

Empowering Street Youth

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of the theoretical concept of resistance to schooling and, using recent research, points to some of the problems with this concept. The paper then attempts to expand the concept of resistance and to apply this expanded theory in practice.

The paper then details a proposal for research on an educational innovation for street youth which seeks to encourage them back into mainstream education.

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Introduction

How do we account for the outcomes of schooling? What explanations are there for the way in which schools seem to both reproduce the class, race and gender differentials of the society of which they are a part? Why do students from working class backgrounds achieve less well than middle-class students at school? Are students from working class backgrounds seemingly trapped in economically disadvantaged positions in society, or is this a simplistic view? Do schools help maintain and/or change broad social and economic structures? Do schools actually mirror the society of which they are a part or is there some resistance in schools to the dominant ideas of that society? What forms does resistance take in schools and what work does it do? Is resistance a class, race or gender based phenomenon? Theorists and researchers in the area of education have long been interested in answers to the above questions.

There is some confusion though about the term, "resistance". It has been used in relation to literature which embodies social struggle and opposition as well as socially critical discourse where its meaning is associated with changing social

practices, eg in relation to feminist readings of literature. There are indeed different theories of resistance as it relates to education and so the term shifts in meaning from theory to theory. There exists a body of theory, in relation to which the term "resistance theory" is apt. However, the make up of this body of theory contains particular theories about what "resistance" actually is.

From Cultural and Social Reproduction to Resistance
In trying to explain the relationship between schooling and society or between the individual and culture, theorists have often examined the inputs and outputs of schooling without actually analysing what it is that goes on inside the "black box" called the school. "Issues such as what is taught, how it is taught, and the concrete experience of children and teachers in schools becomes less important than rates of return to schooling or, more radically, the reproduction of the division of labour." (Weis 1982 p.486).

The work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) on the structural correspondence of the social relations of schools with those of production has been criticised for its "black box" approach to schooling. (Willis 1977, 1981, Connell et al 1982, Weis 1982). Bowles and Gintis argued that students learned their role and place in the process of production through internalisation of values and processes operating at the school level. But this internalisation has been questioned by researchers examining the form and structure of actual school knowledge at the level of practice in both its explicit and hidden forms (Willis 1977).

This raises the important question of what knowledge forms are legitimated at the school level and how these knowledge forms may be alien to a large number of students in schools. The work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) has helped us understand that what is culturally important for one individual or group, their cultural capital, may carry no cultural weight in the wider society or at one of its institutional sites, eg., the school, and therefore the social

structure disadvantages that individual or group. In Bourdieu's terms, the school constructs a symbolically violent system - for the most part in language - in which the working class students accept the pedagogical form and content of their education. This theory has been criticised for its inherently functionalist view of the participants in schooling. (Connell et al 1982).

However, schools can be places in which certain cultural knowledge is advantaged over other cultural knowledge (Everhart 1983, Giddens 1979). Barnes (1976) referred to this knowledge differential as "school" knowledge as opposed to "action" knowledge. It is not difficult to see then that students whose

"action" knowledge goes unrecognised by the school will feel less powerful and more resentful of school than will those whose knowledge is legitimated. Inherent in reproductive arguments though is a basic pessimism which ascribes to schooling no possibility of providing equal opportunity or societal change (Connell et al 1982, Giroux 1983). Another view is to see schooling as operating as a dynamic part of society, making a difference to the way people see themselves and their likely social positioning (Connell et al 1982). Schools can be seen as sites at which contested forces are mediated and dominant ideas resisted or rejected. They can be seen as sites for the propagation of liberal democratic ideals where education is reconstructed in terms of a political struggle for social justice and democratic citizenship. (Giroux 1983). They can also be seen as possible sites of intercultural understanding or articulation (Walker 1988).

Resistance Theory

Theorists and researchers have since the early eighties sought to use the notion of resistance to explore the contested personal, social and economic terrain of schooling so as to bring into relief both the contradictions of society and of schooling itself. Willis (1977) explored the way that student resentment can develop into rejection of or resistance to the social values and meanings embedded within the practice of schools. Students' rejection of schooling was seen by Willis as "a form of cultural autonomy and freedom" (Weis 1982 p.495), that is, they resisted the dominant ideology of the school and did so by

constructing their own oppositional cultural practices. But inherent in this resistance was the structural reproduction of the students as unfree workers in the process of production. Cultural production therefore was seen by Willis as a crucial element in social reproduction. For Willis, resistance reproduced structural relations of oppression at an even deeper level than that suggested by either Bowles and Gintis or Bourdieu (Weis 1982). Willis saw resistance in structural and deterministic terms where human agency in the form of resistance to dominant school culture was always circumscribed by the economic structures of capitalism. Willis believed that the resistance of students to what it was that schools were teaching, and to the educational practices in schools, was a creative cultural response to a "teaching paradigm" whose social relations and cultural form embodied the essence of capitalist society. Ironically, the form of the teaching paradigm promised upward mobility through education, but in resisting school, the working class boys rejected this promise, and of their own volition, cemented their existing class position (McFadden and

Walker, forthcoming).

Willis's lads constructed a "counter-culture" in opposition to the culture of schooling. This valorised manual work and manualist forms of action and despised intellectual work as "feminine". Thus, a superiority of masculine over feminine forms of knowledge relegated females to second class others, therefore reproducing the sexism of the workplace. Neither reproduction theory nor Willis's class resistance theory, however, attempted to explain the perpetuation of oppressive social relations other than those of social class or why other boys from the same class background, "the earoles", aspired to mental forms of endeavour (McFadden and Walker, forthcoming). Another way of viewing resistance in schools is to see it in cultural and socially productive terms as having a potential for human agency and effecting progressive and deliberate social change in a contestatory world (Freire 1987). Both of these perspectives though have been viewed as romanticising resistance (Walker, 1986). Walker claims that Willis romanticises working class culture by postulating that whatever the negative and self-defeating actions of working class people - such as "the lads"- there is at the heart of

working class culture a set of pure insights into the oppressive nature of capitalism. This cultural essence, which unconsciously penetrates the masks with which capitalist ideology blurs and hides social reality, is the hope for future change at some opportune moment. (McFadden and Walker, forthcoming). Everhart (1983) used Habermas' conception of knowledge as technical, practical or emancipatory in interpreting the resistance to schooling of junior secondary students in America. He contrasted what knowledge is known by students, how it came to be known and how it was used with school knowledge. Student knowledge he saw as regenerative and potentially emancipatory, in that it was constructed by students purposefully for the solving of their own life problems. School knowledge on the other hand was reified and in Habermas' terms, largely practical. In an unreflective student world, the processes of resistance supported cultural systems which were predicated on resistance rather than raising the collective consciousness about that which was being resisted (Everhart 1983, Folds 1987). Thus again resistance did not go past cultural production to that which was being resisted. Again we have a romantic notion of resistance whereby the hope of the class is dependent upon acknowledgement and recognition of its oppressed class position rather than in concrete action.

It is this cultural production of resistance though which offers the possibility of promise for students and a critical pedagogy for teachers for progressive change (Folds 1987, Woods 1990). This is seen to be

so in relation to race, class and gender (Mac an Ghail in Woods 1990). Friere's concept of conscientization is useful for helping to construct the framework of such a critical pedagogy. Conscientization emphasises an awareness of social, political and economic contradictions so as to help people to better understand themselves and their potential to initiate action to redress social inequities (Friere 1972, Marjoribanks 1991). De Charms (1976) work on people as either 'origins' or 'pawns' supports the notion that people would rather perceive themselves as controllers of their own behaviour than as puppets .

Recent Research and Problems with Resistance

Recent research in sociology and education reflects the popular use of resistance theory: Baron's (1989) study of street punks of the Canadian west coast, Quigley's (1990) study to explain non-participation of working class adult learners in literacy classes, studies by Graham and Jardine 1990, and Alpert 1991. Tanner (1990) focused on the reported school experiences of 162 male and female high school dropouts in Edmonton, Alberta to explore attitudes to schooling, while Cordeiro (1991) focused on high achieving at-risk Hispanic youth at two urban high schools to identify positive influences in their collective school experience. But too often, resistance has been seen as a phenomenon of class, race and/or gender and therefore related to broad social structures rather than of power and oppression. at a local level.

For example, Connell et al. (1982), investigating a cross section of schools in two Australian cities, found no standard set of expectations within social class groups as to the educational outcomes appropriate or likely for their children, nor standard beliefs as to the appropriate attitude to school. Walker's (1988) study of an inner-city Australian boys' high school, found that responses to school and post-school employment destinations varied more along complex cultural lines, where concrete youth cultures were formed on several interacting dimensions, including ethnicity, gender, and sporting and other recreational preferences. A similar finding in relation to teenage girls was made by Moran (1988). Students were not so much "resisting" schooling as working out solutions to social and personal problems encountered in their lives.

In his study of girls in an English inner-city secondary school, Meyenn (1980) found that resistance to the demands of teachers and schools was not especially class based; anti-school behaviour was not necessarily associated with poor academic performance; positive attitudes to pop culture were not necessarily associated with anti-school behaviour; and most pro-

and anti-school students were able successfully to negotiate school rules. Brown (1987) investigating three schools in Wales, found that the majority of working class students neither accepted nor rejected school; they simply complied with it.

Folds (1987) shows the positive attitude to education,

if not to schooling, of Pitjantjatjara (tribal Aboriginal) children in South Australia. Pro- and anti-school attitudes to school were discovered among Afro-Caribbean boys in an English school (Furlong 1984). Studies of Australian girls by Samuel (1983) and of Asian and Afro-Caribbean "resisters" by Mac an Ghail (1989) suggest that success or failure at school, and attitudes to school are more products of teachers' perceptions and labelling than of any prior characteristics brought to school by the students. Cordeiro's (1991) ethnography of high achieving Hispanic youth in two inner-city high schools in the south-western United States found them committed to education though not necessarily to school. Studies by Alpert (1991) and Graham and Jardine (1990) show students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or class, reacting against what they perceive as poor teaching methods. Foley (1991) sees resistance as dependent upon the context, the subject being taught, the teacher, and their particular teaching style. There is considerable evidence from these and other studies that all students implicitly and sometimes explicitly distinguish between on the one hand education, and especially its credentialist, utilitarian value, and on the other the form and content of actual pedagogy, curriculum and organisation of schooling. As Weis (1990) puts it, students engage and react to the form rather than the substance of schooling.

An alternative interpretation then of the empirical evidence to date is that students from certain kinds of backgrounds have experiences of schooling which restrict their opportunity to extend their knowledge and that depower them. The response to this form of schooling for many students is to resist it.

If this is so, there are serious theoretical problems surrounding the explanatory use which has been made of the term "resistance" (Hargreaves 1982). In his discussion of Willis's theory of resistance, Walker (1985, 1986) argues that the theory suffers from two major errors, dualism and essentialism. The dualism between structure and agency is a persistent theme of contemporary social theory (Giddens 1979). Given the existence of social structures which impinge on individual and group consciousness and action, how is free action possible? How is action to change the structures possible? Resistance theory only goes so far with this problem: resistance to oppressive structures is all very well, but to what does it lead? Walker argues that this whole framework of analysis -

the dualism of agency and structure - is mistaken, and that structures are the creations of free agents, not independently determined patterns of social space within which agents act. Agents are constantly creating - and destroying - structures (McFadden and Walker, forthcoming).

Beyond Resistance

Students, regardless of their class, race or gender, express a belief in the utility of education for pursuit of their goals for the future. However, this belief does not necessarily coincide with acceptance of the form which schooling takes. What students are constantly rejecting, or sometimes at best, merely complying with regardless of class, gender, race and ethnicity is schooling which depowers them. Practices and procedures like streaming, which leads to differentiation and polarisation (Woods 1990), are often followed on the basis of a teacher's perception of ability. The perception can be influenced by race, ethnicity, class and gender, which then has an influence on the curriculum offered, the pedagogy employed and the evaluation procedures used. For example, students placed in low ability classes tend to endure reductivist teaching characterised by "repetition of drill and practice and the accumulation of fragmented bits of information with no apparent relevance to either real world problems or the kinds of thinking tasks productive adults perform" (Wehlage, Smith and Lipman, 1992). This limits students' access to knowledge and therefore their power to determine the options in their lives.

How then do we characterise the relationship between schools and society and how can student resistance be seen as productive or at least lead us to ask different questions about why some students resist the offers of schooling?

Researchers and theorists need a framework which will allow investigation of education in such a way that human agency is recognised for its potential and celebrated, and through which suggestions for an emancipatory pedagogy can be made (Connell et al 1982).

Expanding Theoretical Options

A useful addition to the theoretical frames applied to the notion of resistance are the ideas of Michel

Foucault (Ball 1990). This is not merely to "tack" Foucault on to notions of resistance (Marshall 1989, 1990) but to illuminate the act of resistance as well as the discourse which inscribes it. Foucault saw power as ever accompanied by resistance. He postulated a network of power relations paralleled by a multiplicity of forms of resistance. He saw power as "always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being

capable of action" (Smart p.133). He also saw opposition to power in terms of freedom in that those over whom power was exercised existed within a field of possibilities (p.133). He is close to Giroux when he says that to better understand power relations we should analyse resistance and struggle. Such resistance and struggle was seen to be in terms of local exercises of power and not merely related to struggles of class. From above this has application to the intersection of power relations along the lines of gender, race and ethnicity as well as class. What we know, influences our view of the world and the problems which we perceive in this world. Our behaviour is related to the problems that we perceive and the knowledge we can bring to bear to solve these problems. The state of our knowledge base limits the solutions we can apply to our perceived problems and the strategies which we use to solve them. But in solving the problems that we do perceive, in the world in which we see ourselves as living, we exercise an element of power or freedom (Walker 1988). In essence we have a certain space in which we can make a decision in relation to a problem. We might see ourselves as having limited space in which to solve problems or see ourselves as having quite a large degree of freedom. In this sense we exercise a certain power within, in Foucault's term, a space of freedom. Freire refers to such a space as "a space for change" (1987 p.126).

Concepts of freedom, space and territory abound in the literature on resistance (Willis 1977, Everhart 1983, Folds 1987, Walker 1988, Woods 1990 and also in the literature on youth, life choices and employment (Evans and Poole 1991). Weis (1990) states, "There is an attempt on the part of working-class youth to carve out their own space within the institution - space that can then be filled with their own meanings which are fundamentally anti-school ... Time and space

are, after all, what students in school live as being most out of their control. Thus it is logical that both are targeted arenas of struggle" (p.18).

Resistance might then be seen as the exercising of individual or collective power to increase the size of the perceived free space that an individual or group occupies or has. This means that such exercise of freedom is influenced in a dynamic way by the social background, economic capacity, political experience and social situation of the group or individual trying to exercise their freedom or power. All of these factors influence group or individual perception of themselves and their world and their ability to exercise power to solve problems in that world. Our beliefs about what is possible that we can do in our world are conditioned by the beliefs and practices of others. Therefore the world we believe in, the values that we have, and the way in which we perceive a

problem and its solution is inextricably linked to the group with which we associate and to the wider society of which we are a part. Marshall (1990 p.90) says, "there is no such thing as a subject, or self, independent of our social (and individual) constructions through the exercise of power/knowledge."

Spaces of freedom then are bounded by a person's belief system which is in turn influenced by their social group, its cultural practices, and also by societal norms and expectations. This concept can help us to understand the work that resistance is trying to do and how schools might be changed to accommodate this work as well as help us reinterpret previous empirical data gathered at the school site. Data gathered and interpreted in a framework of reproduction and resistance is open to other interpretations in the light of developing understandings both theoretical and practical (Weis 1990).

Foucault says "everything is dangerous, nothing is innocent" meaning that all things reflect some value judgement or ideology. What is it that is "dangerous" in the social formation, in economic patterns, and schooling that has a negative effect on individuals and groups? What is it they resist in order to give themselves more space in which to solve their problems? How does individual and group resistance to what is perceived as "dangerous" to that individual or

group, help us to better understand the way that society remakes the dominant culture, and help us to better understand the role of schooling to help bring about progressive and deliberate change? Resistance in these terms might help to identify what it is that is seen by those resisting as "dangerous" in their worlds.

At the school level we need to analyse the curriculum: the content of what is taught; the pedagogy: the way in which this content is taught; and evaluation: the way in which both the learning of content and engagement in the learning process is assessed, reported and evaluated (Bernstein 1977). We need to explore the nature of the discourse of teaching to see what practices are "dangerous" in the sense that they may lock students out of engagement with both content and process. We need to explore student resistance in the light of gender, race and ethnicity, and class. Unequal power relations can operate at each of these levels to create unequal outcomes and for students, meaning is produced by "the intersection of subjectivities, objects and social practices within specific relations of power" (Giroux in Freire 1987). Questions which an expanded resistance theory might consider then so as to better inform practice and enhance the opportunities of students are related to:

- ˘ the nature of the self and the group in society

- ˘ the ways in which the self and the group are socially constructed
- ˘ the status of our knowledge claims about the self, the group and society
- ˘ the use of this knowledge in constructing the self and the group
- ˘ the political functions served by the exercise of power/knowledge.

Although research has begun to examine the resistance of working-class students in an era of non-work (Weis 1990), there is a need for research which is culturally based and which explores the perceptions of students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members at all socio-economic levels in this changing world. Further research such as that conducted by Connell et al (1982) is needed (McRobbie 1991) and could only help to clarify the role of students and their resistance as they negotiate the two transitions of which schools and students are a part: that from adolescence to adulthood and the very

transition of society and its institutions as we move to a mode of production based on information rather than materials where notions of full employment are not countenanced (Blakers 1991).

Proposed Research

It is often an educational given that education is inherently empowering. It is ironic then that many students turn their backs on the very thing which many perceive could improve their life situation.

As indicated above, recent research studies on resistance to schooling have shown that resistance is a phenomenon which crosses class, gender and racial boundaries and that any account of educational outcomes should consider the dynamic relationship between students' cultural background and the society of which they are a part. Resistance theory then is a valuable but limited attempt to explain the effects of schooling and education on individuals and society. What is needed are research studies which focus on and attempt to explain actual behaviour which is likely to lead to a change in the lives of individuals and in the social relationships of groups within educational settings. There is a need to move beyond the limited perspectives summed up under the notion of resistance, and to focus on individuals and groups as creative agents capable of transcending both social "structures" and cultures. In other words, we need a more dynamic theory of individual, social and cultural change, a theory which will enable us to understand what needs to be changed in educational curriculum, pedagogy and organisation to bring about better and fairer social outcomes for students.

The students in the SKATE program are suffering the effects of the failure of mainstream education to offer them educational opportunities which are

personally satisfying and rewarding. They come to the program with a history of sexual, mental and physical abuse. They perceive limited opportunities in life but have expressed a wish to referring youth workers to change their life situation and have made a decision to apply to, and enter, the program.

As explained above, recent research and theory is pointing out that students resist the offers of schooling because they perceive that their freedom is threatened by it. In reality, their freedom is more threatened by lack of education because they

experience fewer options in their lives as a result of their poor educational achievements.

The SKATE project is attempting to give street youth options for:

- ˘ tertiary education
- ˘ TAFE training
- ˘ return to school settings
- ˘ employment.

Of course, the other options are that youth involved in the project will drop out early or revert to the streets.

It needs to be established whether education, and the knowledge that this education brings, actually influences students' perceptions of themselves, their world and the choices which this world offers them. Research has also shown clearly the link between relevant and 'authentic' curriculum and pedagogical practices and the satisfaction and retention of students (Nolan and McKinnon 1991). The teachers in the SKATE program are attempting to construct such curriculum based around the concept of a unifying theme.

It needs also to be established whether such a curriculum orientation has the desired effect with street youth whose experience of education has been one of failure and negativity.

Research Methodology

The impact study would:

- ˘ explore both the previous life experiences of students and their previous experiences of school
- ˘ document and analyse the impact of the program on the self-perceptions and world view of the target group
- ˘ assess the effect of the program on the life choices of participants as well as document the intended destinations of the students
- ˘ explore the process of implementation of an innovative thematic approach to the education of the target group
- ˘ document the process of innovation, including teacher inservice work
- ˘ assess the effects of the program on the development of the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the target group.

The diagram over the page gives a conceptual overview

of the study.

Strategies Planned

- ~ Interviews with teachers and participants in the 1992 and 1993 intakes in both group and individual settings.
- ~ Informal and formal observation in class and other settings.
- ~ Informal interviews.
- ~ Analysis of qualitative data using computer technology like NUDIST or ETHNOGRAPH to draw out themes and issues.
- ~ Functional grammar analysis of power relations inherent in the qualitative data.
- ~ Liaison with program counsellor and access to records on individual students.
- ~ Liaison with program director and access to other youth service providers, eg the ComeIn Centre in Paddington.

The research study would use an ethnographic case study approach to the evaluation of the program. The researcher would operate as an observer of the students and teachers in action in a variety of settings. By informal and formal means the researcher would seek to become a participant/observer in the program. Using the techniques of structured and unstructured interview together with open-ended questioning the researcher would open to scrutiny the students' personal views about their life situation, world view, future view and opinion of the program. Students would be involved in post-interview evaluation of information gained. The researcher would also interview the teachers to get their reactions and responses to the program as it has developed.

Need for the Project

I believe it is important that an impact study such as that proposed is undertaken. In the post-industrial society there is an increasingly urgent need for education to provide disaffected students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes they and society will require. It is important that educational providers link to provide disadvantaged youth with as wide a network of support as is possible. It is important to evaluate the SKATE program in terms of the effect it has on students, their view of themselves and their world, and of their perception of the life choices which this world affords them. It is also important to track the students to evaluate the effect of the program on their actual life choices.

There are many people in Australian society who are concerned for the large proportion of youth who, for whatever reason, are involved in substance abuse, prostitution, crime, and other forms of violence and

abuse. People continue to call for something to be done, and they seek reassurance that education is addressing problematic issues in their midst. Others, including those in universities seek to know what is being done in order to replicate successful processes to address similar problems elsewhere in Australia. Equity programs are increasingly targeting lack of education as directly related to long term disadvantage. Governments of all political persuasions have recognised the need to involve young people from all backgrounds in post-compulsory secondary education:

early school leaving and the disadvantages that flow from it are not randomly distributed. They fall most heavily on families of low socio-economic status. (In the National Interest, Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987)

A society which is just and fair must take appropriate measures to overcome disadvantage.

A successful evaluation of the impact of the SKATE program could see a co-ordinated attempt to address real disadvantage in a positive and practical way by giving students, who might otherwise never achieve tertiary entrance, the educational, emotional and psychological support to succeed and change their lives.

Project as a Model

The SKATE program has been operating since 1989. In that time the Director and teachers have attempted to come to grips with the challenge of providing a relevant and stimulating and challenging curriculum for the street youth involved.

The program has set up links with youth organisations and service providers. It has established a network of support in the wider professional and general community.

The program lends itself to replication. In Bathurst, for example, Charles Sturt University would be well placed to offer support to the growing number of youth who for one reason or another cannot succeed in the school system. Other universities throughout Australia are in similar positions.

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