

# *Theorizing Resistance in Education Research: An Introduction to the Reprint of Giroux’s “Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education”*

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Resistance has been theorized by education researchers for actions ranging from student walkouts to academic disengagement and from teachers’ maintenance of teaching practices to curricular subversion. For instance, Mehta (2013) characterizes American teachers as being “resistant” to efforts to control them, guarding teaching as a primarily individual effort and mistrusting their higher-ups (7, 150–151). Discerning this resistance, Mehta embraces rather than eschews it—and flips the traditional school reform model on its head. His proposed alternative recognizes teaching as a profession, supports teachers and celebrates their autonomy, and recommends less control and hierarchization of schooling rather than more. On the student front, when Willis (2017) sought to understand how and why British working-class “lads” got working-class jobs despite their schooling, he found that they “resisted” mental work as well as the authority of the school. In doing so, they drew on a working-class culture that sought to put the self ahead of the game and valued labor and skill as knowledge and self-advancement. Willis observed that while there was an element of self-domination in the lads’ creative counter-school culture, they paradoxically doomed themselves through that resistance into becoming low-wage labor.

Resistance theory in relation to curricula and schooling started to gain prominence in the early 1980s, concurrent with and partially in response to the proliferation of reproduction theories in education, which focused on

how schools reproduced the class structure of society (Pinar & Bowers, 1992). A major player in this development was Henry Giroux.

In this issue, the *Harvard Educational Review* reprints Giroux's "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis," which this journal first published in 1983 and which has been cited more than twenty-five hundred times to date, according to Google Scholar. The construct of resistance in educational spaces continues to be invoked by researchers and the media alike, with different degrees of success. In this introduction to the reprint, I discuss the affordances and limitations of framing teacher and student conduct as resistance and offer some notes for education researchers to consider when utilizing this construct in their work. In doing so, I draw on scholarship from key scholars in this area, particularly on Giroux's rich and still-timely article.

One benefit of theorizing certain student and teacher actions as resistance is a shift in emphasis to the agentic. Such a shift provides a more nuanced view compared to macro-level analyses of how schooling or a given schooled group succeeds, fails, or obtains specific outcomes. Without sacrificing structure or agency, using a resistance lens facilitates studying people as complex political subjectivities influenced by their environment and, at the same time, actively influencing it (Good et al., 2008). As Giroux (2023) notes, it also provides hope of positive change, compared to the often-pessimistic reproduction theories in education that can be overdeterministic about the link between schooling and the maintenance of social class and power relations. Willis (2017) finds that "the couplet accommodation/resistance is riveted tight" (185). The resistance lens enables us to respond descriptively and theoretically to the complex realities of individual and social existence and interaction that influence and are influenced by structural and cultural factors (Warikoo & Carter, 2009)—or, in other words, to the local realities where policies become accepted, resisted, or adapted by diverse subjectivities.

Investigating phenomena as experienced and shaped by students and teachers brings us closer to understanding the complex actualities of education and, hence, to devising effective solutions for the problems we seek to solve. Furthermore, examining specific instances of resistance could plausibly result in devising relevant and creative innovations around policy, as in the case of Mehta's (2013) study, as well as, per Giroux (2023), responsive and fruitful critical pedagogic practices. Finally, research that relegates teachers to the primary function of implementers of policies or curricula reinforces their lower position in the schooling hierarchy (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007), and research that neglects the agency and diversity of students across age groups risks objectifying and abstracting them into ideal or corrupt beings and moves away from student-centered, equitable education. The resistance framing of select actions has the potential of mitigating these risks. However, it also presents some challenges.

The key weakness in theorizing certain actions as resistance is the spectrum of understandings and applications of the construct—in relation to the forms it takes, the intent behind engaging with it, and the subjectivities enacting it. Some researchers use the terms *resistance* and *opposition* interchangeably. However, for Giroux (2023), “behavior can indicate a form of resistance if it emerges out of a latent or overt ideological condemnation of the underlying repressive ideologies that characterize schools in general” (p. 426). In other words, behavior constitutes resistance only if it is coupled with the intention to push back against repression. This definition holds whether the process is conscious or semi-conscious. Resistance is also political in nature for Valenzuela (1999), who warns against romanticizing nonconformity and misbehaviors as resistance (228). Through this perspective, the lads in Willis’s (2017) study are rightly construed as engaging in resistance. However, more information would be needed to characterize the teachers described by Mehta (2013) as doing the same.

Recognizing resistance can be difficult. Giroux (2023), for instance, notes that resistance can be overt or covert. The latter may occur when students observe the domination exercised through schooling for what it is but consciously decide to play along—even if minimally—to pass through that experience without being rendered powerless. A set of behaviors could construe political resistance exercised against domination, while concurrently increasing domination over another group. For example, in Willis’s (2017) study, the lads’ resistance against school authority, which was grounded in their working-class culture, simultaneously advanced sexism, which was integral to that culture as well (3, 52, 146). Finally, recognizing resistance as such is subjective, mediated by one’s valuation of different goals as well as perceptions of various protagonist groups, such as considering an act as oppositional versus resistant behavior based on the race of the protagonist(s) (Valenzuela, 1999, 228–229). Researchers, Giroux writes, may also utilize different spatial and temporal scopes for their analyses, such as situating resistance within the context of the classroom or the larger society or by either considering or disregarding the historic trajectory of the development of the act in question.

Theorizing “resistance” when researching certain educational phenomena facilitates the study of people as complex subjectivities who are simultaneously influencing and influenced by their environments. It also holds the promise of advancing our understanding of complex educational realities, with anticipated positive contributions to policy and practice in the field. However, when engaging with the construct of resistance, researchers would be wise to consider a number of factors.

In relation to the environment or context of resistance, Warikoo and Carter’s (2009) recommendation of treating culture as a dependent variable rather than a mere contextual factor is especially useful. In this regard, Willis (2017) successfully considers culture as both an outcome and mediator of the

reproduction of social stratification yet does not reduce it to a simple, static element. He explains that the lads' working-class culture that influenced their behavior was "in no sense free-floating" but, rather, existed in "balance and complementarity" within a structural context, including specific material (capitalist) and institutional factors (185). Giroux (2023) similarly emphasizes the importance of placing resistance within a wider context and treating instances of resistance dialectically with the subjects or environment at which they are directed (e.g., teachers, administrators, or other school authorities).

Scholars should also look at differences and/or consistencies caused by human biology and psychology—such as factoring in adolescent development as part of the innate environment impacting resistant behavior in that age group, the science of how people learn, and human desires and needs as influencers of behavior in addition to ideologies and rationality (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Giroux, 2023; National Research Council, 2000). In the examples above, it is not clear whether teachers' identities mediate their resistance to reform in Mehta's (2013) study or whether that mediation varies across differing teacher groups. Additionally, a person's behavior may vary based on whether they are (or consider themselves to be) acting individually or as part of a larger group, and possibly based on the size of that group as well (Valenzuela, 1999).

Finally, to better understand resistance, it is helpful to conduct research that focuses on specific groups (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). For instance, Valenzuela (1999) studied how different generations of Mexican immigrant youth employ an attitude of "not caring" as resistance. The alternative of contrasting groups that are drawn along racial or ethnic lines, while possibly helpful, is less nuanced than investigating within-group variation. Moreover, it risks pathologizing the behavior of the less dominant group against the other's (García Coll et al., 1996). Future studies, Giroux (2023) recommends, could explore types of resistance that may be race or gender specific, such as contrasting behavior when one feature of the studied group changes or comparing resistance across different marginalized groups. In doing so, special attention should be paid to the intersectionality of human identities and the interaction between them.

It may feel challenging for some researchers to use and deepen theories of resistance. However, to abandon this exploration when it is warranted is to turn away from the complex reality of education and the subjectivities engaged therein and toward narratives that are simplified or ambiguous at best and reductionist at worst. Conversely, to take on the challenge promises a deeper understanding of certain educational phenomena related to power and domination and constitutes an investment in a more just and equitable future. For researchers using the construct of resistance in their work, Giroux's "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education" offers further insight into the intricacies of engaging in such work, a deep dive into the history of the field, and, most importantly—in relation to improving education and the role of research in doing so—hope.

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