SECTION II

Social Life in Schools and Classrooms: Establishing the Foundation for Moral Development

Children's moral and social knowledge originates in their attempts to make meaning out of social experience. Thus, we must begin our discussion of moral education by examining how schools function as social and moral environments. Social life is not experienced as an abstraction, but confronts children in their everyday efforts to negotiate their desires and needs in relation to those of others, in the social rules and norms that structure social interactions, and the feelings that come along with those social experiences. Schools and classrooms are not exempt from these elemental aspects of social life. How we structure educational environments and respond to student behavior forms part of what Philip Jackson and his colleagues (1993) refer to as the moral life of schools and classrooms (David Hansen, 1996). There are three basic aspects to schools and classrooms as social environments. These are (1) the rules, norms, and procedures, (2) the emotional or affective climate, and (3) the approach to discipline and student transgressions.

In Chapter 4 we will take what has been learned from research on children's social development to explore classrooms as normative (rule-based) systems. The chapter will illustrate how classroom rules that regulate morality differ from classroom conventions. The chapter will also explore how students at different grade levels think about classroom rules that regulate morality and convention. In Chapter 5 we look at classrooms and schools in terms of emotional climate and approaches to classroom management and discipline that facilitate moral development. Although the three basic elements are discussed separately in Chapters 4 and 5, we should keep in mind that they operate in conjunction with one another in school contexts.

CHAPTER 4

Schools and Classrooms as Moral Institutions: Rules, Norms, and Procedures

> *I think there would have to be a lot of rules about hitting at school because it would hurt somebody!*
>
> —Marisha, 5 years old

> *If you obey all of the rules, you miss all of the fun.*
>
> —Katharine Hepburn

Marisha and Lauren are girls who live near each other, but attend different public schools in neighboring districts. At Marisha's school, children all wear uniforms. In the morning they all line up with their classmates and are led into the school by their teacher. There is no talking allowed as they walk into school in single file, being careful to space themselves two floor tiles apart as they walk through the school hallways. When they reach the classroom they each take their assigned seats. During class, students must raise their hand to speak or to get permission from the teacher to sharpen a pencil. Going to the bathroom is done as a class with everyone lining up together and led to the bathroom by the teacher at set times during the day. No one is permitted to chew gum or eat in class. There are clear rules against using swear words or fighting on the playground.

Lauren, on the other hand, can wear jeans or shorts to school, but she can't wear extra-short skirts. When the bell rings she and her classmates enter the school together, laughing and talking to each other. Once they get to the classroom they take whichever seat they wish. If they have something interesting to say during a lesson, they can speak up without raising their hands as long as they don't interrupt another speaker. If they need to sharpen a pencil, they can do so whenever they wish as long as they don't interfere with other students. Bathrooms are built into each classroom, and students may use them freely whenever they need to. As in Marisha's school, students are not allowed to eat or chew gum in class. Also as in Marisha's school, there are clear rules against fighting, and kids aren't supposed to swear, though that rule isn't strictly enforced.

Lauren and Marisha attend schools with different social norms reflecting divergent educational philosophies and ideologies. Readers familiar with variations in school structure can imagine even more divergent forms than the examples illustrated by Lauren and Marisha's elementary schools. Schools constitute mini-societies within the larger culture. They are structured by norms and conventions that frame the emotional, personal, and moral elements of the school experience. As a consequence, the sociomoral curriculum of school, unlike its academic curriculum, is not confined to periods of instruction and study, but includes the social interactions established by school and classroom rules, rituals, and practices (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993), and the less regimented peer interactions that take place on the playgrounds, in cafeterias and hallways.

The standard approach to this "hidden curriculum" has been to treat the entire complex of school rules and conventions as filled with moral meaning (Durkheim, 1925/61; Hansen, 1996). Although it is the case that some school rules deal with matters of morality, and also true that the manner in which even trivial rules are enforced can have moral consequences, it is a mistake to equate school norms with moral standards. This is because the differences among convention, morality, and personal discretion also hold within the micro-society of the school. As teachers and administrators wrestle with how best to establish and maintain educationally constructive school rules and discipline, they are constantly confronted with the different ways in which students at different ages react toward those different types of norms. For the most part, teachers and administrators are unaware of the systematic way in which these types of norms vary. Nor are they generally aware of the tacit ways in which their own classroom interactions are often guided by these qualitative differences. In this chapter we will examine how conventions and moral rules operate in school settings. This will include a look at what rules children expect good schools to have. We will also look at the ways in which a teacher's authority can be affected by her or his approach to these different types of social norms. One might argue that how children view such issues doesn't matter very much because teachers exert considerable power over their students. However, as Metz (1978) indicated 30 years ago, the authority-child relationship is not a one-way street. Just as teachers and schools establish rules and policies for behavior, so too do students evaluate those rules and the teachers who administer them.

Children's Concepts About School Rules

Rules and Morality

Children and adolescents expect schools to have rules governing moral transgressions such as hitting and hurting, or stealing personal property. They argue that it is wrong for schools or teachers to permit such behaviors because they result in harm to people (Laupa & Turiel, 1986; Weston & Turiel, 1980). For example, when asked whether it would be okay for a school not to have any rules about hitting, one 5-year-old said:

> I think there would have to be a lot of rules about hitting at school because it would hurt somebody! (Nucci, 2004)

In addition, researchers have found that elementary school children apply these expectations to evaluate the legitimacy of teacher authority. Laupa & Turiel (1993) found that elementary school children accepted instructions from teachers that would prevent harm to another child, but rejected the instructions of teachers to engage in such things as hitting, which if followed would result in harm to another child. This finding is entirely consistent with the basic research indicating that children do not view such things as hitting as wrong because there is a rule. Instead, they argue that the rule should be there because *hitting is wrong.*

The Laupa and Turiel (1993) study dealt with hypothetical scenarios so that children could provide responses without fear of coercion from an actual teacher. It is possible, and perhaps even likely, that a child would follow a teacher's command to hurt another out of fear of the teacher's power. Nonetheless, the study suggests that children might not view such a teacher as a legitimate authority. The one caveat that must be added to this conclusion, however, is that because teachers are presumed to have greater knowledge than children, they have great potential to alter the ways in which children read the meanings of people's intentions and actions. As was covered in Chapter 2, recent work has shown that the informational assumptions people bring to social situations can radically alter their reading of events (Wainryb, 1991). Teachers who provide children with highly biased and prejudicial accounts of the intentions of people along racial, ethnic, and gender lines have the capacity to alter the ways in which children view the actions of others. The impact of such teacher bias, particularly when enacted within the context of a shared community-wide viewpoint, has been the subject of recent research indicating that children are aware of racial and gender stereotypes by as young as 5 years of age (Bigler & Liben, 2006). As we will discuss in the following chapter, students are influenced by adult bias, but they also negatively judge teachers who display such discrimination (Brown & Bigler, 2004).

Classroom Social Conventions

If we move from the moral domain to consideration of classroom conventions, we see a very different pattern regarding children's acceptance of teacher authority. With respect to conventions, students acknowledge that school authorities may legitimately establish, alter, or eliminate school-based norms of propriety (e.g., dress codes, forms of address) and the rules and procedures for academic activity (Blumenfeld, Pintrich, & Hamilton, 1987; Dodsworth-Rugani, 1982; Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1988 Weston & Turiel, 1980). As we saw in the examples presented at the beginning of the chapter, schools may vary widely in terms of these conventional and procedural norms, while sharing a common set of core moral rules.

The scope of the school's legitimate authority in establishing conventional norms is limited from the child's point of view by whether these norms encroach on areas of activity perceived by children as being within the personal domain. Smetana and Bitz (1996) found that children in elementary school are consistent in claiming personal jurisdiction over such issues as with whom to associate, how to spend lunch money, and choice of hairstyle. Arsenio reported that nearly 62% of all negative rule evaluations provided by fifth-grade boys involved undue teacher control of such nonacademic activities as bathroom and drinking fountain procedures and restrictions on free-time activities. In adolescence students are even less likely than fifth graders to grant legitimacy to teacher authority regarding personal or prudential areas of conduct (Smetana & Bitz, 1996).

As was noted in Chapter 2, the definition of what counts as personal is not, however, solely a matter of individual decision making. Schools are social institutions that place different sets of constraints on personal behavior than might exist in other social settings such as the family and the general outside environment. The majority of students in middle school and high school acknowledge these institutional differences and are somewhat more willing to accept conventions regulating conduct within the school setting such as public displays of affection (kissing in public) that would be considered personal in nonschool contexts (Smetana & Bitz, 1996). Students who defy these school-specific constraints on personal conduct tend to exhibit more general problems with social adjustment (Smetana & Bitz, 1996). Thus, schools represent a rather unique context within which children must learn to negotiate and accommodate their own personal freedoms in relation to the organizational conventions imposed by the varying institutions of general society.

Developmental Factors and School Conventions

There are also developmental factors that enter into students' expectations regarding school conventions. Before fourth or fifth grade children don't generally view the conventions of schools to be their business. Young children rarely if ever respond to another child's violation of a conventional school norm (e.g., talking without raising one's hand; Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Nucci, 1982b). This is not to say that young children are unaware of or disinterested in social conventions in general. Preschool-aged children do respond to violations of general social norms such as gender-inappropriate dress (Nucci, Turiel, & Encarnacion-Gawrych, 1983) and transgressions of the rules of peer-constructed games (Corsaro, 1985). Although young children have a sense of convention, they have a difficult time making a connection between themselves and the arbitrary conventional norms established by adults. In particular, they seem to maintain a distance between themselves and what they perceive to be the adult-generated rules that run schools as institutions.

One implication of these developmental trends in young children's conceptions of convention is for teachers to accept the fact that children are years away from having any real understanding of schools as social institutions, and that children view the establishment of school conventions as a task of responsible adult authority. As was mentioned above, young children view teachers as having such legitimate control over school conventions and procedures. It is reasonable, then, not only from an adult perspective, but from the point of view of the children, for teachers to establish the basic routines, conventions, and customs of the school day. As we will discuss in the following chapter, however, teachers can engage young children in helping to construct some of the conventions and classroom procedures as a way to encourage them to take personal responsibility for their actions, and also to help them construct a sense of the classroom as a community (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Watson, 2003).

As was described in Chapter 3, the development of social convention follows an oscillating pattern in which children shift between phases when they affirm the purposes of convention and subsequent periods when further reflection leads them to conclude that conventions don't really matter. First grade tends to be a period of affirmation of convention as consistent with the "natural order," for example, that girls but not boys wear dresses. Around 7 or 8 years of age (second grade), however, children start paying attention to the situational inconsistencies in the application of social conventions as evidence that conventions are not describing a "natural order." Such things as being able to call some adults by their first names rather than titles are now seen as evidence that conventions don't really matter. As you might expect, there are behavioral correlates of this period of negation, though not as pronounced as what one sees in early adolescence.

In our observations of classroom social transgressions we noted that the rates of conventional transgression are higher in grades 2 and 7 than they are in grade 5 (Nucci & Nucci, 1982b). In grade 5 children are about 10 to 11 years old, which corresponds to the modal age for Level 3 affirmation of the functional value of conventions as serving to keep social order. School rules keep things from turning into chaos. As one fifth-grade student put it: "We need rules or everybody would be running in the hallways." In contrast both grades 2 and 7 correspond to modal ages at the front end of phases of negation of convention. The main tool that teachers possess to help them in constructively dealing with the negation of convention maintained by second- and third-grade and middle school children is the general positive regard that children (especially at younger ages) have for teachers. In Chapter 5 we will discuss the establishment of a climate of *trust* between students and teachers as critical to a developmentally positive approach to student violations of classroom conventions.

One natural question that arises is whether the amount of time teachers spend on dealing with violations of classroom conventions is partially a function of having more conventional rules than necessary. In our observations of classroom interactions we have found that teachers are responding to a fairly large number of repeated violations of the same norms. The vast majority of classroom conventional transgressions committed by elementary school children fall into a few categories: cross-talking, being out of one's seat, talking without raising one's hand, and being out of line (Nucci & Nucci, 1982b). Over half of the classroom conventional violations we observed being responded to by teachers were accounted for by a single category: cross-talking (Nucci & Nucci, 1982b). Obviously second- and third-grade children in a negation of convention phase are not the best sources upon which to make such a judgment, because their lack of understanding of the purposes of convention contributes to their elevated levels of noncompliance. However, if a norm is violated at a fairly high level across grades, including fifth grade, at which point children are at their most compliant, then there may be reason to reconsider the appropriateness of the convention.

Let's consider the issue of cross-talking for purposes of illustration. Second-grade and fifth-grade children differentiate disruptive talking, which prevents others from hearing the teacher and doing their work (a moral harm), from merely chatting quietly with a neighbor. During our interviews, children expressed the view that rules against disruptive talking were good ones. In our observations, however, we witnessed teachers responding to children's cross-talking that was neither disruptive to others, nor interfering with the overall learning of the children being reprimanded. No one, including second-grade children, is in favor of a chaotic classroom. However, there is a difference between chaos and conversation. Even in the most interactive and well-organized classroom, there is bound to be "down time" in which children will want to simply talk to one another. This is particularly the case when children finish their seat work ahead of their classmates, and during periods of classroom transition from one activity to another. In addition, children (and my university education majors) often find it pleasant to occasionally chat with a neighbor while doing their work. In none of the above examples are educational goals being compromised. Reprimanding children in such situations would seem to add little to their education or their love of schooling. A far better way to make use of the children's desire to socialize is to integrate it into instruction through the uses of discourse and group activity as instructional methods. This will be taken up again in Chapter 5. A simple suggestion that DeVries and Zan (1994) make with respect to younger children, which I would echo here as a general approach, is that teachers and school administrators reduce conventional regulations to those that are actually instrumental to the operation of a school or classroom.

In deciding which conventions to maintain on a school-wide basis, elementary school teachers and administrators might consider calling on the expertise of fifth-grade children. Students at this age are both experienced with the norms and purposes of schooling and are also at a point of affirmation in their concepts of social convention. During a focus group that was part of a research project, we asked fifth-grade children to share with us some of the rules at their schools that they thought weren't especially good ones, or rules that should be modified. Their answers might serve as an illustrative example of how children at this age might be of help to teachers. One school was reported to have a "no passing" rule that forbade anyone from walking past someone else in the hallways. The children readily understood the goal of the rule as helping to reduce the likelihood that someone would run in the halls and either get hurt or knock down a younger student. However, they saw the "no passing" rule as going too far. They pointed out that the "no skipping" and "no running in the halls" rules at the school were sufficient to meet those safety goals. These same children also stated objections to the need to raise one's hand in order to say something in class. Again, they expressed an understanding of the organizational purposes of the rule, but felt that it should only apply to whole group lessons and should not be enforced in small group activities. As one girl put it, "We manage to be polite and talk at home without raising our hands, why can't we be expected to do that here?"

Many schools engage fifth- and sixth-grade children in activities such as student council and as hall monitors and assistants to school crossing guards. In these ways, schools contribute to the integration of children into the conventional structures of school society. These activities also help to develop children's sense of personal responsibility. What is being suggested here is that schools go beyond the pro forma nature of these institutions and actually engage them, particularly student council, as meaningful forums within which children can contribute to the establishment of the overall set of school conventions.

School Conventions and Adolescence

Early adolescence is a second phase of negation of convention. This is coupled with an expansion of what children at this age consider to be personal, rather than under the jurisdiction of adult authority. The developmental double whammy of the early adolescent negation of convention along with the expansion of the personal is associated with an increase in parent-child conflicts (Smetana, 1995). It also makes teacher-student relations more challenging. School norms that were annoying to fifth graders become highly objectionable to some adolescents in grades 7 through 9. Issues of appearance, manners, tardiness, talking in class may become a blur of personal choice and arbitrary adult dictate.

These adolescent behaviors often give a false impression of self-centeredness, and the resistance to authority is sometimes mistakenly responded to through harsh control. University of Michigan researchers (Eccles, et al., 1993; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998) have provided evidence that despite the increased maturity of adolescents, middle schools and junior high schools emphasize greater teacher control and discipline and offer fewer opportunities for student involvement in decision making, choice, and self-management than do elementary school classrooms. Accordingly, Eccles and her colleagues (1998) have reported that the mismatch between adolescents' efforts to attain greater autonomy and the schools' increased efforts at control resulted in declines in junior high students' intrinsic motivation and interest in school.

Through it all, these students are still children in need of affection and structure. Schools are still social institutions that require compliance with certain norms in order to function. The key then in terms of positive social climate is to construct a conventional system that allows for personal expression. In many American schools this is accomplished through generous dress codes that permit oddities, such as green hair, but draw the line at obscene or immodest attire. But open dress codes needn't be the avenue that a given community or school takes. As stated above, adolescents are generally able to adjust to the idea that school is a place where behaviors (e.g., public displays of affection, such as kissing) that would be personal matters elsewhere are under legitimate conventional regulation at school (Smetana & Bitz, 1996).

As with young children, a positive approach to this age group is for the teachers to make a distinction between the norms needed to operate the school and to protect student safety and those behaviors that constitute a "minor threat" to the social order. For example, marking a student tardy for being next to his seat rather than sitting in it as the bell rings may make the adult feel powerful, but it does little to enhance the student's appreciation of the norm of promptness. Without reducing things to a cliché, this really is a phase that will pass, and some adult patience is called for. Most students who were "good kids" in fifth grade still view teachers as people worthy of fair treatment. For example, a student will call teachers by their titles in order not to needlessly offend the teacher, even though the student is clueless as to why using the teacher's first name is offensive. Firm and fair enforcement of rules with a dash of humor will work better than rigid requirements for compliance.

Eventually junior high school students and high school freshmen reach the point (14–17 years) where they construct an affirmation of convention as basic to the structuring of social systems. As one would expect, this developmental shift is associated with a marked decline in classroom misconduct (Geiger & Turiel, 1983). It is also a period in which students fully comprehend that the array of school conventions structures the high school as a societal system. Even as students move within their own particular crowds and cliques, the larger conventional culture of the high school with its norms, rituals, and traditions provides many students with a sense of belonging.

An example of how this affiliation can be leveraged within a traditional large high school is provided by the "First Class" program at Deerfield High School in Illinois. First Class originated in 1994 as a result of problems with graffiti, littering, vulgar language, and a basic lack of belonging that was perceived by some students and faculty as characterizing student life at the high school. In response, a committee was formed of students and teachers who set out to democratically establish shared norms of faculty and student conduct, and agreed-upon modes for teachers to address student misbehavior. The result of these efforts was a visible dramatic shift in the overall look of the school, in student behavior, and in a general sense of school community. The challenge faced by Deerfield High School and other schools that might wish to engage in similar sorts of activities is to keep such efforts current and alive. This cannot be done simply by addressing crises and by generating formal codes of conduct. The community discourse needs to become a much more integrative aspect of student life. For this to happen, however, schools are going to have to recognize that a portion of "instructional time" is going to have to be apportioned for these social developmental purposes.

Teacher Authority and Domain Appropriate Responses to Rule Violations

The fact that students apply their social reasoning to school rules has important implications for how they read teacher responses to moral transgressions and violations of classroom and school conventions. Researchers have explored this issue in studies looking at students' evaluations of the appropriateness of teacher responses to hypothetical transgressions of school rules. In one such study (Nucci, 1984) children in grades 3, 5, 7, and 9 were shown line drawings of children engaging in behaviors that were either moral transgressions or violations of a convention. Following the presentation of each line drawing, the children listened to a tape recording of a teacher providing five possible responses to the student behavior. Each child was asked to rate the teacher's responses on a 4-point scale as an excellent, good, fair/so-so, or poor way to respond to what the child had done. The five teacher responses were those that had been shown in observational studies (Nucci & Nucci, 1982b; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Nucci, et al., 1982) to be the most prevalent modes of teacher response to classroom transgressions:

1. *Intrinsic features of act statement,* which indicates that the act is inherently hurtful or unjust ("John, that really hurt Mike.").
2. *Perspective-taking request* is a request that the transgressor consider how it feels to be the victim of the act ("Christine, how would you feel if somebody stole from you?")

3. *Rule statement,* which is a specification of the rule governing the action ("Jim, you are not allowed to be out of your seat during math.").
4. *Disorder deviation statement* indicates that the behavior is creating disorder or that it is out of place or odd ("Sally, it's very unladylike to sit with your legs open when you are wearing a skirt.").
5. *Command* is a statement to cease from doing the act without further rationale ("Howie, stop swearing!).

The examples presented above are all ones that would be considered domain appropriate. The reader can generate examples of domain-inappropriate responses by simply substituting the form of the responses to items 1 and 2 for the responses given to items 3 and 4 and vice versa. If the reader does this, it should be apparent that providing moral responses to violations of convention direct the student to consider a set of intrinsic interpersonal effects that simply are not there (e.g., in response to leaving one's seat during math time: "Darrell, how would you like it if other people got out of their seat during math?" or "Darrell, it upsets people when you leave your seat."). The responses that are the best fit with violations of conventions provide a rather weak basis for evaluating the effects of moral transgressions (e.g., in response to hitting: "John, it's against the rules to hit," or "John, that isn't the way a gentleman should act.").

In the study just described (Nucci, 1984) and a subsequent study with preschool-aged children (Killen, Breton, Ferguson, & Handler, 1994), it was found children prefer teachers to use domain-concordant methods of intervention (e.g., telling an instigator who doesn't share toys to give some back "because it's not fair to others who do not have any") rather than domain-inappropriate ones (e.g., telling a child who has hit another child, "You shouldn't do that; it's against the rules to hit," or simply saying "That's not the way that a student should act.").

When it comes to children's evaluations of the legitimacy of teacher authority, we found that children age 10 and older evaluate not only the teachers' responses but also the teachers themselves (Nucci, 1984). Students rated highest those teachers who responded to moral transgressions with statements focusing on the effects of the acts (e.g., "Carlos, that really hurts Mike."). Rated lower were teachers who responded with statements of school rules or normative expectations. Rated lowest were teachers who used simple commands (e.g., "Stop it!" or "Don't hit!").

As one would expect, students rated highest those teachers who responded to violations of convention with rule statements or with statements indicating that the acts were disruptive or inconsistent with social expectations, and they rated lower those teachers who responded to such transgressions in terms of their effects on others (e.g., "When you sit like that, it really upsets people.").

In studies examining how teachers spontaneously respond to actual classroom transgressions (Nucci & Nucci, 1982b; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Nucci, Turiel, & Encarnacion-Gawrych, 1983) we found that teacher responses were not uniform across transgressions, but instead tended to map onto transgressions as a function of domain (roughly 60% in response to moral transgressions; 47% conventional). These same studies, however, also indicated that about 8% of teacher responses were domain discordant, and another 40% domain-undifferentiated simple commands (e.g., "Stop it.").

During informal conversations, the teachers in the above studies indicated that they were unaware that they were responding in these systematically domain-differentiated ways. Their own sense of things was that, while they tried on occasion to give reasons for rules or explanations for why a given behavior was wrong, they were mostly giving commands to stop misbehavior or reminding students of how they should behave. This perception of themselves as focused on rules and social order may have been due to the fact that in proportional terms, simple commands made up a substantial proportion of their actual responses. This is interesting in light of the fact that students rated simple commands as low or lower than domain-inappropriate responses to transgression. It would appear, then, that there is room for movement in teachers' current practices toward more domain-appropriate patterns of response.

Marilyn Watson (2008) has recently identified an interesting wrinkle in how elementary school teachers may apply these lessons to classroom situations. She points out that when teachers engage students in helping to construct classroom rules, teachers would be wise to occasionally refer to that fact when addressing transgressions with students. For example, a teacher might respond to a child who blurts out answers without raising his hand, "Remember, Martin, we said we were going to raise our hand and wait to be called on to speak." In addressing the student in this way the teacher simultaneously enforces a rule and empowers the student by reminding him of the peer-based source of the rule. This approach works well as a domain-appropriate response to violations of peer-generated classroom conventions. However, it poses a potential problem as a response to moral violations. Imagine if in the example above the teacher had responded to a child who has called another child a name with the statement, "Remember, Martin, we said we weren't going to call each other names in this class." In doing so, the teacher would be making use of the peer-based source of the norm, but also would have reduced the reason that calling someone names is wrong to a matter of social consensus and convention rather than moral harm. This would be a domain-inappropriate response. Watson (2008) suggests that the teacher can avoid this problem by supplementing her reference to the peer norm with an explanation of the moral basis for the rule. For example, "Remember, Martin, we said we weren't going to call each other names in this class. People's feelings are hurt and they feel bad when we do that."

Summary

Schools and classrooms are mini-societies governed by moral rules and conventional norms. An important way in which school contributes to children's social and moral development is how rules and norms are established and enforced. Children and adolescents apply their concepts of morality, convention, and the personal to evaluate schools and teachers as legitimate authorities.

Children and adolescents expect schools to have rules governing moral transgressions such as hitting and hurting, or stealing personal property. They argue that it is wrong for schools or teachers to permit such behaviors because they result in harm to people. Children negatively evaluate schools and teachers that don't enforce rules to govern immoral (hurtful) behavior such as fighting or stealing. They also negatively evaluate schools and teachers that promote morally harmful behavior such as gender or racial discrimination.

Children and adolescents treat social conventions as something that teachers and administrators can establish or change so long as they don't overly infringe upon what students consider to be personal and private. Students' tendencies to obey school conventions fluctuates by grade level as a function of developmental changes in their understanding of the function of social convention. The middle school years are a period of transition in which students tend to negate convention as "simply the dictates of authority." Students in this developmental period are also expanding what they consider to be personal matters that should not be regulated by authority or convention. Most young adolescents, however, accept school as a special institution and go along with restrictions that they would object to in other social contexts.

Children and adolescents also apply their concepts of morality and social convention to evaluate teacher responses to transgression. Domain-appropriate responses to moral violations refer to the harmful effect of the act on another person, or direct the transgressor to take the perspective of the person who was affected by the behavior. Domain-appropriate responses to violations of convention focus on the governing rule, or the social disruption or deviation from social expectation resulting from the behavior.