

# SLIPPERY AS FISH... BUT ALREADY CAUGHT? SECONDARY STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL RULES

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Drawing on nine focus groups with secondary students in southern Ontario, we investigated secondary students' perceptions of, and experiences with, school codes of conduct and their application. While generally supporting the 'big' rules such as no weapons, students engaged more critically with minor ones. We drew on Foucault's governmentality studies to discuss students' successful compliance. We evaluated students' contestation of the rules, rule-breaking as potential resistance, and rule breaking as a manifestation of students' desire. Although students challenge school rules, they are "already caught" within the dominant language that frames the rules and their top-down application, with little sense of themselves as potent political actors.

Key words: discipline, citizenship, resistance, secondary education

D'après neuf groupes de discussion d'étudiants au niveau secondaire du sud de l'Ontario, nous avons enquêté leurs points de vue et leurs expériences au sujet des règlements de leurs écoles et leurs méthodes d'application. Généralement, les étudiants sont en faveur des 'grands' règlements, tel que armes interdites, mais ils sont plus critiques envers les moins importants. D'après les études de gouvernementalité de Foucault, nous discutons comment les étudiants réussissent à se conformer. Nous avons évalué la contestation des règlements par les étudiants, l'évasion des règlements comme résistance potentielle, et l'évasion des règlements comme manifestation des désirs des étudiants. Même si les étudiants résistent les règlements, ils sont "déjà pris" à l'intérieur d'un langage dominant qui encadre les règlements et leur application par les haut-placés. Ainsi, ils ont l'impression d'être impuissants comme acteurs politiques.

Mots clés: discipline, citoyenneté, résistance, éducation secondaire

## INTRODUCTION

Codes of conduct are a standard feature of most high schools. Yet there has been limited research on how such rules are presented to, and experienced by, students. Several authors have each noted a tension within written rules between a top-down emphasis on obedience and an interest in developing students' self-discipline. Lewis (1999) reports on an analysis of codes of conduct from 300 schools in Victoria, Australia, to argue that the emphasis on discipline found within the rules appears incompatible with an education likely to develop democratic citizenship. This pattern is further noted by Schimmel (2003) in his study of citizenship education in the United States and Raby's (2005a) textual analysis of secondary school codes of conduct in the Niagara region and Toronto. Each author rightly advocates processes of creating and applying school rules that include student participation and the cultivation of democratic citizenship (Raby, *forth-coming*). Currently, however, school is mandatory for most youth, yet it is an environment where they have little control or influence, and their actions, time, statements, and clothing are under constant surveillance.

Although research on students' actual responses to these rules has also been limited, three patterns can be identified. First, students are more inclined to invest in the rules if they are invested in the school through having good relationships with teachers, wanting to get good grades, thinking rules are fair, or having a sense of belonging (Stewart, 2003; Wald & Kurlaender, 2003). Conversely, negative school climate and ineffective discipline have been found to increase student drop-out rates (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005). Secondly, students would like administrators to pay more attention to the context of their rule infractions and frequently feel disenfranchised from decision making within schools (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1989; Thorson, 1996). Finally, students on the margins, most notably students of colour, are particularly critical, identifying an unequal application of school rules. For example, two quantitative Canadian studies (MacDonell & Martin, 1986; Ruck and Wortley, 2002) examined students' perspectives on school rules and found that non-white students perceive an unequal application of discipline. Likewise, investigating early school leaving among minority youth, Ontario researchers Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell

& Rummens (2005) found striking experiences of racism in young people's experiences of school disciplinary processes. Ontario Human Rights Commissioner Bhattacharjee (2003) argues that such inequalities are also experienced by students with learning disabilities, and that such perceptions are quite accurate. In her study of detention centres in a predominantly Black, inner city, American high school, Bowditch (1993) found that students deemed academically marginal (and therefore uninvested) are in fact "pushed out" of school through disciplinary techniques.

The purpose of this particular study is to add to this research by examining how various students in a region of southern Ontario perceive and engage with their school codes of conduct. Drawing on nine focus group conversations, we examined their opinions on specific rules, the conditions under which they might accept them, and when they might question, challenge, negotiate, circumvent, or resist them. On the one hand, these students seem quite successfully hailed into the contradictory regimes of self-disciplined citizenship and rule-breaking/punishment. On the other hand, this process is not smooth. These students criticize, contest, and break the rules. To frame this discussion we have drawn on governmentality studies and on several distinct engagements with the concept of resistance.

#### *Governmentality studies*

Governmentality studies are particularly useful for examining the institutionalized processes of self-discipline. Scholars in governmentality studies draw on the later work of Michel Foucault (1978a) to examine how government is not limited to state practices, but permeates social relations and the formation of the self through school, family, media, and so forth. Through this approach, people are understood as actors with freedom; processes of governance in turn attempt to affect people's actions. As Rose (1999) explains, governmentality involves "all endeavours to shape, guide, [and] direct the conduct of others" (p. 3). Through such practices, disciplined individuals "act in socially appropriate ways without the need for any exercise of external, coercive power" (Marshall, 2004, p. 256). Individuals even come to invest, and find pleasure in, their self-discipline.

Drawing on such studies, dress and discipline codes can be understood as sites of knowledge production (e.g., about the 'respectable' student), and attempts to foster internalized discipline and docile citizenship. Fraser (2003) notes, however, that social regulation through fostering autonomy and self-control is currently off-set by repression due to increased unemployment, inequality, and consequent instability. She points to marginal, incarcerated youth to suggest that governmentality is segmented: "responsibilized self-regulation for some, brute repression for others" (2003, p. 169). Such segmentation is evident in school codes of conduct, which claim to foster self-discipline, yet concomitantly deploy mechanisms of repression (such as zero tolerance), particularly towards youth on the margins (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Although school rules may attempt to cultivate self-regulation, such strategies are thus undermined within the rules themselves

### *Resistance*

Young people also respond to rules in diverse and frequently uncontainable ways. One way to reflect on such responses is through the concept of resistance, a pivotal concept for a number of scholars of youth working in critical cultural studies (Giroux, 1983; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1977) and several others examining how young people resist schools' attempts to discipline their bodies (Lesko, 1988; McLaren, 1993; Simpson, 2000). Resistance can be understood in a variety of ways, however. Critical cultural studies scholars have conceptualized resistance as directly confrontational, class-based, and a potential vehicle for social change (see also Raby, 2005b). As such, rule-breaking itself has been conceptualized less as deviance or inherent adolescent high-jinks than as noteworthy resistance to conditions of inequality.

Resistance is a concept that is understood quite differently within governmentality studies and other approaches that draw on Foucault, in that resistance is more enmeshed in relations of power. Techniques of governance and discourses that frame them are disrupted or contradicted, for instance, producing selves that defy seamless regulation (Butler, 1990; Butz & Ripmeester, 1999; Foucault, 1978b; Munoz, 1999). The effectiveness of governance is thus complicated by

contradiction and challenge. This position significantly opens up the scope of who resists, what resistance might look like, and what such challenge might, or might not, accomplish – it may disrupt dominant power relations, for example, but in ways that may be more subtle than direct challenge.

Similarly compelling disruptions of power relations are also presented through Deleuze and Guattari's "lines of flight" (1983), taken up by Tarulli and Skott-Myhre (2006) in their article addressing rights and childhood. This approach is quite distinct from traditional resistance theory or more Foucauldian concepts of resistance because it rests on the notion of uncontainable desire manifested through "lines of flight." Lines of flight involve the disruption of the categorizations and binaries that attempt to contain social life, ultimately in the interests of the capitalist state. The lived immediacy of young people's desire can thus be understood as lines of flight that unsettle and disrupt, even in the face of school rules that are meant to contain such disruptions.

#### METHODOLOGY

Over the summers of 2004 and 2005, we conducted nine focus groups with diverse young people attending secondary schools within a region of southern Ontario (see Appendix A), an area composed of small cities, towns, and rural stretches. We located six groups primarily through approaching organizations: a Boys and Girls Club<sup>1</sup>, an LGBTQ group, an arts group, a drop-in centre for homeless youth,<sup>2</sup> a youth drop-in centre in a mall, and a new immigrant youth group. More informally, three groups were organized through word-of-mouth with students from a Catholic school,<sup>3</sup> a French school, and from a political youth group. By conducting the focus groups outside the school environment, we avoided pre-screening by schools and negotiations with school boards for access. This strategy also potentially encouraged students to talk more freely about their school rules than if they were recruited through the schools and grouped together students from different schools who could therefore compare their experiences. Finally we also sought to bring together students who already knew each other because in such peer groups people make meaning, argue, and produce themselves as subjects. Occasionally this strategy seemed to lead to impression

management with friends (notably bravado) that may have influenced answers. Also, some participants were silent; we tried to address this, as well as unspoken dissent, with individual questionnaires at the end.

Focus groups ranged in size from three to fourteen participants (with fourteen being far too many!), refreshments were provided and each participant received an honorarium of \$10. Consent was obtained from both the participants and their parents. Groups were tape-recorded, but also loosely transcribed *in situ* to provide a skeleton for more thorough transcription later. We asked participants what they knew and thought of the rules and their enforcement, what they would change, how they appealed unfair accusations, and whether they had ever participated in creating their school rules. Each author independently coded all transcripts by hand for open and abstract codes. These codes were then recorded in NVIVO. Through NVIVO, a large number of specific themes were identified by one coder, then these were subsequently grouped into broader themes by the other, with attention to retaining awareness of negative cases that challenged or contradicted larger patterns. Finally, we sent a report of findings to all participants who had expressed an interest in receiving one. We invited comments on the report, but did not receive any. Below we present the broader themes, within the scaffolding of general findings, analysis of compliance, and analysis of challenges to the rules.

*FINDINGS: the good, the bad, and the debated*

Our general findings address several patterns. First, by asking participants to categorize the rules as good, bad, or controversial, we found that certain rules were much more widely accepted than others. We organized reasons for acceptance or non-acceptance of the rules around four issues: practicality, safety, context, and consistency. Finally, the rules were quite commonly discussed as top-down and adversarial.

As indicated above, focus groups were asked broad questions about their school rules. We asked the six most recent groups (conducted in 2005) to categorize a series of cue cards, each with a common rule printed on it, into three piles: good rules, bad rules, and debated or controversial rules, where participants could not agree or they agreed that the value of the rule shifted by context. (For cue card distribution,

see Appendix B.) Participants easily jumped into this task. With a few exceptions, many focus group participants agreed on the "must have" rules such as no drugs, no weapons, and no fighting.

Fernando: "No drugs or alcohol". That's a given.

Moe: That's fair.

Fernando: That's a given. "No bullying"

Maurice: That's another given.

Fernando: Yeah it's a given.

Moe: It's a given but it'll still happen.

Fernando: Yeah. "No vandalism". That's a given.

Moe: Given, but it'll still happen. (Focus Group 8)

Students were less likely to even raise these rules for discussion, although some were concerned that consequences were applied inconsistently. Few had knowledge of Ontario's related zero tolerance policy, which is embedded in the *Safe Schools Act* (Government of Ontario, 2000) currently under review. In contrast, more minor, day-to-day rules were the focus of much attention and dispute. The students were most opinionated about these rules, with general agreement that some are "stupid," such as not being allowed to carry backpacks, and with significant debate around others, such as swearing in the halls or using cell phones.

I: No cell phones. Why is that a stupid rule [as suggested earlier]?

Lindsey: That's a good rule

[Everyone talking]

Mark: No it's not [a stupid rule], you're working, what the hell you need a cell phone for?

[Everyone talking]

Amy: If you're in class turn it off, but if you are in the hallway...

[...]

Lindsey: Cell phones don't work in hallways.

Mark: Well why would you need it anyways, you're working! (Yells) You're doing your work, you're learning!

[...]

Jamie: Trust me, I got my cell phone on me when I am at school...

[...]

Steven: But what about lunch when you are outside?

[Everyone talking]

Amy: Yeah you're at lunch and you're outside [but] my teachers say "turn it off."

[...]

Lindsey: No you're allowed to have it outside, they can't say shit! [Everyone talking]

Amy: In [school name inaudible] they can.

James: Cell phones don't work in school anyways. [Everyone talking]

I: We have mixed feelings about cell phones in this room.

Jamie: Yes. [Others say "yes".] (Focus Group 2)

Some students argued that these minor rules and their enforcement created tension and took up significant amount of time in the school. We certainly found that around these rules frequent power struggles emerged between administration and students. The preceding impassioned debate touched on four key themes that arose through coding, which we now present.

First, rules were challenged when the focus group participants experienced them as *impractical*, especially in terms of their bodily well-being. When it was hot, they felt they should be able to wear spaghetti straps, for instance, and in cold classrooms, they should be able to wear coats. Similarly, backpacks were useful for carrying large piles of books, and bandanas and hats were important for dealing with bad-hair days.

Although practicality often clashed with rules, issues of *safety* supported them. If activities were understood as unsafe, then these rules were more likely to receive support.

Brad: Well I know at School X, ah a few years back they put in the no backpacks in the classroom rule and I can understand that they can say that in the science lab – you are working with chemicals and carrying them around the classroom and if you trip over a backpack, that's chemicals everywhere but that's... say in the English classroom and you don't want to carry all your books around in your arms so you bring your backpack with your books in it and apparently that is also not allowed... (Focus Group 3)

Focus Group 9 had a long debate about whether the rule indicating that students must eat in the cafeteria was important due to peanut allergies.

Students were also highly sensitive to *context*. They did not recognize school as a consistent entity, but one divided by time and space, as is



illustrated in the preceding quotations about cell-phones and backpacks. Rules that might be appropriate in some classes were seen as less appropriate in others. For example, it was considered acceptable and even helpful to listen to music while working in art class, but not acceptable during an algebra lesson. Students felt rules that were appropriate during class time (e.g., no cell phones or no hats) were unacceptable during lunch, considered personal time. Similarly, students distinguished between school property and off-property when discussing fighting or smoking. Such attention to time, space, and place, consistent across focus groups, suggests why there might be tension when rules are presented, at least on paper and by principals, as rigid.

Finally, rules were often challenged on the basis of two forms of *consistency*. In the first form, students noticed and discussed differences in rules between schools, between administrative staff, and between classrooms.

Brad: I switched to Maple and I find the rules, like small rules like the disc man and that, are just a lot more relaxed... (Focus Group 3)

Tina: Well at our school we don't know everyone, um, like we're not supposed to be in the halls especially like during lunch, like they won't let us but people do all the time. Like if a teacher -- most teachers don't even [care if you're there] but like if our vice principal comes then they want you to get out of the hall, that's basically it. (Focus Group 6)

Students generally knew which schools, teachers, and administrative staff were more lenient. They also knew about conflicts over rules among teachers and upper level administrators and also among administrators themselves. They were more concerned, however, when they understood inconsistency as *hypocrisy*, specifically if the teachers and administrators did not abide by their own rules.

Allison: I think also the teacher too. I mean we had this one case where our one teacher's like, father, was in the hospital. And he's the biggest nutcase about having cell-phones. He sees you with a cell-phone, he freaks. And his father's in the hospital, and he's like "my cell-phone might go off at anytime!" And we're just like "jerk." Here he is yelling at us if you have any electronics and he has his cell-phone on waiting for a phone call... (Focus Group 9)

Mattias: Teachers swear.

Crystal: Good point. Yeah. The uh, the principal that I was just saying with the vandalism, he would swear on the announcements and say those "stupid idiots that have gone and fucked up again." (Focus Group 9)

In general, participants argued that teachers attended to their own circumstances, such as having a bad day or dealing with a crisis, in ways that were not available to students themselves. Similarly, many conduct codes indicated that students must respect teachers. Students tended to agree with this stipulation for most situations, yet cited cases where specific teachers did not respect them. The students' belief that respect should be mutual has been supported by British scholars Jones (2002) and Thompson and Holland (2002) who have each found that current social patterns render expectations of one-way respect for authority obsolescent and doomed to failure. Students expect teachers to abide by the same rules that they must follow.

In the second form of consistency, students were keenly aware of inconsistent applications of the rules across students. They felt that students who already got in trouble a lot were more likely to get in trouble for doing things that were ignored when done by other students. Students who stood out, with unusual hair or clothing, or students who were politically involved similarly felt that they were more likely to get in trouble. Corresponding to previously mentioned research in this area (Ferguson et al., 2005; Ruck & Wortley, 2002), the group of new immigrant youth also found that they would be singled out compared to the Canadian students, especially if they were not speaking English.

Fernando: I've seen, I've seen [principal's name] get pissed at somebody 'cause they didn't know how to speak English properly.

Latino Heat: At my school, my uh... vice principal? Right 'cause we're always talking in Spanish... so he goes "oh no, you always try to speak in English." And one day I was speaking Spanish with my friend and he came to me and he told me not to speak in Spanish. He speak in Spanish. // And he told me he was taking Spanish lessons because they thought we were like, forming a gang and all that. (Focus Group 8)

Conversely, cheerleaders, athletes, friends of the administrators or teachers, and those involved in student council were seen as more likely to get away with breaking rules.

Patricia: ...I was on student council for a lot of years and so the teachers really like me a lot like I am one of the favorite students but it's really unfair, (girls laugh), no its extremely unfair cause I am no better than any other student, like I've broken rules, I've done all the stuff but---they don't really look at that ... if you get on student council you're pretty much good for high school (laughs) ...it's pretty bad, like it's not fair at all. (Focus Group 1)

Participants were critical of these inconsistencies and discriminations, arguing that rules should be applied equally to all, and yet at the same time, they defended the importance of context for determining whether or not they should be punished for breaking a rule and the severity of the punishment. This contradiction led to several philosophical discussions about how to apply rules. For the most part, students were uncomfortable with favoritism or discrimination. They felt that students should not be treated differently for who they were or what they looked like, but rules should be enforced with attention to circumstance.

Finally, although many students were well-invested in some of their school rules, particularly those seen to keep the school safe and to address interpersonal issues between students, such as bullying, rules were experienced as a series of "no's" and frequently discussed as top-down and inconsequential (primarily if addressing student comportment, such as dress). They saw many rules as formulated against students as a unified whole and they would therefore act as lookouts for each other. Student policing was therefore rare except when a rule was seen to be *for* them, such as those against sexism and bullying. Although rules are communicated to them through agendas, signs, or announcements, students said that "getting yelled at" was sometimes their first indication that they had done something wrong.

*ANALYSIS: compliance and investment*

As outlined in the previous section, most students accepted and embraced a number of school rules, particularly the big or major rules. Many respondents also followed most rules without noticing. In terms of

their acceptance of the rules, we have noted that students were more invested in the rules that they saw as addressing their own safety and as disciplining students who were perceived to be making life difficult for everyone else. For example, students were quite critical of other students who were seen to be illegitimately breaking rules (e.g., through frequently coming to school late or wearing provocative clothing). A part of their frustration was that such actions undermined what they felt to be legitimate reasons (e.g., being late because the bus was late or wearing a tank top in hot weather).

When they discussed the acceptability of rules, students filtered the language of the written codes of conduct through their speech (e.g., constructing themselves and others through values such as self-respect and self-control). Liz (Focus Group 7), for instance, drew directly from the formal language of the rules regarding young women's attire: "[If] you don't respect yourself then you're not respecting anyone else." Acceptance of rules also reflected school conduct codes when students referred to the role of the rules in preparing them to become future adult selves and employees.

Liz: ...They're trying to prepare you for the real world!

Bee: Yeah people are judgmental and they're just trying to tell you that the clothes that you're wearing, as soon as you walk outside, what do you think? These people are talking behind your back. And you don't want that.

Liz: If you went to a job interview, would you wear like a short little mini skirt to let your butt show? (Focus Group 7, regarding dress codes)

This rationale and the importance of not disturbing others were evident in Focus Group 4:

I: Why is it important to be punctual? Just out of curiosity.

John: So you don't disturb the class and so you're able to learn everything. (Focus Group 4)

Such examples were particularly compelling instances of successful governmental processes because they are embedded in discourses of becoming, in conceptualizations of adulthood, and in a hierarchical work ethic. One might well contend that such instances illustrate the

successful imposition of the state imperative to categorize and contain human desire and creativity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983), a position to be further developed later in this article.

At the same time, however, there was also evidence of non-internalized compliance, or reluctant obedience to these rules. For example, several students quite pointedly stated that they were using obedience as a strategy to successfully get through high school, and that their parents had advised them to do so.

John: But now that it's in the higher levels of high school, [parents] say "yes we know this is wrong but you're almost out of there and teachers, they can determine if you're going to university or not," because they can give you really bad marks.

//

I: It's strategic.

John: Yeah. Yes, worth it.

Nicole: That's the thing, you have to suck up to teachers in the senior grades because they're the ones giving your university references.

Tina: Yeah. (Focus Group 4)

Although this last example to some extent illustrates docility, it may also disrupt easy readings of obedience as the internalization of rules. Arguably, this response can also be understood as a form of strategic, temporary, and conscious compliance to discourses of self-discipline and thus potentially a form of (rather impotent) resistance (Raby, 2005b).

ANALYSIS: *challenging the rules*

Despite preceding examples of internalized embrace of self-governance and reluctant obedience, students nonetheless frequently spoke of breaking and challenging rules. We will now discuss such challenge through several different lenses: direct challenge and contestation, rule-breaking as resistance, and desire.

As noted in the previous sections, students were quite critical of many rules and their application; they were concerned with rules being applied unequally among students and they were also attentive to hypocrisy and double-standards. They were willing to speak up about their concerns by attempting to talk to teachers and occasionally

successfully negotiating in-class concessions (e.g., being able to listen to a disc-player at certain times in class), thus taking advantage of inconsistencies in techniques of school governance. They also sometimes challenged a principal, although such defiance tended to accomplish little except when they were supported by their parents. In fact, students frequently cited appeals to parents or other adults to support their positions and ultimately the presence or absence of such support was pivotal to their success. It is perhaps for this reason, alongside a dearth of overt, formal, appeal processes or participation in rule creation, that despite such challenges, students were most likely to understand themselves as powerless. In fact, when asked if they thought students should be involved in creating their school rules, they expressed interest but framed such an idea as entirely fanciful.

Respondents did discuss a few instances of direct resistance, however, in the form of civil disobedience, when students unsuccessfully walked out to try to get a football team, unsuccessfully refused to stand for the anthem, and when boys came to school in skirts in solidarity with a boy who had been suspended for the same behaviour the day before. In one interesting case of communal non-compliance, a new vice principal had introduced a system of hall passes which was effectively ignored by students and teachers, and soon dropped for being unwieldy. The effectiveness of this last strategy was again bolstered by the support of adults.

In the face of such powerlessness, another potential form of challenge is, of course, intentionally breaking rules (Willis, 1977). Many students talked about breaking rules and gave various reasons for doing so, frequently justifying their infractions but sometimes also seeing them as wrong. Often rule-breaking was seen as acceptable if you had a good reason based on practicality and personal context:

Allison: I think there's a point though. Like you might be at school and say... something really shitty happens. Like you're not gonna want to go to class in tears. Say you know, some weird... like I had a friend who was going through a lot of family crises. She went to class and just walked out, because she could not deal with it. Every time you looked at her, she was in tears. She obviously was supposed to either be in the guidance office, outside, or in a washroom with a friend comforting her. I think that when you come to a point like that, you don't

want to be in class. Sure you're missing out on your education and that's really shitty but... (Focus Group 9)

Such breaking of rules may be best understood in terms of negotiation, or even drawing on a discourse of common sense, rather than resistance or politicized, overt challenge to the rules, suggesting that more traditional resistance theory does not quite fit. This example seems more about trying to negotiate between personal needs and institutional regulations. One might contend that students used what tools they could to escape the rigid boundaries of the institution, although certainly sometimes students seemed to break the rules simply because they could or to willfully push against the rules, as was evident in one group, where the participants sought loopholes. For example, in narrating a story about a student who ate some live fish from a tank in a science classroom, one participant argued, "There's certainly nothing in the code of conduct about fish" (FG 3 – Mike).

At times rules (or non-rules) were intentionally broken due to boredom or apathy with the school environment, also articulated as a consequence of context, although in this case the broader structural context:

Steve: Well this is my ideological suggestion for that situation is that if they could make school a little more interesting you wouldn't be getting into these kinds of problems, like if people were actually paying attention everyday and you actually had things to talk about in class, this whole obsession with rules and everyone knowing that rules matter, well people would be "like I am here to learn." (Focus Group 3)

In response to boredom, Steve skipped out so frequently that he was eventually asked to change schools. Steve was particularly articulate about the frustration that he felt with the school environment, one where he was required to be in even if he did not experience it as stimulating or useful.

Some young people, overwhelmingly from the focus group with street youth, had broken major rules. These students saw such rule-breaking as justified, although they framed their reasons quite differently from Steve. This case illustrates how values and justification are

potentially linked to class (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2003) and certainly to context. One very interesting component of this focus group discussion was their engagement with the rule against fighting. Four or five members in this group pursued a lively discussion about fighting, which they uniquely framed as an inevitable and sometimes even a useful form of conflict resolution. Because fighting is inevitable and simply moves off school property when stopped, they felt the no fighting rule to be impractical and the wider group seemed to agree. This was the only focus group to even debate the no fighting rule<sup>4</sup> as illustrated in the following segment:

I: [...] so okay, there's fighting anyway, so do you guys think it's a problem, this fighting?

Almost everyone: NO!

Becky and Lindsey: It happens anyway [people talking over each other].

I: So do you guys think it's good that people fight?

Jamie: It's not good to fight but it happens [people talking over each other]

//

Male voice [inaudible]: There's not going to be anyone---no one can stop us. If people really want to fight each other they are going to do it---

Girl voice [inaudible]: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Male voice: Whether they do it right there and then or save it for later [people talking over each other].

Jamie: Yeah man---

Amy: Even after school---

Jamie: The school can put a fight on hold but as soon as you get on the bus, you leave the school property you are getting it anyway.

I: Right.

Becky: And then most of the time you get it worse after school.

Male voice [inaudible]: Yeah. (Focus Group 2)

Two discussants, who had been suspended at some point for fighting, explained their actions by suggesting fighting is "just life." More broadly, as with many street youth (Transitions Committee, 2003), many of the youth in this group were marginalized within school: they had all at one point been suspended or expelled (e.g., for fighting, skipping out, or "flipping out" at a teacher), they had all attended more than one high school (one as many as eleven), half talked about their dislike of school,



and several mentioned teachers discriminating against them. Further, in their current context, these youth were economically marginalized and disproportionately prone to victimization by others (Gaetz, 2004). Arguably, for some, fighting is therefore their area of strength, one considered practical within their peer culture. Their debate around the no fighting rule thus underscores the on-going relevance of social context in the conceptualization of school rules, particularly contextual understandings of when rules are considered impractical. When prodded to consider how they would address fighting if they were in the principal's seat, these young people argued that extracurricular activities, especially regulated physical alternatives to fighting, such as boxing or football, would help them. It was here that students discussed having been involved in an unsuccessful walk-out to demand a school football team.

This focus group conversation is reminiscent of Paul Willis' (1977) work on British, working-class lads who resisted the obligations and discipline of the middle-class school structure. Willis argued that the lads' actions and attitudes were better understood as class-based resistance than deviance or rebellion, even if the lads did not articulate their actions as resistant. Similarly, by accepting physical mechanisms for dispute resolution, the participants in Focus Group 2 potentially counter a more reserved, middle-class dependence on verbal dispute resolution. As Annette Lareau (2003) illustrates when discussing working class families' negotiation of the middle-class elementary school, those without the cultural capital rewarded in schools are much less likely to flourish there. This position is also presented by Smith (2003), an ethnographer who argues that educators' attempts to teach dominant cultural capital to a group of young parolees actually fosters resistance, including disciplinary challenges such as pranks, disinterest, and dress code breaches, because the skills the youth possess are not valued. This is not to say that all the street youth in Focus Group 2 were from working-class backgrounds, although this group and Focus Group 7 were certainly the most marginalized of the groups under study.<sup>5</sup> Yet those in Focus Group 2 were clearly (and by far) the most likely to have come into direct conflict with school staff, to lack the economic and

cultural resources to effectively negotiate the school system, to be involved in fighting, and to see it as inevitable.

From this premise, we can look to wider student rule-breaking as resistance to institutional, age, and class-linked hierarchical structures rather than deviance or rebellion, even if it often seems practical and non-politicized. If rule-breaking is conceptualized as deviance or inherent youthful rebellion, the problem is seen to be within the young people themselves; their challenges lack the legitimacy of political motive. In contrast, by considering rule-breaking as resistance, the structural inequalities of schooling are laid bare and young people become rational subjects negotiating inequalities in ways that are practical for them. Willis' analysis also points out weaknesses to such forms of resistance. Through their resistance to the school system, the lads he studied effectively reproduced their class status as manual labourers. More broadly, when students' challenges to the rules manifest as rule-breaking, this form of resistance is undoubtedly quite ineffective. Rather than creating change or solidarity, it raises safety concerns among other students, individualizes students, confirms discourses of young people as unthinkingly rebelling, perpetuates violence and harassment, and may increase rules and their enforcement. Yet few of our participants identified any possibility that they could address inconsistencies in any more legitimate way. For most, the rules and their enforcement are "just the way it is" – rules must either be followed or broken.

A final and quite different way of conceptualizing challenge to the rules is not as resistance but as manifestations of desire. Above we discussed the emphasis on practicality as a reason for rule-breaking. To push this concept further, and drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1983), practicality and other forms of rule disruption can be re-thought as expressions of desire, for desire overflows the social/institutional boundaries and binaries that try to categorize and contain people (Tarulli & Skott-Myhre, 2006). Deleuze and Guattari thus privilege desire as a source of rupture or disruption to order that cannot be entirely contained. "Instantiations of desire", or what Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of flight," disrupt and mutate the order of such boundaries and binaries. The immediacy of these young people's desires, including their desires for touch, for comfort, and for certain peer relations, thus

potentially provides escape from the organization of the social into categories and containment by unsettling and disrupting them. Lines of flight are thus productive forces of becoming: embedded in the present but becoming something else, without a fixed endpoint such as developed, docile adulthood. Ironically then, *becoming* is quite profoundly embedded in the *present* and rule-breaking is about young people bringing themselves into being in the present, living in the immediate. It is the rules, not the youth, that are reactive in their attempts to impose order. The rules embody state practices of categorizing, limiting, and repressing the overflowing possibilities of desire. It is when present, lived desire becomes contained through such governmental categories as responsible student, future worker, and independent adult that people are tamed.

Some of the students' explanations for rule-breaking seem to support this reconfiguration, when they emphasized bodily practicality (the need to eat, the need to be emotional) or self-expression, for instance, and how these were frequently unrecognized by the rules. However, when students drew on dominant discourses (of adolescence or self-respect, for instance) to explain their rule-breaking or discuss breaking rules to serve other institutional ends (e.g., listening to music to do well in class) they did not seem to be disrupting the binaries and boundaries of institutional structures but rather reproducing them. Of course, our data rely on student explanations rather than observations, which complicates these interpretations as well – are respondents framing their explanations in the language of the institution because they are embedded within that language, or is it strategic in the belief that the explanation will then be given legitimacy (by a teacher or a researcher)?

#### CONCLUSION

Young people's relationships to school rules are as complex and diverse as they and their lived experiences are. Nonetheless, we found that many students agree with a number of their schools' rules and are invested in them, particularly more major rules and rules that they understand to be about protecting them. Such acceptance can be understood as indicative of their successful governance, their incorporation into present and future systems of hierarchy, and their recognition that diverse needs

must be weighed within an institutional context such as a school. Students were more likely to accept these rules when they seemed logical, practical, and in the interests of students as a whole and of themselves personally. This reaction is interesting to note when so few student handbooks provide a rationale for each listed rule.

At the same time, most students challenged at least some aspect of the rules and all, at some point, had broken them. It is primarily in the regulation and negotiation of more minor school rules, especially dress codes, where rules were broken, daily tensions erupted, inconsistencies were noted, and resentments brewed. Students were likely to identify a number of these rules as pointless except to allow administrators to exercise their power, and consequently students did not acknowledge the legitimacy of such rules. They dealt with these frustrations primarily through direct political challenge, negotiation, and rule-breaking. Students felt bored, frustrated with teachers who had double-standards or played favorites, and powerless. We concur with both Thorson (1996) and Schmuck and Schmuck (1989) when they stress the importance of listening to young people's experiences and addressing their disenfranchisement, particularly among students on the margins.

At the beginning of this article, we noted that the school rules are, arguably, attempting to create docile subjects (Raby, 2005a; forthcoming). On the one hand, through examining young people's engagement with the rules, we find that the rules are to a large extent unsuccessful in such a venture. Students accepted many of the rules, but this was on their own terms and within their own parameters. They noticed hypocrisies, debated details, and broke rules. On the other hand, students were made politically docile through their impotence as citizens who might engage with the rules that govern them. For the most part, students felt that they had little say in how their lives were governed and they were deeply skeptical about any possibility that they could be. They were resigned to a structural environment that they found oppressive. Their ability to debate some of the deeper philosophical questions regarding individual desires and the needs of a group suggest that many were skilled for such engagement. Instead, however, they lived their embodied lives as best they could while the rules were deployed to contain them. They are "slippery as fish" when they negotiate and elude

school rules, and yet "already caught" within the dominant language of the school rules and their justification, with little sense of themselves as potent political actors.

This paradox has both structural and interpersonal effects: it creates an environment in which teachers and administrators must focus significant time and energy on negotiating discipline, particularly "petty policing"; it frustrates students who are marginalized by differential discipline; it creates an environment wherein rule-breaking is easily legitimated and routinized; it reproduces discourses of adolescents as inherently rebellious; it frustrates students who would prefer to more legitimately challenge or effect change than simply through rule-breaking; and finally, it prevents students from learning to become participatory citizens. Rather than learning a democratic, participatory form of agency that is the cornerstone of democratic citizenship (France, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Schimmel, 2003), students learn that rules are top-down, seemingly arbitrary, applied inconsistently, and made to be broken.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Our focus is on secondary school; however the group from the Boys and Girls Club included three students in middle school. The comments from these students are included in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Although we refer to the participants as students throughout this article, some of the participants from the drop-in centre were not presently in school and several were over 18.

<sup>3</sup> Within Ontario the public school system includes Catholic schools that are overseen by a distinct, Catholic school board. Catholic schools generally include uniforms as part of their dress codes and have a reputation for having stricter rules than non-Catholic public schools. There were some Catholic school students in several other focus groups but this was the only all-Catholic group.

<sup>4</sup> As a reminder, Focus Groups 1-3 were not included in rule distribution outlined in Appendix B. Participants in Focus Group 3 argued at one

point against all rules but did not specifically discuss fighting. Focus Group 1 did not discuss fighting.

<sup>5</sup> Although participants of Focus Group 7 were also economically marginalized, these participants were quite dedicated to supporting school rules, including no fighting, although one participant also narrated an incident of being involved in a fight. These participants were younger than those in Focus Group 2, perhaps contributing to some of the difference.

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### Appendix A: Focus Groups

Focus group	
#1 Youth Centre	This youth drop-in centre is located in a mall in a small city. Participants were white. <sup>1</sup> 15-17 years Five females and two males. Economic backgrounds unavailable. <sup>2</sup>
#2 Street youth	Conducted at a drop-in and shelter for street youth in a small city. Participants were primarily white. 16-21 years Four females and ten males. Economically marginalized youth. 7 youth were out-of-school, 3 due to age.
#3 Political youth	Group located through word-of-mouth, with all participants involved in a leftist political group. All participants were white. 16-18 years Three males. Middle to upper class, professional parents.
#4 Performing arts	Members of an organized performing arts group in a small city. All participants were white. One 13-year-old, the remaining members 16-17. Three females, one male. Middle to upper class professional parents.
#5 French group	Participants located through word-of-mouth. All attending a French school. All participants white. Aged 15-18 Six females. Working class parents (trades and service industry).
#6 Catholic group	Participants located through word-of-mouth. All attending public Catholic school. All participants white. Aged 17-18 Two females, two males. Middle class, professional parents.

#7 Boys and Girls Club	Drop-in centre for young people located in a city. All participants white. Aged 13-16 Four females, two males. Economically marginalized.
#8 New immigrant group	Weekly program for new immigrant youth in a city. One participant white and self-presented as Latin American (with a strong accent). Remaining participants non-white; two self-presented as being from North Africa and one from East Africa. Aged 15-18 Two female, five male. Working and middle class parents
#9 LGBTTQ group	Weekly group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, queer and questioning teens. Seven white, one black, one Asian youth. Aged 15-19 Five male, four female. Across range of class backgrounds.

<sup>1</sup> Respondents were not asked to self-identify in terms of race or culture, although some members of the new immigrant group volunteered this information. It was therefore up to the researchers to determine race as visual cues would presumably be the same basis for differential treatment within the schools.

<sup>2</sup> In all but the first three focus groups, participants were asked about their parents' occupations in a short questionnaire at the end of the focus group. No information on parents' occupations is thus available for Focus Group 1. For Focus Group 2, general information provided by the youth shelter suggested that a number of the participants are currently living in precarious economic situations. As participants for Focus Group 3 were located through word-of-mouth, their demographic information was already known to the researcher.

### Appendix B: Compilation of Card Piles Students Created

	Good Rule	Controversial Rule	Bad Rule
Rules	#	#	#
No fighting No bullying No weapons No vandalism No sexual harassment No drugs/alcohol	6	0	0
No littering	5	1	0
Must be punctual	4	1	1
Respect teachers Must attend class	3	3	0
No clothing advertising alcohol, drugs, violence, racism or obscenity	3	2	1
No spreading rumours	3	0	3
Respectful clothing	2	4	0
No offensive language	1	3	2
No heavy coats in class No shoving or horseplay	1	2	3
No spaghetti straps or short skirts No public displays of affection	0	5	1
Uniform No gang type clothing No hats No ripped/torn clothing No walkmans, pagers or cellphones	0	4	2
No backpacks in class	0	2	4
Eating only in cafeteria	0	1	5
<b>TOTAL<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>62</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>34</b>

<sup>1</sup> Note that this data is drawn from focus groups 4 to 9 only.

<sup>2</sup> Rules have been grouped into categories for ease of presentation. Totals for each category are calculated by multiplying the number of specific rules listed by the number of groups that referred to them.