

## Conference Paper

# Are Youth at Risk, Juveniles or Just Kids? Analysis of the Current Educational Resistance of Minors from Attendance Centers in Culturally Diverse Societies

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of educational resistance shown by minors from disadvantaged backgrounds and placed in attendance centers is the main subject of interest in this article. This is a special group of students, because their attitude towards education is shaped by factors determined by dysfunctional families, antisocial pressure from peers, poor neighborhood, poor infrastructure, experience from the foster care institutions and a school curriculum, implemented without taking into account their specifics. Resistance is a reaction to their educational experience and perceived as a manifestation of a dominant culture associated with a form analyzed by Paul Willis. According to this concept, the connection between the hegemonic culture and subordinate groups is created not only by ethnic or national, but also by socio-cultural and economic factors. Young people from the underclass, shaped by various cultural patterns, norms, values, language and socio-economic conditions, reject the educational offer of the cultural hegemon, generating behaviors leading to school abandonment and truancy. Based on the research material collected during in-depth interviews, the educational resistance of minors was analyzed with particular attention to its causes, patterns and trajectories.

**Keywords:** educational resistance, juveniles, multicultural societies, social diversity, in-depth interview

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## 1. Introduction

According to Kroeber's thesis [1], we live in a world of many cultures, in a complex combination of norms, values and languages. Multiculturalism of modern societies is a special challenge for education. This is a complex generated not only by ethnic, cultural, national or religious, but also socio-economic factors affecting the social exclusion of the young generation in a wide dimension [2], limiting its chances for an adequate

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level of education and access to the labor market [3], [4]. Adolescents from underclass are exposed to many adverse conditions, such as poverty, poor housing, educational failures, dropping out [3], [4] or discriminatory practices [5]. This situation is a difficult task for education, and resistance is one of its side effects [6]. Adult culture perceived hegemonically, social stratification and macrostructure (e.g. institutions) are its main goal. It is a reaction to limited opportunities, expression or development, alienation and adult authority. Scholars believe that membership in deviant peer groups is a form of resistance to society, which is perceived as "repressive" [7].

Educational institutions are a special area of resistance. This is the environment in which the stratification system is reproduced and legitimized. This is a structure in which problematic youth adapts to social structures by assimilating meanings that are consistent with the intentions of cultural hegemon [8]. Unwillingness to perform compulsory schooling, low educational aspirations and violation of the rules of social communication are the main areas of reproduction of the group culture of adolescents. According to Terpstra, "the school is the first most tangible institution that represents a dominant society. Here they learn that, according to the rules of the dominant society, they are "losers" and that the best solution may be an informal resistance to the rules and authority and withdrawal among other (young) people who share their fate" [9].

The subcultural style of 'lads' described in the classical work of Paul Willis [10] is built on the attitude toward school, which is manifested in the reproduction of a position in the social structure, which is determined by developmental limitations and lack of access to environmental resources, but also a manifestation of resistance. The most significant regularity noted by Willis with regard to resistance was that their attitude to compulsory schooling is peculiarly interpreted in accordance with the specific street pedagogy of survival: participation in formal education with a minimum of their own efforts, manifested in violating boundaries that outline not only the role of a student, but also the authority of the teacher. School and traditionally defined education are important for "cissies" -- school colleagues from the upper classes [10].

Willis notes several typical behaviors of the characters described. The so-called 'having a laff' is a crucial element of the school counterculture, which in itself is perceived as a source of fun, a panacea for boredom and protection from difficulties encountered in school [10]. Denial of school education also entails a decrease in mental activity and leads to a cult of strength and masculinity. According to M. Brake, educational resistance arises from the fact that the real functions of the school are at odds with its supposed goals [11]. For the boys studied by Willis, "anti-school culture" is the desired source of

a space of knowledge and resistance, as well as the product of their environmental culture, which reproduces their position in the structure of the social class [11].

## 2. Methods

This article is aimed at analyzing the experiences of minors in juvenile detention centers. Their educational experience in an open environment before isolation is examined. In the context of resistance, this serves as the basis for building relations between representatives of subordinate groups (underclass) in relation to the school, an institution that represents the dominant culture, which is part of conflicts in a culturally diverse society.

In this study, the structural description method proposed by F. Schutze [12] was used, which enables analysis of the educational experience and activity patterns of the respondents. These trajectories are viewed as entanglement in resistance mechanisms. Data was collected using the in-depth interview method [13], [14], [15]. This is a useful tool for collecting information about the participants' live experience [16]. This type of interview is quite commonly used in social or cultural studies, including cultural conflicts, social deviation, or resistance [17]. This is a particularly useful research method when respondents use similar language or slang and when the accepted analytical model entails collecting the same information from each participant (in this case there were minors from rehabilitation centers, which served as the basis for an a priori assumption about their significantly similar experience).

For conducting interviews, one rehabilitation institution of each type was randomly determined (a home for detained juveniles, open, half-open, closed, with intensified educational supervision, therapeutic facilities (all for boys) and facilities for girls). Six to eight interviews were conducted in each of the selected facilities with minors aged 15–19, which were verified using triangulation by comparing their contents with the facts from the participants' profiles (to minimize the possibility of confabulation). During the analysis, ethical requirements related to the field of research were observed (anonymity and confidential principle, minimizing the identification of the interviewees, which led to the assignment of codes to each participant) [18], [19]. Due to the specific nature of the study area, the preservation of genuine utterances turned out to be problematic, therefore synonyms or contextual notes were added in italics in square brackets.

### 3. Educational Resistance from the Minor's Perspective (Results)

Describing their educational experiences in the resistance context, the participants indicate their final years of primary school and in particular the beginning of middle school as the pivotal moments for the analyzed category. The respondents' statements show that educational transition model complicates participation in the educational process. The minor (C/6) says: *[Primary] school was okay, I was passing everything; it's only once I started my first year of middle school... I was held back a year in the first grade of middle school 'cause I wasn't going to school.* The respondent (B/3) also notes the change in his modus operandi after advancing to middle school: *In primary school, they kept an eye on us; in middle school, everybody was doing whatever [she or he wanted].*

Negative attitudes towards school obligations are a significant element emphasized by the respondents as a source of resistance. The interviewee (E/10) puts it briefly: *I did nothing during classes.* The person (B/6) discusses his time at school in a similar manner: *When I was free, I didn't go to school at all; even when I did, I did nothing; I couldn't care less about it.* Unwillingness to learn leads to an increase in problems related to fulfilling school obligations. One minor (E/1) notes:

- *I didn't do well at school; I had bad grades. At first, I sat there, doing nothing; later, I'd play truant.*

- *[Did you repeat a grade]?*

- *Yeah, first grade [of middle school], about three times.*

- *What about the teachers? Did you get along well with them?*

- *No, I never did. Well, in primary school, they actually liked me; only the vice-principal always had it in for me.*

Attitudes towards compulsory school obligations can be interpreted as a result of environmental factors. For example, the minor (E/6) whose family situation was very difficult (rumored to be a house known locally as a den; the minor grew up without a father and his mother changed partners multiple times; she is unemployed and does not maintain contact with the school or the probation officer); so the minor describes his relationship with the school and its reasons: *In fifth grade, I stopped going to school; I didn't go there at all; I met friends, much older than me; I had lots of alcohol at home, mum's friends...* The interviewee (A/4) also indicates his family as a factor which had an effect on determining his relation to the compulsory school obligations: *Middle school was the worst 'cause that's when the fighting started; my uncles and all my older*

*cousins had gone to that middle school, so everybody had some... contacts there. The teachers liked us, but they knew what we were like.* In addition, he said that people living in a 'bad' neighborhood have limited access to education: *I started vocational school when I was still free; it was the most pathological school in town; that's how they called us 'cause we were from such neighborhoods where the most stuff was happening.*

Growth in a dysfunctional family is a factor that leads to interference in parental authority, as a result of which education takes place in a foster environment. A common side effect of interventions is school change, which is an adaptive challenge for minors. Particularly strong barriers are the relationships with peers in the classroom, where stigma in the orphanage becomes the basis for rejection or conflicts. One minor (A/6) describes his experience following a school change: *When I was 12, I got put in an orphanage; I didn't go for half a year 'cause I didn't get along with my peers. I had some problems with them; for some time, I decided I wouldn't go to that school.* The interviewee (D/11), who also grew up outside of her biological family, also perceives the cause of her problems with peer's relationships in the classroom: *When I was in primary school, they laughed at me for being from a foster family. I didn't know what I'd done wrong 'cause I hadn't done anything. In middle school, things turned around 'cause I was kinda the class leader; everybody liked me.*

The minors' experience of psychiatric treatment is a particularly difficult educational challenge in the analyzed context. One of the side effects, aside from the stigma of having been at the so-called 'rathouse', may be disruption of the educational process. In the case of the interviewee's (A/5), the isolation caused an interruption in his education. He recounts his experience: *I'm two years behind 'cause they jailed me. My school [messed around] with my grades, and then the new school year came. I spent half a year in the rathouse in X, and there was no school there; I was at the adults ward and that's why [I had problems] at school.*

The institutional context of educational resistance is particularly significant when minors are placed in and transferred to various types of institutions multiple times. The narrative of one interviewee (E/7) also fits this pattern (stigma and trajectory of institutional admittance):

*- I went to school until the fourth grade of primary school, then they locked me away in the rathouse; from there, I went to an institution; then to a home for detained juveniles; then to the young offenders' home, and here I am.*

*- Rathouse?*

- Well, 'cause there was some Gypsy dude who was stealing from younger kids, he was taking money from them, so I finally caught him and broke his fingers. And they sent me to a loony bin, saying I was stupid or somethin'!

A side effect of their spending time in institutions is breakouts and 'non-returns' (a situation where a minor does not return to the institution from the leave granted to him). In both cases, a long stay outside the educational environment leads to the notorious evasion of compulsory school obligations. One example of the modus operandi described is the interviewee (D/6), who, for the above reasons, had a 1.5 year break in training. Therefore, according to the analyzed narratives, the aversion of minors to school obligations stems from environmental factors, of which the characteristics of the family of origin and the experience of institutional education play a key role.

### 3.1. School and resistance

The essence of the minors' resistance is specificity of their functioning at school, which is reflected in their interpersonal relationships. Regarding to peer's relationships, they don't conceal their antipathies toward "normals" (students functioning correctly at school). One interviewee (E/4) recounts: *I didn't like the environment of peers who studied; they annoyed me.* This animosity results in a search for relations with peers who have similar educational experiences and opinions about school. The narratives analyzed show that above mentioned "normals" constitute the Others/Strangers category, with whom the minors do not maintain in interpersonal relationships. Mentioned 'otherness' did not constitute a source of conflicts; it is more than a strategy of the minors' avoidance of interpersonal relationships with the above "normal". Relationships with their 'Lads' are not only their resistance space, but also the core for their antisocial behaviors. This regularity is noted by the minor (E/1): *In middle school, I hung out with those who were older; those who wouldn't tattle to a teacher when they saw us smoking in the toilet; I hung out with decent people, those who don't [tattle].*

Actions taken against the school system are a particular context of minors functioning in resistance categories. Similar to the boys from West Midlands, described by Willis, "having a laff" is one of the crucial aspects of the analyzed issue. The minor (E/15) discusses his typical rules-breaking behavior: *Sometimes, I'd enter the classroom through the ground floor window; there was a teacher who'd let me in.* The interviewee (C/2) recounts his school activities: *During classes, I'd annoy the teachers, throw stuff outside the window -- plants, chairs.* He also notes some actions directly against teachers: *We were doing [some funny stuff] to each other, throwing petards around the classroom; I*

*threw [a petard] under my class tutor's feet. It was fun.* From the narrative of one minor (C/2), one may surmise that the behavior issues caused by him were not addressed with adequate educational interventions, creating a sense of freedom of action and impunity, resulting in peculiarly perceived fun. Notably, the minor (C/2) remembers this experience as a positive event resulting from a peculiar peer activity.

Treating the teaching staff like objects is a crucial element of minors' attitude towards school. The interviewee (D/6) recounts:

*- If I didn't like something during class, I'd stir up trouble or pack my things and leave.*

*And what did they do?*

*- No reaction. They threatened to write notes about my bad behavior, but I didn't care.*

Another similar account is a reflection given by the minor (E/5) who characterizes his activity at school:

*- I went to school to just get high and for classes.*

*- Could the teachers see you were under the influence?*

*- I dunno if they could see or not, I was always under the influence.*

*- Were you hiding that?*

*- I didn't give a shit.*

The statement of the minor (E/5) is a case where drugs are the basis for resistance-related activities. Based upon the statements and the analyzed documents, one may surmise that they are a significant form of intoxication for so-called problem youth, who prefer resources that can be procured cheaply (particularly marijuana, mephedrone and designer drugs). Minors' narratives show that notorious drugs use at school are met with no response from the staff, who do not notice (or do not want to notice) the problem. Excerpt from the narrative of minor (C/6) is spectacular example:

*- I knew I'd [smoke marijuana] at school; then you get an appetite; when you get [increased hunger after smoking marijuana], I'd say at home [to mother]: "Give me that thermoplastic container, put some French bread pizza and lasagne in it." I'd take about seven sandwiches 'cause I was growing up, I was playing basketball (I got skinnier from doing drugs later). I'd play basketball, then go to school; there, I'd smoke, and during classes I'd [grow faint after taking a drug] and eat: lasagne, sandwiches... The teachers all kept staring, wondering where I got the room to fit all of that, or even didn't pay attention. Sometimes, when they didn't want to let me out in winter, I'd openly do marijuana in the classroom and then [(exhales)] into my bag.*

*- No reaction from the teachers?*

- None at all... I did that when [a teacher] turned to the blackboard, or I was walking down the hallway and smoking a joint; I'd hide it in my hand; when the teacher wasn't looking, I'd [smoke] and later, they even stopped paying attention.

A significant regularity resulting from the narratives cited is teachers' response to such actions. In spite of blatant violation of the rules, teachers adopt attitudes which may generally be described as inadequate. They attempt not to notice their students' behavior, they assent to it; any attempts at persuasion or intervention do not result in desired reactions, causing resentment or escalation of conflict relationships with minors. The form of their relationship suggests that the teaching staff is helpless in the face of the problems caused by the minors. Notably, this attitude intensifies and reinforces the functioning of minors as educational outsiders. This thesis is supported by the statement of the minor (E/11), who says: *Even the principal asked me not to come to school 'cause she only had more problems when I was at school than she did when I wasn't.* The antagonistic and marginalizing relationships results in a sense of alienation of the minors, who are seeking modus operandi outside the school. This process is described by the aforesaid minor (E/11): *So, I was the worst at school, right? Everybody was staring daggers at me for my behavior, until I finally had enough and stopped going.* Truancy is the crucial area related to the resistance of the youth studied. It is about being "out of control", but it is also a form of escapism. This is noted by the minor (C/3), who states vividly: *I was playing truant 'cause I didn't want to be at school.*

### 3.2. Truancy

The minors note that they gained their first experiences with truancy in primary school. The interviewee (B/2) recounts that he began to play truant in the fourth grade of primary school. In the initial phase, skipping classes is incidental. This is noted by the interviewee (D/12) who was attending classes selectively: *I'd go to one class and not go to two others; then not go to another one either; then I'd go to the last one.* Selective attendance of classes, combined with low control from the parents, exacerbates the essence of the problems. This is noted by the minor (D/3): *There was a time when my dad walked with me to school, so I was present at the first and last classes 'cause he came for me. I wasn't allowed to move up to the next year for all subjects.* At a subsequent stage, minors cease to fulfill their compulsory school obligations. This is also noted by the participant (E/2): *Later, I stopped going to school at all; I'd leave my house for it, but I'd never actually make it there.*



The narrative shows that the minors rarely prefer to spend time playing truant alone; this area of activity is part of informal peer groups based chiefly upon the relationships formed in their close environment, which is pointed by the minor (E/17): *Many people from my [neighborhood] went to the same school, so we'd all get together and play truant.* In their narratives, interviewees stress that their escape from their compulsory school obligations is spontaneous and impulsive. The minor (B/3) recounts: *Sometimes, I didn't feel like going; sometimes [they'd call and ask]: are you going with us? Sure, [I'm going], and that's it.*

In the context of peer relationships, a so-called 'bad company' is a significant factor shaping minors' attitude to school. This is noted by the interviewee (A/5): *Everything was fine until the end of the first semester, then I met some people I shouldn't have met and I started to play truant.* The cited statement shows that his new friends met at school (in this case, middle school) contributed to his truancy.

The impact of the peer pressure in the analyzed aspect is particularly strong on minors growing up in foster care, which has been underlined by one participant (E/6):

- *I didn't go because of [my friends].*

- *What do you mean? Why?*

- *I hardly ever went to school; I'd been at the orphanage since the sixth grade. I didn't go to school 'cause... when my friend didn't go, I didn't either; when another friend didn't, I didn't either; we were just playing truant.*

The peer pressure mechanism, which serves to discipline group members to respect group rules, plays an important role in school abandonment. This is noted by the minor (A/2): *I was the kind of guy who gets in with the bad company. I realized that, but I still wanted to hang out with them. We had a falling out later and they started to threaten me, and I don't like conflicts, so I started skipping classes, playing truant.*

The forms of activity preferred by the minors when playing truant are an important issue. It is worth stressing that they do not always entail being outside of the school. The minor (E/2) says: *Usually, I'd play truant in the locker room, where half of the school were; everybody would play truant even in the middle of a class and we'd all be sitting in the locker room.* However, the dominant model of spending time when playing truant outside of the school is one of the following: sports activities, alcohol drinking (C/6) and theft (E/17); the minor (E/3) describes his and his peers typical pastimes during truancy: *It was during the [cheap] wines era, so we'd drink them or go to [the local football pitch] and drink them there. Music [was played] from our phones, we'd sit around for a couple of hours and then go back home, you know?* The interviewee (E/16) recounts a similar experience, justifying his falling behind in school: *I didn't get through to the next*

*year 'cause I preferred to go with my friends to go drinking with the guys, play football, run around. Truancy is also the beginning of sequences leading to intensification of antisocial symptoms. This is noted by the minor (E/1), who states: Everything began with playing truant in middle school; we'd go to do some "jobs" [theft], we'd do drugs, amphetamine, everything.*

Therefore, truancy is a model of behavior that is a unique example of resistance, which not only leads to absence from school and exacerbates the problem of repeating grades, but also begins a series of antisocial actions leading to juvenile crime.

The struggle of minors with education leads to serious delays in completing the curriculum. The interviewee (E/5), who is 19 years old, is currently attending the second grade of middle school. He stresses that he had to change schools several times, as he had been "rejected"; the minor (E/8) states that he is three years behind and regrets it greatly, (A/2) is five years behind in his education. Those are few examples declared by the minors, resulting from the documents analysis.

Interviewees value the opportunity to receive education in detention centers. The minor (B/6) emphasizes that he was unable to finish the upper secondary school and gain a profession until he was admitted to a rehabilitation center. The interviewee (E/3) synthetically includes in his narrative a summary of the educational experience typical for other minors participating in the study:

*School [isn't fun] to talk about; I graduated from primary school with Ds and Cs, but problems started in middle school; first joints and stuff, and bigger demoralization. I repeated the second grade of middle school once; they expelled me from my first middle school for trying to set my teacher's hair on fire. So I [went] to another middle school, where I also repeated a year 'cause I didn't go to school at all 'cause I was in [an orphanage], so I didn't give a... you know... about it. So I graduated from middle school while in the young offenders' home, and now I'm in the second grade of vocational school. So if it hadn't been placed in the juvenile detention center, I wouldn't have graduated from school.*

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the collected material, it can be assumed that school is an institution that generates a model (or rather, stigma) of 'problem youth' among teenagers living in the socio-cultural periphery [20]. The model comes down to attempts at educational effects, which are characterized by low efficiency and inadequacy in the living environment of minors.

According to the cited literature, confrontation and the so-called 'laff' are the weapons of educational resistance, exerted chiefly against the teaching staff and, to a lesser degree, against (as they were called in the text) 'normals'. The context of the statements analyzed shows that it gives them experiences identical in nature to those gained by their predecessors.

In general terms, the characterized mode of action does not differ significantly from that originally described by P. Willis [10]. Its updated version (expanded at the suggestion of J. Terpstra) consists of the unique nature of socio-economic and structural transformations that reinforce the underclass model and the poverty culture model typical of modern culturally fragmented societies [9]. Psychoactive substances are an additional factor that is a modern novelty in resistance (compared to previous studies): cheap and easy to buy.

In the light of the analyzed narratives, the teacher's reaction to education is especially difficult: how methodically they are prepared to respond to problem students and work with them, and how many opportunities they have to work with specialized institutions in this environment. In other words (quoting from John W. Maag), this is question about the teacher's ability to cope with resistance [21].

The analyzed narratives expose the helplessness of the teaching staff. This problem is more complex if we take into consideration the above trend and the nature of the local communities in which the educational institution operates. In such case, this may be referred to as the accumulation of 'problem kids', which is an educational challenge that the teaching staff has to face. Assuming that the scale of students' problems in a school located in a poor neighborhood is multiplying, it should be noted that this does not directly translate into the school's professional resources (e.g. the amount of employed counsellors). This is also a challenge for school prevention programs developed at the level of normative acts in which the forms of talks, lectures and mental tests take precedence over mobilization models, which significantly reduces their effectiveness. Without taking into consideration the identified regularities in the preventive and educational work of the school, it will be difficult to find a solution to the analyzed problem.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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