” is linked to her notions of the aims of schooling—the features that make up a “successful year”—and given these practices and expectations, certain rules must follow. These rules are an aspect of the practice and the embodiment of the expectations. They are part of a pattern that, if we were to see it fully, we might call a tradition or a way of life.

One afternoon, the teacher was working with a group of students on a math lesson. She and the students were all sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, and she was leading the students step-by-step through the lesson. The point of the lesson was to discover the relationships of fractions with different denominators. The children had a worksheet with a number of empty rectangles. For each pair of rectangles, they were to shade in two fractional proportions, so that the first rectangle might be two-thirds shaded and the second might be six-ninths shaded. The teacher wanted the students to divide and shade their rectangles in a way that would make the equivalency as clear as possible, but one boy insisted on shading the top of one rectangle and the bottom of the other, or dividing one horizontally and the other vertically. Finally, the teacher exploded, complaining, “If you can’t follow directions, then I can’t work with you,” and she sent him to his seat.

This scene suggests how classroom rules transcend mere orderliness and sketch an outline of a meaningful order in the world. Having spent a year and a half with this teacher, I am moved to take seriously what she says. If the boy could not follow directions, she literally could not work with him—at least, not at that time, not in that setting. It was not a question of his being annoying or disorderly. It was a question of him virtually removing himself from the life of the classroom, so that the teacher felt obliged to recognize that he had gone beyond the pale.3

Living as we do in a society that values freedom, individuality, and personal responsibility, we are conditioned to think of following directions as a mindless, toadying approach to life, and it is hard to appreciate what is at issue in this third-grade teacher’s expulsion of a student from the math group. But our conditioning is based on the assumption that a rule like “Follow directions” is unimportant in itself, that it is only an
instrument for establishing orderliness, whereas the claim I am making is that the rule constitutes life in the classroom and imposes a meaningful order. The rule is a thread in the fabric of classroom life; pull out the thread and the fabric falls apart.

An unspoken awareness of rules holding classroom life together lies beneath the surface of many of the things that teachers commonly say. They bolster a rule like “No talking” by saying, for instance, to a class getting ready for a field trip: “We can’t board the bus if you’re talking.” On the face of it, such a remark is cryptic, if not nonsensical. It seems to be making a pragmatic appeal; if you want this worthwhile event to take place, then you have to do or refrain from doing such-and-so. But the connection between the if and the then is forced; it is possible to board the bus and talk at the same time.

Beneath the surface of such cryptic remarks is the faith of teachers that their students share their tradition, their sense of how things ought to be done. If students share the teacher’s vision of school life, which includes sharing the desire to preserve it, then the linking of a rule and an activity is not a matter of uninvolved pragmatism; it is not like the instructions for assembling a bicycle. Rather, it is an appeal from within a way of life to preserve the tradition.

If the pattern of life in the classroom depends on the rules being followed, then those who break the rules pose not just an inconvenience, but an affront. The depth of the significance of breaking rules was suggested by a fourth-grade teacher talking in an interview about an occasion in her room when she had, in her words, “gotten excessively angry.” She had, she said, “gotten to a point where I knew what was going on, but I couldn’t pull myself back from it.” Faced with misbehavior, she reacted angrily rather than thoughtfully. What caused this reaction? “Too much talking out of turn.” One child would talk out of turn, and she would quiet that child and then another would begin. But the talking of the children only partially explains the teacher’s reaction. It is the talking that she objects to—it is the talking that disrupts the flow of the class—but what arouses her anger is that “nobody got the message.” She told them to stop talking, but a “number of children did not get the message.” And what this failure to communicate indicates to the teacher is that there is a “breakdown in the relationship, in our relationship.” Classroom rules such as “No talking” and “Follow directions” express a relationship that is part of a way of life.

Now it may be argued that rules like “Sign out on the chalkboard before you go to the restroom” are fundamentally different from “more significant” rules like “No talking” and “Follow directions.” The former could be classified with rules about nonacademic procedures and the latter with rules about how to do classwork. But differences in the content of rules do not offer a reason for supposing differences in function. The belief that rules are only a matter of discipline and deportment rests on a feeling about how rules are used, not about what they say. To someone with a narrow enough vision, even the rule “Love your neighbor” can be wielded as a tool for maintaining orderliness.
The catch is that such an effort is doomed, because, regardless of how rules are viewed, their influence cannot be limited to orderliness. Moving children around a classroom is not the same as moving chairs. No amount of commanding, importuning, bidding, persuading, threatening, requesting, or appealing will cause a chair to move. And because a chair does not choose to move, it draws no conclusions about what being moved means. Rules are not chains that drag children about or rough hands that pick them up and move them. Rules do not embrace us; we embrace them. We may respond positively and comply, or we may respond negatively and define ourselves in opposition to the rule. Either way, we embrace a tradition, for either way, we use the rule’s terms for defining order. The choice is whether we will live within the way of life or outside of it.

To see this embracing of a way of life in the classroom we can look at the second graders at an independent school who were asked to write letters of advice to the following year’s second graders. The children worked in pairs at computer terminals, and they were free to write about whatever they wished. One pair, for instance, wrote at length about a potluck lunch held in the classroom, and the letter described what food each student brought. Many of the letters talked about the activities in the classroom, about the other classes, like art and music, that second graders go to, and about the teachers that second graders meet. But the most common topic in the letters was rules.

In one class of twenty children working in pairs, all but one of the ten letters specifically listed rules. Surprisingly, this was the classroom of a teacher who actively de-emphasizes rules. Her style is to counsel students; her inclination is to stress individuality, responsibility, and choice. Often the children move from one part of the building to another without her supervision. Everyday they have free time, when they can choose their activity. The children have no assigned seats, but decide for themselves where they will do their work. The teacher strives to diminish the institutional, bureaucratic flavor of classroom life with curtains on the windows, dimmed lights, and background music on the tape player. Those times of the day when the children gather on the rug near the teacher’s rocking chair are called “family time.” The array of stuffed animals, mobiles, building blocks, pictures, games, puzzles, and toys is more like a grandmother’s attic than like a classroom.

Despite all this emphasis on the homey and the warm, on responsibility and choice, the children’s letters stressed rules—the sort of rules that might come out of a classroom where the desks are in straight rows, and the activities are all chosen by the teacher, rules like these:

You must raise your hand to talk.
You must listen to the teacher.
Don’t talk back to the teacher.
Pay attention and work hard.
Be nice and polite to everybody you see.
The lists of rules are familiar and, seen in full, reminiscent of Polonium's advice to Laertes (platitudinous and not particularly helpful), because a student who needs to be told all of these things is not likely to be changed much by hearing them. Still, even if we were to question the helpfulness of the rules the children listed or to argue that these are not the most important rules in this classroom, the fact that rules appear at all in the letters is interesting. We can surmise that one child picked up the idea from another, and we can see that listing rules would be a helpful way of dealing with the task of organizing, as well as filling out, a letter. But though the children may have had practical reasons for writing rules and may not have thought much about the rules they wrote, we are faced with the children's belief that the act of listing rules was a sensible way to describe their classroom, that somehow, by telling an imaginary seven-year-old "You must raise your hand to talk," they were saying something important about life in their room. It is as if they are saying, "Hang onto this, and you will go in the right direction."

What they are hanging onto when they grasp even the most mundane rules is a pattern of action and thought that together with numerous other patterns forms that particular classroom's tradition or way of life. In a second-grade classroom during lunch one day, the children were having matzo pizza prepared by the mother of one of the girls. The girl's mother had been in the classroom before and was familiar to the children, but the girl's grandmother, who was also helping out, had never been introduced to the class. So the teacher asked the girl to introduce the new visitor. "That's my grandmother," she said. "How shall we call her?" asked the teacher. When he got no response, he prompted the girl by saying, "Mrs.—?" The girl paused uncertainly for a moment and then said, "Grammy." At which point "Grammy" said that that name would be fine with her.

This interaction is a discourse on the rule that adults should be addressed with a title of respect. During the same class session the influence of this rule was demonstrated when the teacher and the girl's mother called one another "Mr. Jordan" and "Mrs. Stein" even though they knew one another well and would have used first names if they had not been in Mr. Jordan's classroom with all the children. In fact, toward the end of lunchtime, when they were speaking more directly to one another rather than to the children, they did use first names.

The desire to encourage the children to use "Mr." and "Mrs." when addressing an adult—that is, the rule—is seen in too restricted a way if it is portrayed as simply a way of coordinating behavior. The rule is part of the construction of a way of life in which Mr. Jordan is in authority over the children in his room. This relationship parallels other relationships in which adults are in authority over children, and it may be hoped that the children will carry over to other situations both this naming practice and the attitude of respect implicit in it, but in the classroom, Mr. Jordan is simply the proper form of address. If the children are practicing something when they use that form of address, the practice is secondary. What they are mainly about is conducting the class, an activity made up
of innumerable little rules that together build the tradition of this classroom. The act of building goes on continuously, repeatedly. Following the rules is an ongoing act of imagination that brings a view of the world and a way of acting in it into existence. From such little acts as these—calling their teacher “Mr. Jordan” instead of “Mike,” staying in their seats when they eat lunch, raising their hand when they want to talk, not raising their hand when the teacher is talking—the world of Mr. Jordan’s second-grade class is created.

RULES AND INSTRUCTION

So far, I have tried to show that the chief importance of classroom rules does not lie in discipline and deportment, that they are not tools for establishing and maintaining harmony. I have even suggested that classroom rules reflect ideas about teaching and learning. And it is this part of the story I turn to now. Just as rules embody ideas about how students and teachers act toward and are related to one another, so too they embody ideas about instruction, subject matter, and knowledge.

One reason for the difficulty in seeing the role of rules in instruction is the pictures we have in mind when we think about a successful classroom. The pictures vary, of course, with some people perhaps imagining students intently working in silence by themselves and others imagining groups of students in animated conversation, working together on a problem. But however different our images, there is at least one similarity. When we think about a successful classroom, we do not imagine a teacher saying, “I need your attention” to an unruly class; we do not imagine a teacher saying to a pair of students in private conversation, “If you have something to say, share it with the group. Otherwise, listen to what the rest of us are talking about”; we do not imagine sullen-eyed children chafing because of the stiff collar of petty regulations. When we think about a successful classroom, we imagine that the students’ inclinations and the teacher’s plan are so united that the statement of classroom rules seems superfluous.

Imagine the scene in a first-grade classroom one afternoon when movies were being shown. The movies were short, colorful, and lively, and the children were fascinated and attentive. Only one girl was not focused on the screen, but instead was finishing some schoolwork. All of the others were watching in silence. No one dozed, no one talked, no one interfered with the attention of the others.

Or imagine the scene in a fourth-grade classroom one morning during the time for language arts. The teacher was beginning the day with some administrative matters, and she reminded the children that the following day they would be taking a field trip to see a musical about Harriet Tubman. A discussion began as some of the children began to ask questions about the underground railroad, the origins of slavery in the United States, the differences between slaves and indentured servants, the triangular trade routes, the hidden meaning of slave songs like
“Follow the Drinking Gourd,” whether slaves could be brought back from Canada, why they didn’t try to escape to Mexico, why they didn’t come back to help others after they had escaped, and what would happen to runaway slaves who were caught. The teacher followed no plan in this discussion except to think together with the children about the questions they raised. Some thirty minutes passed during this discussion, and although a few children doodled and a few whispered to one another occasionally, the attention of most of the children most of the time was on the meandering stream of curiosity.

Observing such scenes, we are not likely to think in terms of rules. Some observers might even deny that the children are following rules at all, arguing that the children are not thinking about rules as they act, but rather they are doing what they want to do, and their inclination just happens to coincide with the rules of the room. Such a way of thinking makes a distinction between following rules and acting in accordance with them, between constraint and inclination. Students may behave either because they are forced to or because they want to. The two possibilities are conceived as mutually exclusive; constraint and inclination do not exist together.

This narrow view of rules changes, however, when we see them as something that we grasp rather than something that grasps us. “Constraint” is an accurate word to use in describing the action of rules, but it is also misleading; it may be better to say “obligation.” In order to be able to watch a movie, students are obliged to follow rules about staying in their place, remaining quiet, and facing the screen. In order to use the forum of a discussion to satisfy their curiosity about slavery in the United States, students are obliged to follow rules about listening to what others are saying and about taking turns to talk. These obligations, which combine both inclination and constraint, are not preliminary to movie watching and discussing; they are how we watch movies and how we discuss.

Recognizing that classroom rules embody the aims of instruction is not to say that any particular activity, say, writing a story, entails any particular body of rules. But the identification of an activity does entail a need for rules—rules that will show, for example, how writing a story is different from writing a grocery list. To mark off a series of actions or block of experience as “Writing a story” is to make a claim about order, and as such, to imply rules that define both procedures and aims.4

The expression of the aims of instruction through classroom rules does not need to be a conscious decision. The rules speak of aims whether or not teachers put them into those terms, whether or not teachers even think of them in those terms. Consider, for example, a seventh-grade history teacher who began her class by saying, “OK, let’s get started. You will need a marker, pen, pencil, or whatever you use to highlight.” The class proceeded with the students reading in their textbook about the Mayflower Compact and the Virginia House of Burgesses. A section was read aloud, and the teacher asked questions such as “What did the Compact do?” and “What is a ‘civil body politic’?” The students offered answers to these questions, and the teacher helped
them shape their answers. Then she said, “Make sure that you have underlined or highlighted the points that we’ve just made.” Later, after joking about how much highlighting some students were doing, the teacher advised, “The important thing about highlighting is not that you underline the whole page but that you pick out the important words and phrases.”

This teacher’s rules about bringing markers to class and using them to highlight passages in the textbook imply ideas about knowledge and its transmission. The rules imply the expectation that students will memorize and be able to recall “important words and phrases”: names, actions, dates, relationships contained in the textbook. The rules suggest that the teacher believes students can master the facts by focusing on them and that this kind of mastery is worthwhile. A claim about what the students ought to learn and how they can learn it is implied by the rules about markers and highlighting.

Or consider two second-grade teachers at an independent school who showed through their rules about writing their different conceptions of instructional aims. In one classroom, the children were writing in their journal. One girl asked the teacher how to spell a word. The teacher told the girl just to write the word the way she thought it sounded. “But what if I don’t get it right?” the girl complained. “That will be all right,” the teacher assured her. “But if I don’t spell it right, then I can’t read it when I grow up.” The teacher held her ground, however, insisting that spelling the word by its sound would work well.

In the other classroom, the children were writing a story. Each child had a “spelling paper” which was a scrap of paper on which the teacher would write whatever words the child did not know how to spell. When the children brought their stories to the teacher for him to read, he checked their spelling and pointed out misspelled words.

Both of these teachers want their students to learn to write, but their different rules express different ideas about what this learning involves and how it takes place. Although both teachers want their students to learn to write fluently and with purpose, and although both teachers want their students to learn to write accurately, their rules express a difference in emphasis that shapes the writing activities in the classrooms.

Through scenes like these, we can begin to see what it means to say that classroom rules embody the aims of instruction. The rules speak about teaching and learning. But this is not to say that the content of instruction—the subject matter or domain of knowledge—explains the rules of the classroom. In fact, the reverse is true; for the students, the rules explain the subject matter. As they structure life in the classroom, rules also structure knowledge.

For example, the way that a science experiment is conducted will tend to structure the concept of science. If the tradition of the room, speaking through a web of rules about such things as the importance of answering questions and the seriousness of grading papers, stresses getting right answers, then science experiments will tend to be conducted in terms of
right answers. And science will come to be seen as a body of predetermined facts.

A third-grade teacher was conducting a science lesson during which the children were to work in pairs and perform an experiment. At the end of the experiment, the children were to show their results on a worksheet.

The teacher was surprised to see that many of the children seemed to be making a mistake on the worksheet. She decided on reflection that the children must have misunderstood. So she went over the worksheet more slowly, making sure that the directions were clear. After waiting a few minutes for the children to redo the worksheet, the teacher said, "Get out your correcting pens."

Once the grading began, however, it became clear that the same children had made the same mistake. When the teacher began to investigate, she discovered to her surprise that they had recorded their results correctly. The problem was that their results were unexpected. After a moment of thought, the teacher told those students not to mark wrong their answer on the worksheet, but they should turn back to the previous sheet, the one depicting the lettered steps of the experiment. On that page they should make a check, "because that means your mistake is on that page and not on the next page."

In connection with a science experiment, talk about "correcting pens" and finding "mistakes" sounds out of place. We expect the teacher to be concerned with what students can learn from their experiment rather than with what is "wrong" with their results. At least, such an expectation is consistent with the image of science as a method of discovery.

But such an image conflicts with the rules of the room; that is, in this classroom, rules about such diverse activities as following directions, raising hands to answer questions, and grading papers all work together to construct the idea that knowledge in general and science knowledge in particular are bodies of authorized facts. For instance, one of the rules says that the children are to have a red "correcting pen" in their desk. The reasoning behind this rule was shown one day when the children in one of the reading groups were grading their work. The teacher noticed that some of them were erasing and presumably changing answers, and she asked one girl, who was correcting with an ordinary pencil, "What did you just erase?" The girl said nothing but moved uneasily in her seat as if ashamed. "No more erasing," said the teacher. Then she added, "Get out your correcting pen." The message is clear that red ink must be used to insure honest grading of work.

Grading is seen as such an important, serious matter that the academic content of the class tends to be reduced to discovering the right answer. On one assignment that was being graded in class, the children were to characterize the mood of a descriptive passage containing the phrase "jumped with fright." The teacher suggested a mood of "fear," but one girl disagreed, mainly because she was not familiar with the word fright. After the teacher explained the meaning of fright and discussed its place in the passage, the girl who had disagreed seemed to ponder what had
been said, and then asked, referring to the answer she had given, “So, it’s wrong?” The teacher laughed and said, “Yes, the bottom line is—it’s wrong.”

This teacher is not trying to reduce the academic content of her classroom to a bottom line of right and wrong. After satisfying the girl that her answer was wrong, the teacher added, “I hoped though that you were learning something.” She seemed to be speaking about satisfying a curiosity that transcends right and wrong. But the teacher’s hopes for intellectual curiosity can only be realized within the tradition of the rules of the classroom, and the rules speak so loudly about right and wrong that it is unlikely that anyone will see anything more than the bottom line or will inquire into why an apparently failed experiment turned out as it did.

The point of focusing on this classroom is not to show that its rules are wrong, but to show that they are meaningful and that an important part of their meaning is the structure they give to the academic content of the class. Furthermore, it is a mistake to imagine that this scene presents a “problem” that can be “corrected” by emphasizing discovery and encouraging a spirit of inquiry. All classrooms, however open and progressive, have rules that structure knowledge.

Scenes from a second-grade classroom show how the rules of the room structure the subject of mathematics. In this room, individual inquiry and responsibility are emphasized more than is getting a right answer. Because of this emphasis on students finding things out for themselves, the technique of trial and error tends to be used in all unfamiliar situations—even when it is not appropriate.

The school day begins with the children gathering on the rug to read and talk about a “morning message.” Often the morning message contains a problem or puzzle for the children to work on together. One morning the message contained a puzzle provided by the teacher-intern who had been working in the room. It was a puzzle she had borrowed from one of her teacher-education classes. Each child had a set of puzzle pieces—sixteen squares of paper on each of which was a number from one to four and that same number of symbols colored in one of four colors. In other words, the squares of paper corresponded to the aces, twos, threes, and fours from a deck of playing cards. The object of the puzzle was to arrange the puzzle pieces in a four-by-four square, such that no number or color was repeated in any row, column, or diagonal. The intern had prepared a larger version of the puzzle on the board for the children to work on together, and they threw themselves into the task.

The intern began by asking for a volunteer to pick out a piece and say where it should go. Then she called on another child to name a piece and a location. The process continued, with the children eagerly waving their hands to volunteer. As the number of pieces placed on the board grew, it became more difficult for each child to decide where a piece should go, and more time was spent determining whether what they had done was “right so far.” Eventually, the time for the morning message
was spent, and the intern sent the children to their desks to work on the puzzle on their own. She also took down the work the group had done together so that everyone would start the puzzle fresh.

As the children worked, the most common question asked of the intern and of the teacher was, “Is this right so far?” Rumors spread that Melanie had solved it or that William was done, but actually no one made much progress, and after a few minutes the intern gave the class a “hint,” saying that the piece with four green circles should go in the lower left corner. Long before anyone solved the puzzle, however, the class had to move on to other activities.

If we think of the puzzle as an exercise in mathematics and logic, the intern’s approach to it makes little sense. Rather than using trial and error to guess where pieces might go, a more sensible approach, that is, more likely to solve the puzzle, would analyze the structure of the puzzle and attempt to predict where pieces have to go. It is not even too strong to say that the children were misled by the intern. The group’s attempt to solve the puzzle was treated as a “correct” start even though it could not have worked. And calling the information that the piece with four green circles goes in the lower left corner a “hint” made nonsense of the puzzle, since the four of some color has to go in some corner, and it does not matter which color or which corner. In fact, to think of the corners of the puzzle as though the orientation of the puzzle is fixed obscures rather than clarifies the problem. Finally, encouraging the question “Is this right so far?” told students that they were following a sound procedure, although their actual chance of solving the puzzle by trial and error was practically nil.

Obviously, this activity was not guided by ways of thinking embedded in the discipline of mathematics. Rather it was guided by the tradition of this classroom, a tradition that deemphasizes right and wrong in favor of individuality and responsibility. There are no grades in this class, no grading of papers, no “correcting pens.” The children are only seven or eight years old, but they are expected to manage their time and do their work, often having a number of assignments to do on their own. The rules of the classroom shape this tradition of individuality and responsibility. One of the rules, for instance, says that the children are not to disturb the teacher or the intern when either is working with a small group. This rule often leaves children to solve problems on their own. One morning a boy had forgotten where he was to put his reading book when he was done with it, so he asked a girl sitting nearby. “I forgot,” he said to her, “where do we put our books?” The girl said, “On the table.” Then she looked up and saw that the intern was working with a reading group at the table in question. “No,” she said, “Miss Cary is reading.” The girl thought for a moment before deciding, “Put it on your desk.”

On another occasion, the teacher was handing out worksheets to four students who had finished the rest of their work. As the teacher handed out the worksheets, he said to the four children, “Receive no help—you’re all good readers.” The children returned to their seats and began to work, but after a few minutes, one of the boys was stuck. He went to
the desk of another boy and asked him for help. The second boy replied, “I think he said ‘Receive no help.’ Go ask him.” The first boy countered, “He meant receive no help from him.” The second boy thought and then said, “OK,” and the two of them proceeded to work together.

This sort of decision making is typical of these second graders. Even the rule about going to the bathroom—“Sign out on the board”—is a recognition of the children’s competence to manage their lives and of their ability to decide when and how to do things. Working within the framework of such rules, the intern’s approach to the “morning message” math puzzle makes sense. The children are exploring for themselves, finding whatever patterns they can find. And the subject of mathematics comes to be structured by the rules of the classroom.

The structuring of subject matter according to classroom rules, according to traditional ways of proceeding, occurs because schooling is largely a matter of students doing things they do not understand. If they did understand all these things, schooling would not be necessary. A rule is a mental prosthesis that helps us act wisely despite our lack of understanding. This function of rules was dramatically portrayed in an interaction in a first-grade classroom one afternoon.

The teacher began the afternoon by dealing with the complaints of many of the children about the behavior of others of the children on the playground. One girl in particular was the subject of complaints. Her classmates felt she was “getting kinda rough.” One boy, for instance, said that she had hit him because he did not want her to join his game. The teacher said to the girl, “Do you think it would be nice for David to hit you if you wouldn’t let him play?” Without hesitating, the girl nodded that such a reaction would be fine with her. The teacher looked at the girl without any hint of surprise and asked the question again without any change in her voice, “Do you think it would be nice for David to hit you if you wouldn’t let him play?” Again the girl calmly nodded, not as if she meant to be obstinate but rather as an expression of honesty. A third time the teacher asked the question, and a third time the girl nodded.

Now, this teacher possesses great patience, and the fourth time she asked the question, her voice was as kindly and sincere as it had been the first time. The girl’s nod of assent the fourth time was as straightforward as it had been the first.

Still, the teacher did not seem at all flustered, but only looked the girl squarely in the eye and asked, “Is that the right answer?” The girl paused, moved her eyes from side to side, and said, “No.”

It is quite possible that this child honestly answered both questions put to her. On the one hand, she really would like to live in a world in which a punch in the nose is an appropriate expression of disagreement. On the other hand, she is aware that the rules of the classroom tell her not to go around punching people in the nose. For her, a rule about not hitting people functions by filling the place of a missing understanding, namely, the ability to see the discomfort of others by projecting a natural disposition to avoid pain. She can follow the rule without understanding its significance, but it leads her toward a new way of seeing the world.
Whether the subject matter is history, language, science, mathematics, or ethics, the rules of the class structure the subject by prescribing ways of acting that speak about the order of things. Even in those scenes of classroom life where the students' inclinations and the teacher's plan seem as one, rules play their role: as obligations that combine inclination and constraint, they embody the aims of instruction, and they shape its content.

VISIONS OF RULES

If rules embody ways of thinking and living, then why are they mistrusted by such writers as Gaddy (1988), Grant (1988), and Render, Padilla, and Krank (1989)? In this section I will argue that the instrumental vision of rules is itself the danger. Believing their rules to be only the tools for establishing orderliness, teachers can separate within themselves the means of their teaching from the ends of their teaching. They can lose the power to reflect on what they are doing and why.

For those who would confine the significance of rules to only discipline and deportment, rules actually pose a threat in the classroom: they can become overemphasized. It is said, as an obvious truth, that the teacher can go by the book too rigorously, so that instruction becomes mechanical and students unthinking. It is possible to find classrooms run by petty bureaucrats or myopic tyrants, and such instances, it is said, are proof that an insensitive emphasis on regulations can dehumanize life and undermine education.

My account does not deny that such classrooms exist, but it does raise the question: What makes the following of classroom rules a mechanical, unthinking act? The problem seems to be that rules are followed blindly, without reflection. There is no meaning in the order, so the order withers into mere orderliness, the business turns to busyness. Worksheets are completed not because they stimulate or assist curiosity, but because they need to be turned in. A second-grader asked his harried teacher why he needed to complete a certain worksheet. The teacher replied, “Just do it.” There was no harshness in the command. It was more a matter of advice, similar to a doctor saying, “Take this medicine because it’s good for you, and don’t worry about what’s in it.” But while the medicine may soon achieve (or at least be associated with) a quick cure, the efficacy of the worksheet is not so clear. Its end or aim as a step in intellectual growth is so dimly perceived, that the act of finishing becomes itself the end.

In the same second-grade classroom, two girls were working together on a worksheet that involved filling in the blanks in a number of sentences. It was a two-page worksheet, but the girls flew through it in a matter of two or three minutes. When they finished, one girl suggested, “Let’s check it and see if we got it all right.” The second girl replied, “No, I don’t care if my letters are wrong.”

This second girl was not a lazy worker. She seemed to pride herself on
her ability to get things done. Working on a crossword puzzle, she turned several times to an observer in the room and asked for help. In fact, she asked for so much help that a boy sitting at the same group of desks with her complained to her, “Quit asking him. Do your own work.” But her seeking help was certainly not an attempt to better understand the crossword puzzle, and she probably was not even especially concerned with getting the right answers. Getting help was only a labor-saving device, as was working with a friend. These were just ways to finish the work sooner.

But finish sooner for what? To do more work, of course. A short while later, the same girl came out of the back room with a message from the teacher-intern that a certain group of children were to report to the back room with a dictionary. She spread the message enthusiastically. A new assignment generates new enthusiasm.

But these brief bursts of enthusiasm are, without an end in view, a drain into which energy disappears meaninglessly. A reading group had been working with the teacher on Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy*, and the teacher was discussing with the children what life was like on the farm. He asked them what they would think of living on a farm. A couple of children thought it would be fun, and a couple of children preferred their city life. But one boy replied, “It would be just as bad as school if every time you finished one thing there was something else to do.”

For the girl who sees no point in checking work and for the boy who sees school as just one empty chore after another—for all those for whom business has become busyness—the rules of classroom life deal with the necessary, but not with the useful. These children are not themselves connected with what they are doing. There is obligation without inclination, or as Dewey (1975) says, effort without interest.

With a fifth-grade class studying American history, the teacher led a discussion concerned with 19th-century feminists. Among other questions, he asked the students to list the “achievements” of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. “They devoted their lives to the advancement of women,” one student said, apparently offering the textbook’s assessment. The teacher persisted with the question, not because he objected to hearing the textbook read, but because the answer lacked detail. “But what,” he pressed, “did they do?” The students searched their books for the answer and various details were suggested until one person said, “Seneca Falls Convention,” and the teacher was satisfied.

Throughout the discussion, when the teacher called on “people who have something to say,” their contribution consisted of reading a passage from the textbook. These students were as unconnected with the discussion and their history study as it is possible to be while still taking any kind of role in the activity. Neither the questions they were asked nor the answers they proposed were their own or even of any apparent interest to them. No one seemed to think that the work of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton might have anything to do with themselves, their families, their sisters, or their mothers.
But it is not the rules or the activities of the classroom that render checking pointless, chores empty, and discussions mechanical. Busyness is not so much a matter of rule-bound action as it is a matter of narrow vision. The sense of mechanical busyness reflects a vision of classroom rules that separates them from meaning, from thought, from the business of the classroom. The belief that a rule, for example, “Write your name on your paper,” is only a tool for making things run smoothly blinds teachers and students to the significance of saying, by the name at the top of the paper, “This is my work; this is a part of me.” And just as a child learns the habit of putting her name on her paper, so too she can learn the habit of believing that this heading has no meaning and that rules are, after all, just a way of keeping things straight.

The way we think about rules is very important. It is not just a philosophical point, but a practical one, because when teachers forget the significance of their own rules, a chasm begins to open between what they are doing and why they are doing it. The results can be both a mechanical classroom and an uncertain teacher. Durkheim (1956) wrote that “the only way to prevent education from falling under the yoke of habit and from degenerating into mechanical and immutable automatism is to keep constantly adaptable by reflection.” The reflection he had in mind “takes account of the methods” of the teacher by thinking about their aim, by attending to “their end and their reason for being” (pp. 105–106). This sort of reflection is critically handicapped by the belief that rules are separate from the “real” business of the classroom and by failing, therefore, to take seriously their significance. Such thinking separates means and ends rather than clarifying their relationship.

In conversation one afternoon, a fifth-grade teacher said to me that he wondered sometimes whether his rules were justified or were only his whim. He posed the question as if he thought that he might change the rules rather easily and that the effect of the change would simply be that some relatively insignificant things would be done differently. He seemed to think, that is, that the means he employed in his teaching could be altered without significantly altering the ends of his teaching.

But a genuine change in means—in how we go about our work—also involves a change in the end to be achieved, in other words, the outcome of our work. The obscuring of this living relationship follows on the separation of rules and instruction, and the result is a mechanical quality in the life of a classroom. A teacher decries the students’ inability to “pay attention” and exHORTS, commands, and pleads with them, “Please, I need your attention now.” The problem seems to lie in the students’ lack of cooperation or their inability to follow directions or their unwillingness to learn. The solution seems to be that the means of conducting the class need to be fine tuned.

From such a starting point, from the belief that ends are in focus and that only the right means are needed, the teacher cannot profitably think about why students fail to pay attention. The teacher cannot ask, “Why do I need their attention? Do they need to be paying attention? And if they do really need to listen to me, won’t they realize that if I explain it? Have I even given them anything to pay attention to?”
Avoiding the mechanical in the classroom is not a matter of letting up on rules but of seeing them for what they are—a moral ordering of the world for which the teacher is accountable just as the students are to be obedient. The teacher who sees rules as more than just indifferent means, who sees that the rules and the content of the class are entwined, avoids the mechanical by relying on the rules. Such teachers are imbued with a conviction about their role that comes of seeing rules as reflections of something beyond themselves. Their conviction is illuminated in flashes of righteous indignation at rule-breaking, compassion for those who struggle, and jubilance for those who succeed. Their conviction is maintained by relentlessness in the redress of wrongs, in the search for answers, and in the confession of ignorance.

Their conviction is perhaps best seen, however, in the actions of their students, who call on them to act on their beliefs. A first-grade boy spent the lunch recess one afternoon finishing a math assignment. He was to paste paper “coins” beneath pictures of objects in order to show what combination of coins was needed to equal the cost of each item. The arithmetic was not complicated, and the boy had a good grasp of it, so the work was not difficult. But just to be sure, the boy asked the observer in the room to check his calculations. The observer assured him he had done everything correctly, but still the boy was not satisfied because he had paper coins left over.

When the boy’s teacher came into the room, he rushed to her to ask whether he was supposed to have coins left over and what he should do with them. She assured him that he had done the work correctly, and finally he was content.

For this first-grader, an order only partially understood rules the room. He believes that there are right ways to do things and wrong ways, even if he cannot always distinguish them. He also believes that his teacher understands the rules and the order they embody, whereas an outsider, an observer, may not. His attitude suggests not a mechanical following of rules, but an attempt to grasp them, an attempt to see through them to their meaning.

This sort of turning to the teacher may become less common as students grow older, but it continues in the classrooms of those teachers who see meaning in the rules. During the break in a double-period science class, one of the seventh-grade girls who had left the room returned saying, “Mrs. Payton, here goes the boy he was messin’ with me. He was messin’ with me and wouldn’t let me get to my locker.” Immediately, Mrs. Payton went out into the hallway.

This girl did not go to her teacher because she was looking for additional “muscle” to put down the troublemaking boy. In fact, the girl was several inches taller than the teacher. In addition, this school is an urban high school where many of the teachers may be afraid to confront a student, so while the girl’s request for help may have been trivial, her expectation that the teacher would respond was significant. She recognized in her teacher a faithfulness to the rule, a conviction about what is right that far transcends mechanical rule following. It is this faith and this conviction that the girl expected from her teacher.
Avoiding the mechanical in classroom life depends on seeing meaning in rules, depends on seeing rules as the conjunction of obligation and interest, the shape of knowledge, and the weave of a way of life. Without such vision, the teacher cannot see what is happening in the classroom. This kind of seeing is not so much a concept that one grasps as it is a striving, an ongoing effort to recognize how rules touch life. Stretched, questioned, resisted, rethought—the rules are transformed every day and must be seen anew. Whether they inspire the awakening of insight or petrify into mechanical busyness depends on the teacher’s vision.

CONCLUSION

Rules are a familiar part of classroom life—probably too familiar. Taking them for granted, we are not inclined to think about them or to suspect that their significance may transcend superficial orderliness. But my observations have persuaded me that rules carry meanings, which, though forgotten or perhaps never perceived, nevertheless structure classroom life and shape the understanding of those who live there.

The rules of the classroom embody a way of life. They put abstract aims of schooling into concrete patterns of daily activity. They are embraced as the way of school, so that to reject them is to reject the whole educational enterprise, and to contravene them is to move outside the pale.

The rules of the classroom also give structure to the intellectual life. Ideas about what knowledge is, how it is transmitted, who possesses it, and what its value is are all implied by the rules of the room. This structuring is needed by all students, so that rules are not just for the unruly; they are a statement of obligations that hold for everyone.

This broader vision of rules brings together the means and ends of classroom life, making it possible for teachers to reflect on what they are about. Rather than ignoring the significance of much of what they do, they can attend to it. The problems of regimentation and mechanical practices lie not in the acts of obedience, but in what the students are obedient to. They are problems of meaning. To view rules only as instruments for establishing and maintaining discipline and deportment undercuts reflection and, ultimately, the teacher’s conviction by denying the meaningfulness of everyday life.

A broader vision of rules does not solve all problems, but it puts them in a different perspective. When students seem to miss the point, it may be a problem of reconciling the classroom’s system of rules with subject matter that does not fit the way that things are done. Student questions about what to work on and why may not be a digression, but rather an attempt to come to grips with the genuine issues. The only way to be able to reflect on such matters is to see rules for what they are—not a harness, nor a leash, but the handle that we grasp.

NOTES

1. Black analyzes the logical relations of rules (rather than their content or the activities which they govern) and comes up with four “distinct if related groups
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of senses": (1) regulations, (2) instructions, (3) rules of conduct, and (4) principles. The analysis indirectly suggests the special nature of classroom rules. For instance, Black's basis for distinguishing regulations from other sorts of rules is that it makes sense to ask both when a regulation was put into force and who instituted it. But these questions can sensibly be asked of all classroom rules.

2. All of the teachers referred to in this paper were observed as part of The Moral Life of Schools Project, funded by the Spencer Foundation, and directed by Philip W. Jackson. Eighteen teachers participated in the project—three teachers from each of four schools and six teachers from a fifth school. The schools were an elementary and a secondary Catholic school, an elementary and a secondary public school, and a combined elementary/secondary independent school. The teachers were observed in their classrooms by three researchers over a period of a year and a half. In addition, each of us researchers interviewed all of the teachers, and for two and a half years we met with them for bi-weekly dinner meetings. The observations varied in frequency and duration according to the interests and available time of each researcher. I focused primarily on the elementary teachers, keeping a journal in which I both describe what I saw when I visited each room and reflect on those events and interactions. All of the classroom scenes and conversations used in this paper are taken from my journal or from the interviews.

3. This scene and my characterization of it would probably not be surprising to Gordon (1983), who writes that schools "teach the conception of rules appropriate to a pre-legal society," in which nonconformity "is equivalent to estrangement" (p. 212).

4. On the place of aims in the concept of order, see Friedrich (1968), who says that order can only be perceived when the aims of those in authority are understood.

5. In Emile, Rousseau thinks of the "necessary" as strictly physical, whereas I am suggesting that there can be a social necessity; but if this extension is allowable, then my sense of the movement from a recognition of necessity to an understanding of usefulness is similar to what Rousseau describes in Book Three of Emile, as "how we gradually approach moral notions which distinguish good and bad."

6. On this transcendent quality of rules, see Durkheim (1961) especially on the topic of the impersonality of the teacher's authority.

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