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Hushing as a moral dilemma in the classroom

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Abstract

Life in the classroom is governed by a variety of rules. One typical classroom rule is the rule of silence or low noise. Teachers often deal with students' noise-making and conversations by hushing them. This article reports an investigation of how hushing can create moral dilemmas for students at their desks in the classroom. This study is part of a larger ethnographic research project on values education in the daily life of school, conducted in two primary schools in Sweden. The findings show that students think that by hushing, teachers are now and then acting in the wrong way and, in consequence, the students are forced to go against the teacher to act in accordance with their own moral standards, or to give up, in order to avoid the risk of getting a reprimand. The analyses revealed three categories of moral dilemmas or conflicts with rules: indiscriminate hushing as (a) a conflict between morality and social conventions; (b) a pure moral conflict; and (c) a conflict between morality and authority.

Everyday life in the classroom is governed by a variety of explicit and implicit rules. One typical classroom rule is the rule of silence or low noise (e.g. Jackson, 1968), and one typical way for a teacher to deal with students' transgressions of this rule is to hush. This article reports an investigation of how hushing can create moral dilemmas for students at their desks in the classroom.

Moral education in Sweden

Primary schools in Sweden have, according to their official curriculum policy document (Skolverket, 1998), the task of forming, mediating and firmly establishing democratic values and norms in their students. Schools should strive to let all students develop skills to make and verbalise ethical decisions, to respect the human dignity of others, to oppose and counteract offensive treatment of others, and to help others. Students should develop the ability to empathise with others and the disposition to act in the best interests of others. In this respect, the essential purpose of values education in the public school in Sweden is the internalisation of democratic and pro-social values in the students. However, schools in Sweden do not traditionally teach values or moral education as a specific subject. Instead moral education is more or less integrated in other teaching subjects, especially social studies and religion, but even in subjects such as history and physical education. Nevertheless, two school classes in the study reported here allocated one lesson a week to Project Charlie, a special approach to values education aiming to teach students social competencies and life skills to enable them to cope with anger, harassment and conflicts in a constructive and non-violent way, to resist peer pressure and drug use, and to have a healthy lifestyle and be both self-confident and pro-social. Furthermore, a national report indicates that teachers undertake values education through conversations of many forms: formulating and implementing common school rules, trying to create a good social climate, handling conflicts between students, working against bullying, and so on (Skolverket, 1999). According to Swedish statistics, more than 90% of Swedish students feel safe in school, but only half of the students think that the classroom is usually calm and quiet (SCB, 2005). In a Swedish study, teachers were asked to write down behaviours that they found troublesome in the classroom. The most frequently cited were chattering, inattentiveness, hindering other students, being noisy and late arrival (Granström, 1996). Observation data from Swedish classrooms indicate that teacher-dominated whole-class activities and individual deskwork are typical, whilst cooperative teamwork among the students is atypical and infrequent (see Granström, 2006). This is also typical in the case of the two schools studied here. These strategies in classroom management are of course significant to the social climate in the classroom, and therefore also to the issue of moral education.

The functions of classroom rules

According to Doyle (1990, p. 118), classroom rules are 'usually intended to regulate forms of individual conduct that are likely to disrupt activities, cause injury, or damage school property'. One common view is that the main function of classroom rules is to regulate and control the students' behaviour in the classroom. Through the rules, and the sanction and reward systems which uphold them, the teacher is able to establish order and discipline, and when order is established, it is assumed that teaching can be conducted in an environment conducive to learning (e.g. McGinnis *et al.*, 1995).

This view of seeing classroom rules merely as a means of achieving order has, however, been criticised. Boostrom (1991, p. 198), for example, argues that this instrumental view of rules obscures their function as 'the embodiment of a way of life in the classroom'. According to him, students do not only take part in short-term behaviours but also in far-reaching ways of thinking about themselves and the world. Classroom rules reflect ideas about teaching and learning. As rules structure life in the classroom, they also structure the knowledge and the skills that students learn at school. Rules and teaching content are interlinked. Classroom rules function as a moral ordering of the world, and embody a way of life. This indicates that the school or classroom rules are also an aspect of the moral education in school. Some of the rules are part of explicit moral education, for example explicit prosocial rules or rules against bullying, harassment or stealing (Thornberg, 2004). Other school or classroom rules are part of implicit moral education or the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968; Thornberg, 2004).

Some problematic aspects of school or classroom rules

School or classroom rules are problematic for at least two reasons. First, an over-emphasis on rules can, according to some theorists, undermine the goal of fostering self-discipline, critical thinking and democratic skills in children. Instead, over-emphasis on rules may just lead to superficial order and blind compliance (Render *et al.*, 1989; Schimmel, 2003). In such a case, moral education does not appeal to students' reasoning, feelings and participation, but to authority and power, and it reduces morality to the valuing of obedience and respect for authority. This can hardly promote and empower students to develop democratic skills and more complex moral reasoning and understanding.

Second, it is easy to imagine that there is a risk that a system with many explicit as well as implicit school or classroom rules contains inconsistencies and contradictions. Many studies show that students actively judge teachers' behaviour, and the value and fairness of school rules (e.g. Killen *et al.*, 1994; Taylor, 1996; Thomson & Holland, 2002). Jackson, Boostrom and Hansen (1993) observed how teachers enforced classroom rules inconsistently. Sometimes teachers ignored transgressions, and sometimes they did not. Occasionally a transgression could result in severe punishment, at other times the same kind of transgression elicited only a command to stop a certain behaviour. Because classroom rules can be perceived by students as inconsistent and unfair, being in conflict with each other, and being enforced inconsistently, it is reasonable to assume that this system of rules can lead to moral dilemmas in the classroom, both for the teachers and the students. Students have to choose between conflicting rules, or between a rule and a teacher's command. Furthermore, if the students perceive too many inconsistencies and too much unfairness in the rule system and discipline procedures at school, this could jeopardise the teacher's credibility as a moral authority or the rule system as a good, credible and legitimate set of rules, in the eyes of the students. According to Taylor's (1996) research, students frequently report teachers' failures in implementing rules consistently and in treating students equally. In a study conducted by Williams (1993), students criticise teachers who they judge to be insincere, unfair and inconsistent. They 'respect' these teachers only because they 'have to'.

Method

This study is part of a larger ethnographic research project on values education in the daily life of school, conducted in two primary schools in Sweden. The first research site was a school which included classes from preschool to Grade 9 (from 6- to 15-year-old students), and the second was a school which included classes from preschool to Grade 6 (from 6- to 12-year-old students). Data collection strategies included observations, as well as interviews with students and teachers. Classroom and playground observations were conducted three to five days each school week from October 2002 to May 2003, in the first school, and then from November 2003 to May 2004, in the second school (with an exception of two school weeks). Field notes were written to record students' and teachers' interactions and behaviour. Many conversations in the field were also audio-recorded on a portable minidisc recorder.

Nine teachers (seven females and two males) participated in individual semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The questions used in the interviews focused on the teachers' perspectives on their values education practices. Ninety-four students in four school classes, 50 in two Grade 2 classes (8-year-old children; 26 boys and 24 girls) and 44 in two Grade 5 classes (11-year-old children; 24 boys and 20 girls), participated in same-sex and same-age small-group interviews (2 to 4 children in each group). All the students received their parents' permission to take part in the study. In these group interviews, the focus was on school and classroom rules as well as other values issues in the everyday life of school. Student group interviews took place during the last two months of the fieldwork in each school and lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. All interviews were recorded on a portable minidisc recorder and transcribed by the author. Informal conversations were also had, usually with students but also with teachers, during fieldwork.

The method of abduction, with roots in pragmatism, was used to analyse data in this study (Scheff, 1994). Abduction is an analysis approach between induction and deduction. Instead of beginning the research with a preconceived theory in mind, the researcher tried to be open and sensitive to the data, without rejecting pre-existing theoretical concepts and constructions. Theories were used, not to mechanically derive a hypothesis to test, but as a source of inspiration and interpretation in the processes of qualitative analysis in order to detect patterns that might lead to understanding (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). The steps in the analysis in this study included: (1) an inductive detection of the classroom rule of silence or low noise and the high frequency of teachers' hushing practice in the classroom; (2) interviews with teachers and students about this topic in order to obtain their perceptions and ways of reasoning; and (3) comparisons between hushing incidents and interview statements from teachers and students in order to sort them conceptually and group them. In this third step, theories were used in the analysis, according to the method of abduction. Concepts and research from domain theory were particularly drawn upon because of this tradition's interest in children's and adolescents' perceptions of rules, rule transgressions and teachers' interventions (e.g. Turiel, 1983; Smetana & Bitz, 1996; Nucci, 2001).

The classroom rule of silence or low noise

During the observations in the primary school classrooms the observer became aware of the classroom rule that deals with the question of how much noise is tolerable (see also Jackson, 1968). According to Jackson, this rule serves the function of maintaining order and preventing 'disturbances' in the classroom activity, together with several other rules; for example, the rule about who may enter and leave the room:

A common problem in elementary classrooms is how to prevent students from disturbing each other during periods of individual seatwork and study. The solution has to do partly with maintaining a relatively low noise level ...(Jackson, 1968, p. 105)

In the study reported here, Swedish students explain this rule of silence or low noise with *functional reasons*, that is, in order to maintain and promote specific activities (e.g., 'so we get a good working atmosphere', 'all rules are good, because it should be quiet so we can work better', 'it's quite good that it has to be quiet in the classroom - we can get more done'), but also in moral and egoistic terms. The students give *moral reasons* by pointing out that too much noisy behaviour has negative consequences for others and it is not fair (e.g., 'if we talk too loud, we spoil things for our classmates who are trying to work', 'it's not fair because other classmates who are working get disturbed and have to do more homework', or 'if we talk too much, our teacher can get a headache'). The students give *egoistic or prudential reasons* by pointing out that too much noise also has negative consequences for themselves (e.g., 'if we just talk and forget to work we won't learn anything').

Indiscriminate hushing

One common strategy that teachers use to maintain the classroom rule of silence or low noise is, according to the classroom observations, to hush. It happens now and then when the teacher is talking to the class, when a student who has permission from the teacher to speak is talking, or when the students are doing individual deskwork, and when one or more students are speaking or making a noise in these situations. In this study, the focus was on the situations in which the students are doing individual deskwork. If we take a closer look at the different conversations going on between students, and which are being hushed up by the teacher, then the moral education in these situations appears to be considerably more complex and problematic than at first glance.

While the students work at their desks, for example with tasks in mathematics, it often happens that students start talking to each other. Some of these conversations are about TV programmes they have watched, handball matches which they have played, incidents in the playground, discussions and negotiations about what they want to do in the playground during the next break, and so on. There can be jokes and giggling in some conversations, in others there can be questions and explanations relevant to ongoing schoolwork. In addition to these conversations students may start to make inarticulate sounds, make comments, or talk quietly to themselves while they work with a task. Now and then teachers hush the students or tell them to be quiet or to lower their voices. Often these reactions from the teachers have a collective and indiscriminate character, that is, they do not have an explicit addressee and do not take into consideration the

differences in the content of the conversations. These teacher-interventions are, in this article, called *indiscriminate hushing*. Because the hushing usually has a collective character, that is, the teacher addresses the class as a whole, not an individual student, it is reasonable to assume that every student who, at that moment, is talking or is involved in a conversation could perceive the hushing as being addressed to her or him. The following excerpt is from a peer conversation that occurred along with other peer conversations in the classroom during a lesson in mathematics.

Daniel: Well, how did you do that one?

Erik: Which one?

Daniel: Number fourteen?

Erik: I did it like this [*points to something he has written in his open sum book*]. I put-

Teacher: Shhhh! [*It becomes silent in the classroom.*]

Erik: [*Turns back and starts to do his own school work again.*]

(Sound-recorded field-note, mathematics lesson in the classroom, fifth grade, age 11.)

This type of conversation begins with a student who turns to another student near her or him and asks for help. If the other student begins to help, then we have a helping situation, an example of pro-social behaviour. But what happens in the kind of helping situation mentioned above? In some cases the students stop speaking when the teachers hush, as in the example excerpted above. In other cases they continue their conversation but at a lower volume (usually they are already talking quietly). Since a number of conversations between students often take place in parallel while the students are working in their seats, the teacher's hushing often becomes indiscriminate. The hushing and the demand for silence do not discriminate between the different types of peer conversations, irrespective of the students' intentions (whether they are, for example, to help others in their school work, to loaf around, to make fun of others, or to challenge the authority of the teacher) or the content (on-task or off-task behaviour) of their conversations. The hushing from the teacher affects everyone who is talking. The indiscriminate hushing appears to mediate that *it is better to be quiet and just get on with one's own work than to assist someone asking for help*. It seems that the teacher mediates to the students involved in the helping situations that silence is more worthwhile or desirable than being helpful. According to the classroom observations the phenomenon of indiscriminate hushing is very common, and it is actually fairly common that students, who are involved in a helping situation, are exposed to this indiscriminate hushing.

How students perceive the indiscriminate hushing in helping situations

How do the students perceive these situations? Group interviews and informal conversations with the students indicate that some students discriminate the indiscriminate hushing on their own. They interpret the teacher's hushing as addressed to those who are talking about non-schoolwork issues, and not to those who are helping each other in the schoolwork issues ('I think

that you can go on helping because she is only hushing those who are talking about other things'). However, the group interviews and informal conversations also reveal that a lot of students do not discriminate, but seem to interpret the indiscriminate hushing in the helping situation in line with the 'mind your own business' norm. Some of the students think that the teacher's reaction is wrong and that they have to disobey the teacher in order to act in accordance with their own moral standards, or just give up, to avoid the risk of getting scolded.

Interviewer: Mm. What do you think about, for example, when a student asks another friend for help, and they begin talking and the other explains how to do something, and there are others in the class who are chatting, and then Marianne [the teacher] says, 'Shhh!'. What do you think then?

Victor: Bad. I think you should be allowed to finish helping with the problem.

Robin: It's good of course if people are talking like this.

Interviewer: What did you say?

Robin: If people are talking all around the class, it's good if she hushes, but those who are helping each other should go on, just talk a bit quieter.

Interviewer: Mm.

Robin: Or just whisper a bit.

Victor: Yes, sometimes they do. When I am sitting beside a friend, they do sometimes, and sometimes I do. And sometimes I don't.

Interviewer: How come?

Victor: Well, so that Marianne doesn't hush me up.

Interviewer: How does it feel when you stop helping someone?

Victor: Bad.

Interviewer: Why does it feel bad?

Victor: Well, it isn't right not to help.

Robin: No, you want to help, you know.

(From a group interview with three boys in fifth grade, age 11.)

Some students seem to perceive that they have to disobey and go behind the teacher's back in order to act according to their view that the moral value of helpfulness (to help a person who is

in need of or who asks for help) is the right thing in these circumstances. According to classroom observations, the students sometimes defy the teacher's hushing in order to continue helping their classmate, but sometimes they stop helping, and instead of helping they comply with the teacher's hushing.

Indiscriminate hushing as a moral dilemma

'Moral dilemma' refers to a situation where we are faced with conflicting alternatives and must choose between them, and no matter what we do, we may break a rule. This may be seen as a conflict of duty (e.g. Fox & DeMarco, 2001). There has been some research on moral dilemmas in everyday life (e.g., Wark & Krebs, 2000; Haviv & Leman, 2002). Colnerud (1997) discusses ethical dilemmas and conflicts that the teachers themselves experience and describe in their teaching situation. It is not just the teachers who are faced with moral dilemmas in school or classroom settings. It is reasonable to argue that the students also have to deal with moral dilemmas and make moral decisions in the classroom as a result of the complex system of classroom rules and the teachers' discipline procedures. The focus in this article is on the teachers' indiscriminate hushing and the classroom rule of silence or low noise. The analysis in this study resulted in three categories of moral dilemmas or conflicts of rules: indiscriminate hushing as (a) a conflict between morality and social conventions; (b) a pure moral conflict; and (c) a conflict between morality and authority.

Indiscriminate hushing as a conflict between morality and social conventions

If we try to understand this tension from a domain theory viewpoint, the tension could perhaps be interpreted as a conflict between morality and social conventions. Within domain theory a distinction is made between the child's developing concepts of morality, and other domains of social knowledge, such as social conventions. Different forms of social knowledge - knowledge and thinking about social life organised within fundamental categories (domains) - develop because children experience different kinds of social interactions. From these social interactions children draw different inferences that are organised in domain-specific ways. According to domain theory, *morality* refers to conceptions of welfare, justice and rights. Actions within the moral domain, such as hitting someone without any provocation, hurting someone's feelings, or not helping someone in need, have intrinsic effects on the welfare of the other person. Morality is structured around considerations of the effects that actions have upon the well being of other persons. In contrast, *social conventions* are nothing more than social norms and expectations, agreed rules or uniformities in social behaviour determined by the social system in which they are formed, based upon authority, traditions or customs. Actions that are matters of social conventions, such as no outdoor clothes in the classroom, have no intrinsic effects on the welfare of the others (Turiel, 1983; Nucci, 2001).

The research on domains indicates that children and adolescents generally make a distinction between moral transgressions and conventional transgressions. Children and adolescents judge moral transgressions as wrong regardless of the presence or absence of rules. In contrast, they judge conventional transgressions as acceptable if there were no rules about them. Furthermore, children and adolescents consider moral transgressions to be generally wrong to a greater extent than conventional transgressions. They also justify judgements of moral issues in terms of the

harm or unfairness that actions would cause, while they justify judgements of social conventions in terms of norms and expectations of authority (for reviews, see Tisak, 1995; Nucci, 2001).

The norm that it is better to be quiet and just mind one's own business than to help someone asking for help, which seems to be mediated by the teacher's indiscriminate hushing in the helping situation, could be interpreted as an issue of domain overlap - a conflict between the moral issue of helping someone in need and the social conventional issue of complying with the classroom norms of silence and of doing what one is told by the teacher. If this is the case, the students should be evaluating the teacher's hushing as wrong because they, according to domain theory, should judge moral transgressions as (a) more wrong than conventional transgressions, and (b) wrong, independent of the existence of social norms. Most students in the study do indeed claim that the teacher's act is wrong when they interpret her/his hushing as 'be quiet and don't help your classmate'. This is also in line with studies that indicate that children judge moral transgressions, in contrast to conventional transgressions, to be wrong even if the teacher dictates that they are acceptable (Weston & Turiel, 1980; Laupa & Turiel, 1986).

Indiscriminate hushing as a pure moral conflict

However, the picture appears to be more complex than that. It is obvious, if we are trying to see the perspective of the students through the lens of domain theory, that the classroom norm of silence is a domain overlap issue in that the norm can both be seen as a moral issue (conversation and noisy behaviour have negative consequences for others in the classroom: disturbing and disrupting others' schoolwork activities) and a social conventional issue (it is a school rule functioning to regulate the social order and work in the classroom). Indiscriminate hushing in helping situations could therefore also be viewed as a pure moral conflict - a conflict between (a) helping classmates asking for help, and (b) not disturbing and disrupting other classmates who are trying to do their work. If a student chooses to do (a) then the student risks failing to do (b).

The students in this study seem to handle the moral conflict between (a) and (b) by speaking quietly ('but those who are helping each other may go on, just speaking a little bit quieter', 'I usually just speak a little quieter and like to speak just to that person') or whispering ('you don't need to shout, but you can just whisper'). These students appear to think that quiet conversation or whispering (in contrast to loud talking or noisy behaviour) would not harm or disturb anyone; therefore the act of helping is probably not perceived as a moral transgression, but just as a conventional transgression, as regards the norm of silence. In contrast, the act of not helping seems to be perceived as a moral transgression by the students (e.g., 'if I don't help, I think she will be sad - I would be', and 'if I don't help him, he will be behind, and then he will have to do more homework').

Indiscriminate hushing as a conflict between morality and authority

A series of controversial experiments conducted by Milgram (1974) during the 1960s show how the majority of ordinary people chose to obey authority even if they thought they might be endangering the life of another person. Milgram talks about *the dilemma of obedience* in which the moral question is whether one should obey the authority or not, when the authority's commands conflict with one's own conscience or moral standards. The norm of obedience to

authority is, according to Milgram (1974), a basic element in the structure of social life. Both at home and at school children are expected and told to obey the adults who have authority over them. Milgram argues that this internalised norm in people is problematic because it could result in blind obedience and override people's other internalised norms and values, and even make people harm others, under the influence of an authority in a hierarchical situation. Morality does not disappear, according to Milgram. The morality shifts to a radically different focus: the feelings of shame or pride are dependent on how diligently the person has performed the actions the authority has required of him/her. The person feels a sense of *responsibility to the authority* but feels no *responsibility for the content of the actions* that the authority prescribes.

Language provides numerous terms to pinpoint this type of morality: *loyalty*, *duty*, *discipline*, all are terms heavily saturated with moral meaning and refer to the degree to which a person fulfils his obligations to authority. They refer not to the 'goodness' of the person per se but to the adequacy with which a subordinate fulfils his socially defined role. (Milgram, 1974, p. 146)

The indiscriminate hushing in the classroom setting appears to form a conflict between morality and authority when students are involved in a helping situation. The question in this moral dilemma is whether one should obey the teacher and stop helping the classmate or disobey the teacher and continue helping the classmate. There is a conflict of duties. According to Milgram's (1974) reasoning, both duties could be seen as moral issues, and therefore the dilemma can be seen as a pure moral conflict (the duty to obey the authority in a hierarchical situation *vs.* the duty to help a person who is in need). The norm of obedience is of course very problematic because its consequences could be severe, which Milgram's experiments indicated. Milgram also argued that this norm or duty played an important role in Nazi Germany where ordinary citizens systematically slaughtered millions of innocent people, acting on orders.

Fox and DeMarco (2001) list some of the logical fallacies often committed in moral reasoning. Two of them have some relevance in this case: appeal to authority and appeal to force. *The fallacy of appealing to authority* happens when one claims that something is true or right simply because someone in authority says it is, rather than because it is supported by evidence or logical reasons. Anyone, including authorities like teachers, scientists or professionals, can make mistakes. Blind obedience to authorities is therefore not a reliable basis for moral reasoning, decision-making and acting.

The fallacy of appealing to force happens when people 'assume that what is right or wrong in ethics or in politics depends on who has the power to enforce his or her opinions on other people' (Fox & DeMarco, 2001, p. 52). This doctrine of 'might makes right' supposes that 'the opinion of the stronger is the correct opinion, or at least that the opinion of the stronger determines what, morally speaking, is correct' (p. 52). However, it does not follow that the decision or opinion of the stronger party is necessarily the right one or the best one. In the school setting, the teachers may be able to make rules and enforce them, but it does not follow that their rules always are good. Nor does it follow that their enforcement is always fair. In the domain theory view, this norm of obedience to authority should be interpreted as a social convention (not a moral rule); therefore this conflict between morality and authority could also be seen as a conflict between morality and social conventions.

The attraction of egoistic retreat

One common reason students mention as a reason for not helping their classmate any more, is to avoid getting a telling-off.

Maria: I usually help Jessica sometimes.

Interviewer: Has it happened when you are helping her that the teacher says 'shhh'?
[Comment: the interviewer has observed this happened to Maria and that she then stopped helping the class mate.]

Maria: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you do then? Do you go on helping her -

Maria: No.

Interviewer: - or do you stop helping her?

Maria: I don't go on helping. I shut up then.

Interviewer: How come you shut up then, and don't go on helping?

Maria: Because she hushes you up.

(From a soundtrack recorded informal conversation with two schoolgirls, aged eight, in second grade.)

It looks as if the teacher's coercive power in these situations makes the students solve the dilemma by an *egoistic retreat*, that is, to discontinue helping the classmate in need because of the fear of getting a telling-off or other negative teacher responses. The egoistic retreat here is about saving one's own skin at the sacrifice of helping a person who is in need. As a result of the indiscriminate hushing, the teacher, consciously or unconsciously, actually influences the students to make this choice. The indiscriminate hushing favours the classroom rule of silence or low noise at the expense of the pro-social rule of helping. This teacher discipline strategy thereby favours a more general rule that also appeals to egoism, because of the message it mediates to the students: get on with your own work and just look after number one.

Covert moral resistance to rules and power

Sometimes students appear to make this kind of egoistic retreat, but at other times, as mentioned above, students defy the teacher's hushing and continue helping their classmate. This resistance is usually not overt. Instead students have to go behind the teacher's back in order to act according to their own moral standard. They lower their voice and leer at the teacher, or they stop and wait for a while, and then go on helping again.

Interviewer: Does it happen sometimes [that you stop helping when she hushes]? What do you think, Jennie, when that happens?

Jennie: I don't know. But I don't want Marianne telling me off.

Interviewer: You don't want Marianne telling you off?

Jennie: No.

Maria: It's a bit crazy.

Interviewer: Why is it crazy?

Maria: You should be allowed to help.

Jennie: Yeah.

Maria: It's a good thing, you know. Not bad.

Anna: If she says 'shhhh' like this, if someone is helping someone else the it all goes quiet. After a while everyone starts chatting again.

Jennie: And after a while it gets louder and louder.

Anna: And then you can go on helping.

(From a group interview with three schoolgirls aged eight, in fifth grade.)

Some rules and regulations in school may actually increase resistant behaviour among the students, especially when rules are nonsensical or have no logical reason (Olafson & Field, 2003). In this study, the students seem to perceive the indiscriminate hushing and the rule of silence enforced by this hushing as an obstacle to their own morality, and therefore they now and then choose to confront the teacher's power and classroom rule with *moral covert resistance*, that is, to disobey or not comply with the teacher's request or with a specific school rule in order to follow a moral idea or imperative, and at the same time try to hide this disobedience or non-compliance from the teacher.

The teachers' dilemma

According to interviews and informal conversations with the teachers, most of them argued that it is acceptable for the students to talk to each other when working at their desks as long as they (a) talk about the lesson content, that is, ask and help each other with school work, and (b) do not disturb others (however, according to one of the teachers, 'if you have maths and not group work, then I think it should be quiet').

Well, some chat is allowed, but it mustn't be so that this chat interrupts the student next to you or that you are talking about something that is irrelevant, what you will do during the break - the disturbing chat. That's something completely different from when you sit writing and actually need to ask the class-mate about something ...and do it a bit quietly. (Class teacher of second grade)

Some teachers say that they see students helping one another as something positive and good. At the same time, they also argue that it is important to maintain a peaceful environment in the classroom which is conducive to work, and they express a worry about an escalating sound level of conversations that will disturb other students' concentration.

If we talk then we talk maths, and we uphold a decent voice level and so on, but I feel that in this class, if I let them go, then they usually reach the ceiling very quickly where you feel that it isn't okay. (Class teacher of second grade)

Some of the teachers express a conflict or a dilemma between (a) letting the students talk about school work and helping each other, and (b) maintaining a peaceful environment conducive to work: 'I'm torn between my own values, so to speak', as one of the teachers put it.

The idea that the students lack the skills to talk quietly and that the sound level in the classroom will inevitably escalate to an unacceptable and disruptive level, appears to be one reason for teachers to choose (b) before (a), and therefore hush indifferently to the whole class. Another reason behind indiscriminate hushing, according to some of the teachers, is the problem of discriminating among students' conversations. Teachers do not always hear what students are talking about and do not always have the time to find out about it.

But when I tell them, I don't know if the conversation is about helping, gossiping or something else. Then I should go and ask: 'What are you talking about now?' 'Well, we are talking maths.' 'Yeah, that's okay.' But if I stand twenty metres, well, perhaps not twenty (laughing) but five metres away in the classroom, and I notice the buzz, then I don't have the time to check what is going on in a way one could wish. (Teacher of fifth grade)

At least for some of the teachers, their indiscriminate hushing is obviously connected with a dilemma of their own. However, one of the teachers does not appear to perceive a dilemma here: the students should not talk when they work individually at their desks, only when they are engaged in group work. In addition, the teachers also think that part of their reaction towards the students is something they do not reflect upon; they just act.

Discussion

This article has shown how the disciplinary practice of indiscriminate hushing can create moral dilemmas in the classroom for students when they are involved in helping situations, such as helping a classmate when they are working at their desks. The classroom rules both regulate everyday life at school (classroom management dimension), and teach the students about morality, how to assess behaviour of oneself and others (moral education dimension). School and

classroom rules are part of both explicit and implicit moral education (Thornberg, 2004). Indiscriminate hushing as a method of discipline sometimes results in moral dilemmas and could confuse the students' moral orientation by creating perceptions of inconsistencies in the school's moral education.

This study indicates that indiscriminate hushing and the classroom rule of silence that this hushing enforces at the same time uphold implicit moral education about how rules, authority and power can counteract morality, and *vice versa*. On the one hand, teachers in these schools seem to be teaching their students that it is better to be quiet and look after number one (comply with rules, authorities or social conventions, and act egoistically) than to help someone in need (following pro-social morality). On the other hand, students in these situations also have the opportunity to acquire experience of violating rules and resisting power and authority pressures in a covert way in order to act in accordance with their own moral standards. How can we understand this from a moral education viewpoint? The goal of education in a democratic society should be to foster critical thinking, pro-social morality and democratic skills, not to produce blind rule-followers and uncritically obedient citizens (cf. Render *et al.*, 1989; Schimmel, 2003). The moral dilemma of indiscriminate hushing could, on the one hand, promote uncritical rule-following and blind obedience to authority and, on the other hand, a critical and pro-social moral covert resistance to rules, authority and power. These learning situations in morality in the classroom are, however, a result of implicit moral education or a hidden curriculum rather than deliberations about explicit moral education.

Furthermore, these perceived inconsistencies in teachers' behaviour and in the rule system appear to jeopardise the teacher's credibility as a moral authority or the rule system as a good, credible and legitimate set of rules, in the eyes of the students. Students are not passive receivers in a values transmission process. On the contrary, they actively judge teachers and school rules. They dislike and think it is wrong when they perceive teachers' behaviour or the rules teachers uphold as unfair, inconsistent or in conflict with the students' own morals. This finding is consistent with other studies (e.g. Williams, 1993; Killen *et al.*, 1994; Taylor, 1996; Thomson & Holland, 2002). Students' judgement of teachers' indiscriminate hushing as over-inclusive and wrong can be compared to Taylor's research (1996), in which a common source of complaint of unfairness in students' reports is when teachers blame and punish the whole class for the apparent misdeeds of the few or one.

Implications for moral education

The findings have implications for moral education. First, teachers have to reflect upon their indiscriminate hushing and other classroom management techniques and consider them in terms of the hidden curriculum and moral education. Second, in considering their work, teachers should not only reflect upon their interaction with the students, but also consider the students' views. Students are active agents in their own socialisation process (cf. Corsaro, 1997). They construct meanings for their experiences and they are negative or critical about school rules and teachers' interventions when these lack congruence with the students' own moral standards. In order to enhance the students' confidence in the school's rule system and in teachers as moral educators, teachers have to invite the students to express their views of both school rules and teachers' behaviour, and to discuss, negotiate and participate in the decision-making process with

regard to school and classroom rules. Furthermore, teachers should also verbalise their dilemmas to the students, encourage the students to verbalise their dilemmas, and initiate classroom or group discussions about them. These real-life moral dilemma discussions can be compared to Kohlberg and his colleagues' classical 'just community' approach to moral education. Findings of their research show that real-life moral dilemma discussions as well as participating in democratic meetings have positive effects on students' moral development (see Kohlberg, 1985; Power *et al.*, 1989). Teachers should explore and expose hidden issues with moral matters in the hidden curriculum together with the students, transforming implicit aspects of moral education so that they become more explicit.

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