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Rebellion of School-Age Youth in Poland

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Abstract

In the article below I explore the level of rebellion of modern youth, in the context of various ways of adapting to school and being a student. For research purposes I use an author's five-stage scale to measure student strategies. I developed the scale based on the model of adaptation by R. K. Merton. The study involves a group of 656 students aged 13–17 in Poland, and the analysis presented is part of a larger project on youth adaptation strategies. From all the answers provided, I select those relating to rebellion strategies. The results obtained show the average level of rebellion in the study group: means for rebellion statement range from 2.542 to 3.465 on a scale of 1 to 5. Many students feel a high level of satisfaction when they can point out mistakes to their teacher and want to speak their mind regarding school rules. However, generally this result shows that the statistical research subject has a rather neutral or positive attitude towards the goals pursued by the school. Findings indicate general approval within the tested population for entering into discussion with the teacher when the student feels the need or duty to defend his or her opinion but the mean for the statement referring to radical changes in the school indicates a relatively low need to completely change the existing school order.

Keywords: contestation, youth, student strategies, rebellion, rebelliousness, R. K. Merton.

Introduction

The problem with functioning and adaptation of youth never seems to become outdated in educational research (Jackson, 1968; Woods, 1980; Janowski, 1998;

Bilińska-Suchanek, 2003; Cybal-Michalska, 2006; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Mianowska, 2008; Dusza, 2011; Wysocka, 2012; Melosik, 2013; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Jaskulska, 2018; Babicka-Wirkus 2019; Amai, 2020). Moreover, the adolescence period still enjoys very high social interest, which is additionally fuelled by numerous, often stereotypical, media messages. The image of rebellious youths with problems, constantly opposing, being aggressive, irresponsible or addicted, emerges from these messages. Youth has also become a kind of a symbol and personification of the idea of contestation. This was due to, among others, American countercultural movements of the 1960s, including hippies, as well as other youth subcultures (Miller, 2011). In the context of the changes taking place in the socio-cultural space, as well as lifestyle changes, one may wonder whether the issue of youth rebellion is currently overestimated. I decided that in connection with the repertoire of (mostly colloquial) judgments on youth it was worth diagnosing the level of student rebellion in relation to school institutions. Therefore, I decided to verify in my research the myths and stereotypes functioning in the public space. This work is a voice in the discussion on the condition of contemporary adolescents and their level of adaptation to functioning in social structures. It is worth noting that the presented analyses are a part of a larger project entitled “Student Strategies in Schools with Varied Educational Potential” concerning the strategy of adaptation of growing up adolescents. The research was conducted in Poland in the period 2016–17, in Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship.

Theoretical assumptions of the research

The subject of the research conducted under the project is the level of occurrence of the adaptation strategy towards the school and the student’s role in the group of examined young people from selected schools. To analyse the occurrence of student adaptation strategies I use the Merton’s model of adaptation. It identifies two key elements of the social structure: culture goals and the institutionalized means leading to them. However, the ways of achieving goals do not always have to be compatible with them. People are constantly adapting to new socio-cultural conditions, especially in such a dynamically-changing contemporary reality. Adaptation can be implemented through attitudes of conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion (Merton, 1968, pp. 193–194).

Such attitudes can be identified by either positive or negative responses to the means and objectives pursued by society. Rebellion, which has been singled out for in-depth analysis in this text, enables students to go beyond the school

structure in order to implement it anew. It assumes alienation from known goals and measures when the system becomes an obstacle to their realisation. It is also often associated with having own resources and objectives (Merton, pp. 209–2011).

In other publications, rebellion is identified as well as the category of resistance. It becomes an action for change, thereby underlining its link with the need to improve the situation perceived by the group/individual as disadvantageous or oppressive (Bielska, 2013, p. 25, 199). This is an action preceded by reflection, which is a form of social participation (Modrzewski, 2007).

Table 1. A typology of models of individual adaptation according to R.K. Merton

Models of Adaptation	Culture Goals	Institutionalized Means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	+-	+-

Source: Merton, 1968, p. 194.

The application of Merton's theory to the study of student strategies allows for their universal character to be taken into account, since each of them involves an attitude towards the school, which as an organisation constitutes a certain micro-society (Schulz, 1992; Ballantine & Spade, 2008). Therefore, such strategies could also be an attitude towards the social world. Such an approach is the result of treating the school as an institution that requires adaptation and therefore the strategy itself is the epitome of acceptance or its lack in relation to the means and objectives proposed by the institution.

Methodological assumptions of the research

The research question I am asking is: To what extent does the researched youth apply the rebellion strategy? My random variable is the student's strategy of rebellion, which I define as an alienation from goals and means when the system becomes an obstacle to their achievement, or an ambivalence towards objectives and means. The variable is identified as a level of value intensity on the author's five-level scale.

The research, the partial results of which I present in this text, was conducted in Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship in Poland on a representative group

of students aged 13–17: a total of 656 respondents from twelve previously randomly chosen junior high schools¹. The research was conducted in a quantitative design, therefore the explanations obtained are of a nomothetic nature. In order to collect data for analysis, I used the author's questionnaire that measures student strategies by applying the five-level scale (by Likert). This tool, that was constructed on the basis of the theory of R. K. Merton, was subjected to verification through the use of a pilot research procedure on a different study group (179 people). The questionnaire was also developed in consultation with young people and another independent researcher from the same university.

The presented results, showing ways to adapt to being a student, are based on the author's scale measuring student strategies: conformity, innovation, rebellion, ritualism and retreatism. The scale contained six statements for each strategy, which were answered on a scale from 1 to 5, as follows: 1: I strongly disagree, 2: I disagree, 3: I have no opinion, 4: I agree, 5: I strongly agree. Therefore, '5' means a high degree of identification with the given strategy component, while '1' a low degree. The detailed results are contained in Table 2 and Table 4.

In order to find out about the application of the "rebellion" strategy by students, I used a research tool in which this strategy was represented by six statements. The results presented relate to the following statements, which refer to the rebellion strategy:

1. I feel satisfied when I can point out a teacher's mistakes
2. I think that school effectively hinders me in the realisation of my plans
3. I get annoyed when I am unable to speak my mind in school matters that are important to me
4. I think that everything in my school should be completely changed
5. I do not like the school rules, I would like to take part in changing them
6. When I am of a different opinion than that of the teacher, I am eager to discuss this with them

¹ The junior high schools (gimnazjum) that do not exist in the current structure of Polish education system were examined. The school structure was changed in 2017. Now students attend primary school for 8 years, and then 4 in high school (previously 6 in primary school, 3 in junior high school and 3 in high school). The research was conducted in the 2016-2017 period and described in my unpublished doctoral thesis titled "Student Strategies in Schools with Varied Educational Potential" (2017).

Results: youth and rebellion

The results are presented in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5. First, I show individual statements within the whole population of the surveyed students and then for the collective result for the whole strategy.

Table 2. Percentage results for the rebellion strategy

Statement	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I have no opinion	I agree	I strongly agree	Total
	N/%	N/%	N/%	N/%	N/%	N/%
I feel satisfied when I can point out teacher's mistakes	78	87	163	123	198	649
	12.018	13.405	25.116	18.952	30.508	100
I think that school effectively hinders me in the realisation of my plans	171	159	172	77	65	645
	26.512	24.651	26.667	11.938	10.078	100
When I am of a different opinion than that of the teacher, I am eager to discuss this with them	83	119	153	157	144	656
	12.652	18.140	23.323	23.933	21.951	100
I get annoyed when I am unable to speak my mind in school matters that are important to me	72	71	164	161	177	645
	11.163	11.008	25.426	24.961	27.442	100
I do not like the school rules, I would like to take part in changing them	74	111	206	136	127	654
	11.315	16.972	31.498	20.795	19.419	100
I think that everything in my school should be completely changed	91	169	236	84	74	654
	13.914	25.841	36.086	12.844	11.315	100

Source: Author's research.

The data in Table 2 show that nearly half of the students feel satisfaction when they can point out mistakes to their teacher. Among the respondents, 45% declare their willingness to enter into a debate with a teacher when they have a different opinion. In contrast, 30% of students do not declare such a need. This may be due to the need to take control in the classroom (at least for a while) and to weaken the total power that a teacher has in the school. At the same time most of the students identify their plans with the goals pursued by the school, so they do not consider them in opposition to one another.

Youth declare they want to discuss school matters that are important to them, but one in five respondents do not feel the need do so. More than 40% of the respondents are not satisfied with the rules that exist in their school and would like to be able to change them, but more than 28% declare that they do

not feel such a need, and only one in four students are in favour of a total change in their school. However, less than 40% of the students do not support the demand for comprehensive and radical changes.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the rebellion strategy

Statment	Mean	Median	Mode	Deviation	Skewness
I feel satisfied when I can point out teacher's mistakes	3.425	3	5	1.359	-0.358
I think that school effectively hinders me in the realisation of my plans	2.542	2	3	1.275	0.427
When I am of a different opinion than that of the teacher, I am eager to discuss this with them	3.244	3	4	1.322	-0.213
I get annoyed when I am unable to speak my mind in school matters that are important to me	3.465	4	5	1.300	-0.463
I do not like the school rules, I would like to take part in changing them	3.200	3	3	1.253	-0.134
I think that everything in my school should be completely changed	2.818	3	3	1.168	0.260

Source: Author's research.

The results presented in the Table 3 show that means for rebellion statements range from 2.542 to 3.465. Many students feel a high level of satisfaction when they can point out mistakes to their teacher and want to speak my mind in school matters that are important to them. However, generally this result shows that the statistical research subject has a rather neutral or positive attitude towards the goals pursued by the school. Mean, mode and left-handed asymmetry indicate general approval within the tested population for entering into discussion with the teacher when the student feels the need or duty to defend his or her opinion but the mean for the statement referring to radical changes in the school indicates a relatively low need to completely change the existing school order.

Table 4. General results for the rebellion strategy

Answer category	N	%
I strongly disagree	569	14.582
I disagree	717	18.375
I have no opinion	1093	28.004
I agree	738	18.909
I strongly agree	785	20.113
Total	3902	100

Source: Author's research.

Out of the 3902 responses given by the respondents, 39% indicate a positive attitude towards the statements concerning rebellion. On the other hand, 33% of the answers related to the rebellion strategy were negative.

Table 5. General descriptive statistics for the rebellion strategy

Mean	Median	Mode	Deviation	Skewness
3.116	3	3	1.322	0.07

Source: Author's research.

On a five-level scale, the overall mean for the rebellion strategy is 3.116 and the median and mode are equal to 3, which indicates the average level of occurrence of rebellion in the group of researched subjects.

Conclusions

The achieved results showed that the level of contestation of the school among students vary and remain at an average level (3.116/5). Therefore, it is difficult to attribute any importance to it. Reflecting on the results obtained, it can be concluded that student rebellion, if it occurs, is not only “art for art’s sake” and a desire to provoke. It is because an important regularity in the answers to this strategy has become apparent. If students rebel, it is mainly for the sake of some change in their favour, to the whole school community and of the educational process (Bilińska-Suchanek, 2003). Pupils want to be able to speak up on school issues that are important to them, and often feel satisfied with disputes with the teacher, while not being of the opinion that their school should change radically.

Analysis of the results in conjunction with the social perception of a teenager may also come as a surprise, as the very concept of a teenager, an adolescent, is often connected with the adjectives of negative character (Ostrowicka, 2012). The connotations of the term youth are often associated with maladjustment, indifference, rebellion associated with a constant rebellion or undermining of authority; this image is strengthened by numerous media messages and even memes. This may be due to the sentimental vision of sub-culturally entangled, rebellious youths changing the reality, that is still functioning in social consciousness. However, it is worth stressing that all expectations (and, as a result, strict assessments) towards the youths are conditioned by the high hopes which older generations associate with adolescents. Rebellion against school remains present, however, it is moderate, and its level can be considered average or optimal: oriented towards transformation, not aggression or the art of

mutual malice. This may be related to a greater awareness of the importance of education among contemporary youth, a change in the perception of the role of school for young people, or simply the need to maintain a safe level of comfort. However, in order to answer these questions further exploration and research are needed.

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