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This article describes the different forms of students' moral discourse at a Mexican secondary school, paying special attention to their judgments about teachers' arbitrary use of authority, pedagogical formality, and favoritism. The article then analyzes the historical and cultural roots of this discourse. Taking issue with situationist and organizational explanations of pupil resistance, the author argues that to fully understand student's moral discourse at this school, one must examine the historical changes in local social relations and recently emergent cultural conceptions of "rights" that inform this discourse.

THE MORAL CONSTRUCTION OF STUDENT RIGHTS
Discourse and Judgment among Mexican Secondary School Students

BRADLEY A. LEVINSON

IT IS STILL EARLY in the school year, and the principal has convened a meeting of those students who won in the recent elections for student government (Sociedad de Alumnos). We are crowded into his small office, forming a tightly packed semicircle around his desk, some sitting, some standing. (I am standing just beyond this circle, near the door, before the principal motions me in and gives me a seat next to his own).

The students interact very little with one another. They are staring forward at the principal, who has a stern demeanor, as usual. He sets the tone for the meeting, congratulating them on their victories and laying out the business of the day, which is to develop a course of action for student government at the school. The students remain largely apathetic (heads bowed, serious faces, sharp, cynical glances at one another) throughout the meeting, as the principal controls the discussion and

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pushes forward his own agenda. On the few occasions when he stops to ask the students if there are any questions, responses, or suggestions, the students mostly look at him with blank faces and shrugged shoulders.

Late in the meeting, the principal preempted what he thinks is the students' primary interest in having a student government; he tries to dissuade them from pursuing what he calls "frivolous" activities:

So I'm giving you my opinion, right? That what we need is a clean-up campaign. A gardening campaign, right? To take care of the garden areas and plant them, right? What else do we need? A punctuality campaign . . . [we need you to] help us with discipline in the school. Help us to control attendance and punctuality. The thing is that all of this is your job since you're the students' representatives. Do you understand? In other words, there's a lot of work to be done in the school, and the committees of the Student Society don't necessarily get formed in order to plan dances. You're very mistaken in that, kids . . . I'm sure you were thinking about doing that, weren't you? Am I wrong? Tell me.

The girl who has been elected president of the school's afternoon shift asks somewhat sheepishly, "You're not even going to let us have one dance?" And the principal responds, "We're going to meet with your parents to see what we can do. That's why you should put all this down on your plan of activities."

Iván, the president of the morning shift, chimes in, "Some of my classmates asked if we could have a preposada [ritual Christmas party] before we leave for December vacation, you know, have some piñatas and . . ." The principal interrupts:

A preposada here in the school? Fine, we can just call that a social gathering [convivio social]. . . . Sure, we're going to organize those things, but only as long as we don't lose any class time. Okay? Sure we can do it, why not? You can organize a little party for your class with your advisors, or we can organize something at the basketball court. Fine, but look: we're going to work in order to have the right to do these things. If we don't work we're not going to have the right [emphasis added].
INTRODUCTION

The scene just described took place at a provincial Mexican secondary school in the fall of 1990. It demonstrates the power of the school’s principal to control student activities and delimit the range of student initiatives. The principal’s office, of course, is not a neutral social space. It is here that the principal, alone with the students, can most freely enact a strategy of imposition. Yet even here, we should note, the principal evokes the complicit authority of the parents’ council. Importantly, he also phrases his final qualifying statement in terms of rights (derechos). As the principal makes clear, the right to have fun and to hold dances and parties is contingent on students fulfilling their obligation to complete schoolwork. Students only gain the “right” to have fun in school after they have put in the necessary “work” (trabajo). The principal offers this limited contract from a position of power. He constructs his authority through his professional prerogative as a teacher and administrator, as well as his confidence that the students’ parents will share a common adult concern for proper discipline.

Outside the principal’s office, as we shall see, students had a much broader range of action and a much more active pressing of claims. They, too, advanced a conception of their rights, and they often drew on this conception to articulate a moral discourse on teachers and teachers’ practices. The importance of this student perspective forced itself on me after a few weeks in the school, when I became aware of just how frequently students complained about or praised different teachers. What I am calling a moral discourse consists of a series of recurrent and thematically interlinked gestures and statements about teachers’ conduct. Such gestures and statements, taken together, articulate a coherent view of propriety—of good and bad behavior—within the interactional environment of the school.²

To be sure, these students’ moral discourse about teachers could not be considered a well-defined genre of local speech, as such. Nor was the discourse always tied to recognizable and coordinated forms of student resistance, although students did
occasionally draw on its themes to challenge or undermine teachers’ power. Rather, what I am calling students’ moral discourse is an ethnographic reconstruction of students’ normative claims about themselves and their relations with their teachers. Many of the quotes that follow are indeed from observed conversations between students. Many more were parts of interviews—more or less spontaneous, more or less structured—that followed on some observation of a classroom conflict. In other words, some of the moral discourse I trace here does not circulate as such in the school. It is built on elaborated accounts I solicited after observing more truncated or embedded critiques in the course of students’ everyday practice. Much of what the students expressed to me had the quality of a “partial transcript” (Scott 1985, 286-87; 1990), that is, oblique, subversive moral commentaries not readily offered for full public inspection. I clearly offered a safe communicative space, and it must be remembered that students’ critical commentaries were often made directly to me—the resident anthropologist—who was known to be writing a book and to be sympathetic to student concerns.

My position as ethnographer has allowed me to reconstruct the implicit premises on which students frequently advanced their claims for recognition and validation. While the dominant teacher discourse on adolescence in the school constructed students as half-formed citizens, not worthy of full rights, and in need of close guidance and instruction (Levinson 1993b, 1997b), students often asserted alternative views of work and rights, questioning—even contesting—teachers’ power through the passion of their moral discourse. This vision of their own rights manifests itself through critical commentary about teachers and administrators. Indeed, I was ultimately struck by the degree of unanimity in students’ condemnations of particular teachers and teacher practices. Regardless of their differences in other matters, students almost invariably shared the same opinions about the same teachers. As I will show, students were keen to point out the contradictions and injustices in various teacher practices. They clearly condemned instances of teacher “despotism,” which often manifests itself as the as-
sumed prerogative to call students insulting names or arbitrarily restrict student freedoms. They also rejected teachers who remained overly formal in their style of presentation or interaction or who would not allow classroom interaction to stray from the immediate topic at hand. Finally, students roundly criticized instances of teacher favoritism, even, most remarkably, where such practices might work to their individual advantage.

How can we account for this apparent unanimity of student sentiment, and what might be the sources of such a shared discourse? Indeed, my findings run against those of much of the ethnographic literature on secondary schooling, which emphasizes the development of antagonistic student groups and subcultures, some of which tend to be anti- or proschool and are often organized according to class and ethnic affiliations (Eckert 1989; Foley 1990; Lacey 1970; Willis 1981). In Willis's (1981) study, for example, we would scarcely believe it if the rebellious "lads" and the conformist "ear'oles" shared a common judgment about teachers and their practices. Yet, at the secondary school I studied, where the social profile of the student body was even more diverse than in some of the above-mentioned studies, such antagonistic groups failed to form (Levinson in press), and a virtually consensual moral discourse emerged. As I will argue below, much of this could be attributed to the situational politics of classroom interaction (D'Amato 1993; Woods 1990), which encourage a common student response to the demands and authority of the teacher. After all, even Foley (1990, 112-18), who emphasizes the deep historical roots of much student antagonism at North Town High School, describes how students negotiate their class and ethnic differences to mutually construct "making out games" as a way of making life in the classroom less tedious. Still, I believe some of the sources of students' similar conceptions of their rights and of teachers' legitimate authority can be found not only in students' structural position in the organizational culture of the school but in historical and cultural trends specific to this Mexican region. Toward the end of the article, I will attempt to specify what some of these sources might be.
In what follows, I introduce the fieldwork site as well as the methods and theoretical concerns comprising the study before moving on to a detailed ethnographic description of the students’ moral discourse. I conclude by briefly discussing the theoretical ramifications of understanding students’ moral discourse in more historically and culturally emergent terms.

THE SITE AND THE STUDY

After several preliminary visits, I spent the school year of 1990 to 1991 at the largest secondary school (Escuela Secundaria Federal, or ESF) in a regional market town of some 50,000 inhabitants in the west-central highlands of Mexico. The town, which I call here San Pablo, dates back to the early colonial era as an important religious, commercial, and administrative center for an extensive peasant and artisanal region. While San Pablo still serves its nodal function in regional culture and economy, more recently it has been groomed by local entrepreneurs for a predominantly national tourist industry.

San Pablo has always been a study in contrasts. Today, an increasingly small, landed elite shares power with an emergent upper class that has accumulated wealth through well-invested earnings from migrant stints in the United States and/or timely involvement in lucrative enterprises such as hotels, timber operations, or soft-drink distributorships. A small, professional “middle class” (lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers) and “lower middle class” (schoolteachers, shop owners, federal and state bureaucrats) are interspersed geographically with the poorest classes in San Pablo, which consist of small vendors, day laborers, housekeepers, construction workers, artisans, and the unemployed.

Because there is no high-quality private alternative in San Pablo, and because there are no geographical restrictions on enrollment, ESF has a rather heterogeneous student body. Students from among the wealthiest and poorest families alike clamor to enroll at ESF. Like most urban schools in Mexico, ESF
is divided into morning and afternoon shifts (turnos) that share the same principal and several of the same teachers but that often function as two separate schools. I concentrated my efforts on the morning shift, whose class and ethnic composition tends to be more heterogeneous than either the afternoon shift at ESF or the other two public secundarias in town, where the lower classes prevail. The morning shift of ESF includes children from San Pablo’s moneyed, professional, and lower classes, as well as some 13 percent who live in outlying towns and villages and travel daily to attend school.

Students were placed together for most of the school day in structured cohorts, called grupos escolares. Grupos escolares were created by teachers and administrators to accommodate maximum social and academic diversity. Each grupo was assigned an advisor (asesor) and encouraged to work together for the collective good (Levinson in press). It was not uncommon to find students from vastly different economic and cultural circumstances mingling together in school, especially within the grupo. In grupo 3F, for instance, one boy lived in a colonial style home with tile floors, a modern kitchen, and a satellite dish. His mother, from a wealthy family of fruit growers, owned and operated a couple of stores in town, while his father, a doctor, ran his practice out of a building adjacent to the home. This boy, whose brother had once spent a year as an exchange student in North Carolina, often collaborated on school assignments with a smaller boy whose modest home was composed of dirt floors, roving chickens, and an outdoor latrine; whose father spent most of the year working illegally in the United States; and whose mother still spoke the indigenous language of the region. This is just one small sample of the kinds of class and ethnic—not to mention gender—differences that played themselves out in the school.

This study was originally motivated by questions of cultural production and social difference (Levinson 1993a, 1996). As I have noted, the ethnographic literature on secondary schooling has assiduously documented and critiqued the prevalence of polarized student subcultures and categories. Such categories are often thought to help (re)produce the structural divisions of
the broader society (Foley 1990; Solomon 1992; Willis 1981). Students’ participation in constructing and positioning these categories appears to have a major impact on the formation of their identities and aspirations, their evaluations of what it means to be an “educated person,” and hence their chances for altering their life circumstances (see Levinson and Holland 1996). Yet, most of the critical ethnographic studies in the tradition of sociocultural reproduction theory have been carried out in Euro-American contexts, characterized by the hegemony of liberal philosophical paradigms for educational development, especially an emphasis on meritocracy and possessive individualism. My study sought to examine whether, and how, students developed polarized categories in a Mexican secondary school; it also sought to examine whether and how the historical, cultural, and structural features of this Mexican school mitigated or reinforced the production of invidious social distinctions in local society. The Mexican schooling context, as I soon discovered, tempered the liberal tradition with historically rooted commitments to “socialist” solidarity (Vaughan 1997) and “hierarchical holism” (Lomnitz, Lomnitz-Adler, and Adler 1993; see also Levinson 1997b, in press).

The secundaria in San Pablo seemed additionally appropriate for interrogating some of these questions. Few have studied the secundaria in Mexico, while numerous studies of primary and postsecondary education exist (Ducoing and Landesmann 1996). Moreover, the secundaria—or “educación básica media”—has expanded dramatically since the 1960s, incorporating new social groups that had been previously excluded. Secundaria is also the last point in the Mexican “basic education” cycle. After secundaria, students must choose between several very different options, including college preparatories, vocational schools, business courses, and the like. Finally, most authors in the literature on student cultures have identified early adolescence as the period in which subcultural identification often begins to develop (Eckert 1989; Woods 1990).

Of all the students in the school, I focused especially on the third graders, in their last year of secundaria (average age was fourteen to fifteen years). I did this because, as already men-
tioned, students were formed into grupos escolares that remained together in virtually every class period for all three years. Thus, by their third and final year, students were likely to have developed well-defined strategies for negotiating the maze of requirements, expectations, and rules constituting the “official” structure of the school, and they had come to know their fellow classmates in some intimate detail. Moreover, the third year was pivotal for students, since they soon had to decide whether to continue studying and, if so, at what type of school.

After two previous, brief research trips, I arrived in San Pablo in early summer 1990 and took up residence in the home of two teachers from ESF. In August, when teachers were returning to the schools for administrative tasks and students were beginning to enroll, I began spending more time around the school, observing parent-teacher interactions, attending teacher meetings, and sitting in on special exams for last year’s failed students. For most of the school year, from late August to late June, I was engaged in ethnographic research at the school. This principally involved classroom and playground observations, paying special attention to four of the six third-year grupos escolares. I conducted spontaneous interviews with individuals or groups of students when I wanted to clarify or sharpen my understanding of an observation or when I wanted students to elaborate their understandings of a process or event I had witnessed. I also participated in extracurricular activities, attending parties, dances, church services, sports events, and study groups.

Besides the more general interviews and observations, I chose twenty focal students for the study. These twenty represented a full range of backgrounds, dispositions, and academic records in the school. Ten were girls and ten were boys; some were judged by teachers and their peers to be “good” students, others “bad,” still others “average”; some were rebellious, constantly challenging teachers’ authority, while others seemed more compliant. Some were poor, others moderately comfortable, others part of a local elite. Importantly, there appeared to be little consistent correlation between social class and school
performance or attitude. The wealthiest boy of the bunch had numerous run-ins with teachers and took an extra year to graduate, while probably the poorest maintained high grades and good standing in most classes.

Over the course of the year, I extensively interviewed each of these students at least twice, sometimes three times. I also paid them special attention in my observations. I visited the homes of more than half of these focal students and interviewed one or more of their parents in an extended, taped format. In some cases, I developed an ongoing relationship with the families, and visited frequently throughout the year. I also interviewed the teachers of these twenty focal students.\footnote{SHOM}

\section*{STUDENT RIGHTS AND THE MORAL EVALUATION OF TEACHERS}

Despite their differences, students constructed a powerful common culture within the school (Levinson 1996, in press). Like the youth cultures Schwartz and Merten (1967) studied in the United States, ESF students postulated a “normative order” (p. 457) encapsulating the “moral attributes” and “moral dispositions” (p. 454) of fellow students and teachers alike. These common understandings allowed students to act as a contingent “moral community” (Shaw 1994; Shweder 1996) in sanctioning each other’s behavior and regulating their relationships with out groups—in this case teachers. As I have said, part of this culture involved a diverse field of moral discourse directed at the propriety of teachers’ conduct. Such a discourse was not moral itself but was about moral conduct at the school. Because of students’ subordination to teacher authority, moreover, the discourse was forced underground, beyond the perception of most teachers. Clearly, students actively evaluated their teachers in peer discussions, but they only shared such evaluations with sympathetic adults such as myself, certain parents, and the occasional teacher who reached out to hear their case and perhaps defend their cause (see below). Here, I underscore the passion and relative coherence of this discourse to offset pre-
vailing notions of adolescence (Elder 1980; Lesko 1996; Levinson 1997b), which might dismiss student concerns as fleeting and therefore illegitimate.

**AGAINST TEACHER DESPOTISM**

One of the most common student complaints against some teachers was their tendency to be “despotic” (déspota) in their conduct with the students. While the term déspota was itself used rather frequently, here I will include a number of other complaints under the same rubric. Despotism was just one key term in a field of moral discourse directed principally at forms of arbitrary, unnecessary, or excessive imposition of authority, especially in a manner that did not respect student autonomy or sensibility. The moral discourse against despotism, moreover, was articulated most forcefully when it was grounded in a particular conception of student rights, or derechos.

One of the ways in which students asserted their derechos was through recognition, and active challenge, of the limits of teachers’ derechos. For instance, several students recounted instances in which they had been physically punished. As Lidia, the daughter of a traveling salesman, heatedly told me about one teacher,

He pulled my ear because I was copying some notes from a classmate . . . and that shouldn’t be done. So I went to the principal and told him; then the principal reprimanded [the teacher], and all the other teachers came down on him, too. . . . No matter how good a teacher he may be, and no matter how much respect we may have for him, he doesn’t have the right to do that. . . . He even hits the boys on the hands with an eraser. . . . [Here Lidia’s friend jumps in and says, “And they don’t even do that in the colegios.”].

Officially, corporal punishment was proscribed at the secundaria, although the question was often open to negotiation. Parental support in the matter was decisive. Many, if not most, parents no longer sanctioned corporal punishment, especially between male teachers and female students. In San Pablo,
so-called liberal approaches to child rearing, encouraging rational dialogue and intimate collaboration, had largely displaced methods based on fear and imposition. Some parents, though, still supported corporal punishment, citing the old adage, “Solo con sangre entra la letra” (literally, “Letters enter only with blood,” i.e., “Only with corporal discipline does one learn”). As Lidia’s friend recognizes, corporal punishment was much more common in the private religious schools (the colegios), where greater discipline and order were often the strongest selling points. In any case, what is interesting is the way Lidia, like other students, draws on her understanding that corporal punishment was generally proscribed at ESF. It is an understanding bolstered, no doubt, by her parents’ own liberal practices. But it also articulates a definite sense of limits on the scope of teachers’ actions.

In another instance, a male student challenged Mr. Solana’s right to call his mother in for an interview without first notifying the group’s advisor (asesor). According to Efraín, Mr. Solana had continually badgered him in front of his classmates about chronic absences and missed assignments. On the day I observed his class, it was Efraín’s first day back from a long absence, the result of a hunting accident that scattered buckshot across his legs. Mr. Solana grilled him for a full five minutes in class, asking him about the incident in detail and shaking his head in disgust. Then he told Efraín he would not be allowed back in class until his mother came to the school for a chat. Later that day, Efraín approached me to complain about Mr. Solana. He asked me if I thought it was fair (justo) for him to be singled out like this in class. Then he commented that only the group’s asesor had the right to condition attendance on parent conferences. He had spoken with his asesor, who had told him not to worry. Efraín was clearly attempting to assert his own derechos by advancing a claim about the limits on those of his teacher.

Some of the most common student grievances concerned instances of teacher hypocrisy or rigidity. For example, students especially denounced teachers who often arrived late for class but heavily penalized students for doing so themselves, told
students to pay close attention to their classmates when they were presenting an assignment but often read the newspaper or chatted with visitors at this time themselves, and would not or could not admit their errors. In a group discussion about what makes some teachers good and others bad, Alicia illustrated the latter point with a scathing anecdote about her science teacher:

She says she never makes a mistake, that she’s always right, and that makes me really mad. . . . Mr. Soto is like that, too. He says he never makes a mistake. . . . I remember one time when we were with Mrs. Jacinto [last year], Mirasol was talking but the teacher blamed me; she wanted to throw me out of class, so I told her, “But teacher, it wasn’t me,” and she shouted at me, “No, don’t you talk back to me, I’m never mistaken.”

This is just one of many instances in which students expressed a keen sense of justice. Indeed, most students seemed to become quite expert at noting contradictions between teachers’ normative statements and their actions. According to students, the most despotic teachers were those who exhibited the greatest and most severe contradictions. Comments and observations circulated among students mostly during free time, such as recess or classroom transitions, when students often commiserated about recent teacher violations of student rights. I often happened across students when they were involved in such discussions. One day just after recess, I came upon a few girls with disgusted looks on their faces, and one of them explained what they had just been discussing:

We used to like Mr. Cantú but not anymore. . . . He says he doesn’t want us to call each other names [sobrenombres] in class, but then he uses his own. He comes and does stupid things [hace sus payasadas], like he comes up to you and grabs you like this by the hair, and asks you, “And why did you brush your hair like this today?”

On another occasion, I was chatting with a group of boys about their English teacher, and two of them together produced this
anxious description of hypocrisy: “He always wants to be right about everything. . . . If we say something to the teacher, right away we’re going to have problems, later he’ll want to screw us with our grades.”

Some of these observations, to be sure, were generated by my simple questions, which often evoked such passionate responses that groups of students seemed to forget my presence as they launched into a kind of communal tirade. If my questions indeed on occasion sparked such tirades, in the process of negotiating a response students spoke more with one another than with me, thus modeling a style of interaction I observed in other contexts. By way of illustration, I present the response of several girls to my question about their language teacher, who was also their grupo’s advisor:

BL: And has she done a good job for you [les ha convenido]?
Gina: She tries to be a good teacher but we don’t like the way she treats us, because she says we’re the worst grupo.
BL: She says that to you?
Gina: Yes, really shamelessly [bien descarada] [laughter]
Marina: And then she scolds us nastily [bien feo] in front of the whole group, [imitating the teacher’s imperious tone] “I told you to sit over here,” and, “Be quiet,” and, “Your head must be full of cobwebs.”
Pati: Yeah, because look, the other day this kid Roberto handed in his notebook. The teacher saw that it had pornographic things and she scolded him right there in front of everyone. She was telling him he had cobwebs in his head and who knows what else. . . . She even showed everybody the notebook and said, “Just look at this.” . . . I think she should have talked to him about it, but alone.

Here I intervened again to point out that I had seen many teachers scold students in front of the whole class, that this practice seemed normal in the school. Gina responded that the teacher did it “more loudly” (un poco elevado), and Marina added, in an irritated voice, “and really frequently!” Then, a number of girls animatedly spoke out of turn, and I have tried to reconstruct their comments, less than exactly, from an audiotape and notes. The gist was as follows:
She tells us that we create a lot of conflicts, that if we keep it up we're going to have an enormous amount of problems . . . and then there are times that we can't even understand her in class, because she speaks like she's swallowing her tongue. She starts to say this and then that, and then a while later she says something else. Then she tells us that we're going to have to do such and such work, and later she explains other things.

This conversation illustrates the dynamic process by which students arrived at judgments of their teachers. It also illustrates another critique of teacher despotism. Perhaps the greatest moral indignation among students was provoked by teachers who frequently called students names or ridiculed them in front of their classmates. This practice, as we shall see, was thought to violate student integrity and students' derechos to dignified treatment.

In one case, the insistent name calling of one teacher provoked an entire grupo to draft a written denunciation and bring the matter to the attention of their advisor. I sat in on a special meeting called by the advisor to address the issue. During the course of this half-hour meeting, the students aired a number of grievances against the teacher: "In our second year, he called us 'dunces' [burros—literally, donkeys], and now he calls us 'turkeys' [guajolotes]." "For those who don't pay him full attention, he just sends them out of class." "[To the advisor]: Teacher, if you ask us a question and we don't answer it, you don't have reason to call us a name, do you?" "There are times when we can't answer his questions or we don't have our homework and he sends us out to collect trash. I think that's why we have the custodians, no?"

Some students even claimed he hit them with an eraser or small stick when they did not answer correctly. It is difficult for me to convey the passion with which students advanced their claims for proper treatment. Much of the meeting was chaotic, with students and teacher shouting over one another. My position in the corner prohibited me from capturing many of the details of students' complaints. Still, I could ascertain that students were articulating a notion about derechos: the teacher had no right to send them out of class to pick up trash or water.
the gardens just for arriving without that day’s homework assignment. Nor did he have the right to call students names like dunces, turkeys, or even “fags” (jotos) when they responded incorrectly or missed an assignment. Apparently, while many students had never been struck or sent from the room, virtually all of them had been called a name. In the meeting with their advisor, the students clearly presented these grievances with great energy and passion, demanding they be allowed to switch teachers. When the advisor informed them it would be impossible to do this, the grupo’s leader (jefe), whose response met with resounding approval, articulated their most basic demand: “We don’t have to switch, then. What we really want is for him to treat us better.”

Finally, the most despotic person in the school, according to the students, was the principal. In 1990, the principal was beginning his second year at ESF. (Thus, third-year students had initially known a different principal their first year in the school.) According to his own statements, the new principal entered ESF with a mission to restore levels of achievement and orderliness that higher authorities felt had lapsed in recent years. The principal was fond of pointing out ESF’s historical prominence in the region, and he was determined to restore its legacy. Perhaps as a consequence, students perceived his tenure as unduly strict and uncompromising. As my opening vignette shows, the principal cut out a number of social events, such as dances, fairs, and ceremonial meals, to which students had grown accustomed. He laid down strict rules for student activities, allowing little autonomy. Moreover, he had a personal style that did not invite negotiation or feedback, especially by the students. As he liked to emphasize, the principal was the “highest authority” in the school, and nobody could hope to successfully sway his decision once it had been made.

The students called him despotic because of what they saw as his manner of imposing unilateral decisions, his unwillingness to concede, his “hypocritical” tendencies, and his inability to recognize possible errors. Paco, who traveled nearly an hour each way to reach the school, told me he had almost dropped out the previous year on account of the principal. Apparently,
the principal had already warned him for some other misdemeanor when he found him one day without the requisite tie and expelled him for the remainder of the school day. When Paco complained, “But teacher, why, if [the tie] got wet on me?” the principal cut him off and shot back, “Don’t you talk back to me like that,” and stiffened the penalty with a full week’s expulsion. Paco was very disillusioned by the experience. He had not gotten the chance to “defend himself” and explain how his tie had fallen in the mud after school and still had not dried from the previous day’s washing. From that time on, Paco skipped classes more often and put little effort into his studies:

BL: Why did you become so discouraged [desanimado], as you say? Paco: Well, more than anything because [the principal] wouldn’t give me the chance to defend myself or to tell him how it had happened or anything. . . . Just that one time I wanted to just defend myself and that’s when I got discouraged and didn’t want to come anymore.

Although Paco did not use the word despotic, he was complaining about the principal’s unilateral imposition in a way that squared with other student accounts of his heavy-handed discipline.

Students were perhaps most disturbed by the principal’s inconsistencies or contradictions. I have already noted that students were especially astute and sensitive in this regard, and I rarely needed to solicit their reactions. In one instance, I had just observed a heated meeting between the principal and the parents of graduating third-year students. The meeting had been called by the principal ostensibly to “inform” parents about where and when the graduation ceremony would be held. However, a movement was afoot among parents to persuade the principal to hold the ceremony at the local theater, which was considered more dignified, rather than at the school itself, as the principal was advocating. Many parents raised their voices in favor of the theater proposition and invited their children in to argue on their own behalf as well. But the principal vehemently opposed the introduction of students to the meet-
ing. He had banished them from the auditorium and kept waving them away as they tried to get close to the windows and door. As several parents insisted on their children's right to speak, so too did the principal insist they leave, each time more vociferously. When a few intrepid students made their way in, encouraged by the parents, the principal refused to conduct the meeting any further, yelling at the students to get out. At this point, the meeting broke down. Many parents left in disgust, disappointed their children could not participate in the dialogue.

Afterwards, as groups of parents, students, and teachers continued to speak or argue in smaller groups, Patzi, a third-grade girl, approached me with a disgusted look on her face. She was one of those who had most wanted to speak on her classmates' behalf:

Patzi: Can you believe that the principal always tells us how important a good education is, and then he doesn't even show any himself?
BL: What do you mean?
Patzi: Yeah, you know, he's the one that's lacking education, not us. Just look at all those nasty things [groserías] he said in there.

Patzi's use of the term educación is pivotal here, for it connotes far more than schooling. In Mexico, educación often refers to the general formation of habits, manners, and responsibilities in the home. Teachers themselves are fond of pointing out that the school does not really serve to "educate"; its primary mission is to "instruct." Education takes place in and through the family and home. A good education provides the foundation for successful schooling, not the other way around. In this instance, Patzi was turning one of the principal's preferred phrases against him. She highlighted the irony by juxtaposing what she saw as his crude, tactless behavior in the meeting with his constant exhortations for good behavior to the students. Later, at the graduation ceremony itself, I was accompanying one of Patzi's group mates. We listened to the principal's opening speech, which reiterated themes I had heard from him on numerous occasions, especially in the presence of teachers:
The students come to [ESF] in order to grow scientifically and culturally. Their progress depends on the firm guidance of the teachers. . . . Most of the students are well behaved, they are noble, and properly dedicate themselves to their work. . . . When there are problems with the students, it will always be the teacher’s fault, the teacher who didn’t know how to properly guide the students.

As she listened, the girl at my side shook her head, tightened her fists, and commented curtly: “He tells us [students] just the opposite.”

Parents and the Sources of Student Rights

Teachers and administrators who were criticized for trampling student rights tended to exaggerate their disciplinary prerogatives, because it was clear that students could endure or appreciate what they felt was appropriate discipline. Indeed, even those students who most often provoked teacher sanctions recognized the value of strict discipline “for their own good” (por el bien de uno). Their moral discourse included praise for teachers who “explained things well” (explica bien) in class but who could still be strict and demanding. As Ricardo explained,

Ricardo: I can’t stand going into [Spanish] class. . . . That teacher is always angry [bien enojona]. She kicks you out for any little thing.
BL: Come on, isn’t the science teacher like that, too?
Ricardo: Well yes, but not so much, and besides, he teaches, you know what I mean? In other words, he demands a lot, he scolds you, but it’s so you’ll learn, and [the Spanish teacher] on the other hand just scolds you for whatever reason. If you’re talking she sends you out of the room. And the thing is, she doesn’t teach well, she jumps from one thing to another.

Students’ rights to be treated with respect, then, were also balanced against their rights to be taught well. They were willing to acknowledge the value of discipline if it was matched by a teachers’ dedication and skill in teaching. What students re-
sented most was what they perceived as arbitrary or direction-
less forms of disciplinary action.

Importantly, students’ parents were often called on to adjudicate their children’s claims about discipline. They often heard such claims at home, and frequently they came to school to speak with the teacher in question or other teachers and administrators. Their support of the student’s position was usually decisive in such matters. If a teacher was known to be effective in the classroom, and could convince parents of the need for his or her style of discipline, the parents in turn might persuade their child to adjust his or her conduct. If the parents became convinced, on the other hand, that the teacher’s actions were unwarranted, they might attempt to mediate the classroom relationship. Not infrequently, parents supported their child’s conception of rights and enjoined the administration to reprimand the teacher.

Why and how did the parents’ mediation matter, and what were the sources of their own conceptions of students’ rights in school? This is the most complex of questions, but I can venture a few answers. First and foremost, the moral grounds for a discourse in favor of student rights and against teacher despotism appear to have evolved fitfully in San Pablo during the course of the last generation or two. With the massive influx of electronic media, and the proliferation of so-called liberal and modern discourses on education and child rearing, youth and adults alike have been encouraged to develop new expectations for intergenerational communication (cf. White 1993, on Japan). As San Pablo adults often pointed out, kids in 1990 were more “awake” (despiertos) and less pliable in the face of arbitrary imposition than their counterparts some thirty years prior. They were aware of their derechos and willing to defend them. Moreover, schoolchildren, especially, demanded reasons for adult authority and action; they were less accepting of ungrounded assertions or encyclopedic instruction and more knowledgeable of the school rules that even teachers had to follow. As the school’s vocational counselor explained to me at some length,
Before, the students didn’t have the kind of awareness they have now. Now they feel as though they have derechos, and even the teachers themselves tell them they have derechos. . . . Before, yes, the teachers would give you a good beating [te daban tus buenos reglazos—slaps with a ruler], and the parents themselves would even send you to the most forceful [enérgico] teacher, in order to have that discipline, but not anymore; now they complain if you touch their kid. . . . and before the students couldn’t tell the teacher that something he explained or wrote on the board was wrong. The teacher would go so far as to expel them if they dared to say that something was wrong. The teacher was always right. . . . The teacher also used to call the students names and the students had to put up with them all year long, I mean, [the teachers] didn’t respect the student’s person [no respetaban la personalidad del alumno]. In those days, the students almost always bore it, but not anymore.

It is the kind of sensibility the counselor describes that in large part informed students’ conceptions of rights in the school. Moreover, changes in the broader social position of teachers may have contributed to students’ increased boldness. By the 1990s, massive school expansion, union corruption, and the pauperization of the teaching profession had eroded much of the traditional mystique of a teacher’s classroom authority. It was widely known that many secondary teachers had never received professional pedagogical training and that many more were being forced to moonlight in their spare time (Sandoval n.d.). In this atmosphere, parents were much less likely to automatically endorse a teacher’s authority.

Parents, of course, did not all agree about these rights. Typically, those from rural and/or lower-class backgrounds endorsed a more restrictive conception of rights, in which students owed fuller obedience to the teachers’ directives. There were instances, to be sure, such as the parents’ disagreement with the principal over the site of the graduation ceremony, in which class differences did not prohibit a unified position among parents in attendance. Still, the common peer culture at ESF, dominated by the ethos of an emerging urban middle class (Levinson 1993a), served to socialize students into a conception of rights that might be at odds with their own parents’ views.
You will recall Paco’s desire, even expectation, to defend himself in the face of the principal’s challenge. Paco’s impulse clearly stemmed from a more historically recent model of teacher-student relations that permits or encourages rational dialogue. The principal, by contrast, relied on an earlier model that proscribes any form of student response, automatically characterizing it as insolent or subversive. Paco’s mother, meanwhile, tended to side with the principal. While she thought the expulsion a little severe, she counseled her son to follow teachers’ directives and not question their logic.

Among teachers, the degree of awareness or accommodation of this relatively new student sensibility clearly distinguished their pedagogical and personal styles, and determined the tenor of their relationships with students. Not surprisingly, those teachers who recognized student derechos and even encouraged their defense were among the most beloved by students. For instance, the advisor who handled her grupo’s complaint about the name-calling teacher was almost universally praised by students. She “understood” (comprender) her students, respected their interests, and invited them to share their concerns (inquietudes). As the counselor describes above, she was one of those who often reminded students of their rights. Conversely, and as I have shown, those teachers who imposed their moral, social, or pedagogical agendas in a heavy-handed manner, and without regard for student rights or interests, could be denounced for their despotic or excessively strict ways. Also not surprisingly, teachers who encouraged student rights tended to be much younger and schooled themselves during the 1960s and 1970s, when contemporary psychological discourses first began to make themselves felt.

AGAINST TEACHER FORMALITY

Another aspect of students’ common moral discourse was what I call the criticism of teacher formality. Here, I will only briefly explore a few facets of this discourse. Its general features included a critique of teachers’ tendencies to maintain social distance, construct a position of authority, and adhere strictly to
curricular objectives. Conversely, students lauded those teachers who encouraged closer, more egalitarian relationships between themselves and students and who left classroom time for games, joking, or open discussion.

Time and time again, students condemned teachers who would not allow time or space for students to talk or laugh. Conversely, students like Vicente and Jaime in the following interview praised those teachers with whom they could “goof off” (echar relajo) or “talk” (platicar) while completing pedagogical objectives as well:

Vicente: These teachers, it’s like they goof off with us too, so to speak.
Jaime: Working and working, and goofing off and talking at the same time.
BL: And the other teachers like Mrs. Hinojosa, on the other hand, don’t let you talk [among yourselves] like that?
Vicente: When we laugh just a little bit, that teacher [Mrs. Hinojosa] is already scolding us [Esa, nos reímos tantito, ya nos reaña].

It was common for students to negotiate a kind of contract with certain teachers. They would bargain a period of concentration and dedicated task work for time to goof off and chat at the end of the class period. Other teachers would punctuate lessons with jokes, riddles, and stories. Although some of the more serious students that worried teachers might go overboard and sacrifice the substance of lessons, most students appreciated these diversions, and many asserted they were indispensable for making the school day more bearable (menos pesadito). When I asked a few boys from 3C who their favorite and least favorite teachers were, one of them responded, while the others nodded and added a few words here and there:

The social studies teacher is more open with us, I mean he understands us better, he talks with us about subjects we like. . . . Like lately, we’ve been talking a lot about war. And he also gives us more chances to get the work in. . . . He doesn’t pressure us a lot about homework (no nos presiona mucho las tareas) and all that. . . . The math teacher, on the other hand, I mean she does her teaching job ok, I guess, but she never talks
to us about other things, and she's always pressuring us to do the work . . . just like the Spanish teacher. I mean, the two of them just go straight to the topic and that's it, they don't talk about anything else.

This kind of comment was frequent among boys and girls alike. Students made manifest their affection for teachers who treated them with dignity and respect and who minimized the signs of social distance. The critique of teacher formality, on the other hand, was often embedded in spontaneous imitative displays, as these selected field note excerpts show:

I bring Abel and Constantín into the dark, vacant auditorium for a taped interview. Abel walks quickly toward the stage, positions himself behind the podium, folds his arms, and bellows out, “Buenos días, jóvenes,” (“Good morning, kids”), in exaggerated fashion.

I'm sitting with Marina in the school's central plaza. She has motioned me over to chat. Lately, she's been confiding a number of problems to me: “Right now there aren't too many conflicts [conflictos], ah, I'm already like the Spanish teacher, ah.” I take note of Marina's self-parodying interruption, which I translate here as “ah,” but which in the original Spanish is “¡Ay sí!” I interrupt and ask why she has said she is like the Spanish teacher: Because look, one little quirk the teacher has is that whenever she's asking something she's always, “Alfredo be quiet because next you're going to start with your conflicts and you're going to have problems” . . . or, “Be quiet because if you continue like this you'll have conflicts later.” Marina has spoken these phrases in a pedantic tone, and made the gesture of folding her arms across her chest, in imitation of this teacher. As I noted later, Marina was often fond of imitating this gesture. The Spanish teacher usually wore button-up, cardigan-style sweaters, which she frequently closed by folding her arms in precisely this manner.

In my interview with Lidia and her friend Karla, they were complaining about Mr. Solana and his rigid ways. They described his speech in a meeting with teachers, parents, and students:
Karla: [imitating the teacher's voice] “You should study three hours . . .”
Lidia: “A minimum of three hours a day.”
BL: And social studies above all.
Karla: Yes, just social studies, and then he goes, oh yeah, really stuck-up like [bien sangroncillo] that time because he said [we should sit] at a table with a chair . . .
Lidia: [imitating the teacher again, in a slow, formal voice] “For your children who are approaching the final stage of their secondary studies” (“Para sus hijos que están cursando el último peldaño de su estudio secundario”), ay!, even our legs were falling asleep on us that time, just check it out, even the parents were over there asleep.

I am sitting with group 3B in the science lab, and the teacher’s lab assistant is trying to give instructions to the group for the upcoming experiment. I have noted to myself before that the students do not seem to like this assistant much. Now, Beatriz gets up on the raised platform behind the assistant and pretends to throw something away while imitating the assistant in the act of passing out microscopes and slides, with exaggerated, mechanical gestures. Her classmates are snickering and egging her on.

I have selected several of many possible examples to show how discursive and nondiscursive imitation could provide the students with a means of oblique moral commentary. Students enacted some of the adult roles available to them, but they did so in a playful way that implicitly chided the formality and distance, the predictability, of their teachers. In the first instance, Abel is clearly mocking the principal’s flourishes of authority, since the latter often used the word jóvenes when addressing the students. In the other instances, girls are seen poking fun at their teachers’ overly serious mannerisms and locution. Students were trying to have fun and insert humor into the situations I have documented. Yet, the parodies were also performed in such a way that any student could immediately identify their subversive content. In addition to the more direct commentaries I have already presented, imitative displays often served the function of communicating students’ ideas about proper and improper, valued and devalued, teacher conduct. They were thus moral in their playful proscription of formal
teacher authority and subversive in the way they undermined the seriousness of some teachers’ actions.

AGAINST TEACHER FAVORITISM

The moral discourse against teacher favoritism was perhaps the most pervasive and passionately felt of those I will discuss here. It sprang up in almost every group interview I conducted, regardless of whether I had specifically addressed the issue. My questions about teacher character or practice often evoked complaints or observations about teacher favoritism.

During the interview with three boys from 3C from which I have already quoted, Valentino most clearly articulated the consequences of teacher favoritism when it cut against the grain of solidarity and equality constructed in the grupos escolares:

The math teacher is really different from the English teacher, because the math teacher isn’t fair [pareja]) with everyone and the English teacher is. I think the math teacher isn’t a good teacher, I mean she explains things ok, but she has her favorites [preferidos]. That’s what I think’s bad. It has to be equal. I mean that’s why all the students are there and we’re all in the same class, so that we’ll all be equal. . . . If [the math teacher] is going to prefer certain students then we’re also going to prefer certain classes and decide which ones we’ll skip and which ones we’ll go to. If she wants to have her favorite students, then we’ll have our favorite classes, and we won’t go to whichever one we don’t like.

Obviously, Valentino’s statement is touched with a certain bravado, a kind of eye-for-an-eye defiance. One would suspect that Valentino had been slighted by the math teacher on more than one occasion. In fact, this was not the case. My observations showed that Valentino was not one of those habitually passed over for class participation or other special considerations. Nor did he ever skip class with quite the regularity suggested by his comments. What is significant, I think, was the treatment given two of Valentino’s closest buddies in the group. Iván often complained about the math teacher ignoring his petitions for help and giving special preference to other students, while singling him out for criticism (“Siempre me carga más a mí”).

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After the beginning of the school year, he skipped her class with increasing frequency. In the meantime, another member of Valentino and Iván’s friendship group, Andrés, received all sorts of special attention from the teacher. Virtually everyone in 3C recognized that Andrés was the teacher’s favorite. She called on him frequently to give responses and perform errands, and she often displayed his work as a paragon. Nevertheless, Andrés was not stigmatized by classmates. What seems most poignant about Valentino’s complaint is not that two of his best friends were on opposite ends of the teacher’s preferential treatment, but that the whole environment of equality in the grupo was potentially poisoned. Teacher favoritism threatened the fragile construction of equality and solidarity by providing incentives for students to pursue their own interests against the interests of the grupo (see Levinson in press).

This becomes even clearer in those cases in which students who had most to gain from teacher favoritism nevertheless denounced it. Throughout the year, Leticia had become one of my closest ethnographic collaborators, keeping a diary and regularly reporting her observations. She was one of the more articulate students in her grupo, and her teachers recognized a bright and active intelligence. Perhaps because of this, they tended to give her the benefit of the doubt when assignments were late or incomplete. Yet, Leticia was sensitive to this treatment, and though she benefited from it, her discomfort was palpable. In fact, she consistently underachieved to remain on good terms with the grupo. She also did most of the work on team projects, although the grading outcome differed according to the particular teacher. Thus, in one instance, Leticia had done virtually all the research for an oral report her team would have to present. Because she ended up presenting the smallest and thinnest section of the report, her final grade was one point lower than those of her teammates. On another occasion, the art teacher forced Leticia to admit she had done most of the work for a short skit her team had presented. The teacher gave Leticia a 10 and the others on her team lower grades. Despite the benefits to her in the second instance, Leticia obviously
preferred the first arrangement. She privately condemned her teammates’ lack of initiative but also resented the art teacher’s insistence on distinguishing individual performances within the team. Leticia singled out a few teachers for their habit of giving her a higher grade than she felt she had deserved (“Me regalarían calificación”). After one grading period, she was sure that her point total was equal to classmates who nevertheless received a final grade significantly lower than her own. She was distressed by the teacher’s blatant and unjust use of prerogative and came to me asking, “Don’t you think this was an unfair grade for the rest [of my classmates]?”

While most of the students denounced a few teachers in particular as playing favorites, they denied it had anything to do with race, class, or gender. For a researcher predisposed to finding such forms of structural discrimination, this was very surprising news. According to the students, these teachers chose their favorites (“agarrarán sus consentidos”) for other reasons: because of older siblings they had previously taught; because the student was particularly well behaved or apt to give bright, thoughtful (and correct!) responses in class; and because of a vaguely defined personal sympathy the teacher felt toward the student. While my own observations suggested that teacher preferences sometimes reflected the privileging of class-based forms of cultural capital, such privileging was by no means consistent. Several students pointed out to me that those teachers who had their favorites also had their least favorites—students whom they would tend to frequently discipline or compromise with well-timed and embarrassingly difficult questions (“Les cargan más”). And, as most students were also quick to point out, these students were just as likely to be boys as girls, rich as poor, from the city as from an “Indian” village. My observations confirmed what the students said, too.

In the meantime, those teachers who came in for the most praise invariably did not practice favoritism at all, or at least not as it would be perceived by the students. For example, when I asked a group of girls whether any teachers obviously discriminated against boys or girls, they denied it outright. However,
one girl singled out their science teacher as a particularly apt example of even-handed treatment:

For example, the science teacher, when somebody answers back to him, even if it's a girl, he kicks them out of the room. It doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl. . . . For example, if you say something to him he doesn't like, that doesn't seem right to him, he'll kick you out. He just kicks Juana and Sabrina out when they're not behaving well.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My aim in this article has been to present and analyze the moral perspective on teachers and teaching that Mexican secondary school students expressed through a passionate discursive practice. Many of us who work in secondary schools, as teachers or researchers, will no doubt recognize features of this discourse, and there are several complementary and competing frameworks to explain it. We might be tempted to characterize such student talk not as moral discourse but as the perennially anguished expression of adolescents' fledgling independence against the constraints of adult authority (cf. Valencia 1996). Indeed, there is a grain of truth to this quasi-functionalist portrayal of adolescents struggling against the socializing imperatives of the modern school, but it tells only part of the story.

Similarly, many educational scholars have portrayed such discourse as an agonistic display of student solidarity against institutional authority, suggesting that such displays are inherent to the organizational features of modern schooling. The British ethnographer Peter Woods (1990, 22-23, 138), for example, summarizes qualitative research that has consistently found "pupil cultures" with well-articulated complaints about teacher practices, including some of those I sketch here: favoritism, contradiction, unfairness, and inconsistency. Much of the ESF students' moral discourse on student rights could indeed be analyzed in symbolic interactionist terms as a response to teacher practices and features of school organization (curriculum, administrative policy and technique, disciplinary mea-
sures, etc.) that are largely shared across the Mexican and European contexts.

In related fashion, what I have called here a moral discourse can be understood as a situated form of resistance. John D'Amato (1993) draws on his study of Hawaiian American children to argue that the phenomenon of resistance to teacher authority is not always rooted in the particular values or class- and ethnic-based cultural characteristics of children attending school. Rather,

three features of schooling appear to be primarily responsible for engendering resistance from children: School is compulsory and otherwise constraining; instructional interaction is contentious; and children are taught as groups with the consequence that they encounter and react to the compulsory and contentious aspects of school as groups. (p. 188)

D'Amato makes a compelling argument for a view of ESF students' moral discourse as a form of situational resistance to the imposition of adult prerogative and as a natural outcome of the "ethic of egalitarianism" that pervades students' peer group dynamics (p. 198). Thus, D'Amato tends to portray students' resistance as a fairly universal and transhistorical phenomenon (where there are adults in authority in classrooms, there will be resistance). It is a resistance that only escalates into open conflict when schools fail to provide adequate "situational" or "structural" rationales for student compliance.¹³

Less compelling still for our understanding of ESF students' moral discourse are the arguments of subculture ethnographers like Paul Willis (1981) and Penelope Eckert (1989). Willis and Eckert portray the actions of rebellious "lads" and "burn-outs" as a rejection of the fundamental premises of school ideology. In a sense, these groups develop a class-based moral discourse that condemns most teacher practices and the institutional authority of the school. But the source of these students' resistance is not the interactive context of the school. This may be the trigger, but ultimately such resistance is rooted in social-class sensibilities cultivated outside the school. By implication,
the majority of students who identify with neither the lads nor the burnouts are portrayed as “accommodating” dominant school practices. This analysis may be more or less valid for the divided schools these authors studied, but what about a school like ESF where students construct a common culture across the social divide? Foley’s (1990) analysis of “making out games” in the classroom may provide a clue, for the development of antagonistic class and ethnic groups in various spaces at North Town High did not preclude a kind of situated collusion to make lessons less dull. While this strategic collusion failed to form the basis for a moral discourse, as I have portrayed it, it does show the possibilities for coordinated actions and perspectives in an institutional context otherwise rife with conflict.

I have chosen these authors for discussion because of their recognized strengths and the trenchancy of their formulations. Yet, none of these accounts of student culture is wholly sufficient for the present case. Explanations like those of Woods (1990) and D’Amato (1993) advance our understanding of recurring patterns in student conduct. They enable us to see how a common student role vis-à-vis the teacher, a similar position in school structure, may encourage a “pupil culture” with common strategies. While this sort of account helps us understand some reasons for students’ moral discourse at ESF, it fails to address adequately the historically and culturally variable dimensions of teacher-student relations. Rather than viewing students’ sense of rights and proper conduct as variable across time and space, Woods and D’Amato appeal to a universal logic, suggesting that (a) pedagogical relations are intrinsically contentious, and (b) student action is intrinsically defensive and self-justifying. Willis (1981) and Eckert (1989), on the other hand, highlight the social differentiation involved in students’ evaluation of teachers and schools. Despite their common status as students, they draw on class-based meanings to work up a kind of moral discourse. Foley (1990) provides a bridge between both sorts of accounts by showing how students may come together across their class and ethnic differences to construct a provisional “pupil culture,” in this case the shared understandings involved in making
classroom life bearable (cf. Everhart 1983). My own work with students at ESF suggests a further nuance. The conception of rights or derechos animating ESF students’ moral discourse presupposes a subtle historical shift in local cultural values. This shift should be considered when assessing the durability and ongoing consequences of students’ action in the school.

As I have tried to demonstrate here and elsewhere (Levinson 1993a, 1993b, 1996), Mexican students’ sense of derechos appears to be a comparatively recent development in local culture. This much is clear from teacher and parent testimonials and from historical accounts of school relations. Before the 1970s, the conservative Catholic culture of San Pablo stipulated a much more obedient stance for students. Parents empowered teachers to have the final word in most matters of school discipline, and students understood that compliance was the sine qua non of the success their parents expected. It is hard to imagine students from those times bringing a formal complaint against a teacher for name calling or mocking in front of other friends a teacher’s formal style of oratory. The rules of respect proscribing such critical behavior would have been deeply habituated in family and community contexts.

Several trends suggest themselves as the reasons for this historical shift in student sensibilities. Most San Pabloans identify the late 1970s, when secondary schooling expanded considerably and younger teachers entered the profession in greater numbers, as a time of important change in student attitudes. Accompanying the decreasing authority of the patriarchal church was the rise of more dialogical parenting practices. Parents began to invite their children to address them in the informal *tu* form rather than the more distant and formal *Usted*. They also tended to explanation rather than exhortation in efforts to correct misbehavior, and they encouraged their charges to maintain a strong sense of personal integrity. Contemporary psychological discourses on child development, and their attendant associations with modernity and progress, became available through newspapers, lectures, local radio programs, and the lifeways of returning U.S. migrants. Such
discourses also made themselves felt in the schools. By the 1980s, new secondary teachers were required to have completed the equivalent of a college degree to teach. The introduction of this new generation of teachers, who by and large operated according to conceptions of respectful collegiality between teacher and student, tended to inspire students' critical judgments of older teachers with more despotic styles.16

During the past twenty years, there is also evidence that a relatively autonomous youth culture has been forming in San Pablo. Like many authors have described for North America, Europe, and Japan (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Brake 1985; Fornäs and Bolin 1995; Kett 1977; Schwartz and Merten 1967; White 1993), the expansion of advanced schooling, leisure time, and youth-oriented mass culture in San Pablo has provided the space and resources for more intensive peer socialization beyond the school. While ESF students participated unevenly in this burgeoning culture, they shared many of its common pleasures. Most ESF students were avid readers of teen magazines that offered advice on relating to parents and teachers. Most also partook of an incipient youth market for cultural commodities such as music cassettes, television programs, and movie videos. While these new cultural media sustained diverse messages, discourses of youth empowerment and rights comprised core themes (Levinson 1993d). Perhaps for the first time in San Pablo, consumer commodities designated specifically for youth were in vogue, solidifying new generational categories while creating in youth new sensibilities of individual rights and expectations.

Such dynamics suggest how the bases for an expanded conception of students' rights have been established over time. New forms of youth culture and intergenerational conduct help explain why and how students at ESF could construct a common moral discourse around these conceptions.17 They also challenge those educational researchers who might attribute such a discourse to the organizational commonalities of Western schooling, especially the “compulsory and contentious"
nature of group instruction (D’Amato 1993). I would submit that what makes compulsory instruction contentious is, in no small measure, the sense of rights students bring with them to the situation. This sense may issue from a universal human impulse toward dignity, and it may be nurtured to varying degrees in the primary culture of the home and community. As I have described here, it may and often does evolve historically as families adjust to shifting circumstances and new spaces for youth culture develop. In all likelihood, ESF students have only more recently begun to exhibit the sense of rights that other studies have often taken for granted.

Ethnographic educational research often yields rich insights into the situational and organizational parameters of social interaction. Some focus on commonalities arising from the immediacies of the instructional context (Bosser 1979; D’Amato 1993), while others explore the more differentiated responses issuing from students’ experience in the broader social structure (Eckert 1989; Willis 1981). Yet, the strengths of such analysis must be complemented by a recognition of historical emergence and the cultural complexity of the modern world system (Hannerz 1992; Marcus 1986; Miller 1995), a recognition requiring us to expand our interpretive horizons spatially and temporally (Carspecken 1995; Levinson and Holland 1996; Quantz 1992). In modest fashion, this is what I have attempted to accomplish here. After exploring the various means by which students at one Mexican secondary school expressed their judgments of teacher practices, I attempted to show that the meanings of students’ moral discourse could not be fully understood without reference to local conceptions of rights and personhood that have themselves undergone important changes in recent years, as the influence of globalizing youth culture and educational ideologies have increasingly made themselves felt across all social classes. Students’ sense of themselves and their relation to teachers, then, is not given only by the communicative context. Nor is it just a fickle product of a transient life stage. If we are to imagine new forms of educational relationship, we must first reckon with the historical and structural contexts of personhood and value.
NOTES

1. Most urban schools in Mexico stretch their facilities by dividing the long school day into morning and afternoon shifts, thus accommodating the growing school population.

2. Students' moral discourse about each other was considerably more varied and ambiguous. In this article, I have chosen to focus on students' perceptions of their teachers and administrators.

3. For the remainder of this article, my references to Escuela Secundaria Federal (ESF) only encompass processes observed during the morning shift, unless otherwise specified.

4. ESF is known as a "general" secundaria, whereas the other two are called "technical" secundarias. The technical secondary schools are typically younger, and they devote a greater part of their school day to "industrial" activities such as carpentry or clothing design.

5. In addition, the morning shift has a higher proportion of girls to boys than any of the other secundarias. I explore some of the consequences of these gender relations in another article (Levinson 1997a).

6. For a few studies conducted in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, see Okano (1993), Stambach (1996), Herr and Anderson (1997), and several of the essays in Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996).

7. The methodology included a set of structured interviews and questionnaire surveys in a number of local elementary and secondary schools and their respective administrative offices, as well as research into the history of ESF and other regional schools. See my dissertation (Levinson 1993a) for a fuller discussion of my research methods, as well as an account of my relationships with research participants.

8. I might note here that freighted terms such as liberal, authoritarian, modern, and traditional were very much a part of local speech in San Pablo. Parents, teachers, and students drew on these terms to articulate their sense of appropriate conduct and to make critical judgments about patterns of social change. In general, adults used the term liberal to describe behavior that was permissive and gave free rein to the expressive capacities. They often worried, though, that "liberal" behavior might be pursued beyond acceptable boundaries, into libertinaje. Certain modes of social control and behavior thought of as tradicional, then, were often prescribed to counterbalance liberal tendencies. "Traditional" behavior included female modesty and adult (usually male) imposition. The term moderno was most often used by the students themselves. Garnering associations with that which was most novel, up-to-date, and originating in the United States, "modern" objects and practices, such as computers and popular rock music, had the greatest currency in the emerging dominant youth culture of San Pablo.

9. In most interviews, students elaborated well-defined, collective opinions about teachers. When I interviewed two or more students together, such opinions were consensually constructed in the interview context itself. If one student contradicted the opinion of others in the group, they were quick to point out the discrepancy and through the use of argument and suggestion altered the terms of the original statement. Often enough, though, the first student would also marshal arguments, and while conceding some, would nuance the case until some middle ground was reached. This could be seen, as one view would have it, as just another case of adolescent peer pressure: one student cannot stand to be different and succumbs to his classmates' prompting. Yet, I would argue that there is a real tension here, not just between "individual" preference
or experience and "group" pressure but between the discursive construction of group experience that one incorporates as one's "own" and other competing discourses that at different times and places, under different conditions, come also to be used to formulate (represent?) one's own experience. I say this for two reasons. First, because the kind of construction that occurs in group interviews is not necessarily coercive. It involves suggestion, correction, amendment, and sometimes light ridicule or banter. There seems to be an imperative to produce a consensus about a certain teacher. Second, because in their individual interviews with me students still tend to use the generic "we" to situate their own opinion in the context of a collective opinion ("We feel this way about Mr. So and So").

10. I knew the teacher in question and often observed his classroom. Although he never called students *burros or jotos* in my presence, he did call them less pejorative names, and he did oblige students to perform custodial tasks or stand in front of the class when they did not meet his academic expectations. Students told me they noticed that my presence in the classroom seemed to put a brake on this teacher's harshest disciplinary measures. Meanwhile, other teachers confirmed that this teacher had always provoked student resistance through his actions.

11. The educational bureaucracy in Mexico is notoriously hierarchical and centralized, and secundaria principals must curry favor with clientelistic networks in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, even as they negotiate teacher, parent, and student demands at the local level (Sandoval 1996). The national- or state-level bureaucracies usually manage to impose their administrative selections on individual schools, although local forces, especially alliances of teachers and parents, are occasionally successful at resisting such selections. Principals, moreover, embody a range of personal styles. Two years after my fieldwork, in 1993, the principal at ESF was "promoted" to regional curriculum consultant (*jefe de enseñanza*) for mathematics and natural sciences, a position with less immediate power. He was replaced by the former vice principal, a man with considerably more skill at negotiating conflicting interests and allowing diverse voices into school governance. Many teachers and parents claimed that their own resistance to the earlier principal had been decisive in his exit from the school.

12. There are many reasons why teachers at ESF exhibited less discriminatory practices than we might expect. Many of these have to do with the history of schooling in this region, as well as the strong value placed on equality within the Mexican nationalist framework (Levinson 1993a, 1993c, 1996). The well-known Mexican educational ethnographer Elsie Rockwell (1995) provides even more insight:

In Mexico, in contrast to what has been described for other countries, the social discrimination implicit in unequal schooling has functioned more through the actual organization of the institution than through the practice of teachers. Possibly because of their own social origin, many teachers assume an attitude of equalitarian compensation, by which they show special interest in pushing ahead [sacar adelante] the most needy children. The implicit identification between teacher and students at the level of language and interactive repertoire produces an environment of greater trust. (p. 21)

13. Situational rationales are strengthened when going to school has an intrinsic value for children, when "children . . . view participation in lessons and other school processes as a means of maintaining valued relationships with teachers and peers and
of gaining access to experiences of mastery and accomplishment; structural rationales are strengthened when students perceive school compliance to be important for achieving important extrinsic goals, such as career development, advanced schooling, and/or status (D’Amato 1993, 190-91). Not surprisingly, these are some of the areas in which students’ cultural traditions come into play.

14. One important exception to this historical pattern would be the Mexican experiment with “socialist education” in the 1930s. Under the tutelage of President Lázaro Cárdenas, teachers went out into local communities and emphasized a rationalist form of dialogue with their students, questioning and debating (Vaughan 1997). The region around San Pablo was one of the most active zones for socialist education. Ironically, the socialist experiment failed largely due to pressure from conservative, especially Catholic, parents.

15. There are a number of ethnographic studies of Mexican communities and neighborhoods that have examined these same kinds of cultural changes and tend to support my observations here. See, for instance, Levine (1993), Gutmann (1996), and Arizpe (1989).

16. This trend in education and child development finds echo in Boli and Ramírez’s (1992, 28) thesis that the expansion of compulsory schooling beyond the developed West carried with it cultural emphases on economic progress and the “capacities and personalities of the individual.” Boli and Ramírez discuss formal schooling, but it is clear that more broadly these cultural premises of the developed West were being disseminated through popular culture and migration as well.

17. As I write elsewhere, there are other important sources for a common culture bridging students’ class and ethnic differences. These include the ethic of national and group solidarity developed in students’ grupos escolares (Levinson 1993a, 1993b, in press), as well as the sense of equality and achieved status developed as part of a secondary “schooling identity” (Levinson 1996). Through these modalities, students actively constructed a culture of equality that went well beyond the more circumscribed moral discourse discussed here.

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