Secondary Students’ Perceptions of School Rules

What is this research about?
This study examined how secondary students in southern Ontario perceive and engage with their school’s code of conduct. In particular, the researchers were interested in exploring students’ opinions on specific rules, when they might accept them and when they might challenge or resist them.

What did the researchers do?
During the summer of 2004 and 2005, the researchers hosted nine focus groups within urban, suburban and rural areas of a region in southern Ontario. Focus groups were conducted in conjunction with local community organizations including a Boys and Girls Club, an LBGTQ group, a drop-in centre for homeless youth, a Catholic youth group, and a new immigrant youth program.

Focus groups ranged in size from 3 to 14 participants, aged 13-21 years. 28 participants were male and 32 were female for a total of 60 youth from various socioeconomic backgrounds including economically marginalized, middle to upper class, and working class families.

What you need to know:
This study examined how secondary students perceive and engage with their school’s code of conduct. Results from nine individual focus groups with a total of 60 youth from southern Ontario revealed that students generally accepted rules related to safety but challenged rules that were seen as an inconvenience or were impractical. In general, participants felt that all students should be treated the same but the circumstances of the infraction should be considered when enforcing rules or issuing disciplinary actions.

Focus groups explored topics including what participants thought about school rules and the way they were enforced, what rules they would change, and whether they had ever participated in the creation of school rules. These
discussions were audio-taped and transcribed for data analysis.

Six of the focus groups also participated in a cue card activity where participants categorized school rules into three groups; good, bad or controversial. If the group reached a consensus of either good or bad, the rule was categorized accordingly. If no consensus could be reached, the rule was categorized as controversial. Examples of school rules included “no drugs or alcohol”, “no bullying”, “no offensive language”, “no spaghetti straps or short skirts” and “eating only in the cafeteria”.

What did the researchers find?
Results from this study indicated that certain major rules such as no drugs, no weapons, and no fighting were seen as “must haves” by the vast majority of participants and were generally followed. The one exception to this was the group of street youth from the homeless centre who debated the no fighting rule, stating that, in their life, fighting was bound to occur.

In contrast, several other rules were the focus of much conversation and, sometimes, debate. For instance, rules such as no swearing and no cell phones gathered mixed responses with some students arguing that the enforcement of these minor rules took up too much school time and caused tension between teachers and students.

In general, students tended to challenge rules when the rules were perceived as impractical—for example, students felt they should be able to wear spaghetti strap tops when it is hot and wear coats in the classroom when it is cold. However, rules were generally accepted when they dealt with issues of safety. For instance, no backpacks in the classroom was seen as an acceptable rule in a science lab, where tripping may cause chemical spills and accidents, but students challenged this rule for an English classroom where a backpack would be convenient to carry books in.

The context of a rule was also seen as important. For instance, many students felt that some rules, such as no cell phones or music players, might be appropriate in some contexts, but not others. It was considered acceptable to use a cell phone during lunch or in the hallway but not acceptable during class time. Likewise, students felt that they should be able to listen to music when
working on art projects but not during math lessons.

Participants also reported having issues with rules when they were not applied consistently by all teachers and when teachers broke their own rules such as having their cell phones on or disrespecting students. The general feeling was that teachers allowed themselves to have a bad day or deal with a crisis but the same was not afforded to students.

Likewise, participants also expressed frustration that rules were not applied in the same manner to all students. Some participants stated that students who were labeled troublemakers were picked on for infractions that were ignored when done by other students. The immigrant group also felt they were singled out compared to students who had lived in Canada for longer. Thus, participants felt that all students should be treated the same but the circumstances of the infraction should be considered when enforcing rules or issuing disciplinary actions.

Finally, participants discussed the language of rules which was described as a series of “no’s”. Many rules not related to safety were seen as being against students rather than in support of them. Students reported acting as lookouts for each other to avoid getting caught by those attempting to enforce such rules. In general, rule breaking was seen as acceptable as long you had a good reason and you were not jeopardizing safety or disturbing others.

**How can you use this research?**

Teachers and administrators may wish to consider:

- Rewording existing school rules in more positive language;
- Establishing a student advisory committee to represent student voice regarding school conduct;
- Examining school rules to ensure they are practical;
- Examining the way in which rules are enforced to ensure that enforcement is consistent and fair for all students;
- Consulting the larger body of research on effective and ineffective school rules and students’ perceptions of school rules.
About the researchers:
**Rebecca Raby** is a sociologist and an Associate Professor in the Department of Child and Youth Studies at Brock University. Her research interests include constructions of childhood and adolescence, gender and sexuality, regulation and resistance, and school rules. rraby@brocku.ca

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Original article:
To learn more about this study, we invite you to read the original research article:


Keywords:
Discipline, rules, code of conduct, student advocacy, student voice, secondary education.

About this summary
The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.

This summary reflects findings from this study only and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

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