The Uses of Rules for Strategies of Containment and Self-Regulation in a Global Economy

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ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative research conducted from 1998 to 2001, this article describes classroom interactions in a high school and examines two uses of rules: one associated with confinement, and another associated with cognitive skills development. Though the two forms overlapped, the first was more prevalent in self-contained classes, and the second in the general education classes. At one level, the article describes how rules are part of an interaction between teachers and students, in which both groups are active in using rules to obtain benefits relating to personal fulfillment, peer approval, and social positioning. At another level, the article discusses how rules are used to teach some youths individual responsibility and respect for authority (preparing them to be law-abiding citizens and professionals in a world where they will have choices and some level of free will), while others, who are predominately African American, Latino, male, and poor, are literally surrounded by rules and placed in classroom arrangements that prepare them for immobility and limited choices. The uses of rules are examined in relation to social and economic realities involving work and the preparation of youths for a global economy, and for the way that school becomes a provider of free wills, offering mobility and choice for some, and confinement for others.

In his discussion about the nature and function of classroom rules, Robert Boostrom (1991) pointed out how rules are not just instruments for classroom management, but are also structures of meaning that teachers and youths use to make sense of the world. He used an example of a teacher telling children on their way to a field trip, “You can’t board the bus while you’re talking.” On the surface, the rule looks commonsensical; however, the children can board the bus while talking. The rule is not based on fact, but rather creates a “fact” based on beliefs about how a school bus should be boarded by students, and on assumptions and expectations about what teachers should say to students on their way to a field trip. The
The functions of rules surpass their basic utility—to safeguard, to maintain orderliness, and so on. Rules also function to benefit those who make the rules, and it is partly for this reason that particular rules (telling students not to talk) are chosen over others (telling students not to shout). There are too many questionable rules—rules that do not solve problems and rules that exacerbate problems—for us to believe that rules are created only for the reasons that are given by those making and enforcing them. Particular strategies are chosen over others partly because they benefit the individuals making the rules and serve larger interests having to do with social organization, economics, and the acquisition of power and status. The issue here is not whether the rule achieves its stated goal, but rather, whether it could be stated (and that people will be convinced) that the particular strategy will achieve the goal—that, for example, a group of children who do not talk will board a bus faster and in a safer manner than a group of children who do talk. The challenge for the rule-maker is to convince individuals who need to abide by the rule that the rule is in their best interest and that it naturally follows its stated purpose.

What Linda McNeill (1988) has shown about “defensive teaching” is applicable to rule-making. Though often shrouded in best practices, certain teaching strategies are used not to increase achievement or even to improve test scores, as is commonly stated, but to gain compliance from students. Simplifying topics to basic information, fragmenting topics into chunks of facts and figures that can be easily memorized, and mystifying controversial issues and avoiding talking about them are attempts to bargain with students. The teacher agrees to lay out the material in a simple way to give students what they need to know to pass the test, and does not make the class too taxing; in exchange, students adhere to classroom rules, do not cause trouble in class, do not make the teacher look bad in front of her or his colleagues, do their work promptly and quietly, and, most important, do not make the teachers’ lives too taxing. As McNeil put it, “Tired, bored and rushed to cover content, teachers and students met in a path of least resistance” (p. 176).
Though McNeil did not deal explicitly with meanings and functions of classroom rules as Boostrom did, she demonstrated through her descriptions of classroom interactions that students and teachers strike a bargain. In the earlier example, the children boarding the bus do so quietly not only because they believe that it is safer and more efficient to do so (if they believe this at all), but also because if they follow directions, they will be able to reap benefits; at the very least, they can go on this field trip, will be left alone by the teachers, and may get opportunities for other field trips. Martin Haberman (2000) has pointed out how students and teachers are often involved in a game called “What do I get for following directions?” (p. 208). Students follow directions and sometimes punish teachers by not following directions, depending on how teachers treat them; teachers respond to the actions of the students by altering their practices to keep the students at least partly pleased in order to avoid being punished with unruliness. Rules are not a means to an end; they are a shrewd kind of business between those making and enforcing rules and those abiding by and resisting rules. Those who abide by rules also create rules in other contexts, and those who create and enforce rules also are required to abide by rules that are sometimes different from and sometimes the same as those that they enforce. Through these processes, individuals negotiate their places in social hierarchies, attempt to alter the behaviors of others, and use rule enforcement to achieve personal gains; they follow certain rules and not others as a way of altering behaviors and achieving certain gains, all of which are valuable skills that individuals hone daily in a competitive capitalist society.

SCHOOLING IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

In this article, classroom interactions will be examined for the meanings and functions that rules have for those creating and enforcing them, and for the way that youths react to the rules, sometimes using them to assert power, sway people, and show off. The rule processes are also viewed in relation to the social and economic realities of the day, especially in terms of work and the way that schools prepare youths for a new economy. The new economy, marked by globalization, concentrations of wealth, displacement of individuals, and gentrification, is deeply stratified (Massey & Denton, 1993; Mishel & Bernstein, 1994; Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991). To some extent, schools, having the responsibility to prepare individuals for society, prepare youths for this stratified society. The rule processes in schools are a part of this, for the rules not only regulate but also prepare youths for particular positions in society. While some youths are taught the importance of self-regulation and are prepared to act with some level of free will, others are taught to accept lives in isolated communities outside circles of power. Though a number of authors have made the point, Bowles
and Gintis (1976) provided one of the first explanations of the school’s role in an industrial capitalist society where students’ access to knowledge is limited, schoolwork entails menial chores, and the status quo is continually reproduced. Here, rules are the groundwork on which rule-abiding, docile workers are formed and elites assert their authority and maintain economic and social dominance over others. Since the 1970s, though, the nature of work and the nature of national economies have changed, and so have the needs of power elites.

Unlike in an industrial society, where quantities of laborers are needed and jobs are menial and repetitive, current economic systems in many areas of the world are sustained by a slimmed-down crew of ambitious, creative individuals with the capacity, for example, to turn computers and Internet capabilities into dot.com businesses, to mine various industries (music, advertising, technology, media, entertainment, communications, tourism) for lucrative financial rewards, and to create home businesses. Some are able to turn towns into tourism sites and create world-class cities through both illusions of grandeur (slick advertising and media savvy) and hard money from investors and state budgets to build sports stadiums, new convention centers, and entertainment districts, and to gentrify neighborhoods. Labor has been mostly replaced by service industries and professional occupations (the white-collar mid-level salary or temp workers); work is often more temporal and spatially dispersed (people can work for businesses from their homes hundreds of miles away and are quick to change jobs); technology has made work more efficient (hence fewer workers are needed); and corporations are less devoted to particular places and operate in a more international world that stretches job opportunities across continents (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Casella, 2002; Torres, 2002; Wilson, 1996). Once organized around its center of commerce (a port, industrial center, or downtown), the global city is organized around entertainment districts, the creation of which has entailed gentrification and the revitalization of “hot” neighborhoods, and has led to the subsequent displacement and isolation of those who cannot benefit the new economy and are a detriment to the plans of developers (King, 1997; Lipman, 2002).

Under these circumstances, the city dweller who may have found a job in a textile factory in the early 20th century is more likely in the early 21st to find himself in a security company uniform guarding a parking lot for a new club in a gentrified neighborhood that may have once been his own. Even the talk about “labor,” “blue collar,” and “working class” can sound unreal; where are the blue-collar workers, anyway? They’re now uniformed clerks, attendants, security officers, or fast-food counter and cash register personnel with name tags who work for organizations headquartered in other states and countries. As capital becomes concentrated in the hands of a few global barons and is further removed from the professional worker, the power of individuals to enact change in upper-level corporate circles is cut off not only by distances, but also by the loss of power that workers
experience once businesses can easily relocate their plants and headquarters, sometimes to other parts of the world. An advanced degree and the willingness and ability to work odd hours and to relocate have become the norms in the service economy. This virtually cut off whole segments of mostly poor African Americans, Latinos, and disenfranchised Whites who lacked professional capital, were moved out of neighborhoods to make way for gentrification or suburban sprawl, and did not become appropriately educated to succeed in an information technology world, creating what Duncan (2000) referred to as a “superfluous population”: a group of individuals who are no longer needed, and are therefore directed to confinement in either segregated neighborhoods or in prisons.

If particular rules were used during industrialization to prepare workers for factory work, what rules are used in postindustrial society, a society that is increasingly stratified and where work is reserved for the educated classes, not the working classes? Some of the observations presented in this article suggest that we prepare youths for a world where some will have choices and mobility and some will not. The ability to have choice and mobility is based on how schooled, flexible, and technologically knowledgeable one becomes. Those who do not fit this description—the superfluous population—are prepared in sometimes separate or self-contained classrooms for lives not of mobility and choice, but of confinement. Sometimes these individuals do manage to enter the service economy, but usually on the lowest rung of it, where they serve the new global elite and the career professionals in all of their travel, entertainment, consumer, and work-related activities (Nelson & Cooperman, 1998; Swanger, 2002). Their jobs are low paying, there is no power attached to them, the individuals are easily replaced, and their access to upper-level management, again, is cut off by distance, loss of union power, and the lack of security that comes with companies that increasingly exist in scattered worldwide headquarters and in the World Wide Web but not in actual facilities.

Though focused on schools, this article examines what happens to a society that becomes technologically driven and therefore requires that individuals have knowledge that can only be learned in schools, a knowledge that requires access to computers and other technologies. This knowledge requires special expertise having to do with things more complex and invisible than the knobs and gears of industrial machinery—things such as information, circuits, chips, and microbits of data. For a variety of reasons that have been discussed by sociologists and anthropologists of education (Brantlinger, 2003; Delpit, 1988; Wells & Crain, 1997), schools provide knowledge and professional capital to certain populations and not others. Hence, knowledge itself becomes a commodity, something that individuals must earn, pay for, or have provided to them by quality public schools, which increasingly exist in more expensive neighborhoods. Additionally, U.S. society has become more deeply segregated by race and especially social class, partly because of the technology revolution (which helped spur
huge disparities between the wealthiest and poorest), and also because of
gentrification and suburbanization, an entrenchment of libertarian beliefs
in “choice,” and increased housing prices in neighborhoods with success-
ful schools and public services. In past eras, individuals lacking access to
higher education may have found jobs in factories, but factories have either
downsized or moved to where labor is cheaper. How a school responds to
such changes and social realities depends on the school, but undoubtedly,
schools will respond to the technology revolution as they responded to the
industrial revolution.

This article presents narrative data to examine the uses of rules in class-
rooms in relation to these more global considerations. At one level, the
descriptions of classrooms and the rule processes address how rules are
part of a teacher-student interaction in which both play active parts in
obtaining benefits relating to personal fulfillment, peer approval, social
positioning, and acquisition of power. At another level, the article shows
how rules are used to teach some youths self-restraint, individual respon-
sibility, and respect for authority, preparing them to be good professionals
and law-abiding citizens in a world where they will have choices about jobs,
where to live, where to send their children to school, and where to travel.
Others are literally surrounded by rules and placed in classroom arrange-
ments (self-contained classes, for example) that prepare them not for
menial labor, but for no labor. In these cases, rules act to confine them
and keep them separated from the mainstream school. That most of these
youths are African American and Latino, mirroring the demographic
makeup of the dispossessed in the early 21st century, highlights how their
school isolation is a precursor to their isolation in low-income neighbor-
hoods and in various kinds of correctional facilities.

BACKGROUND ON THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted in an urban high school over a 2 1/2-year
period from 1998 to 2001, during which time ethnographic methods were
used to examine violence and violence prevention efforts in the school. As
site-based and ethnographic, the research does not speak for all schools,
but highlights a pattern that has become apparent in the broader research
context. Although a range of ethnographic research was conducted, this
article is based on observations of 12 self-contained classes, 8 health classes,
and 8 social studies classes. Interviews were conducted with 23 students in
self-contained classes, 11 students in general education classes, 10 special
education teachers, and 6 general education teachers.

Two primary groups of students were the focus of the study. The first
group included students in self-contained classes. These students were
diagnosed as socially and emotionally disturbed (SED), other health
impaired (OHI), or as having some other form of conduct disorder, which
is a broad term used in the school to describe youths who acted inappropriately or defiantly, who were suicidal, or who were in conflict with other students. Most students who were overtly violent were transferred to an alternative school. There were about 200 students assigned to self-contained classes, though about 100 would show up at school on most days. The students took all or most of their academic courses in a single classroom with a single teacher. Though a distinct group, they were loosely connected to other tracked groups, specifically the low-level track (level 3) and the vocational education students. This connection between the tracks was seen, for example, with the “floaters.” About 10% of the students in self-contained classes were floaters. These were individuals assigned to self-contained classes but permitted to attend a limited number of classes with upper-tracked general education students.

The second group consisted of the general education students, which included level 1, and to some extent, level 2 classes, as well as the honors program. General education (or “gen. ed.”) was the umbrella term used in the school (and in this article) to refer to all of those students who were receiving a college preparation high school education; in short, they were not in self-contained classes, in the lowest-level track, or in vocational education. There were obvious differences between self-contained classes and general education classes, not the least of which were racial, gender, and socioeconomic differences. Self-contained classes were overwhelmingly composed of young men of color and poor White students; about 95% were African American or Latino, and the school social worker claimed that only 2 or 3 of the students came from a stable middle-class home.

The motivation for the observations and interviews was to examine how teachers used rules to maintain control of students, and how teachers and students conceptualized behavior in their everyday interactions. Just as Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1998) identified ways that teachers attempted to influence students’ beliefs about ethical behavior, and Bickmore (2001) showed how teachers regulated critical reflection and decision-making even as they taught citizenship, the study focuses on how teachers attempted to maintain control of their classrooms and influence students’ beliefs about behavior and their roles in society. During the coding of the field notes and interview transcripts, different activities relating to behavior and social control were highlighted. One set of activities, most prevalent in the self-contained classes, made use of rules and reward systems to prepare students for limited choices, immobility, and seclusion. Another set of activities, more prevalent in the general education classrooms, made use of moral lessons and rules to prepare youths for some level of autonomy, choice opportunities, and social and economic advancement.

The high school studied was located in a small and rather poor city in the northeast United States. It was one of the largest schools in the state (2,700 students), a sprawling building of additions made when the two high
schools in the city merged. The school was about 40% Latino (most from Puerto Rico), about 30% African American or a mix of Latino and African American, and about 30% Caucasian, many of Polish or Italian descent. Just over 50% of the students were eligible for the free lunch program. When the research was conducted, the self-contained classrooms, along with the special education department, were located downstairs in one wing of the school. In 2001, partly because of criticism relating to de facto segregation and complaints made by self-contained classroom teachers through their union about inferior work conditions, the self-contained classes were redistributed throughout the school, most in classrooms where health and other non-content area classes were taught. Though more dispersed throughout the school, the students in self-contained classes and those in general education remained relatively separate from one another; this separation was reinforced by the school through its tracking system and by the students through their peer group relationships.

Though the data were drawn from one school, the points made in this article are also based on observations and interviews from the larger research context, which includes nearly 7 years of observations and interviews in a variety of places, including other schools, a prison, and community centers. The research also includes studies of globalization and social policy, which were done primarily through reading policy documents, analyzing business ventures, and reading business trade magazines. In the article, the uses of rules are examined through ethnographic research, but their implications are understood in relation to the school’s new role in a global economy, where vast work-world changes have benefited some and devastated others.

CONFINEMENT AND RESTRANT IN SELF-CONTAINED CLASSES

At the time of the research, the self-contained classes were still located in the basement wing of the school. The classrooms were small and windowless, and often smelled of body odor because of their confined and airless nature. There were very few books in the rooms, and the walls were usually nearly covered with rules and instructions. In a typical classroom, I observed posters written on construction paper that said, Follow Directions! Be on Time! Maintain Boundaries! No Yelling, Teasing or Swearing! Only Food Given by Teacher Allowed! Write on Your Paper Only! Another sign read, ENGLISH SPOKEN HERE. Two signs read, Positive Call Home and Work Off Consequences. These last two signs referred to what the teacher would do if students behaved: make a positive call to their guardians or parents, or allow the students the opportunity to eliminate “demerits.” On the adjacent wall were signs that stated different responses that students would receive from the teacher if they misbehaved: 1. Warning; 2. Ten Minutes After Class; 3. Detention and Writing; 4. Send
to Housemaster and Call Home; 5. Severe Clause: Fighting, Vulgarity, Threats.

A series of signs stated what students should do if in a disagreement. They included: 1. Identify the problem; 2. STOP and think; 3. Three choices I can make; 4. Come up with a plan; 5. JUST DO IT. Next to the JUST DO IT sign was a check mark in the form of a Nike swoosh. The “three choices” part was meant to prompt students to think of three ways of acting that would avoid a confrontation. The sign next to the Nike swoosh read, All Privileges Will Be Earned, (ex.) Free Time, Canes Corner [the school store], Free Gym. Another sign read, Bring All Needed Materials to Class. If a student needed a pencil, he or she would buy it from the teacher. A sign near the teacher’s desk read: Pencils: 25 cents/Pens: 50 cents. A pie chart on the wall was half labeled “class participation/effort/attitude,” a quarter labeled “homework,” and another quarter labeled “tests and guides.” Also on the board was a list of the students in the classroom. Next to each name were check marks representing demerits for misbehaving, and merits for behaving. Next to this list was another that laid out the “cash-in” system: items that could be gained with each student’s merits. It went as follows:

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\text{CASH-INS} \\
10 \text{ pts.}—\text{Fruit Roll Up}; 15 \text{ pts.}—\text{Bag of Chips or Animal Crackers}; 15 \text{ pts.}—\text{Pencil}; 20 \text{ pts.}—\text{Pen}; 30 \text{ pts.}—\text{TWIX}; 30 \text{ pts.}—\text{Juice}; 30 \text{ pts.}—\text{Sprite}; 45 \text{ pts.}—\text{Free Homework Pass (One subject, one night)}; 55 \text{ pts.}—\text{Free Time (Quiet for 20 min.)}; 400 \text{ pts. (On Fridays Only)}—\text{Burger King or McDonald’s}; 300 \text{ pts.}—\text{Quiet Walkman (20 min.)}
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These types of signs were similar to those in other self-contained classrooms, and represented a means of classroom management that relied almost entirely on rewards, demerits, and other behavior modification techniques based on behaviorism (Johnson, 1996; Lowman, Menzies, & Palys, 1987; Skinner, 1983). Alfie Kohn (1993) pointed out that such rewards can undermine students’ motivation and teaches individuals that the reward is superior to the task for which one is beginning rewarded; in other words, when we tell students that if they do their work they will get time to listen to their CD player, we teach them that listening to the CD player is the desirable task, and doing schoolwork is a necessarily evil. Kohn and others agree that one’s behavior may be altered through the use of rewards, but often these are temporary changes that condition students to want an ever-escalating quantity of rewards.

What if we were to change the strategy, as we did when discussing the children boarding the school bus for their field trip? As noted earlier, students will abide by rules when it benefits them, so what if we changed the strategy in the following way: We get rid of the merit/demerit system and the reward/punishment system. We take down all of the signs except those
that urge students to be respectful (for example, take down ENGLISH SPOKEN HERE but leave up the signs that remind students to “STOP and think” before reacting). Then we work to make class interesting and beneficial to the students so that most behave because they understand that they will benefit by having an interesting class and that they will advance in their goals for themselves. It is quite possible, and perhaps likely, that this strategy will be just as effective as the merit/demerit system. Additionally, though, we would make classes more interesting and convey to students that they are expected to be successful; here we are conveying an entirely different message about the students and their role in the school.

Of course, there are significant problems with this scenario. There are huge hurdles, such as getting money and excellent teachers to those with the greatest needs, and even the resistance among some students as they are forced to work harder and to really succeed, sometimes for the first time. Additionally, though, there is the problem of what some economists refer to as the capability of society to absorb so much human capital. Are there really enough steady, well-paying jobs that offer health benefits for all youths, year after year, or do we expect that some will opt out or drop out of that competition for good jobs? Partly connected to this issue is the problem of expectations. Most teachers do not expect these students to succeed; to treat them as such is not really in their minds, for they are preoccupied with control and behavior, not freedom and academics. Students’ expectations for themselves are equally harsh. Not only do they have low expectations for themselves, but they also cannot envision routes to success, or they have aspirations that are so unlikely (to become a professional athlete, for example), failure is almost inevitable. Hence, these students and the teachers sink to the lowest common denominator. Students, for the most part, obey the rules, but only if teachers do not make them work too hard. They will accept, for example, that with so many rules posted in the classroom, there is little room left on the chalkboard for the teacher to write material related to academics. The teacher keeps standards low in order to avoid stressing the students, and uses the little free space on the chalkboard for little work.

The point system and rules not only filled the classroom walls with reminders of punishment (literally surrounding students at or above eye level), but they were also used and referred to during the course of the day. As in other classes, the signs were not stagnant messages; they became a part of classroom interactions and were used by the teacher and the students. The class just described was taught by a caring and usually energetic teacher who was on most days overwhelmed with paperwork and with students who, though they abided by most rules, constantly tested her patience. She was a White woman who had limited experience living among and working with diverse people, but felt that the best part of her job was the challenge and joys of working with minority students. As a relatively new teacher, she was given a difficult class of students who were
failing academically and had difficult, if not tragic, lives. They were all boys, all but one was Latino, and there was a mix of 9th-, 10th-, and 11th-graders in the same classroom. At the beginning of one class, the teacher told the students that they were going to do math. She had a worksheet for them. David, a 10th-grader who had been referred to the school social worker earlier in the year because of suicide threats, had the answer key to the worksheet. When the teacher noticed this, she told him to put it on the paraprofessional’s desk. While the teacher wrote a math problem on the board, David put the answer key on the paraprofessional’s desk, which was near his own. He sat back down and craned his neck to see the answer key. As in other classes, the students did not have books or notebooks, and some did not have pens or pencils.

After writing the math problem, the teacher turned back around and said to David, in an annoyed voice, “Put the key on the desk like I told you.” David told her that he did, but the teacher did not believe him. She told him that he would not be allowed to go to “free gym” during seventh and eighth periods if he did not put the answer key on the desk. Again, David swore that he had. The teacher went over to the desk, which was piled high with papers, memos, and workbook pages, and looked. She could not find it. David came over and found it and showed it to the teacher, who was satisfied and said politely, “Okay, my mistake.” A student, laughing, told her, “No free gym for you,” mimicking the voice of the teacher. Another student turned to this student and said, “And no free gym for you for saying that to the Missus.”

After the incident with the answer key, the teacher turned to the math problem. She had written on the board: 7.38 × 3 = . There were many volunteers to answer the problem. With enthusiasm, the students started getting loud, wanting to volunteer, and they became disappointed when they were not chosen. The boy who was chosen stood at the board trying to do the problem, and while he did, the class grew louder. The teacher kept threatening them with “time-out.” “Look,” she said, “you are heading toward a time-out if you don’t settle down, you know the rules.” She came to the center of the class and pointed out the rules to the students, referring them to the signs on the wall, but she could not find the sign dealing with time-outs. Out of the temporary silence, a student said loudly, “I want time-out,” which the teacher ignored.

After the student at the board figured out the problem, the students were given worksheets and told that they could work in pairs. There were three worksheets, and many students complained that there were too many pages. The teacher relented by telling them that they did not have to do the third sheet in class, but could do it for homework. While the students were working in groups, the teacher kept telling them, “If I have to say your names, then you have a time-out.” One student, acting as if to help the teacher, went to the front of the room, grabbed a piece of chalk, held it up to the demerit list of students, and, scouting the class, said, “Who am
I going to have to check?” The teacher turned to him and said, “You might as well put a check next to your name if you don’t sit down,” which the student did.

The students did not seem particularly loud, but the room was small and crowded, so even discussions about the math problems by the various pairs made a ruckus. The teacher told the students on a couple of occasions, “Keep control for your own good!” One student crumpled up a sheet of paper and threw it into the garbage. The teacher told him, “That’s one point off.” The student wanted to know why, and the teacher told him, “Because you threw it.” The student insisted, “but I got it in, that means two points for me.” The teacher told him, “It doesn’t work that way.” Another student said, “Don’t you know that the teacher always wins?”

There was a student sitting next to me. He was Latino, and the teacher called him, in private, the Eddie Haskell of the group because he was sweet and polite. When doing his math, he had to use a copy of the multiplication table because he did not have it memorized. One student was helping him, and asked him, “What is \(3 \times 1\), what is \(6 \times 1\)?” but the student was not able to answer him. He had to refer to the multiplication table. The student who was helping him turned to me and said, “I love math.” He helped other students in the classroom. I overhead one student say, “The best thing about childhood is graduating.” The students continued their worksheets until the end of the period. Two students were speaking in Spanish, making fun of a student who had become involved in a fight in the cafeteria the previous week. Apparently, the student in the fight was gay, and the two students talking about it were making fun of the way the student fought, “swinging his hands like a girl.” They imitated him, slapping at the air with their wrists. A student who had yet to do any of his math problems walked over to a computer in the room and began playing a game called Royal Rumble, which had a professional wrestling theme.

Not only did regulations and rules overtake wall space in the classroom, but also the teacher’s primary concern was that students obey the rules, especially those dealing with remaining quiet and still. In one way, this seems logical; after all, the teacher was working with students who were troubled and depressed, at least one who was suicidal, and others who seemed too big, energetic, and loud for such a small space. She understood the balancing act that she was up against; how do you teach kids with such social and academic troubles—at least one student did not even understand the concept of multiplication—in such a small space with so few resources, and not turn into what she called a “control freak”? She explained her job as she complained about it: “The simple fact of the matter is that I’d like to teach these kids, and we all know they need it, but what I have to do all day is just keep them in line.”

It is not expected that what she must do all day is teach them; she knows that her colleagues will evaluate her based on how well the students behave. The students are not expected to succeed, so teachers are not evaluated
by success rates. But the students are expected to misbehave, so when they
behave, the teacher earns respect and some level of job credit. Under these
circumstances, it pays for teachers to keep youths as quiet and controlled
as possible, which some do—especially in lower level self-contained
classes—through the use of rules that minimize mobility and talk, and with
mindless work that can be shortened and made easier if youths behave.
For their part, most students did their work quietly, and even the students
who rebelled and tested the patience of the teacher did so in nonthreat-
ening ways. There was jest in their actions, not threats. During the inter-
actions dealing with the rules—the references to time-out and free gym,
and the use of the demerits—students were verging on unruliness and were
sometimes showing off. They were the most attentive when the teacher was
teaching the math lesson. Students lost interest and began to get restless
when the student was brought to the front of the classroom and took a
long time to solve the equation. Others were obviously disappointed that
they had not been chosen, and once they were asked to begin their work-
sheets, which was routine in self-contained classes, this downward slide into
unruliness accelerated.

In a later observation of the class, the teacher had just finished doing
“2-minute mysteries,” a book series. In each story, a short (2-minute)
passage described a mystery that students had the opportunity to solve. The
mysteries were written for fifth-graders, but the teacher read them to the
class because some of the students were unable to read the books them-
selves. The teacher also used the books to reward students, telling them
on occasion that they would do a 2-minute mystery if they behaved.

For many educators and scholars, this combination of restraint, rewards,
and point systems is an effective way to address the specific needs of certain
young people who need clear guidelines and a lot of structure, and who
respond positively to behavior modification. In terms of classroom man-
agement, these are strategies to win over student compliance, and are sup-
ported by a range of theories associated with behaviorism, rational choice
theory, and some aspects of learning theory (Casella, 2001; Tavares, 1996).
Although it is possible that without these strategies, there may have been
even more inappropriate behavior, there was also a great deal of obvious
rule ineffectiveness. Despite the rules and energy put into efforts to “just
keep them in line,” students were still capable of breaking rules, being
unruly, making fun of the teacher, and homophobic mocking of a student
via a loud discussion about a fight. In addition, one student was able to
avoid doing his math work and sit at a computer playing what turned out
to be a violent professional wrestling video game.

The use of rules to keep students still and quiet, to limit interactions
among them, and to keep them in check through rewards and punish-
ments was the norm in the self-contained classrooms. In another class, stu-
dents were given their school breakfast only after they completed their
individual work, and only if they did so quietly. In this class, there were 18
students registered, but only 12 students had shown up for class (which was fortunate, because there were only 12 desks in the classroom). Of the 12 students, 4 were girls; 1 boy and 1 girl were White, and all students had urban accents. The teacher’s desk was on one side of the room, and the paraprofessional’s desk was on the other. Between the blackboard and the first row of desks was a narrow aisle, between the first and second rows of desks was another narrow aisle, and behind the second row of desks was the classroom wall. Each row was seven desks long. The classroom was about 15 feet wide and 20 feet long. The students were beginning third period, it was 9:30 a.m., and the students were impatiently waiting for their school breakfast, which was routinely served in their classrooms. Some of the students who had not arrived yet were floaters (as noted earlier, they attended art, physical education, and other non-content area classes in general education classes).

The teacher reminded the class that they could purchase privilege points by behaving, which included eating their breakfast in class. The breakfast was in a milk crate next to the teacher’s desk. It consisted of a juice box and a donut in plastic wrap. At the front of class was a chart that consisted of the students’ names under the header “Readiness Points.” This list took up about one third of the white board. Each student had check marks next to his or her name. The teacher started class by standing next to this section of the board and noting who was ready for class and who was not. A group of floater students came in late, and the teacher erased check marks next to their names. They came in loudly, and the teacher told them, “Not only are you late, but you are being disruptive.” Israel, one of the students, explained, “You know we come all the way from the other side of the building.” The teacher told him he had to try harder to get to class on time.

There was another poster board on the wall that said TICKET/POINT CASH-IN. It was the reward system: Soda: 30 Points; Movie Pass: 200 Points [watch a video on Friday]; Walkman Time: 100 Points; Breakfast: 200 Points; Headphones: 400 Points; CD: 600 Points.

By accumulating points, students also increased their privilege level. Starting at the highest level, these included (written on poster board): Level 3: Independent Work Time or Time-Off Work Privilege; Level 2: Day by Day to Level 3 or 1 [depending on behavior move to Level 1 or 3]; and Level 1: Possible Building Escorts, Assigned Seating, Few Privileges, and No Deals. Next to this, another poster board read CONSEQUENCES: 1. Warning; 2. Ten Minutes/One Page [writing assignment]; 3. Twenty Minutes/Two Pages; 4. Five Pages; 5. Thirty Minutes After School/Five Pages; 6. Return With Parent.

Above the classroom white board were several signs written on construction paper, including Follow Directions, Participate, No Swearing or Teasing, Be on Time, Maintain Boundaries. During the class period, the teacher either added check marks when a student behaved or erased them.
when a student misbehaved. He also referred to the charts and signs, on one occasion cautioning two students who were poking at each other to “maintain your boundaries.” The students were generally well behaved, and referred to the teacher, a 30-ish White man, by his first name or by “Mister” (which the teacher did not mind). They got to work when the teacher asked them to read a short story from copy paper and write a summary. The teacher told the class that after they wrote their summaries, they would discuss the short story. A student asked if he could go next door, where the time-out room was located, to write his summary. The teacher told him, “Yes, you have earned that privilege, so you may go.” The student got up and went. He returned about half hour later with his summary, which consisted of about four sentences.

While the students were doing their summaries, the teacher stood at the front of the class beside the Readiness Points Chart with marker in hand, giving or taking away points according to how the students behaved. Some students worked on their summaries, though lazily. Some were reading (or rereading) the story. Some were sitting quietly, looking half asleep. One student was at his desk sticking tape to his face. The teacher asked him for the tape, but the student would not give it to him. The teacher took hold of the tape dispenser, and he and the student had a tug of war for several seconds. The teacher said, “Please give me the tape,” and the student let go.

Every once in a while, a student asked about the breakfast packages. “When do we get to eat?” Another wanted to know if they could eat now because she was going home at fourth period. The teacher told them, “After you do your work, and if you behave, I’ll hand out breakfast the last 10 minutes of the class period.” After about 15 minutes, though, when it came time to discuss the summaries, the students protested. They complained that they were hungry, so instead of discussing the summaries, the teacher handed out their breakfast packages, and the students ate.

After observing this class on two occasions, the teacher explained his reasoning for having the point system. “The point system takes me out of the equation.” What he meant was that the system was objective; he was able to be fair and consistent, and put the decision-making process in the hands of students: “They, and only they, determine their behavior and the consequences of it, whether that be good or bad.” He also felt that it was better to display check marks for good behavior than for poor behavior because it focused on the positive. In regard to his teaching, he remarked, “It’s pretty basic stuff, so it’s not that demanding on me. That’s how come I can teach all the subjects. They really need the basics.” He explained that this enabled him to focus on behavior, and added, “That’s so they can get something done, because they are quite capable of doing it. They need the constant reminders, though.”

On the one hand, the rules and reminders concretized behavioral expectations. On the other hand, they were insistent messages that
drowned out academics and failed to prepare youths to live freely and to make appropriate decisions about their actions. Three of the teachers who taught self-contained classes discussed the importance of classroom structure, which was their rationale for their classroom management techniques. They also understood that there existed a threshold where good structure degenerated into overbearing restraint, and felt that their classes represented a good level of structure, not restraint. This was partly because they compared their classes with other self-contained classes, and because most of the self-contained classes were run in a similar way, the teachers’ use of rules never seemed out of the ordinary. However, if compared with the general education classes, clear differences emerged. The students in self-contained classrooms were kept as confined as possible and were not instructed on how to act as free agents, but rather how to be inactive. As the next section points out, restrictions, punishments, and rewards were also part of the general education classrooms, but they were not as prevalent as in self-contained classes. Instead, other uses of rules had to do with cognitive skills development and decision-making. The students in general education, which included the mid-level and upper-level classes, were prepared for libertarian lives in which they would be relatively free to live where they want and to act with few restraints. Generally, they were taught how to act in a civil society through moral lessons and didactic teaching.

COGNITIVE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN GENERAL EDUCATION

Whereas confinement and restraint were prevalent in self-contained classes, in general education classes, the focus was on cognitive skills development: teaching youths to behave appropriately through lessons about individual responsibility and self-regulation. In one social studies class for a mixed group of average and high-achieving students, behavior was integral to class lectures and there was informal banter between the teacher and students on each of the 4 days that I observed. Rules were part of the classroom organization; students sat in rows and knew classroom manners (raising their hands and not chewing gum). There were signs on the wall about respect, and rules about handing in papers on time and remaining quiet during tests. The social studies teacher was White and in his 3rd year of teaching. There were 21 students in the class, most of whom were White, and slightly more than half were girls. The teacher started the class by bringing up a fight that had occurred the night before at a basketball game at the high school. The fight had turned into a rumble, and several students were arrested by the school police officer. Other police officers had also been called to the school, and some students had been taken away in police cruisers. After mentioning the fight to the students, he asked them, “Why is society so violent? Why did there have to be a fight last night at the basketball game?”
One White girl responded to the teacher, “Because everybody wants to show that they are hard.” Another White student said, “They learn it from their parents.” The teacher explained that violence was like a bad habit and made an analogy to a stick of butter. He said, “What if you have a stick of butter on the counter and every time you walk by it you rub your finger on it. It becomes a habit. After a while, that stick of butter is going to be deformed, and no matter what you do, you’ll never get it back to the way it was.” An African American student said, “I really don’t care. I’m not going to go walking around with a big ‘S’ on my shirt for STOP THE VIOLENCE.” The teacher told this student, “You have to care. It is up to you, you to know what is right, to do the right thing.” He said, “Stopping violence starts with you!” The same student said, “Me stopping being violent isn’t going to stop other people.”

The teacher shook his head and made another analogy. He said, “Stopping violence is like stopping sunlight. You can’t get it all, but you can get a piece of it.” He then used another analogy involving a pile of dirt. He wanted the students to imagine that there was a pile of dirt in the parking lot, and that he asked one of them to scoop it up and move it elsewhere. He explained, “But if I ask everybody to help and cooperate, it gets done faster—if you all do your part.” A White boy said, in a fed-up and sarcastic way, “We know, we got to work together.” At this point, an African American student put his head down on his desk to fall asleep. When the teacher protested, asking him to lift his head, he said, “But if I’m asleep, I won’t do nothing wrong.” A White boy said, as if supporting the student but clowning around with him as well, “It’s true, teacher. He’s best behaved when he’s asleep.”

The teacher recognized the sarcasm coming from the students and seemed to grow a bit frustrated. He responded by making his point clear to the students by asking them sternly, “Who do I have control over?” And the class answered, with the same kind of sarcasm, “Myself.” A student started singing “Man in the Mirror,” a song by Michael Jackson, the theme of which is that change in the world starts with the “man in the mirror”: yourself. The student said, “That’s the song in my head whenever you give that speech.”

Compared with self-contained classes, the number of warning signs about discipline and the use of point systems was not as evident. Instead, students in general education were taught about their own needs for self-regulation—that it was “up to you, you to know what is right, to do the right thing.” This was achieved in part through moral lessons. The teacher expected these students to live relatively freely and to make choices, and put responsibility on them to solve problems associated with violence, a responsibility that was conveyed through simple stories and analogies with allegorical lessons. The lessons, though, did not pursue the issues raised by some students who felt that it was impossible to stop violence and criticized sloganisms (“I’m not going to go around with a big ‘S’ on my
shirt . . .”). In short, students were expected to take it upon themselves to pull together as if working to remove a pile of dirt in a parking lot, putting an end to their violence as one would break a bad habit. The teacher’s lessons and analogies were, in essence, morality tales that held little nuggets of truths that always, in one way or another, led to the same conclusion about youths’ individual responsibilities. On occasion, these lessons put some students to sleep and caused others to roll their eyes.

In an interview, the teacher described what he felt was his objective with regard to behavior and the types of problems that arose when attempting to achieve his goals:

It’s not only behavioral change, it’s behavioral maintenance. Keeping control of them [the students]. But we also need to have stronger training in education in the process of behavioral change. More information on how students work, about the human psyche. It’s fun, but behavioral change is tough. But the important thing is that there is consistency. In the building we have rules. These rules are not adhered to the way they should be. So rules mean nothing [to the students]. We have kids who say, “Hey, I’m a minor. I can do whatever I want.” I put this in the same category as the foreign diplomats who are immune to the legal system of our country. Some of these students walk into the room and think they’re immune, you can’t touch me. So we have rules in school that don’t mean anything. We have rules in society that don’t mean anything. This becomes part of the education. It becomes part of what these students learn: “I can get away with it. Your rules don’t mean anything to me.”

In a way, this teacher had given up on rules. He also felt that other teachers in the school, and sometimes administrators, did not enforce the rules. In another interview, he brought up the school’s dress code, which prohibited short skirts and sleeveless T-shirts: “But nobody enforces these rules, so when I say to a guy that that is inappropriate dress or say to a girl that the skirt isn’t what it should be, they see me as the enemy, and think this is my rule, not the school’s.” What he did not give up on, though, was an effort to influence individuals, if not by rules, then by education. He felt that students learned bad habits, that they learned that “rules mean nothing,” and therefore attempted, in a sense, to undo these teachings and replace them with moral lessons. Partly for this reason, he felt that teachers needed more education to learn about “how students work, about the human psyche.” The emphasis on education here was distinctive, for this was not the case in the self-contained classrooms where students were not considered capable of learning.

The focus on education, or cognitive skills development, was also seen in a health class observed on three occasions. The class was taught by a 1st-year teacher, 27 years old, White, and from a small town. He taught in a casual and easygoing fashion, and seemed to get along with students. On the classroom walls were posters of sports figures with inspirational messages: Achievement, Leadership, Challenges. There were also posters against drunk driving and binge drinking, and posters telling students to
“Respect Others and Yourself.” All but 4 of the 16 students in the class were Latino or African American. It was the first day back after the Thanksgiving holiday, and the teacher was starting a unit on violence prevention. Once the students got settled, the teacher asked them about their Thanksgiving vacations. The students responded in a variety of ways. Some shrugged their shoulders. One complained, “Not long enough.” Some said that they had a good time. One said, “Terrible, I got busted.” One boy asked the teacher, “How was yours? Did you get drunk?” The teacher told the student, “No, I did not touch one drop of alcohol.” One student said, “I did a lot of shit.” The teacher asked, “What was that?” And the student said, “Stuff. I did a lot of stuff—with my family.” The teacher shook his head and moved on. As usual, he began class by asking students if they had any questions or problems that were health-related that they wanted to talk about. Nobody volunteered.

The teacher turned to the textbook and said, “Okay, today we will learn about violence.” He wrote “Violence” on the chalkboard. He turned back around and pointed to one student, and said, “What is violence? And don’t tell me what the book says. In your own words.” The student, an African American boy, pretended to look at the teacher, but had his eyes downcast and was reading the definition from the textbook. Discontented, the teacher asked another student for a definition. “What is violence?” The girl he had chosen said, “Like hurting someone.” He asked another student, who said, “Anything against the law.” Another student said, “Not appropriate behavior.” The teacher wrote each of these responses on the board.

Then a White girl said, “If you want to defend yourself that’s not against the law.” The teacher was still writing the students’ responses on the board. Before he could respond, a Latino boy, disagreeing with the girl, said, “No. You can’t even defend yourself these days. You do something to somebody and you’re busted, no questions asked.” The boy who had said that he got busted during vacation said, “Right. That’s what happened to me.” Then another girl, who was African American, said, “When people try to disrespect you, you do what the school wants you to do and it doesn’t work, but if you’re violent it works. That’s true.”

The students became very loud, everybody shouting over the other, responding to this last statement. The teacher came forward and said, “Violence isn’t always the answer.” In response, one girl said to him, “I’m saying that sometimes you got to take action—wake up, Mister.” Another White girl said, “I have an example of what we are talking about. There was this girl who started in with me in lunch. I didn’t do anything. I just started to walk away, but then she spit on me. When I felt that spit hit my skin, I just flipped out. I dragged her across the floor. I can’t even remember what I did. I just flipped out. I had to ask my friends what happened. But I had to do that or she would have kept up with me. You see, I was walking away when she did that.”
The teacher, not liking these answers and responses, turned around and wrote “Justification” on the board, and under that, “Hunger.” Here, he was following the textbook. He said, “I don’t know what happened exactly in the cafeteria, but it does raise an important issue.” He asked the class, “Is being hungry something that could send you over the edge, be a justification for violence?” Students said, “Yes.” One student said, “Don’t talk to me when I’m hungry.” Another said, “Don’t be getting in my face when I’m hungry.” The teacher said, as well, that he gets edgy when he is hungry. “Maybe I won’t be violent, but I can lose my temper a lot easier,” he told the students. He then asked the class, “Is justification also an excuse?” But nobody answered him, or seemed to know what he was talking about.

The teacher wanted students to learn that violence isn’t always the answer, and used pedagogical techniques (question and answer, lecture) to do so. His transition from the girl’s story about the cafeteria fight to the class material having to do with hunger as a justification for violence distanced the issue and kept it within the realm of what the teacher wanted to convey. The teacher moved on with the lesson, teaching defensively once the students became interested and boisterous. However, the students had points to make about disrespect and self-defense, about violence prevention’s ineffectiveness (“you do what the school wants you to do, and it doesn’t work”), about violence as a way of taking action (“sometimes you got to take action”), and about the possibility that violence will achieve your goal (“if you’re violent, it works”). In addition, somebody in class had been arrested during the vacation for what he purported to be an act of self-defense. Despite these issues involving actual violence and real-life experiences, the teacher turned to the textbook, distancing the issue, and began talking about justifications, which he implied could be an excuse that people use to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions.

In an interview, the teacher told me what he tried to teach students during these lessons. Explaining what he meant by “justification,” he said, We can talk all day about the reasons for violence. We can talk about hunger, like we did. We can talk about poverty and all of that, but we don’t want to lose sight of what occurs up here [he points to his head]. If we just zero in on the justifications that are about poverty, then we forget what the kids have to contribute to the cause, though those are important too. But they’ll [the students] will just say, “Hey, I can’t solve world hunger and poverty, so what’s the point?” The point is not to make excuses. This is what I have to teach kids. It’s true, there are many reasons for violence, but this class isn’t about teaching kids how to solve hunger, though that is important. That I can’t really teach them, though, it’s not my job. I can teach them how to solve their own problems and to make the right decisions—that I can do.

Some students recognized the kind of approach that was being employed here. One student mentioned that it was a “security thing.” This was the same student who, in the social studies class described earlier,
was asked by her teacher, “Why is society so violent?” and responded, “Because everybody wants to show that they are hard.” She said about the health unit,

They want to teach us how to behave, raise our hands, keep our distances, not get down [fight]. And it’s for us. Nobody argues about that. Because some kids in this school need that. There’s fights here all the time. But it’s also a security thing, for them [school personnel]. You know, if I have a bunch of people I’m going to have to keep them in line and one way is to just keep bombarding them with stuff about what they got to do, that they got to take care of their own selves so we don’t need the police to do it all, arresting and all that.

Ironically, it was a self-contained class student who best articulated the distinct form of pedagogy in general education classes. He was a floater, so attended some general education classes.

I see the differences between here [self-contained] and reg. ed. [general education]. There [in general education] you have a lot more privileges. You can leave the class, talk, do what you want to a point, as long as you are good. And the way they teach you is different because they treat you like you can learn. They give you lessons and rules, but mostly lessons. And not just about the subject, but also about how you are supposed to act. That’s where they do all the training and teaching, the peer mediation, and character ed. stuff. It’s just part of the classes. Sometimes I think it is too much, and here, it is not enough. They don’t really do that here.

The comparison of the general education classes with the self-contained classes raises the issue of how differently students are taught about their own responsibilities and potentialities in the world. Some students, especially those in low-tracked or self-contained classes, are prepared for life on the outskirts of society. However, in the general education classes, the actions that went on around rules were enmeshed in moral tales and lessons, and seemed more appropriate for students who would be striking out on their own soon, many to college but others to work. These tales and moral lessons presumed the students’ right to choose and to be free agents in the world, urging them to make the right decisions and to act democratically and responsibly. In all of these cases, including in the self-contained classes, the rule actions were a kind of pedagogy, promoting a hidden curriculum that prepared students either for lives of containment or for lives as free agents, and sometimes a mixture of the two. The students listened to the lessons given to them. Sometimes they ignored them and fell asleep, but for the most part, they abided by the rules—this was true in the self-contained and general education classes—and did so in ways that were not always smooth and easygoing, and usually in ways that benefited them and enabled them to sometimes control others the way they were being controlled. The rule-making and rule-abiding processes were not just about social control; they were part of an ongoing occurrence
that had the effect of preparing youths for particular life circumstances. These circumstances were based on assumptions about how free students should be, and their future likelihood of being either lifelong productive citizens or perpetual wards of the state.

**BEING RULED AND USING RULES**

In both self-contained classrooms and general education classrooms, behavior maintenance was an undercurrent of class dynamics in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Jackson et al. (1998) noted a similar kind of phenomenon in the school they studied. Toward the end of the school year, each student in an elementary school classroom was asked to write a letter to the incoming class of students. The researchers reported that the most prevalent subject passed on to the new class from the more experienced students was the classroom rules and the importance of following them. Devine (1996) drew attention to similar circumstances in his reporting on an interview between a TV reporter and a New York City high school student. When asked by the reporter, “How do you like this school?” the student responded, “OK. Security treat us right.” And in interviews at City High, students sometimes automatically associated school with rules and security.

In some ways, the teachers’ use of rules was part of a continuum that extended from the types of classroom-based actions seen in this article to more drastic forms of policing and security. More drastic forms of security were seen in some classrooms, especially when school police officers were called to classrooms to escort students out, or explicit links between school and prison were made by teachers. For example, one day, a self-contained classroom teacher chastised his class by telling them, “When I was in prison, people paid attention to what superiors told them.” When some of the students didn’t believe that he had been in prison, he explained that before becoming a teacher, he was a prison guard. He went on to explain, “When people didn’t obey what they were supposed to do, they got a chair over their back real quick.” The students seemed mildly impressed. The teacher told them, “And it wasn’t the guards doing that, it was other inmates, because some of them wanted the order too. They knew that all of them would be punished.”

Not only is this a more blatant form of social control involving the hiring of ex-prison guards who espouse prisonlike mentalities, but the teacher also emphasized another aspect of the rule-making and rule-abiding process: that it is up to each individual to enforce the rules. He highlighted the dual roles of rules: to provide social control through rules and to train newer people for carrying out the rules. In the teacher’s example, inmates disciplined each other, and the teacher expected that students would do the same.
In general education classrooms, too, the nature of social control could be more drastic than the morality tales and didactic teaching described earlier. This was seen in the simple use of the intercom telephones by some teachers. This item of communication represented the easy access that teachers had to the main office, and from there, the guards and school police officer. As one teacher reminded students, holding up the intercom, “I’m hardwired to the man [the school police officer].” Students saw that the teacher, just by stepping out the door and looking down the hallway, could access the guards, who could be brought to the classroom—and sometimes were.

These are obvious acts of social control and security that become part of classroom interactions. However, the actions examined in this article were less obvious. But within them, several types of interactions occurred. In some classes, youths appropriated the threats of their teachers. Recall the first class description involving the self-contained classroom. The students mocked one another and clowned around by telling each other that they would not be allowed free gym or would have a time-out—the strategies that the teachers used on them. In so doing, they also reiterated—and therefore supported—the use of isolation and assumptions that they should be denied freedoms and have their choices limited. At the same time they were doing this, they were able to subtly belittle the teacher by mimicking her voice and using her own threats against her. They took up the rule process and performed it themselves, but also transformed the meanings of the student lists and signs to suit their own purposes. Inevitably, though, they made it common knowledge that these types of acts of confinement and restrictions were suitable and deserved. In one self-contained class, a teacher had to leave the room and assigned a class monitor. The student was asked to mark down any students who misbehaved using the teacher’s demerit system on the chalkboard. But as in the case of students mimicking the teacher, the monitor did not follow through as the teacher had intended. Instead of marking down wrongdoers, the monitor put the names of students whom he disliked on the board under the teacher’s “No Free Time” header. This was done in a semihumorous way, but the monitor undoubtedly took the opportunity to point out to the entire class those classmates he did and did not like.

In some cases, what students were doing here could be described as acts of humor—just clowning around—and in many cases, this was true. But the youths’ humor was not random and without political significance (see also Cousins, 1999; McLaren, 1985; Willis, 1977). In these cases, students demonstrated their acceptance of roles in which they would oversee people in ways that entailed a supervisory position, which they sometimes handled in ways that supported and parodied what they were doing. These students were given a taste of power that came with being in charge—the power to provide safety and to alter behavior, but also the power to twist other people’s strategies for their own benefit. And with this came additional
power to oversee, inform on, and sometimes humiliate others publicly. They also used the rules to avoid doing work and to reap other kinds of short-lived advantages. Sometimes the rules were used to secure their own failure in school. Some students wanted to be punished, especially if it entailed a time-out. This was seen, for example, when the student blurted out, “I want a time-out!” after the teacher had made a threat about it. In other self-contained classes, students coaxed and even dared teachers to give them a time-out or to suspend them. When this was mentioned to a student, she remarked that she too has seen such daring, and added, “It’s them [the students] showing they can stand up to the school.” In addition to defying authority, though, their resistance was partly a logical alternative to their predicaments in school (see also Knight Abowitz, 2000). It was a rational choice for youths who wished for better circumstances. For those in self-contained classrooms, an opportunity to go to the time-out room, which usually meant the chance to nap or to sit and daydream, was a step up from class drudgery. But the important point here is not the students’ resistance per se, but the way that the isolation in a time-out room becomes a normal and desirable circumstance, something that is made routine and accustoms students to confinement and isolation.

In the descriptions of general education classes, too, it was clear that students were not just soaking in the lessons about self-regulation and individual responsibility, and were doing their own kinds of ignoring and challenging. They were ignoring rules, criticizing them, and using them against others in ways that spiced up classes with humor and sarcasm. At the end of the social studies class, when the teacher called to them, “Who do I have control over?” and the students responded, “Myself,” they knew what they were supposed to say and responded as expected. They had heard the lesson even in their own popular culture through a well-known Michael Jackson song. After their initial attempts, many students did not want to be bothered with talking more seriously about the various topics, and some just wanted to move on. Therefore, they gave the teacher what they knew the teacher wanted: affirmation that the students knew that they needed to control themselves. Students also mocked each other, using the rules used against them to put down other students or to rally others to their side. And in a completely different way, some students went along with the class content and lessons. These were the students who knew how to play along and were willing to sit through classes and engage with the material (even if only superficially), in many cases passing through high school on their way to college.

CONCLUSION: OF FREE WILL AND CONTAINMENT

As noted earlier, what is being described here is similar to the dynamics examined by other theorists and researchers who have explained how some
students undermine authority and instruction through actions that McLaren (1985) referred to as “clowning,” and what Willis (1977) saw in working-class boys who used a biting sense of humor for self-defeating subversions of middle-class school orthodoxy. Other researchers have pointed out how class content (the teaching of civics, or Drug Abuse Resistance Education [DARE], for example) can have what is clearly a knowledge base that teaches conformity and self-regulation (Apple, 1993; Bickmore, 1999; Casella, 2001). Freire (1970, p. 64) pointed out how such pedagogies “treat students as objects of assistance” and “inhibit creativity and domesticate,” thereby destroying the “intentionality of consciousness.” Critics such as Kohn (1993) also have valid points when they criticize the unduly influence that behaviorism has had on education, and how reward systems seen in this article sometimes teach competition and undermine the intrinsic value of education. There are also examples of defensive teaching, of the ways that tracking can undermine the life chances of students, and of how knowledge is distributed differently based on a student’s track (McNeil, 1988; Oakes, 1985).

But there is another aspect of the events seen here that relate to how students are prepared not only for higher education or for the workforce, but also for life circumstances having to do with their participation or non-participation in a free society. In general, students are prepared for stratification. They are given a place somewhere in the socioeconomic hierarchy through a variety of strategies, some of which occur in schools (but certainly not all). Of those that occur in school, along with tracking and testing, rules are a part of this preparation. Those in the higher tracks are not only treated to high academic standards and enlightening education, but are also prepared for decision-making and choice opportunities. It is assumed that they will be productive citizens and are therefore in need of guidance and lessons about responsibility and self-control. Those in the lower tiers of the school are more likely prepared for limited choices and immobility. They are not taught how to act responsibly; rather, they are taught how to not act at all and to accept placements in society that are and inevitably keep leading to positions of low status and separation from good opportunities. They exist outside the mainstream of the school, often overlooked and kept quiet and semihidden; this prepares them for life outside mainstream society, similarly hidden and kept quiet.

In the early 21st century, the wretched of the earth are those who are not useful in a world of global capitalism, those who undermine gentrification and new tourism efforts, those who stand in the way of urban renewal, those who have not the resources to consume huge quantities of things both big and small, and those who have not learned or were not taught the skills needed to live in a highly technological, consumer-based world. In industrial society, even those not successful in school could live moderately as union laborers or factory workers. In most cases, they could take public transportation or walk from their neighborhoods to their jobs.
Now, many of those working-class neighborhoods have undergone renewal; they have either been destroyed to make way for a center or highway, or they are now middle-class neighborhoods with housing prices and taxes that prohibit many of the original residents from living there. Jobs are scattered, sometimes globally, and technology has replaced manpower. Public transportation is beside the point when one’s job has been liquidated because of a company move to Asia. Though individuals were treated poorly and industrial capitalism contributed to poverty, industrialization also contributed to a swelling middle-class sector of society, providing jobs to immigrants and southern African Americans in northern industrial cities and towns, and paving the way for ethnic neighborhoods and a semistable working class. Their treatment was often unfair and they were not given the same opportunities as the college-bound or those with clear professional inclinations. However, though they may have been in lower-level classes in school, they were prepared for work. The students in the lowest level classes today are not prepared for work. They are prepared for a world without work, and are treated as extra people—a superfluous population.

Youths once trained for the factory and placed in work-bound tracks are now prepared for confinement in prison-bound tracks. Not everybody on prison-bound tracks ends up in prison, and in some contexts, the use of the phrase prison-bound may be an overly harsh way of describing tracking, self-contained classes, and other groupings that tend to be overwhelmingly composed of minority and low-income individuals. But the immense incarceration rate of mostly young Black and Latino men and the high enrollment of young Black men and Latinos in self-contained and low-track classes cannot be dismissed. In my own research, I have heard individuals in schools use the term prison-track or prison-bound, though often tongue-in-cheek. The reference to prisons hints at a reality that rarely surprises us anymore: that over two million mostly poor, young, often illiterate and health-impaired individuals are in prisons across the United States—most for nonviolent crimes—and many are kept in severe isolation. Additionally, there are perhaps millions more in the preprison system of lock-down facilities, training schools, state schools, locked alternative schools, and boot camps (Casella, 2002; Parenti, 1999). Ferguson (2000) has pointed out that even elementary school administrators and teachers sometimes describe mostly young Black children as “prison-bound.” That classes were self-contained was in itself a strategy of confinement, and it was not uncommon for students to refer to this confinement in offhand remarks about wanting to “get out of this prison” while impatiently waiting for school to end. In addition, more thorough reports and files about the youths were compiled, including papers reporting on diagnoses, Pupil Placement Team (PPT) meetings, and psychiatric tests. This was partly due to federal and state regulations and special education laws, but was also part of a means of keeping information about students (having a paper trail) for cases in
which documented justifications were needed to outplace students to more secure facilities and alternative schools.

Of course, students in the lowest-level classes do have successes. Some enter the college track and are provided the classes and supports needed to continue their education. Others manage to start their own businesses or work for family members, and some move on to technical schools or community colleges and find jobs as state employees, nurses, and tradesmen. Increasingly, many are trained in the security profession, often with funds provided to schools by the Department of Homeland Security. Many enter the military. As mentioned earlier, for those entering the service economy at the lowest to mid-level rungs, their livelihoods often revolve around the needs of global elites. Whereas the factory worker provided labor for an industrial elite to prosper when resources seemed infinitely abundant, the same person today provides security, temporary work, data management, and information gathering for a global elite to monopolize resources that are increasingly scarce. The reach of capitalism is much greater when countries halfway around the world become so easily accessible by businesses—and they become so easily accessible partly because military, corporate, and political elites, especially in the United States, are so clearly aligned in their global ambitions. To live in this world and prosper, one must contribute to global capitalism in one way or another—as a consumer of things, as a taxpayer, or as a professional worker or member of the military. From observations of classrooms, it appears that if in-school youths are determined incapable of contributing to this system, they are taught to accept immobility and isolation, while those who can benefit this system are taught self-control and decision-making processes that will enable them to get ahead and to become the service workers and foot soldiers for global capitalism. Certainly, not all livelihoods fall into these patterns, and not all schools are the same. There is no way to make a direct connection between the types of rule processes seen in this article and such issues of global capitalism. But it seems unlikely that schools are removed from the influences of global capitalism, or that they will not respond to globalization. If, for industrial society, the school was a training ground providing skills for labor, in postindustrial society, the school seems to be a provider of free wills, offering mobility and choice for some, and containment for others.

REFERENCES


