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The dilemmas and breakthroughs in cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students

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Abstract. The middle grades of primary school represent a critical transitional period in which children's rule consciousness develops from externally imposed regulation toward self-regulation. The quality of rule consciousness cultivation during this stage directly influences students' formation of behavioral habits and the development of their social adaptability. Due to limitations in students' cognitive development and self-control abilities, insufficient emphasis on rule education in schools and inadequate professional competence among teachers, as well as deviations in family education concepts and inappropriate educational approaches, middle-grade primary school students face prominent practical difficulties in terms of rule cognition, emotional identification, and behavioral practice. Based on an analysis of the problems existing in the cultivation of rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students, this paper explores the underlying causes from three dimensions: students' own limitations, deficiencies in school education, and deviations in family education. It further proposes a systematic strategic framework from four perspectives: constructing a four-stage cultivation model of "cognition–identification–internalization–practice", optimizing the content and methods of rule education, strengthening the collaborative education mechanism among families, schools, and society, and improving the evaluation and feedback system. The study argues that resolving the dilemmas in cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students requires the joint participation of students, schools, families, and society. A comprehensive and multi-level system for cultivating rule consciousness should be established to provide solid educational support for the development of students' rule literacy.

Keywords: middle-grade primary school students, rule consciousness, rule education

1. Introduction: the practical background and significance of cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students

The cultivation of rule consciousness constitutes an important component of moral education in primary schools and plays a fundamental role in students' social development and the formation of sound personalities. The middle grades of primary school (ages 8–10) represent a critical transitional period in which children's moral judgment develops from heteronomous regulation toward autonomous regulation. According to Piaget's theory of moral development, children at this stage begin to demonstrate "reversibility" in their thinking, gradually shifting from absolute obedience to authority toward the pursuit of "equality" and "mutual

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cooperation". Their criteria for judging right and wrong begin to shift from the consequences of actions to the intentions behind them, and they gradually develop the cognitive capacity to understand that rules are collectively established agreements among members of a group. Meanwhile, Kohlberg's theory of moral development suggests that children in this period are transitioning from the pre-conventional level to the conventional level of moral reasoning. They begin to pay attention to social expectations of being a "good child" and attempt to gain recognition by complying with rules. Therefore, the core challenge and fundamental task of rule education during this period lies in how to adapt to and facilitate the qualitative transformation of children's moral judgment from heteronomy (external authority-based constraints) to autonomy (internal value identification).

From a policy perspective, China has placed increasing emphasis on rule education in primary and secondary schools in recent years. The *Guidelines for Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* issued in 2017 explicitly stated that the goals of moral education at the primary school level should include cultivating students' initial awareness of rules and the rule of law, as well as helping them develop positive habits in daily life and behavior [1]. The *Outline for Building a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035)* further requires schools at all levels to adhere to the principle of fostering virtue through education and integrate the cultivation of rule consciousness throughout the entire process of education and teaching. However, a noticeable gap remains between clear policy orientations and actual educational practices. Incidents closely associated with weak rule consciousness, such as campus bullying, traffic safety accidents, and inappropriate online behaviors, continue to occur from time to time, indicating that the effectiveness of current school-based rule education still requires improvement. Against this backdrop, focusing on the critical stage of middle-grade primary school education, examining the practical dilemmas in cultivating students' rule consciousness, and exploring educational approaches aligned with students' cognitive characteristics at this stage are of significant theoretical value and practical importance.

2. Major problems in cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students

2.1. Deviations in rule cognition and the disconnection between knowledge and practice

Middle-grade primary school students demonstrate multiple deviations in their understanding of and attitudes toward rules. First, their cognition of the essence of rules tends to be misguided. A considerable number of students perceive rules as "things imposed by teachers and parents to control us" rather than agreements established to safeguard collective interests. Some students equate social rules with game rules that can be modified arbitrarily, while others believe that rules "only need to be followed at school". These cognitive deviations directly influence students' judgments regarding the legitimacy of rules and their willingness to comply with them. Second, students' motivations for following rules show a clear tendency toward instrumentalism. Some students comply with rules primarily to avoid punishment, obtain rewards, or please teachers, rather than because they recognize the intrinsic value of rules. This externally driven motivational pattern indicates that once external supervision is removed, rule-following behaviors are difficult to sustain. Third, there exists a significant gap between students' cognition and their actual behaviors. Although students are able to verbally repeat rule requirements, they often struggle to put them into practice in real-life situations. Their level of cognitive recognition of classroom discipline is considerably higher than their actual rate of compliance, and there is a noticeable discrepancy between their behavioral self-regulation in public settings and their cognitive understanding of rules. Children who have just entered primary school, lacking in

knowledge and life experience, have a superficial understanding of the significance of rules. Their comprehension of the connotation, value, and meaning of rule culture is inevitably biased, leading to a lack of willingness to consciously abide by rules [2].

2.2. Monotonous cultivation methods and the lack of subjective experience

The prominent problems in the implementation of school-based rule education are mainly reflected in the monotonous nature of cultivation methods and the absence of students' subjective experiences. In terms of educational approaches, current rule education in the middle grades of primary schools relies heavily on verbal instruction and one-way indoctrination, with themed class meetings, morning assembly discipline reminders, and the posting of publicity slogans serving as the primary methods. However, what students genuinely expect are experiential activities such as situational simulations, role-playing, and volunteer services, while such approaches are rarely applied in actual teaching practices.

Meanwhile, the implementation of rule education is highly concentrated on class teachers, with limited participation from teachers of other subjects. This structure makes it difficult to integrate rule education into the entire process of daily teaching. In the formulation of class rules, teachers often occupy a dominant position, while children's initiative and agency are insufficiently developed [3]. The lack of students' voices in the process of rule formation prevents them from developing an internal recognition of the rationality and necessity of rules. As a result, rule compliance remains at the level of passive obedience and fails to develop into a conscious pursuit of values.

2.3. Lack of democratic procedures and deviations in evaluation orientation

The institutional construction of rule education also faces deep-seated obstacles, primarily manifested in the absence of democratic procedures and deviations in evaluation orientation. Although these two issues appear to be deficiencies at the level of management techniques, they fundamentally hinder the crucial transformation of rule consciousness from heteronomy to autonomy.

First, the lack of democratic procedures in rule-making deprives students of an important opportunity to experience "social cooperation". At present, class rules are generally announced unilaterally by teachers, with students rarely participating in their discussion, formation, and decision-making processes. According to Piaget's theory of moral development, the essential driving force behind children's transition from "heteronomy" to "autonomy" comes from "social cooperation" among peers—that is, experiencing the negotiability and reciprocity of rules through equal interactions and developing a renewed understanding of the rationality of rules through conflicts of opinions. When rules are imposed on students in a top-down manner, students lose the opportunity to understand the fundamental nature of rules as "negotiable collective agreements". Consequently, their moral judgment remains confined to passive obedience to authority, making it difficult for them to develop the cognitive conflicts and sense of responsibility necessary for the transition toward autonomy.

Second, the utilitarian tendency of evaluation and feedback reinforces students' externally driven motivations for rule compliance. Current rule education lacks systematic process-based assessments of students' rule literacy and relies excessively on external mechanisms such as point deductions, rankings, rewards, and punishments. This evaluation orientation subtly directs students' motivations for following rules toward what Kohlberg termed the "pre-conventional level" of moral reasoning—namely, acting to avoid punishment or obtain rewards—which contradicts the essential requirement of rule consciousness based on autonomy. Particularly noteworthy is that the middle grades of primary school represent a critical transition period from the pre-conventional level to the conventional level. Students at this stage are highly sensitive to

"social recognition"; however, utilitarian evaluation not only fails to utilize this sensitivity to promote internal identification but instead reinforces a mindset of treating rules through "cost-benefit calculations" rather than "value judgments". The misalignment of evaluation mechanisms prevents rule education from establishing a positive cycle of "behavioral performance–value reflection–motivational internalization". As a result, rule compliance remains at the superficial level of passive obedience and fails to develop into a conscious pursuit of values.

3. Analysis of the underlying causes of problems in cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students

3.1. Developmental constraints of students' cognitive abilities and self-control

The difficulties encountered in cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students first stem from the developmental characteristics of students themselves at this age. From the perspective of cognitive development, although children aged 8 to 10 have acquired certain logical reasoning abilities, their abstract thinking and moral reasoning abilities are still undergoing continuous development. Students at this stage can generally understand concrete and visible behavioral instructions, but they often lack the capacity to deeply comprehend the social values and moral significance underlying rules. This cognitive limitation means that if rule education remains merely at the level of behavioral requirements without explaining the value logic behind rules, students will find it difficult to achieve the cognitive advancement from "knowing that rules exist" to "understanding why rules are necessary". In terms of the development of self-control, although students in this age group have developed preliminary self-regulation abilities, they are still highly susceptible to external stimuli and peer behaviors. When facing temptations or experiencing emotional impulses, students often struggle to consistently adhere to established rules. The phrase "I couldn't control myself in that moment" has become a common explanation for rule-violating behaviors, which precisely reflects the general weakness of students' rule-related willpower during this developmental stage. Rule compliance requires not only cognitive understanding but also perseverance at the level of will. The cultivation of willpower requires long-term practical training and emotional support and cannot be achieved through short-term verbal instruction alone.

3.2. Insufficient attention from schools and inadequate professional competence among teachers

Deep-rooted constraints at the school level should also not be overlooked. First, rule education occupies a marginal position within the overall framework of school work. Driven by the inertia of examination-oriented education, schools devote the majority of their resources to subject teaching and academic achievement improvement, while rule education is often regarded as merely a supplementary task aimed at "preventing safety incidents". This positioning prevents rule education from receiving adequate guarantees in terms of instructional time, financial investment, and professional support. Second, teachers generally lack sufficient professional competence in rule education. Although most teachers undertake the responsibility of implementing rule education, they have received limited systematic professional training in this area during both pre-service preparation and in-service development. Teachers' understanding of the goals of rule education tends to be narrow; a considerable proportion of teachers equate the primary purpose of rule education with maintaining classroom discipline and class order, while failing to fully recognize its deeper educational value in shaping personality and enhancing social adaptability. Teachers often rely habitually on verbal instruction and moral preaching, while lacking familiarity with more effective approaches such as

situational experiences and practical participation. Third, teachers' exemplary role in demonstrating rule consciousness has not been fully realized. Students possess a strong tendency to emulate their teachers, and teachers' words and actions subtly influence students' behavioral habits and value judgments. Some teachers require students to follow rules while failing to serve as appropriate role models in their own daily conduct. Such inconsistency between words and actions significantly weakens the persuasive power of rule education.

3.3. Deviations in family education concepts and inappropriate educational approaches

The absence of effective family participation in cultivating rule consciousness represents another significant underlying cause. On the one hand, a considerable number of parents regard rule education as the exclusive responsibility of schools and lack both the awareness and concrete actions necessary to actively participate in the daily cultivation of their children's rule consciousness. This conceptual deviation prevents families and schools from forming a unified educational force and may even lead to contradictory expectations between home and school, causing students to experience confusion when confronted with inconsistent educational standards. On the other hand, even among parents who value rule education, their educational approaches often demonstrate obvious deficiencies. Some parents adopt excessively strict approaches, responding to children's rule violations with zero tolerance and even resorting to physical punishment, which may instead provoke children's rebellious attitudes. Others demonstrate excessive indulgence by tolerating or covering up children's inappropriate behaviors, preventing them from establishing clear boundaries of conduct. In addition, parents' own weak rule consciousness and non-compliant behaviors further intensify the problem. When parents frequently violate traffic regulations or disregard public order in daily life, the rule awareness that students acquire at school is weakened and contradicted by these "negative examples" within the family environment.

4. Strategies for improving the cultivation of rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students

4.1. Constructing a four-stage cultivation model of "cognition–identification–internalization–practice"

In response to the systematic problems of cognitive deviation, emotional indifference, weak willpower, and behavioral disconnection in the cultivation of rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students, it is necessary to construct a comprehensive cultivation model that runs throughout the entire educational process. This study proposes a progressive four-stage model of "cognition–identification–internalization–practice", which integrates Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Kohlberg's theory of moral development stages, and Dewey's educational concept of "learning by doing". The model emphasizes that the formation of rule consciousness should follow a progressive logic from superficial to profound, from external regulation to internal motivation, and from knowledge acquisition to behavioral practice.

The cognition stage serves as the starting point of the entire cultivation process, with the primary task of helping students accurately understand the meaning and functions of rules. In teaching practice, teachers should avoid merely reading out and emphasizing rule provisions. Instead, they should use examples and situations closely related to students' daily lives, enabling students to understand the origins and values of rules within specific contexts. For instance, when teaching traffic rules, teachers can present contrasting examples of the consequences of following and violating rules, guiding students to understand the protective significance of rules through intuitive comparisons.

The identification stage serves as the key bridge connecting cognition and behavior, with the central task of stimulating students' emotional identification with rules and generating value resonance. Teachers can design experiential activities that allow students to personally experience the fundamental role of rules in maintaining order and ensuring safety. It is equally important to involve students in the process of formulating class rules. When students contribute their opinions and participate in decision-making during rule formation, their sense of identification with and willingness to uphold rules are significantly strengthened.

The goal of the internalization stage is to transform students' understanding and acceptance of external rules into internal value standards. This stage requires the creation of sufficient practical situations in which students can gradually achieve the transition from heteronomy to autonomy through repeated experiences with rules. For example, a rotating "rule supervisor" system can be established within the class, allowing every student the opportunity to transform from a rule follower into a rule maintainer. Through continuous role experiences, rules gradually shift from external requirements imposed by teachers to conscious choices made by students themselves.

The practice stage represents the ultimate goal of rule education, aiming to cultivate students' ability to transform rule consciousness into stable behavioral habits. Teachers should create opportunities for students to consciously apply and practice rules in authentic life situations. Through social practice activities, rule education can be extended beyond the campus, allowing students to test and consolidate their existing understanding of rules within broader social contexts.

4.2. Optimizing the content and methods of rule education

In terms of content, a multidimensional system of rule education should be established. Rule education for middle-grade primary school students should not be limited to campus discipline and classroom regulations but should extend to various aspects of students' lives. It should systematically cover dimensions including classroom learning discipline, campus activity norms, public social order, interpersonal communication etiquette, safety and self-protection knowledge, and online behavioral norms. Although the textbook *Morality and the Rule of Law* has incorporated a progressive design logic from campus rules to social rules and from behavioral norms to legal awareness, this design has not been fully implemented in actual teaching practices. Teachers should systematically identify the elements of rule education contained in textbooks and fully explore and effectively implement them in daily teaching.

In terms of educational approaches, a transformation should be achieved from one-way instruction to diversified experiential learning. Situational experiential teaching allows students to simulate authentic life scenarios and personally experience how rules function in specific contexts through participation. For example, a "simulated supermarket" activity can help students understand the meaning of queuing rules and fair transactions, while a "traffic intersection simulation" enables students to experience the protective function of traffic rules through role-playing. The case analysis method presents real-life cases closely related to students' experiences and guides them to deepen their understanding of the value of rules through discussion and analysis. Game-based activities integrate rule education into the process of play, allowing students to absorb rule consciousness imperceptibly in a relaxed atmosphere. Schools should also make full use of diverse channels such as flag-raising ceremonies, campus broadcasts, and themed bulletin boards to create an atmosphere conducive to rule education, thereby forming a complete educational chain of "cognitive guidance–situational experience–practical reinforcement".

4.3. Strengthening the collaborative education mechanism among families, schools, and society

The formation of rule consciousness is a continuous process constructed through interactions among multiple parties. Relying solely on schools cannot achieve ideal results. Establishing a tripartite collaborative mechanism led by schools, supported by families, and assisted by society is an essential pathway for overcoming the difficulties of rule education.

At the family level, parents should first transform their educational concepts and incorporate the daily cultivation of rule consciousness into important aspects of family education. Parents should establish clear and consistent behavioral norms within family life and encourage children to participate in discussing and formulating family rules, such as jointly determining daily schedules, household responsibilities, and limits on electronic device use. Through participation in the formulation of family rules, children can truly understand that rules are not tools of unilateral restriction but mechanisms for coordinating individual needs with collective interests. More importantly, parents should provide positive examples through their own regulated behaviors. The most powerful educational resource in rule education is not any written material, but rather the behaviors of adults that children observe every day. When parents can correctly understand, recognize, and abide by rules, and strictly demand themselves, they have inadvertently provided a model for their children to emulate in cultivating their awareness and behavior regarding rules. This is the best and most effective rule education in the family [4].

At the school level, systematic mechanisms for home–school communication and cooperation should be established. Teachers should maintain regular communication with parents regarding students' rule-following behaviors through parent meetings, home–school communication records, and instant messaging platforms. When students demonstrate behavioral deviations, teachers should work together with parents to identify causes and jointly develop improvement strategies. Schools can regularly organize specialized guidance activities on rule education for parents to help them acquire scientific approaches to cultivating children's rule consciousness.

At the social level, schools should actively develop and utilize extracurricular resources for rule education. The formation of students' awareness of rules requires strengthening social education, establishing a mechanism for joint social education, and striving for support from various departments and all sectors of society [5]. Schools can establish cooperative relationships with community organizations and organize students to participate in activities such as community volunteer services, discussions on community regulations, and maintaining public order. Through authentic social participation, students can experience and examine the social value of rules. By organically connecting school-based rule education, family-based rule cultivation, and community-based rule practice, students can receive consistent value guidance and behavioral norms across different life contexts.

4.4. Improving evaluation and feedback mechanisms

A scientific evaluation and feedback mechanism serves as a fundamental guarantee for the quality of rule education. Based on educational evaluation theories, the evaluation system for rule education should achieve an organic integration of three functions: diagnostic evaluation, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation.

Diagnostic evaluation should be conducted at the beginning of the semester to understand students' initial levels of rule consciousness. Teachers can use brief questionnaires and daily observations to identify students' basic conditions in terms of rule cognition, emotional attitudes toward rules, and rule-related behaviors. This allows teachers to recognize both group characteristics and individual differences, providing a basis for designing subsequent educational strategies.

Formative evaluation should run throughout the entire process of rule education, with its core value lying in providing dynamic feedback and timely adjustments. Teachers should continuously monitor students' rule-related behaviors in daily teaching and class management, offering timely recognition for positive behaviors and prompt guidance for inappropriate behaviors. The subjects of evaluation should expand from teacher-only assessment to a combination of teacher evaluation, student self-evaluation, and peer evaluation. Through evaluating others, students can deepen their understanding of rules, while through receiving evaluations from others, they can gain directions for behavioral improvement.

Summative evaluation should be conducted at the end of the semester to systematically assess students' development in various dimensions of rule literacy. Evaluation should focus on students' overall performance in four areas: deepening rule cognition, strengthening emotional identification, enhancing persistence of willpower, and improving behavioral habits, rather than simply judging whether students "follow rules or not" through a binary outcome. Evaluation results should be provided as feedback to students and parents and serve as a basis for adjusting future educational strategies.

Regarding the implementation of rewards and consequences, rules should be transparent, standards should be consistent, enforcement should be fair, and implementation should be timely. Provisions concerning rewards and consequences in class rules should be clearly communicated to all students at the beginning of the semester, enabling them to understand what outcomes different behaviors will produce. During implementation, teachers should avoid differential treatment based on personal preferences or students' identities and ensure the fairness and authority of rules. Timely feedback has greater educational value than severe consequences. Positive behaviors should be immediately affirmed, while inappropriate behaviors should be promptly guided and corrected. Only by helping students establish clear and timely connections between behaviors and consequences can rule internalization and the development of behavioral habits be effectively promoted.

5. Conclusion

The difficulties in cultivating rule consciousness among middle-grade primary school students are rooted in the developmental characteristics of students' cognition, the structural contradictions in the allocation of school educational resources, and the deep-seated deviations in family education concepts and approaches. Addressing these challenges requires abandoning the narrow understanding that "rule education is merely discipline management" and recognizing the cultivation of rule consciousness as a core component of personality development. In terms of practical approaches, a systematic and consistent cultivation system should be established, with the progressive logic of "cognition–identification–internalization–practice" serving as the central framework and the collaboration among schools, families, and society serving as the supporting structure. Only through the continuous interaction of cognitive guidance, emotional awakening, practical reinforcement, and evaluation feedback can students truly complete the transformation from "knowing rules" to "identifying with rules", from "identifying with rules" to "internalizing rules", and from "internalizing rules" to "practicing rules". In this way, they can develop into modern citizens who possess both rule consciousness and self-regulation abilities.

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