

Black Sheep as Tragic Hero: How Disruptive Students Resist the Oppression and Why They Fail to Liberate?

Zixi Zou^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 8UW, UK*

a. vivianzou@outlook.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Within the educational landscapes, there exists a prevailing dichotomy. On one side stand the obedient students, absorbing knowledge from their teachers unconditionally, and on the other side stand their non-compliant counterparts who are prone to disrupt the prescribed order, labeled as the black sheep of the academic flock. In education, obedience and conformity are celebrated, while noncompliance is stigmatized. Researchers often focus on strategies to control disruptive behavior, perpetuating teacher-centered approaches that maintain power imbalances. However, disruptive behavior is not just defiance. It's a response to an oppressive educational paradigm. This study delves into the narrative of these disruptive students, exploring their resistance to an educational system with intrinsic oppressive nature and the obstacles they encounter in their pursuit of liberation. The theoretical framework of this study is mainly constructed upon Freire's critical pedagogy theory and literature on power dynamics to examine power dynamics in education settings and to understand students' resistant behavior and why it fails to provoke change.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, power dynamics, education, oppression, resistance

1. Introduction

Within the educational landscapes, there exists a prevailing dichotomy. On one side stand the obedient students, absorbing knowledge from their teachers unconditionally, and on the other side stand their non-compliant counterparts who are prone to disrupt the prescribed order, labeled as the black sheep of the academic flock. In education, obedience and conformity are celebrated, while noncompliance is stigmatized [1]. Researchers often focus on strategies to control disruptive behavior, perpetuating teacher-centered approaches that maintain power imbalances [1,2]. However, disruptive behavior is not just defiance. It's a response to an oppressive educational paradigm.

This study delves into the narrative of these disruptive students, exploring their resistance to an educational system with intrinsic oppressive nature and the obstacles they encounter in their pursuit of liberation. The theoretical framework of this study is mainly constructed upon Freire's critical pedagogy theory and literature on power dynamics to examine power dynamics in education settings and to understand students' resistant behavior and why it fails to provoke change.

The study begins by exposing the oppressive nature of education, highlighting the passive role assigned to students by introducing Freire's term of "banking concept of education.", it compares the similarities between passive learning patterns and other forms of social oppression by doing so, it reveals the common thread of imposing incompetence onto subordinate groups. Further exploration

delves into how standardized curricula and predetermined answers stifle autonomy, perpetuating the status quo and reinforcing societal inequalities. The narrative then shifts to the realm of student resistance, viewing disruptive behaviors not merely as acts of defiance but as nuanced forms of resistance against an oppressive educational paradigm. However, these acts often yield unintended consequences, reinforcing the very systems they seek to challenge.

The study's significance lies in its dual purpose. Firstly, it calls for collective recognition of the inherently oppressive nature of education itself. By acknowledging the stifling power dynamics within educational institutions, society can take the first step toward transformation. Secondly, through a detailed examination of students' struggles, the study aims to inspire ideation for change. It envisions an educational landscape where students are empowered to think critically, to confront oppression, and contribute to a liberating education, where the black sheep may emerge as heroes leading the way to transformative change.

2. Context: The Stigmatization of the Deviant Students

In schools, there seem to be two main categories of students: the meek and docile students who sit and listen, being the perfect recipients of knowledge conveyed by teachers, and their non-compliant counterparts responsible for various kinds of misconduct and negligent of their own academic duties. People tend to take the meek for granted and marginalize the disobedient as if they are the black sheep in a flock. Passivity, respect for authority and obedience are expected from the role of students and are seen as virtues [1], whereas the noncompliant are regarded as if they are “pathology” in a healthy system [3]. Students who refuse to comply are made to stand out, individualized and highly stigmatized under thorough surveillance [4].

Thus, groups of researchers in the field of education have been busy developing strategies of better classroom management [5-8] along with techniques of behavior alteration [9]. Large chunks of literature in this field are produced out of the intention to get disobedient students under the control of teachers, assuming teachers as educators are warranted to exert power over students. These researches reduce the student-teacher relationship to a teacher-centered one-way process, where students are forced to play a passive role in a linear cause-effect relationship [2,10], and whoever disobey are labelled as the deviant others. Even though there seem to be improvements in the development of these compliance-gaining strategies where educators forsake strict requirements and punishments as deterrence [11, 12] and instead choose to modify students' cognition and perception of the authority in educational settings [13, 14, 15, 16], it is still a unilateral point of view to solve a problem caused by both sides of the party.

Focusing merely on the “unwanted” behaviors of the deviant students and trying to shape them into meek ones is a teacher-centered perspective, ignoring the fact that students are trying to gain a sense of agency and power by means of disobedience. It is a call for collective reflection on an education that embedded an oppressive ideology at its core. This research is meant to analyze students' disruptive behavior and disengagement in educational settings through the lens of power dynamics theory, indicating that rebellious students and their unwanted behaviors are attendant consequences of an oppressive education. The theoretical framework of this research will be constructed on the base of critical pedagogy theory and power dynamics theory.

3. Realizing the Oppression

Instead of looking for solutions from one side of the problem, it might be worthy to also reflect on the other side of the power relationship. Disruptive behaviors and disengagement inspire educators to think again on the education system itself. Should students be unconditionally compliant to a

position where they are always suppressed as a subordinate group incapable of gaining knowledge and understanding of the world unless guided by a knowledgeable instructor?

3.1. Freire's Banking Concept of Education

This teacher-centered one-way instruction is condemned by Paulo Freire as oppression. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire [3] defined the “banking concept of education” as an education model that reduces students to mere containers and recipients of contents authorized and conveyed by their instructors who claim to possess the knowledge. And in contrast to the knowledgeable teachers, students are considered to be the innocent who know nothing about the world. The interpersonal relationship between students and teachers in the banking model of education is reduced to a permanent inequality, a one-way imposition where mutual communication is inhibited. This imposition, which projects an absolute ignorance onto others, is characterized by Freire as oppression. And this problematic personal relationship between students and teachers results in intellectual monopoly. It keeps students away from active inquiry and praxis, and thus annul their power of being creative and proactive, and stimulates credulity. The whole process of the banking concept of education reduces students to the object of learning and deprives the students of their agency and freedom to think independently. This means that the banking concept of education keeps students in the “shackles of a permanent immaturity” [17]. And this kind of interpersonal relationship can be categorized as oppression.

3.1.1. Banking Model with Oppression at Its Core

Literature on oppression shares something in common when it comes to identifying interpersonal oppression. In “The Second Sex”, Simone de Beauvoir [18] indicates the oppression on women is implicated through objectification and depriving their autonomy. How women are asked to give up their agency and to depend upon men for social status and welfare is parallel to the way students are encouraged to be unconditionally compliant to teachers for knowledge. The similarity shared by these two kinds of oppressive interpersonal relationships can also be found in the process of colonization and cultural imperialism. Edward Said, in his works "Orientalism" and "Culture and Imperialism", analyzes how Western empires colonize and manage other cultures by exerting domination and cultural norms, and values on those being colonized. And they justify it by authorizing the superiority of Western culture and constructing a biased understanding and an inferior image on the colonized culture [19,20]. In short, the oppressive relationships listed above all share the same ideology where the dominant groups impose incompetence and ignorance onto the subordinate groups alongside with objectification and dehumanization. And these toxic norms and values are implanted in the mind of the oppressed repetitively, and the repetition of harmful discourse itself is oppression [21, 22]. Therefore, the banking concept of education is inherently oppressive, both from the point of view of interpersonal relationships and its similarity to colonialism and cultural imperialism.

3.2. Representation of Freire's Banking Education

Ethnographic research on rebellious students offer detailed insight into oppressive conditions in the classroom and reflects on the importance of critical pedagogy theories. Everhart conducts a two-year fieldwork in a junior high school, looking into the rebellious behaviors of students, and he depicts in detail the educational environment in classrooms [1], which all point to the oppressive education system coined as the “banking concept of education” by Paulo Freire [3] according to their common characteristics: Everhart illustrates that students are treated as “an empty vessel into which knowledge was poured” [1] and the students accepted their role of passive knowledge recipient with little overt complaint. They are only “respondents”, complying with what teachers instruct within the limitation

of time and space. Therefore, there is little space for dialogs to happen in classrooms. Students, as Everhart observed and interviewed, also commented that “every class we have is the same, just straight book work. We never discuss anything” [1], which exemplifies the oppressive education that deprives the possibility of dialogs in comparison to the liberating education promoted by Freire. This passive learning process has been long critiqued since Plato, who appears to be especially antithetical to the kind of education where knowledge and understanding are forced into the recipients’ soul as if putting sight into blind eyes.

Everhart also points out that in the junior high school where he conducts his ethnographic research, learning process and what is legitimate knowledge are defined by school officials. Learning process of students is to prove that teachers have done their job conveying standardized materials by students’ giving the predetermined “right answer” and this process constitutes an intellectual hegemony, making students intellectually and emotionally dependent on teachers.

3.3. Standardized Curriculum and the Legitimate “Right”

In addition to the oppressive interpersonal relationship between students and teachers in Freire’s banking theory, oppressive education system can also be identified by its standardized curriculum and the legitimate “right” answers expected from students. Scripted contents of teaching and predetermined right answer on the one hand makes students more manageable [1] and on the other hand strengthen the imposition on students supposing they are the ignorant who are unable to perceive and understand the world rightly, and the only way for them to obtain knowledge is to be a docile recipient of what teachers instruct. As Everhart observed in junior high school, teachers are providers of knowledge and lead students into “standardized and known ends”.

Furthermore, this standardization contributes to the static and rigid status quo, depriving of the possibility of any change and betterment. So that the toxic norms and values that serve the interests of the dominant group can be continually implanted into the mind of the subordinate group through the repetition of authoritative and standardized curricula in schools.

3.3.1. Teachers Being the Oppressive and at the Same Time the Oppressed

It is also worthy of mentioning that in the banking concept of education, teachers not only play the role of the oppressive instructors predominant in the learning process but also suffer from oppression themselves. They are simply cogs in a massive institutional machine, as they are not in charge of deciding the contents to be taught and how to teach their students in classrooms [23]. Au also points out that scripted curricular structure usurps teachers’ power and autonomy in classrooms, increasingly putting teachers under the control of policymakers and state authorities [24]. So that public schools become an effective apparatus of top-down control for the authorities [25]. In fact, many teachers complain that what they do in classrooms are against their initial will and beliefs of what it means to be a teacher under the pressure of accountability [4]. Test-driven standardized teaching, accountability and centralized regulation leave teachers no room for being creative and student-centered in classrooms, casting out some of the most committed teachers in pursuit of a more democratic teaching process and liberatory education [4]. All these similar literature point to the same direction that standardization in education diminishes the role of teachers and at the same time, keeps students away from active learning [26].

3.4. Oppressive Education Reproduces Social Oppression

In addition to alienating students from their realities and the dehumanizing nature of oppressive education, Paulo Freire argued that the banking model of education, with its inherent oppressive ideology, compels individuals to accept their circumstances. This, in turn, sustains and exacerbates

the social contradictions between those in power and the marginalized groups. As a result, it actively contributes to the perpetuation of social inequality and reinforces oppression from the authority and state's ideology.

When it comes to the function of school, many scholars have pointed out that school is entrusted with the duty to reproduce the cultural norms and social values of the larger society and pass on these pre-determined standards to the young generation by means of educational activities [1]. In his book "Education and Power" from 2012, Michael W. Apple references Louis Althusser's perspective on the role of schools as "ideological state apparatuses" [27], designed to produce compliant agents aligned with the state's objectives. Foucault has also commented on the role of the school as an institution of power that play a pivotal in conveying and implementing the state's authority [28]. School as an institution of power is intentionally established to preserve existing production relationships and maintain the dominant status of the ruling group. Consequently, they serve as contributing factors to segregation and the perpetuation of social hierarchies.

4. Resisting Against Oppression

4.1. Deviant Behavior as Resistance

Where there is oppression, there will be countervailing practice.

There are researchers who have noticed the contradiction of power between students and teachers and interpret the noncompliance and disengagement as resisting and fighting against the oppressive system.

After a close participant observation, Everhart comes to the conclusion that those unwanted behaviors like goofing off and joking in class are in fact, students' attempts to grasp a sense of power in an informal way, trying to make their own narratives and social structure in response to the oppressive teaching pattern and management structure wherein students are robbed of their agency and freedom to think independently. In other words, Everhart regards students' disobedience and disengagement as a student-initiated knowledge system formed from a collective purpose representing their resistance against oppression in education settings as their way of creating their own culture within the organizational boundaries.

Other researchers argue in a similar vein: Paul Willis mentions in his ethnographic research focusing on a group of non-compliant working-class "lads" that school helps to perpetuate the cultural patterns of working-class children [29], therefore, for those rebellious "lads", disobedience and disengagement in classrooms are their ways of seeking some degrees of independence, constituting a special form of culture that particularly belongs to the group of students, namely the "counter-school culture". Their seemingly rebellious behaviors are tantamount to putting up a fight against authorized structures constructed by bosses who impose oppression on the working-class parents of students. Waller also points out the power dynamics between the group of students and the school and the hegemonic nature of the school. He argues that "the school is continually threatened because it is autocratic; and it has to be autocratic because it is threatened" [30].

Ralph Larkin have conducted thorough ethnographic research in upper-middle class suburban high schools and he points out the reason underlying students' disengagement [31]. He explains that most high school students only engage with formal school activities pertaining to academic performances at a minimal level and this emotional withdrawal means that students refuse to accept the dehumanizing authority structure fostered by school and they would rather "tolerate the boredom and meaninglessness of their own existence" to express their desire as being regarded and treated as authentic beings [31]. Michael W. Apple also notices that rebellious actions like smoking, and skipping classes are attempts to control the pacing of their classroom life in an informal way [27].

All this literature demonstrates that unwanted deviant behavior and disengagement are actually the attendant consequences of an oppressive education system. The behaviors that may appear as deviations among students are, in fact, a product of their informal knowledge system, the counter-school culture, which emerges within the boundaries and scrutiny of schools' formal discourse. This informal knowledge system is shaped by students' interpretations and symbolic understanding of authoritative institutions and administrators [1].

4.2. Why Do Resistant Actions Fail to Provoke Changes?

4.2.1. The General Result of Disobedience and Disengagement

One of the reasons of why those underachievers are stigmatized and marginalized is that the results of their deviant behaviors are more often than not detrimental (like poor academic performances, suspension and even expulsion) regardless of their intention to fight against hegemonic administrative structure in school that worth reflecting on and to strive for some sense of power.

Burroughs, Kearney, and Plax have commented that how students put up resistance is inappropriate, therefore, unsuccessful [10]. It is exactly their resistant behaviors that in the end reinforce the cultural systems based on these oppression-resistance power dynamics instead of raising collective awareness of the real oppression [1]. Thus, it is safe to say that the result of students' resistance seems to be "entrapment rather than liberation" [29].

4.2.2. Why Do They Fail? (Using Freire's Theory to Analyze the Failure)

It is worth of thinking why these student-initiated rebellions against oppressive education fail to achieve their intention and end up being marginalized. Freire's theory on critical pedagogy again sheds light on it.

According to Freire, the process of transforming from oppression to liberation requires the engagement of the subordinate group to actively engage in the struggle [3]. This means that in order to achieve a liberal education, it has to be the students who stand up against the banking model of education and make a declaration. After identifying the subject of the liberation, Freire claims that the subordinate group has to become conscious of their oppressor and stop internalizing their oppressive ideology. However, in the case of resistant behavior of students, they are most likely to be unconscious of the effects of institutional oppression [1]. Therefore, students' disruptive behaviors could only be seen as a spontaneous reaction on an individual level, and unable to call for a collective reflection on institutional oppression on a larger scale.

And as for taking action, Freire emphasizes on the importance of being critical and reflective [3], which means that reflection should be involved in the course of action on an iterative basis. Even though those rebellious students take actions out of the intention of valuing their own culture and identity, seeking for their own autonomy, they fail to reflect on the problematic part of their own counter-school culture, that for starters, they merely strive for their individual freedom, instead of the liberation of the whole group of students. Therefore, their action not only hinders their personal development, leading to their own downfall, but also counterproductively contributes to the reproduction of the oppression and power contradiction between students and teachers, which further marginalize themselves from teachers, their parents, and even their compliant classmates.

5. Conclusion

This research ventures into the world of the black sheep, the disruptive students in classrooms, trying to eliminate the conventional stigmatization on them and call for a collective understanding for these seemingly deviant behaviors. The significance of this research lies not merely in shedding light on

the struggles of these students but in raising collective recognition of the inherently oppressive nature of education itself.

This study starts with analysing the oppressive characteristics inherent in education, where students are cast as passive vessels for knowledge. Drawing from Paulo Freire's "Banking Concept of education," it unveils the dehumanizing power dynamics in the student-teacher relationship. It further emphasises the hegemonic feature of banking education by drawing parallels between this education model and other forms of social subjugation.

Additionally, we scrutinized how standardized curricula and predetermined answers reinforce this oppression, further stripping students and teachers of their autonomy and ultimately contributing to the perpetuation of the status quo.

After that, student disobedience and disengagement are examined in detail in order to demonstrate that disruptive behaviors represent a nuanced form of resistance against the oppressive educational paradigm. However, these acts of defiance often yield unintended consequences, reinforcing the very systems they seek to challenge.

The significance of this research lies in two aspects. Firstly, it calls for a collective recognition on the entrenched oppressive nature of our educational institutions. Secondly, through a detailed examination of students' rebellious behavior, this study intends to spark inspiration for changes towards a liberal education. It is worthy of envisioning an educational landscape where students are empowered to engage critically, think independently, and challenge the status quo. This study encourages future scholars to conduct more ethnographic research that delve deeper into the motivations behind student disobedience and disengagement. Exploring the intricacies of students' resistance can provide valuable insights into the transformative potential of education. By doing so, we may uncover new approaches to fostering a truly liberating educational experience.

References

- [1] Everhart, R. B. (2022). *Reading, writing and resistance: Adolescence and labor in a junior high school*. Taylor & Francis.
- [2] McLaughlin, M. L., Cody, M. J., & Robey, C. S. (1980). *Situational influences on the selection of strategies to resist compliance-gaining attempts*. *Human Communication Research*, 7(1), 14-36.
- [3] Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)*. New York: Continuum.
- [4] Lipman, P. (2004). *High stakes education: Inequality, globalization, and urban school reform*. Psychology Press.
- [5] Hue, M. T., & Li, W. S. (2008). *Classroom management: Creating a positive learning environment (Vol. 1)*. Hong Kong University Press.
- [6] Marzano, R.J. (2008). *Classroom Management That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Every Teacher*.
- [7] Emmer, E.T., & Sabornie, E. (2014). *Handbook of Classroom Management*.
- [8] Lee-Man, Y. C. (2013). *Behaviour modification theory: From research to student behaviour guidance*. In *School guidance and counselling: Trends and practices (pp. 137-154)*. Hong Kong University Press.
- [9] McCroskey, J.C., Richmond, V.P., Plax, T.G., & Kearney, P. (1985). *Power in the Classroom V: Behavior Alteration Techniques, Communication Training, and Learning*. *Communication Education*, 34, 214-226.
- [10] Burroughs, N. F., Kearney, P., & Plax, T. G. (1989). *Compliance-resistance in the college classroom*. *Communication Education*, 38(3), 214-229.
- [11] Ewing, C. P. (2000). *Sensible Zero Tolerance Protects Students*. *Harvard Education Letter*, 16(1).
- [12] Casella, R. (2003). *Zero tolerance policy in schools: Rationale, consequences, and alternatives*. *Teachers College Record*, 105(5), 872-892.
- [13] Skiba, R.J., Reynolds, C.R., Graham, S.H., Sheras, P.L., Garcia-Vazquez, E., Conoley, J.C., Subotnik, R.F., Sickler, H., Edmiston, A.M., & Palomares, R.S. (2008). *Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools?: an evidentiary review and recommendations*. *The American psychologist*, 63 9, 852-62.
- [14] Way, S. M. (2011). *School Discipline and Disruptive Classroom Behavior: The Moderating Effects of Student Perceptions*. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52(3), 346–375. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23027541>
- [15] Skiba, R., & Peterson, R. (1999). *The Dark Side of zero tolerance: Can punishment lead to safe schools?*. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(5), 372-382.
- [16] Kupchik, A. (2010). *Homeroom Security: School discipline in an age of fear (Vol. 6)*. NYU Press.

- [17] Kant, I. (1996). *An answer to the question: What is enlightenment? (1784)*. *Practical philosophy*, 11-22.
- [18] De Beauvoir, S. (1949). 1989. *The second sex*. Trans. HM PARSHLEY. New York, Vintage Books.
- [19] Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- [20] Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books.
- [21] Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirl fictions*. London: Verso.
- [22] Kumashiro, K. K. (2000). *Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education*. *Review of Educational research*, 70(1), 25-53.
- [23] Renter, D. S., Scott, C., Kober, N., Chudowsky, N., Jofstus, S. and Zabala, D. (2006) *From the capital to the classroom: year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy.
- [24] Au, W. (2011). *Teaching under the new Taylorism: High-stakes testing and the standardization of the 21st century curriculum*. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43(1), 25-45.
- [25] Moe, T. M. (2002) *Politics, control, and the future of school accountability*. In Peterson, P. e West, M. *No Child Left Behind?: the politics and practice of school accountability* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press), 80–106.
- [26] McNeil, L. (2002). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. Routledge.
- [27] Apple, M. W. (2012). *Education and power*. New York: Routledge.
- [28] Foucault, M. (1984). *The Foucault reader*. Vintage.
- [29] Willis, P. (2017). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Routledge.
- [30] Waller, W. (1965) (1932). *The sociology of teaching*. New York: John Wiley
- [31] Larkin, R. W. (1979). *Suburban youth in cultural crisis*. Oxford University Press.