



# ***Resistance in the Polish Formal Education System The Feminist Perspective***

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to outline new perspectives in research on the category of resistance in the formal education system in Poland. I adopt the feminist perspective because I am convinced that the issue of gender and sexuality in Polish school is particularly tabooed and marginalised, which reinforces the existing system of cultural, political and economic domination. This system is materialised in the form of a new education reform, closely associated with the government and dominant religion. Polish student and teacher use social media, they can learn about social protests (including #metoo action and protests in defence of court independence) and take active part in them. What certainly connects both spaces (off-line and on-line) is a post-truth category<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> A new research area in media studies, already present in curriculums, e.g. in Sweden

## School as a space for reproduction (cultural, economic) and a place of resist. Theoretical contexts

Research concepts created in the field of the sociology of education in the 1960s and 1970s, gave us a picture of school as a place of cultural reproduction and consolidation of political and economic domination. This school was supposed to reproduce and modify the knowledge and the dominant system of values and attitudes, as well as economic and political relations. The vision of reality, communicated by the schools, recognised values and tools for their reproduction, created a pedagogical discourse. Basil Bernstein<sup>2</sup> defined it as:

*Specialised form of communication through which the subjects of the pedagogical process are created in a selective manner [...] (and) under which a differentiated transmission of knowledge and assimilation takes place* (Bernstein 1990, p. 167).

From the wide spectrum of knowledge about the world and man, educational institutions choose some part to transform it into a coherent vision of reality. The ambiguity and diversity within the students' identity are reduced. Unclear and ambiguous areas are ignored. Only politically "safe" topics are discussed. In this way, important aspects of the human identity are covered with a veil of silence. In Polish schools, such topics include gender and sexuality (Stoch 2015).

School, as a place of discursive shaping of identity, uses symbolic violence defined as (...) *imposing cultural arbitrariness by arbitrary authority* (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990, p. 61). The process of school socialisation lasts until a full

education is achieved, that is a *habitus* – (...) *effect of the internalisation of the principles of cultural arbitrariness capable of self-recreating after pedagogical discourse stops and thereby recreating the principles of internalised arbitrariness in practice* (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990, p. 90).

Cultural reproduction is carried out by applying: distribution (rules controlling the right to the production of educational discourse), recontextualization (rules of processing and reduction of available knowledge) and evaluation (rules for knowledge reproduction) (Bernstein 1990).

Knowledge of the rules of cultural reproduction is the domain of the pedagogical staff. The task of the students is (...) *to obey*. In the existing system of power, it is extremely difficult to resist the oppression (which was pointed out by Bourdieu and Passeron), because domination relations seem natural and indisputable. It is only after we expose this "naturalness", reveal the rules of the school performance, that we can resist. Theorists of cultural and economic reproduction give relatively little thought to the category of resistance. Students were perceived mainly as passive objects of social "production" (Rakoczy 2015, p. 52).

According to Bourdieu, social actors are unevenly equipped with four forms of capital: economic (material goods), social (networks of contacts, positions and relationships in groups), cultural (knowledge, "familiarity"; education, taste, lifestyle) and symbolic (symbols used to maintain capital). Their use depends on the characteristics of social actors and the context (Bourdieu 2004). The key social actors in the school are: students, teachers, parents, peoples holding senior positions. Change depends on involvement of all of them. Changes can only be brought about by new competent staff: critically thinking, committed, sensitive. These people working in schools as professionals are responsible for the organization,

relations and culture of education within the framework defined by political power. They give space (or not) for critical thinking, discussion, dialogue, reflection, participation in decisions making. They use different types of power or implement the idea of equality. Critically or without reflection, they use the guidelines in the core curriculum and textbooks. They notice or do not and react or not to manifestations of discrimination, violation of borders, abuse.

The only exception is the approach of "emancipatory pedagogy" which have included the category of resistance as a key concept for understanding school interactions. As a representative of the Frankfurt School, Paulo Freire (in his scientific works) drew attention to the fact that culture and education are closely linked with politics and economics. Thanks to Freire, pedagogical programs from the 1960s and 1970s have been verified in terms of the creative potential of male and female students. Freire asked for emancipation education, which is to serve the struggle for liberation from the rule of domination structures. The basic tool of resistance was critical thinking and transformative actions aimed at demythologisation of reality. Freire drew attention to the discrimination and opposition of students and teachers. Emancipation should include all subjects of educational processes. It is mutual growth to solidarity, responsibility for oneself and critical reflection. Dialogue is the key for understanding and building solidarity (Freire 1996).

This approach also appears in the works of Henry A. Giroux (2001) and Peter McLaren (2015). They recognize the features of resistance in critical thinking and emancipatory and transformational action. They occur in a school, in which students critically reflect on the mechanisms of prejudice, social injustice and reproduction of material goods, and acquire the ability to transform their own environment

(e.g. through the ability to participate in a dialogue). Such understood resistance should be examined, among others, by measuring attitudes towards the school (Giroux 1991).<sup>3</sup>

## Polish research on resistance in education

The latest Polish research on the category of resistance in education provides order into the existing theoretical material. It recognises resistance understood as:

- ▶ a form of reaction of consciousness under the influence of undesirable content, thanks to which the subject defends its frontiers against the attempts of categorisation and objectification (psychoanalytical approach),
- ▶ a form of deliberate and purposeful questioning of the *status quo* in order to free oneself from the oppression and create new social conditions: free from domination, overcoming individual alienation, discomfort, automatic thinking (Marxist approach),
- ▶ strategy of coping with power relations by creating new forms of subjectivity (thought by Michel Foucault),
- ▶ interactive phenomenon, consisting in conscious (or not) resisting the institution through open rebellion or withdrawal (interactive approach),
- ▶ form of emancipation and transformation activities, consisting in the refusal to obey an institution that acts in an unfair and damaging manner (perspective present in emancipation education and in the form of civil disobedience),
- ▶ a form of contestation of the existing system of values and an attempt to

<sup>2</sup> Referring to *Reproduction. Elements of theory of education* by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> For those interested in further reading in this area, I recommend the publications of Ewa Bilińska-Suchana (2006, 2009, 2011, 2013).

replace it with a new one (research on counter-cultures),

- ▶ a ritual manifesting itself in bodily forms of expression, etc. (Pasikowski 2014).

These forms of resistance are divided into individual and institutional (group), internal (within the institution) and external (beyond its framework). Attention is also paid to the purposefulness, reflexivity and criticality of thinking (Pasikowski 2014, p. 109). The processual approach, to which Pasikowski draws attention, is important: resistance is usually not a single form of resisting but a complex process (Pasikowski 2014, p. 113).

One of the the most interesting concepts present in the last study of the category of resistance is the model of “rose emancipation”, which provides for four forms of opposition (rejection) to the imposed oppression:

- ▶ avoidance (unconscious opposition, expressed in withdrawal and passivity),
- ▶ disagreement (unconscious opposition, combined with reluctance, disapproval of norms and experiencing discomfort),
- ▶ rebellion (open and conscious opposition to the dependence),
- ▶ innovation (open and conscious opposition to dependence, but additionally directed at the transformation of social conditions) (Pasikowski 2014, p. 117).

At the end of this brief summary, I should mention a large study on the emancipatory theory of education by Maria Czerepniak-Walczak (2006). The author shows the sources of the Polish tradition of “emancipational pedagogy”, lists the methods and forms of emancipation through education, and draws attention to the methodological contexts of emancipation pedagogy.

### Era of post-truth and educational reforms in Poland – basic contexts for new forms of resistance

As it was previously mentioned, modern students are functioning not only in the real world, but also in an alternative reality, ruled by media logic, including the so-called new media. Through them, reality is re-created and reproduced for an infinite number of times. Reproduction of reality gives way to its simulation (when sign refers only to other signs, and the reality itself is blurred, Baudrillard 2005, p. 11).

This “new reality” is made of memory units that are connected in a specific narrative framework. As Baudrillard wrote with reference to traditional media, “hyper-reality is secured (...) against any possibility of distinguishing what is real from what is imagined” (Baudrillard 2005, p. 7). Simulations of reality undermine the difference between truth and false, reality and imagination about it (Baudrillard 2005, p. 9). The so-called truth (objective cause) ceases to exist. It is mediated not by one medium (radio, television, press), but by a hyperlink of references and mediations. Lack of ability to verify information in the network favours the shaping of post-truth – a manipulated narrative about reality, which is regarded as true only because it has been repeated many times (Keys 2017). Post-truth is a story that is considered to be true, because it stirs the emotions and imagination of crowds, lacking the competence of critical reflection on the action of the media and on own emotions.

Logic of post-truth seems to be strongly used in Polish schools. The repeated narrative about reality (former and contemporary) creates its seemingly true image. As Baudrillard has already noted, (...) *the myths of beginning and signs of reality (...), secondary truths, objectivities and authenticities multiply and grow in*

*price* (Baudrillard 2005, p. 12). Since public education is a political venture, in Poland a new reform plan is launched almost every time the government changes. Fundamental changes were initiated in 1989, when the democratically elected government overturned the PRL constitution of the 1950s, and introduced democracy and free market economy in place of the socialist system. At the same time, the role of the catholic church increased. Gymnasiums were introduced in 1999 only to be removed in September 2017. In 2004, Poland joined the European Union<sup>4</sup> and since 2005 the matura exam has been organised according to new, constantly improved principles.

Since 2017, the new government of the Law and Justice party has been introducing next education reform, the main element of which is the to reform the structure of educational system. The system known 17 years ago now returns: it is based on an 8-year primary school and a 4–5-year high school (<http://reformaedukacji.men.gov.pl/>, access: 08.01.2018). Vocational schools are to be replaced with second degree trade schools. The manner, in which the reform is being introduced, provokes strong criticism from teaching community, as well as from university staff and the Polish Academy of Sciences. As early as in October 2016, ninety-nine representatives of university circles involved in teaching polish language wrote a letter to the Minister of

Education, Anna Zalewska, with the following criticism:

- a) failure to provide the public with substantive justification for the liquidation of gymnasiums,
- b) lack of long-term consultations of new core curricula with an expert group,
- c) system and program changes introduced too quickly,
- d) lowering the rank of the “Polish language” as a school subject, the perspective of limiting the freedom of teachers in the sphere of choosing program content, and the manner of their implementation (“Polonistyka. Innowacje” 2016/4, s. 191–196).

It was stressed that the assumptions of the new reform and the way it is introduced could ruin all the achievements after 1989. Public discourse on reforms of education requires further research, but even a brief analysis makes us realize that it is not so much about structural and program changes as about in-depth reform of educational goals. They are to be subordinated to the idea of a national and religious state (although this is not formulated explicitly). And so, for the “proper” patriotism to exist, it is necessary to re-invent the “proper” idea of the fatherland and citizenship. In order to establish the “real” narrative about the past, the history must be “substantiated” again. This is supported by the recurring pattern of “banking education”, defined and described by Paulo Freire (Freire 1993, 2016). Its characteristics include:

- a) emphasis on reproduction of ready knowledge, provided by “professional” teachers,
- b) dominance of slogan-based narratives (for example on values), monologues and instructions,
- c) practices of mythization of reality,
- d) objectification of students and reducing all forms of resistance (Freire 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The same institution, which now launched Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union against Poland. The Council states a serious violation by Poland of the main values of the EU, referred to in Article 2: “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society based on pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men” (Journal of Laws .2004.90.864/30 – Treaty on European Union – consolidated text recognising the changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon).

Students who stand out from others are excluded from the community life. The research results of the Anti-discrimination Education Association<sup>5</sup> confirmed that there are persistent discriminatory structures in Polish schools that reinforce:

- ▶ lower status of girls and women and different standards to treat both sexes,
- ▶ traditional masculinity patterns based on strength, physical fitness and heterosexuality,
- ▶ domination of roman catholic religion,
- ▶ unequal access to education for people with disabilities,
- ▶ authoritarian power of adults and limiting children's rights (Gawlicz, Rudnicki, Starnawski, 2015).

It is strongly possible that newly promoted identity models will favour xenophobic, sexist and homophobic attitudes. It was precisely due to school homophobia that Dominik, student from school in Biezuń committed suicide, and few months ago (2018), Kacper (also student) from Gorczyn did the same. For them, suicide was the ultimate, radical and dramatic form of resistance to the school violence.

At the end I would like to add that in Polish schools sex education and media education do not exist at all. After school hours, hate speech is transferred by the students themselves to the internet, to social forums, posing a real threat to children and adolescents. Research from 2014, which involved a group of youth aged 16–18, showed that 70% of young people came across racist statements on the internet (58% heard such statements in conversations with friends) (Bilewicz, ed.

2014). The percentage of people who encountered homophobic and sexist hate speech was equally high. Since then, the situation only worsens.

The issue of reproductive health (access to contraception, abortion and conscious motherhood, freedom from sexual violence, access to reliable sexual education) is not addressed at all.

Teaching in the days of patriarchal backlash, post-truth and growing nationalist tendencies is a particular challenge for pedagogues.

### Resistance in the feminist perspective. Polish contexts

Thanks to feminist thought, it was noticed that "private is political", i.e. our everyday choices, including educational ones, are part of the wider social structures. These structures were called patriarchy, a system of domination based on polarity and hierarchy of genders (associated with other characteristics of personal identity). This system – as Carol Gilligan argued – (...) *separates one man from another, separates men from women and divides women into good and bad ones (...). It is a process of fragmentation of the psyche* (2013, p. 145).

According to Gilligan, the tools of patriarchy are embarrassment and exclusion, so common in Polish schools. (...) *The initiation of children into the patriarchal order leaves behind a loss and some defects, that we use to associate with trauma* – says Gilligan (p. 28). Therefore, schools teach forgetting, alienating students from each other. The essence of oppression is separating the oppressed from their stories, replacing these stories with culturally accepted narratives. Those who resist, are "embarrassed, beaten, excluded, mocked, rejected and condemned" (p. 29). They suffer. The breakdown of peer relationships is part of the internalization of gender-related norms.

That is why the source of the transformational resistance – according to Gilligan – are mainly women, as those who are able to transform psychological resistance into political action. Recovery of anger as a signal of enslavement and injustice is crucial (p. 127). When emotions connect with recognition, awakening occurs.

Thus, resisting the dominance requires intergenerational solidarity (p. 130). Bridging the gap between students and teachers, setting common goals and revealing mutual connections.

Adoption of the feminist perspective makes me realize that in Poland we now need alternative forms of sexual education, real centers of social dialogue and well-thought, consistent strategies of symbolic "sabotage" inside the institution of the school. We need transformational and emancipatory resistance, which is an active and peaceful response to violence that we experience as citizens from the institution of the state and school.

The starting point should be a critical reflection on the mechanisms of violence, aimed at emancipation and empowerment. In this reflection, we must find a space for our personal stories, as a place of recognition and resisting. Working with the body (real and symbolic body), even when interpreting literary texts, is already a form of resistance to the taboo of body.

From critical reflection, we must go to action, as sole criticism of the system can end withdrawal and manipulation. Our society is critical, but it does not know what to criticise and how to turn it into active action. Therefore, it no longer trusts any media, choosing the narrative about reality that will at least temporarily drive off the sense of complete hopelessness. Each didactic activity should contain an element combining it with the social reality.

The transmitted knowledge should always be related to current social, political, cultural

and economic contexts. In times of crisis of democratic values, we need science and humanities to be involved, and capable of transforming actions. One of the radical forms of resistance in contemporary school is real dialogue and the ability to work with conflict in a group.

Each teacher should honestly talk with his/her students about the context in which they gain knowledge. Revealing the rules of the school performance, exposing them, is the basis for the development of consensus and intergenerational solidarity.

Retaking the school also mean: revealing emotions (of course in an atmosphere of security and trust) and working on them; interpretations that take into account not only individual points of view, but also the interest and good of the group (thus search and education for consensus); education involving not only the mind but also the body (e.g. through a spectacle) – as a form of liberating the disciplined body (as Foucault would like); recovery of the "memory of loss" in discussions over childhood; building a utopia and caring for each other.

Finally, it should be added that the research on the category of resistance in education alone can no longer be the activity in which the scientist hides his or her motivation and position (even if they mostly are). We need new methods to study the school, which will strengthen local communities in dialogue rather than appropriating and neutralising the resistance. Open conversation and collective self-reflection within the so-called research in action (Červinková, Gołębniak, ed. 2010) should replace the "cataloguing frenzy" and typologising. Research should open the communication space.

5 The Anti-discrimination Education Society (TEA) was founded in 2009 by persons involved in anti-discrimination education. The Anti-discrimination Education Society brings together several dozen persons who specialize in this area. More about this on: <http://www.tea.org.pl/eng/index>, 10.05.2018

6 The term Umberto Eco, describing the way of meticulously describing things.



## Summary

This article is a conceptual work, combining considerations about economic and cultural reproduction at school with a feminist perspective. In the first part of the article I make a reference to the well-known theory of cultural reproduction and symbolic violence of P. Bourdieu, which is the theoretical framework for further argumentation. I bring to light the work of P. Freire who, in thinking about the role of pupils and students, considered their creative potential and the ability to resist institutions. According to Freire, a key tool of resistance is dialogue.

In the second part of the article, I discuss Polish studies on the category of resistance in education. I emphasize the processual and emancipation approaches. I am referring to the current cultural and media contexts (related to the post-truth category) and political (education reform) to draw attention to the recurring model of banking education (Freire), closely related to the reproduction of xenophobic, sexist and homophobic attitudes.

In the third part, I made an introduction to Polish studies on the category of resistance in education as a feminist perspective. I draw attention to the need for transformational and emancipatory resistance, which is an active and peaceful response to violence, which we experience (as citizens) from the institution of the state and school. The starting point should be a critical reflection on the mechanisms of violence, aimed at emancipation and empowerment.

The next elements of the process are: working with the body, critical analysis of media messages, reconstruction of power relations at school, contextual teaching, work with emotions, dialogue. This is a difficult task, as the power relations in school remain not transparent. The contemporary Polish school needs new research methods that will open

the space for dialogue and build a community of transformative activities. In some sense, teachers of all types of schools has enough resources to get involved. The following simple questions could be inspiring to start with a few simple questions:

- ▶ How would I describe my current situation? Can I change it?
- ▶ Who creates/generates the standards applicable in my institution?
- ▶ How do I go from mental resistance to political resistance? What form of resistance is safe and constructive for me? Do I have any allies?
- ▶ What are my resources? ☹

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