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## **(In)formal Teacher Culture: The Ruler, the Super(wo)man, and the Ignoramus at School\***

**Abstract:** The article addresses the issue of the informal teacher culture that functions alongside the formal one in which the teacher is seen as a representative of the dominant culture. It discusses three main types of teacher resistance culture: the ruler, the super(wo)man, and the ignoramus. They show the ways in which teachers function at school that are different from the commonly accepted ones. These cultures have been distinguished on the basis of a literature analysis and author's own research and do not constitute an exhaustive catalogue. However, being aware of them allows us to enrich pedagogical reflection on the issue of resistance in education.

**Keywords:** informal teacher culture, resistance, school

### **Introduction**

“There are many cultures, but they all make up the culture.”<sup>1</sup>

School culture is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which is explored by researchers at different levels of its activity. School

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\* The article analyses the problem which is more broadly elaborated upon in a book chapter titled “Specyfika oporu nauczycieli wobec szkolnej hegemonii” [The specifics of a teacher resistance against school hegemony]. In: A. Babicka-Wirkus: *Kultury oporu w szkole. Działania - motywacje - przestrzeń* [Resistance school culture. Actions - motivations - space]. Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2019.

<sup>1</sup> W.J. Burszta: *Czytanie kultury. Pięć szkiców*. Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej UAM, Łódź 1996, p. 53. The quote in the Author's translation.

culture may be likened to a process rather than a state. It is variable and dependent on the (geographical, topographic) location, time, social norms, socio-political and economic situation, and the specificity of social actors (students, parents, pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff), who simultaneously create and reproduce it. Czerepaniak-Walczak<sup>2</sup> stresses that “school culture is not a monolith. It is a structure in which there are different beliefs and views, values, styles and forms of communication, as well as other cultural elements. Some of them are coherent and complementary, while others are oppositional and contrary to the others.” Resistance, ingrained in school culture, is an integral part of school activity and is manifested by the presence of different resistance cultures in everyday school life.<sup>3</sup> The culture of resistance is a constellation of actions resulting from the views, attitudes and relationships of defiance against the dominant order.<sup>4</sup> Its various manifestations are a constant element of school life, and therefore, they deserve the attention of researchers and theorists.

Teachers are one of the main actors in school life. Although the dominant culture assigns to them a privileged role at school, teachers often oppose the arbitrarily imposed rules of school life. The subject of my research, described in this article, is the types of teacher resistance cultures. The research question I tried to answer was: What types of cultures of resistance do teachers foster in their daily practice? For this purpose, I conducted qualitative analyses of the literature in the field of critical pedagogy and ethnographic research at school. I analysed 52 articles and 5 books which I found on Google Scholar search and which titles were related to the “teachers resistance” category. The collected data were subjected to qualitative text analysis. A coding strategy was used to find typical resistance strategies for teachers. These data were supplemented with the results of ethnographic research conducted in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Based on the analyses, I distinguished three types of teacher resistance culture: the ruler, the super(woman), and the ignoramus, which I describe in the present article.

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<sup>2</sup> M. Czerepaniak-Walczak: *Proces emancypacji kultury szkoły*. Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa 2018, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> H. Giroux: *Theory and resistance in education: Towards a pedagogy for the opposition*. Bergin & Garvey, Westport, London 2001.

<sup>4</sup> A. Babicka-Wirkus: *Kultury oporu w szkole...*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Eadem: *Respektowanie prawa do autoekspresji a rytuały oporu gimnazjalistów*. Biuro Rzecznika Praw Dziecka, Warszawa 2011.

## Dominant culture vs subordinate culture

The normative dimension of school culture is constituted by the opposition of domination and subordination.<sup>6</sup> A dominant culture is a formal culture and its main goal is to recreate and maintain the established order and structure. It is a culture of conformity which uses symbolic violence as a tool of subordination. It is a space created by the police order,<sup>7</sup> as defined by Rancière.<sup>8</sup> It is a hierarchical culture in which teachers are the privileged group and students are the dominated group.

The existence of a dominant discourse at school implies the co-occurrence of a subordinate culture because “the dominant culture is rarely omnipresent.”<sup>9</sup> A subordinate culture includes discourses that are different from the imposed one and based on different beliefs, views, values, and norms. This culture functions as an anti-structure which, as proposed by Turner,<sup>10</sup> creates opposition to the dominant structure. It is a space for the emergence of Rancière’s politics, which appears when the conflict arises. The conflict destroys the established order because it leads to the clash of the two worlds within one. “Politics is based [...] on a community of conflict which, unlike the community of freedom created by the police order, divides the citizens [or the participants in everyday school life – Author’s addition] into two camps.”<sup>11</sup> The conflict disrupts the functioning of the order imposed on all actors of the school life, which masks the existence of opposition groups and creates the appearance of an undivided community.

The subordinate culture is in opposition to the dominant culture. The existence of the former is conditioned by the activity of the latter. Resistance is permanently inscribed in this relationship, since it

<sup>6</sup> Eadem: “A three-dimensional model of resistance in education.” *The New Educational Review* 2018, no. 52, pp. 43–54.

<sup>7</sup> The police order is both inclusive and exclusive. In Rancière’s view, the police have the possibility to create a binding discourse that determines the way and direction of interpretation of social reality. This mechanism imposes the existence of logical (consistent with the current line of interpretation) judgments and interpretations, as well as illogical voices that are meaningless and therefore not taken into account in the discourse.

<sup>8</sup> J. Rancière: *Dis-agreement. Politics and philosophy*. Trans. J. Rose. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1998.

<sup>9</sup> P. McLaren: *Życie w szkołach. Wprowadzenie do pedagogiki krytycznej*. Trans. A. Dziemianowicz-Bąk, J. Dzierzgowski, M. Starnawski. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej. Wrocław 2015, p. 251.

<sup>10</sup> V. Turner: *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure*. A Division of Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, London 2008.

<sup>11</sup> A. Babicka-Wirkus: *Kultury oporu w szkole...*, p. 122.

is a typical element for both sides. The clash of the two orders within school culture proves its dynamic character.

### Teachers as actors involved in the resistance culture at school

Teachers are closely identified with the school and with the dominant culture promoted by this institution. They are the representatives of the subjugating structures and their main executors. Usually, when school is discussed using the metaphor of struggle, the two opposing sides are the group of students and the group of teachers. They are “natural” enemies that fight over the meanings and rules of the game at school and in the classroom. However, if we take a closer look at the school, we see that the resistance is in fact not only the students’ domain. Teachers are not only the “bearers of the official culture” of the school but also create a specific informal culture in which disagreement plays an important role.<sup>12</sup>

Informal teaching culture consists of the following components<sup>13</sup>:

- autonomy – the teacher exercises it in the classroom because his/her colleagues do not interfere with classroom activities and refrain from commenting on them in public;
- loyalty – it consists in working “hand in glove” with one’s colleagues; it is a kind of professional solidarity which comes down to not telling on the teacher when one knows about his/her offenses and not criticising their teaching methods;
- illusion of mediocrity – willingness to remain unnoticed, not sharing one’s achievements in front of colleagues, along with the reluctance to reward students for outstanding achievements;
- cynicism – disbelieving in the successful introduction of any innovations and improvements in(to) the school or in the attainment of the set goals (or simulating such a lack of faith);
- anti-intellectualism – associated with playing the role of a teacher (putting on a mask) and maintaining the attitude of pragmatism;
- categorisation – it is a tendency to assign labels to students that may prove to be relevant during further interactions.

The distinguished components indicate that teachers at school combine two roles: that of representatives of the dominant order and that

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<sup>12</sup> P. Mikiewicz: *Spółeczne światy szkół średnich. Od trajektorii marginesu do trajektorii elity*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław 2005.

<sup>13</sup> D. Hargreaves: *The social relations in the secondary school*. London 1967, after: P. Mikiewicz: *Spółeczne światy...*, p. 108.

of persons who promote a system of values and norms as well as an ethos attributed to the school, the student, and their professional role. Just like the students, the teachers also function in what, following Peter McLaren,<sup>14</sup> could be called street culture. Most often it manifests itself in the space reserved exclusively for this professional group, namely, in what transpires in the teachers' room. It is a space where teachers can for a moment throw off the mask of the custodians of official culture and be themselves, that is, individuals with personal issues, dilemmas, and a sense of humor. It is worth noting here that some manifestations of teacher street culture can also be seen in the classroom, which is a territory usually held by representatives of the official culture.

In the informal teacher culture, there is noticeable resistance to being constantly criticised and subject to external and internal regulations. Through such practices, teachers are symbolically forced to comply with unreasonable regulations, to abide by rather abstract and impractical school rules, or to teach contrary to their own axionormative systems or the current state of knowledge. Teachers are often required to conform to the prevailing political ideology (manifestations of which are visible in the core curriculum), which results in them being, unbeknownst to themselves and mechanically, cast in the role of advocates of this ideology.

### **(Un)usual types of teachers**

Referring to the typology proposed by Peter McLaren<sup>15</sup> and Jacques Rancière,<sup>16</sup> three types of teachers were distinguished that are relevant from the perspective of the resistance culture at school: the teacher perceived as the ruler and master, the super(wo)man, and the the ignorant one.

The teacher perceived as a hegemonic ruler and master is a privileged individual at the classroom and school. Their main task is to maintain their high status and to prevent any acts of resistance by the students that might lead to its change. They act as the guardians of the school norms and regulations, which they do not want to deviate

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<sup>14</sup> P. McLaren: *Schooling as a ritual performance. Toward a political economy of educational symbols and gestures* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> J. Rancière: *The ignorant schoolmaster. Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Trans. K. Ross. Stanford University Press, Stanford 1991.

from, and which they unwittingly accept. Thus, their main task is to maintain classroom discipline and attain high test scores, which is in line with the current trends in education set by obsession with testing and bureaucratisation.

The teacher perceived as the ruler and master may manifest the following strategies or a combination of them:

- the stigmatising strategy – is used mainly with students who are disobedient or display behavioural difficulties; it involves labelling the students, which leads to a kind of stigmatisation of the young person<sup>17</sup>;
- the avoidance strategy – is more of a defensive strategy based on the belief that it is better not to provoke the “problem student” for fear of losing the fight and the authority and/or jeopardising the perceived seriousness of teacher’s role; such actions only lead to masking the existing problem rather than solving it;
- the aggressor strategy – aggression is a common response to student resistance; it is the most dangerous of the teacher resistance strategies;
- the functionary strategy – expresses itself in guarding the school law; it usually takes form of moralising, which leads to an escalation of acts of resistance that, in turn, usually do not take the form of a dialogue, but rather further uncompromising responses to the teacher’s behaviour;
- the fugitive strategy – typical of teachers who use passive resistance in the form of withdrawal or avoidance of problematic situations;
- the partner strategy – the teacher supports and/or participates in student expressions of resistance. This type of strategy is the domain of the other types of teachers: the facilitator and the ignoramus.

The teacher perceived as a super(wo)man creates an illusion of equality inside and outside the classroom. They are referred to by students as a “super dame” or a “great guy” with whom one can talk freely. However, this is an illusion easily dispelled when we take a closer look at this persona and see that, under the guise of the permissive acts, students are in fact being subjugated. It is worth noting that, unlike the previous type of teacher, the super(wo)man is focused more on the student than on maintaining their power and position at all costs. According to Cornelissen: “On this view, students are no longer passive

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<sup>17</sup> E. Goffman: *Stigma. Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, London, Toronto 1963.

receivers of knowledge, but active constructors of knowledge, based on existing knowledge and prior experience.”<sup>18</sup>

Teachers who are perceived as super(wo)men have a rich array of resistance acts, which are mainly based on defensive strategies, similar to the previously described type of teacher. These are mainly aimed at masking the teacher’s real qualities and views and ensuring relative peace in the classroom. They can be referred to as “survival strategies.”

One of their most common expressions of resistance is a sense of humour. Through comedy, laughter, and wit, the super(wo)men try to get closer to their students. Although on the surface it appears to be an attempt to equalise the statuses of teachers and students, this strategy is in fact an attempt to outwit a potential opponent, namely, the student. Students are often manipulated to ensure the safety of the teacher who, as a “good sort,” will not be exposed to any student attack. Humour is seen as an asset that gives direction to classroom interaction. Thus, it leaves the power in the hands of the teacher as the main player. Typically, for this type of teacher, the laughter is of cynical variety. Lewis highlights that: “The cynical and or ironic post-modern laugh becomes a poor substitute for political action, a cathartic moment of release that simultaneously ‘affirms’ one’s superiority over the system while also indexing one’s complacency with this modicum of reassurance.”<sup>19</sup>

An interesting strategy used by the super(wo)man is socialisation. On the one hand, it is a tool for reproducing the existing order, and on the other hand, it can lead to the internalisation of behaviours that differ from the dominant trends in a given culture and society. In this type of teacher, it is about using the strategy of socialisation as a way of introducing a young person, who is enchanted by the teacher, into a reality that hides ossified social structures as well as norms and rules rooted in them under the guise of openness and contestation. It is not a direct socialisation, as in the case of the teacher who plays the role of the lord and master. In this case, the teacher puts on the mask of a benevolent “friend” who is not able to change reality, despite his/her best efforts. They can only ridicule and caricature it.

Another possible form of manifesting resistance by the super(wo)man is a deliberate infantilisation of their persona. The motivation behind this strategy is to deny the need to step into the role of a power-

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<sup>18</sup> G. Cornelissen: “The public role of teaching: To keep the door closed.” In: *Rancière, public education and the taming of democracy*. Eds. M. Simons, J. Masschelein. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2011, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> T.E. Lewis: “Paulo Freire’s last laugh: Rethinking critical pedagogy’s funny bone through Jacques Rancière.” In: *Rancière, public education...*, p. 125.

ful teacher who rules over his/her kingdom – in this case, the classroom and the students. However, this is choosing the opposite extreme. It can lead to overly identifying with the students and losing the point of transformative resistance against the influences of the dominant culture. The teacher then loses his/her authority as a guide in the world and becomes an insignificant element of school life.

Another type of teacher is the ignorant one. His or her actions seek to establish equality in educational relations.<sup>20</sup> By consciously not paying attention to the different statuses socially attributed to the teacher, who is privileged, and the student, who is still an “incomplete being,” new rules of the game and the distribution of the sensible are introduced. This is crucial to break the police order functioning in the school and to show its arbitrariness. A new relationship between the teacher and the student is established, in which the student is constituted as an entity speaking with their voice. The student is transformed from a “learner” into a “speaker,”<sup>21</sup> who creates their interpretation of the possessed knowledge by speaking on a given topic.

The teacher who disregards the school order or some aspects thereof allows a liminal space,<sup>22</sup> that is, a temporary suspension of assigned roles and associated functions, and behavioural patterns. Such an action requires critical reflection on a reality that is not accepted as the only valid one.

Resistance is inscribed in the model of the ignorant teacher. The forms of its manifestation are located in the sphere of disagreement with the binding norms, rules and ways of interpretation. With their attitude, such a teacher negates the symbolic order of the school and inspires a dialogue that leads to real changes of the unwanted reality. LouAnne Johnson, an English teacher at one of the schools in the United States, the main protagonist of the iconic film *Dangerous Minds*, based on a book entitled *My Posse Don't Do Homework* by the real-life LouAnne Johnson, is an example of a teacher who disregarded the labels assigned to the students, assumed their equality in terms of the power of intelligence and opposed the school rules. This teacher acted in a similar way to Jacotot, the ignorant master,<sup>23</sup> and did not yield to the accepted patterns of behaviour. A symbolic expression of the assumed equality of the students' intelligence was the scene of giving

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<sup>20</sup> J. Rancière: *The ignorant schoolmaster...*; G. Biesta: “Learner, student, speaker: Why it matters how we call those we teach.” In: *Rancière, public education...*

<sup>21</sup> G. Biesta: “Learner, student, speaker...”

<sup>22</sup> A. van Gennep: *The rites of passage*. With new foreward by David I. Kerzner (2nd ed.). The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019.

<sup>23</sup> J. Rancière: *The ignorant schoolmaster...*



the highest marks to every student. The students' task was to maintain those high marks, not to get them. This symbolic gesture changed the school reality, which forced the students to fight for their marks. An important aspect of the portrayal of school reality in the said film is that it encourages students to speak out and enter into discussion, which makes them believe that their voices are important<sup>24</sup> in the space of school life.

Resistance of the ignorant teacher can take many forms. One of its manifestations is laughter. In this context, laughter has a transformative<sup>25</sup> and sometimes even revolutionary meaning.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the culture of resistance is an integral part of school culture.<sup>26</sup> Its manifestations can be found in the functioning of the main actors of school life. It challenges the dominant structures but is necessary for the development of the school structure. It is important to create conditions for the development of resistance with high emancipatory potential, to raise individuals who are ready to resist.

Teachers are important actors in the life of the school and creators of its informal culture, which can take on a transmissive, transformative or transgressive character. The former occurs when teachers follow the ruler and master model and treat resistance as an unpleasant necessity that can occur when external conditions are unacceptable. What we have here is a transmission of the power roles: teacher (the ruler and master) – student (the subordinate fool).

The situation is slightly different for the super(wo)man teacher. The resistance inherent in this model is usually expressed in actions driven by cynicism, which may lead to a transformation of existing reality, but do not result in its transgression. Students' resistance is tolerated as long as it falls within the framework established by the teacher. Transgressing this framework may imply a return to a relationship based on domination. Teacher resistance, on the other hand, is a manifestation of a cynical approach to reality resulting from the recognition and definition of the subjugating structures.

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<sup>24</sup> H. Giroux: *On critical pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury Academic, London-New York-Oxford-New Delhi-Sydney 2020.

<sup>25</sup> M. Dudzikowa: *Osobliwość śmiechu uczniowskiego*. Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Kraków 1996.

<sup>26</sup> P. McLaren: *Życie w szkołach...*; A. Babicka-Wirkus: *Kultury oporu w szkole...*; H. Giroux: *On critical pedagogy...*

The model of the ignorant teacher presents the most developmental character of resistance. In it, actions based on dissent are not framed as unusual events, but are a typical component of everyday life that enables anti-structure to occur. Understanding the necessity of dissent and the different forms of expressing it is crucial to fulfilling this role. Thus, the teacher often joins in the resistance and contestation activities of the students. It is also not uncommon for teachers to initiate them themselves, in order to demonstrate the arbitrariness and undermining of the dominant structure. The resistance inherent in this model of the teacher has significant emancipatory potential to liberate teachers and their students.

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