Symbolic Violence in Schools
Summary of PhD thesis

In my attempt to show how symbolic violence operates in schools, I have begun an investigation concerning the problematics of violence within the schools. The first part of the paper contains **chapter I**, entitled *"Characteristics of School Violence"*. This chapter aims to draw attention to fundamental research papers inside the national and international space in order to define types and forms of violence in schools and the place of the educational institution in which through a configuration of causes this phenomenon is generated. Although the school is a place meant to form character, it is difficult for the didactic community to accept that the educational environment can be involved in causing violence and at the same time to generate violence itself. The educational system (next to other systems studied by M Foucault) could be the place which generates institutional violence through organization practices and procedures. The analysis of certain mechanisms typical of the educational process (the authority relationship between teacher and student, evaluation, discrimination and labelling, the type of educational discipline) can only invite reflection on schemes well-rooted within the collective mentality and on educational practices we take for granted, considering them useful and often inevitable, but which from the perspective of the student are seen as constraining.

The concept of *symbolic violence* was introduced by the French sociologist in order to draw attention to those forms of violence that do not involve physical force. Thus, symbolic violence is the gentle, invisible violence that is not recognised as such. Its usage by the dominant ones is so deeply rooted in cultural and social norms that they are not even aware of using it, especially as the dominated accept this domination

Chapter II, *Social and Cultural Reproduction through Education* aims to set the scene of the discourse – proving the existence of symbolic violence through the educational system by using the theory developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970). Basically, the theory of symbolic violence in schools is based on the idea that institutional education possesses an internal function *of imposing cultural capital*, capable of reproducing, through education, a homogenous habitus, long-lasting for its legitimate receivers, and an external function of *social and cultural reproduction*. By producing habitus, the pedagogical action acts as a power that imposes as legitimate meanings that dissimulate power relationships, becoming symbolic violence. It legitimizes and strengthens dominant relationships. Therefore, the characteristic of symbolic violence education possesses challenges the democratic characteristic of society, especially the principle of equal opportunities. However, although Bourdieu's theory has been

criticised for its pessimism, the French sociologists urged the social agents to act towards the awareness and denial of domination.

Chapter III, *Combating Symbolic Violence through Educational Policies Meant to Raise Opportunity Equality in Education* suggests a brief analysis of the contributions of educational reform measures and educational policies which aim to minimize symbolic violence and increase the democracy of education, here understood as equal access to cultural resources for different disadvantaged categories. Currently, educational policies aim for equal access to education, desegregation of the schools, increase of mandatory school time, investing in early education, promoting cultural diversity and also a more careful counselling for parents.

Chapter IV, *Symbolic Violence through the School Curriculum* analyses the dynamic and contradictory relationship between power, culture and education. In Pierre Bourdieu's opinion, culture is a space of domination, because all symbolic systems are anchored in culture and have the ability to shape reality. Organizations, including the school, have the power to build a representation of reality and to impose it to other members as a legitimate definition of reality.

The culture of a society is found in a compressed, selected and hierarchized form inside the content transmitted through didactic practices. However, the selection at work here is far from innocent. The symbols a society produces are not harmless; many of them are *carriers of violence* as they stem from and serve various power relationships. The content of education has a significant role in modifying the attitude presumably belonging to the school system also. Because of this, the curriculum was and still is an "object of control trials from the groups in competition with each other for political or cultural hegemony" (Hatos, A., 2006). The phenomenon of self-reproducing power relationships is easily understood when we tie symbolic violence to the ideology of the dominant group. From the view of the paradigm of symbolic violence, values and norms are imposed by agents in possession of symbolic power, especially with the help of the media, but also through school discourse. Society's representations created by power are not necessarily false, but always their aim is to determine in the ranks of individuals certain actions that reflect the interests of those I have already referred to as "dominant". An example of the reproduction of economic relations and patriarchal ideology in the formal and hidden curriculum proves the insertion of symbolic violence in institutionalized education. Next to these examples, the analysis of the particularities belonging to the didactic discourse and certain discursive strategies shows that the symbolic violence stemming from the formal curriculum determines and is sustained by elements from the real curriculum.

In this chapter I have illustrated the theoretical assertions developed around the paradigm of symbolic violence with two case studies reflecting distinct manners in which symbolic dominance is insinuated through the curriculum. The first case study is entitled *The Reproduction of Social Order through the Study of History in Schools*. The meta- analysis of certain studies concerning the reorientation of the History discourse on the ethnocentric-

eurocentric axis in Romanian Curriculum products has allowed the argument that textbooks are not neutral, being "a sum of versions belonging to the collective memory animating society at a given point in time" (Mihalache, C., 2012).

The second case study follows *the symbolic violence associated to learning Mathematics in school*. By synthesizing certain studies examining the exclusion of some groups and the reproduction of power through the study of Mathematics, I was able to ring to light several subtle practices which limit the success of some groups in this curricular field.

Chapter V, *Theoretical Premises for Combatting Symbolic Violence Through the Curriculum* reunites the main theories developed as reaction against cultural reproduction via the curriculum, offering principles and intervention strategies to re-establish equity. Symbolic dominance through the curriculum causes frustrations for the actors involved in the educational act. Therefore there are certain reactions that mask one's own vision and makes one conform to a singular vision imposed via the curriculum, as well as some resistance behaviour. Investing the student with the power and ability of owning this education and overcoming passivity and docility has been one of the directions proposed by critical pedagogy. The care for students and for knowledge as a professional attitude, essential in the face of symbolic and physical violence, is discussed in the context of the postmodernist paradigm of education. The postmodernist pedagogy releases the curriculum from its *"fetters of power"* (Ulrich, C., p. 2007), offering a series of theoretical instruments which aim to reconsider the relationship between culture, power and knowledge.

Chapter VI entitled "Symbolic *Violence. Perceptions from Educational Actors* is dedicated to field research and contains to empirical studies. The analysis of specialized literature as well as research on the manner in which various studies have operationalized the term of "symbolic violence" have served the purpose of framing some *analysis planes on symbolic violence in schools:*

1. *The macro level:* educational politics that do not acknowledge diversity (gender, ethnic, linguistic, of abilities, socio-cultural) and which does not guarantee equity within the school system;

2. *Intermediate level:* curricular decisions which reproduce power relations from society by imposing values and concepts belonging to a dominant faction; limitation of the democratic character of educational management by imposing power;

3. *Micro level:*
   a) the marginalisation, ignoring, exclusion, misrecognition (lack of appreciation) of the "non-dominant" categories of parents and students; preferential treatment, depending on someone belonging to a certain social category, bearing a negative impact on equality and social justice;

b) authoritarian attitude while building knowledge for students and while managing interpersonal relations within the school group.

The first study, *Symbolic Violence in Schools. Reactions of Highschool Students from Suceava County* aims to investigate the perception of 652 highschool students concerning types of symbolic violence identified within the *school environment* (inequity, non-inclusion, marginalization) and in the *didactic process* (authority while building knowledge). The study has also researched the hierarchy of factors pertaining to symbolic violence and the identification of common forms of resistance in students at the teacher's imposition of authority during educational communication. The general hypothesis of our study claims that the perceived level of symbolic violence varies depending on the students' home environment, biological gender, type of school and evaluation results as well as on the level of direct (objective) violence inside classrooms.

The research methodology involved applying two questionnaires to students from the Xth and XIth grade from 9 selected highschools in Suceava county, as well as organizing a semi-structured interview with 27 form teachers of the participating classes in order to establish the level of objective violence in these highschools.

The second study, *Teacher's Views on Protective Factors for Symbolic Violence in Schools* has aimed to capture just how much do pre-universities teachers perceive the manifestation of symbolic violence inside the school system, such as inequity, reduced inclusion in the school environment, marginalization, imposition of symbolic power and domination through curricular politics. Seeing as changes and educational reforms are shaped with the help of the teachers, the study was eager to identify how much they can appreciate the efficiency of certain measures in educational politics designed to reduce educational inequalities. I also kept in mind the way in which teachers appreciate a series of protective factors against symbolic violence: acknowledging bio-psychological-socio-cultural diversity in textbooks and in the lesson planning, an educational management which is stimulating and equitable.

The research methodology has entailed applying a questionnaire to 440 teachers of primary, lower and upper secondary schools

Field research has brought to light the fact that, from a students' perspective, symbolic violence manifests itself as follows:

- At the *level of the school system* – through *inequality,* manifesting itself through the student's lack of faith in the meritocratic ideology, unequal chances depending on ethnic background, social category and learning possibilities,
- At the level of the *school environment* – through *non-inclusive educational climate,* through *marginalization* by classmates, depending on ethnic background, financial statute, religious convictions or beliefs and conceptions different from those of the majority;

- At the level of the *didactic process* – through the authoritarian style of imparting knowledge emphasised by the pedagogical attitudes encountered in some of the teachers: imposing teaching ideas, failure to challenge the textbooks authority by lack of critical debates for some concepts and ideas presented there, the sanction of students' expressing themselves in terms other than those of the teacher, reduced use of interactive strategies. There is a high number of answers that suggest teachers tend to impose their own teaching ideas in fields such as Romanian, Mathematics, History, Geography. Teachers of Mathematics and of Sciences, as well as those teaching Religion do not question ideas presented in the textbook. As far as sanctioning students for expressing themselves in different terms or addressing clarifying questions, this attitude is present more in Romanian teachers and less in Religious Studies teachers, according to the students.

The empiric attempt has confirmed a part of the research hypothesis:

- *There are differences between students in their perceptions of inequities in the school system,* depending on biological gender, home environment, level of objective violence in the classroom. Students from *urban areas* manifest more distrust towards the meritocratic ideology than those coming from rural areas. Also, boys, compared to girls give less favourable marks to the equitable character of the Romanian education system, showing more reserve towards the possibility that school offers them the chance of reaching their full potential by experimenting with social and professional success. More boys than girls declare that school does not offer equal chances to all students, regardless of social or ethnic background. It has been shown that the perception of inequity varies also according to the *level of objective violence* in schools. The bigger the level of objective violence among students, the less favourable the students' perception on the equity of the educational system.

- *There are differences among students regarding the perception of the quality of the school climate, as far as non-inclusion is concerned.*
  According to the data obtained, students from the rural area feel more than those from towns the teachers' lack of involvement and support in discouraging certain negative attitudes manifested by students towards their classmates from disadvantaged environments, as well as the failure to intervene when they are mocked due to their linguistics particularities. From the moment they enter the school and throughout their education, a category of students undergo a process of aculturalization meaning breaking away from linguistic patterns and gestures used in the family or with friends, in order to learn those imposed by the school culture. As a consequence, some students (part of those from rural areas, those from less advantaged socio-economic or cultural environments) encounter difficulties in adapting to the linguistic demands imposed by various formal environments. Teachers should be aware of the obstacles perceived by those categories of students as they struggle to adapt to school and to manage interpersonal relationship so they prevent and dismiss prejudices and discrimination.

This empirical research has shown that students with lower educational performance coming from classes with a high level of violence talk about a non-inclusive educational climate. These categories sense a low level of safety in schools, a weak involvement for students in the decision making process, reduced praises from teachers for the accomplishments of all students, lack of support for higher aspirations, non-involvement of teachers in discouraging the labelling of students with weaker results, of those that are mocked due to their belonging to a disadvantage category, or their regional accents. Also, students who follow a technical path, less valued in the educational community claim less than those from theoretical fields that the educational environment is structured according to the principle of inclusion and respect for differences. Therefore, it has become increasingly important for schools to point out certain measures that might contribute to the improvement of the school climate. *The ethical perspective,* favourable to *inclusion* is the basis of respect for diversity and cements equitable pedagogical practices. Since students and teachers must learn to respect and recognise diversity, they need to experiment it themselves, to live with differences, rather than learning about them in an abstract manner. The improvement of the school climate through the effort of including all students is a factor which might contribute to the improvement of school performance.

- *There are differences in how certain students perceive marginalization from classmates.* Marginalisation phenomena are perceived as more frequent by classes with a low level of violence and by students with good school performance. It has been noted that groups of students from technical fields state as more frequent situations of marginalization by classmates due to economic status or concepts and ideas different from those of other students.

- *There are differences in how students perceived authority manifested by teachers during the teaching process.* Students with better results are more receptive to the teaching style and appreciate more than all the other categories the fact that the teacher adopts an authoritarian attitude, imposing power during the lesson.

-*There are differences between students regarding resistance strategies adopted against the imposition of institutional authority.* By analysing the data obtained, it can be deduced that usually girls, students from rural areas, students from classes with a lower or medium level of violence tend to react mostly by conforming when the teacher imposes their authority during the educational communication. On the other hand, the higher the level of objective violence among groups of students, the lower the desire to conform and accept the teacher's ideas. Moreover, the students' tendency to react through withdrawal, aggression and reduced interest in the school activity increases as well.

At the same time, students from classes with a low level of objective violence, unlike those coming from places with higher levels, hae proven to be more tolerant to the teacher's attitude during the educational communication when they ranked potential factors of institutional violence. These conclusion further prove some hypothesis (Bourdieu, Neamțu, 2003, Amirou,

2001, Debarbieux), which sustain the existence of relations of mutual determination between institutional and symbolic violence on the one hand and direct violence in schools on the other.

From the *teacher's perspective,* the results of the empirical result have showcased that symbolic violence manifest itself as follows:

- At the level of the *official curriculum,* by imposing power at the level of the education system, through curricular policies and managerial decisions: imposing certain curricular changes, ignoring the traditions of the Romanian school with the new curriculum, imposing European mentalities in the curriculum, reduced latitude when choosing textbooks;

- At the *textbook* level, through reduced acknowledgement of diversity. The non-discriminating character of the textbooks is limited by: the presence of nationalistic ideologies, ignoring in textbooks of social privileges and power as well as of viewing cultures and civilizations equal (cultural relativism), the presence of stereotypes and prejudices regarding gender and ethnicity;
- At the *lesson level,* by not acknowledging diversity manifested through reduce interest in: objective standpoint to social inequalities during lessons, informing students about cultural influences in language and curriculum;

- at the level of *educational environment* by reduced awareness of certain barriers raised by the differences between the school cultural environment ad that of the family and the insufficient means at school level of overcoming these obstacles;

- at the level of *school management* through insufficient structural changes that would create a more equitable environment, the weak involvement from parents in decision making and policy setting, the reduced offer of training programs for cooperative learning and the support of various cultural groups.

The study dedicated to point out *the protective factors* against symbolic violence indicate that, actually, there are attempts to fight symbolic violence with:

- Educational politics aimed at increasing equality in opportunities (increasing the length of the mandatory learning period, desegregation in schools, positive discrimination measures, early education, parent counselling, promoting cultural diversity);
- Promoting tolerance values and respect for human dignity at the textbook level;
- Promoting lessons starting from students' different life experiences and knowledge, creating opportunities for culturally heterogeneous teamwork, stimulating cooperation and acknowledgement of individuality, care for the development of the ability for critical interpretation of the ideas presented in textbooks.

Implications and Recommendations for the Educational Practices

From the perspective of awareness of the mechanisms involved in symbolic violence, it is important that, through the initial and ongoing training programs for teachers to reveal also more subtle forms of violence that affect the educational climate:

Abuse of authority in the teacher-student relationship.

Preferential or discriminatory treatment depending on the student's belonging to a certain social category (shown while registering for school, while being sent to a class, a group, during evaluation).

Failure to acknowledge the bio-psycho-socio-cultural diversity (lack of support for students with special needs or for those socio-culturally disadvantaged, the imposition of certain large educational standards for all students, labelling students).

For this purpose the following educational directions would play an important part in the training of future teachers: *Educational communication, School management ,The pedagogy of diversity The Ethics of school evaluations* .

   I also suggest a broadening of the set of competences in the initial and continuing training for teachers through adding and emphasizing **socio-cultural competences** which would give the teacher abilities to value the students' cultural background. When structuring this set of abilities, the following dimensions are taken into account: ability to offer social support, knowing the student, creating a school-family partnership, a socio-constructive approach to learning, affirmative support of students from non-dominant groups, support for teachers so they can become agents of social transformation.

   From the perspective of combatting symbolic violence through the forma and real curriculum, a series of *measures* are suggested, which could contribute to the amelioration of interpersonal relations from the educational space:
• *Stimulation of Multiple Intelligences through Extracurricular Activities.* Acknowledgement of the contribution many students and parents can bring to school life will contribute to diminishing the impact various capitals (social, material) have on determining the students' status in the school.

• *Promoting emotional education in schools.* Feelings play an essential part in the development of a *solidarity policy* which shows care for others, a fundamental aspect for the functioning of an inclusive and democratic society. The feelings of failure, of lack of prospects or of isolation experienced by many students in schools cannot be discussed unless emotional language is allowed within the educational discourse.

 • *Improving the pedagogical relationship through the negotiation of authority.*

• *Through educational activities,* students need to be helped to re-focused their attitude towards success. Success, power, consumerism are all central values of society, imposed through all communication channels, including the channels symbolic to school culture. Introducing the discipline *Education for values* in the nucleus curriculum in highschool would help with the imbalance between cognitive and affective purposes. By promoting values such as solidarity, tolerance, honesty, dignity, educational activities could open up paths necessary for restoring equitable relations between various social categories (majority-minority, dominant-dominated).

Without minimalizing the importance of preventing and combatting other forms of violence, the fight against symbolic violence offers the chance of the fulfilment of individual and collective potential for as many students as possible, at the same time diminishing the level of direct violence by the students.