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## **Discursive determinants of youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods empowerment through participatory socio-educational work.**

### **An example of an extra-school education**

**Dyskursowe uwarunkowania procesu upodmiotawiania młodzieży z defaworyzowanych sąsiedztw poprzez partycypacyjną pracę społeczno-wychowawczą. Przykład placówki edukacji równoległej**

**Abstract:** This article presents the results of an analysis that is part of a broader action-research project on the onto-epistemology of Social-Educational Work (SEW) with youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods (DN) in one of

Łódź's extra-school educational facilities. We argue that SEW offered in such facilities located within urban underprivileged areas is especially susceptible to the impact of overarching discourses. This vulnerability becomes pronounced when SEW objective is to empower children and youth from DNs. The aims of the study were to reconstruct the onto-epistemologies of parties involved in social-educational work and to develop premises for changes to be introduced into it in participatory way.

The objectives were achieved in participatory research, during which we conducted in-depth interviews with the staff, discussions with youth and participant observation, as well as separate analytical discussions with both groups, in which we co-created the interpretation of data from previously mentioned sources. As a result of the research, through the example of a distinctive institutional project of co-production of socio-spatial change with young people from DN – detaching a Youth Club from the conventional structures of a community center in this facility – we documented how various discourses (economization, psychologization, educationalization) influence the execution of the chosen pedagogical approach in practice. At the background of the human and social strengths identified within the institution and the ways they oppose these processes; in this article we focus more on the critical analysis of discursive conditions.

**Keywords:** extra-school education, youth, disadvantaged neighborhood, socio-educational work, discourse.

## Introduction

Given the adverse trends of ghettoization and gentrification juxtaposed with the rising demand for the activation of all citizens, the empowerment of youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods (DNs)<sup>1</sup> is critical today. Growing up in city areas considered “inferior” often promotes unequal opportunities in life (Gulczyńska and Granosik, 2022), particularly unequal access to education (e.g. Lankford et al., 2002), inadequate childcare facilities (Fuller and Liang, 1997), less qualified teachers (Holme and Rangel, 2012).

In the realm of scientific and political discussion on DN residents, deficit-based explanations prevail, effectively sidelining the inclusion of residents' perspectives (Gulczyńska and Granosik, 2022), and marginalizing the traditions of the Polish social pedagogy in which both local social strengths

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<sup>1</sup> DN refers to impoverished neighborhoods, particularly emphasizing their low status in the city and limited life opportunities of their residents.

and conducting action-research in collaboration with the DN residents are promoted as key dynamics of empowerment.

This contrast presents a challenge for local out-of-school educational institutions and becomes even more complex when the influence of post-structural critical philosophy focused on the impact of dominant, largely neoliberal, discourses is considered.

Framed in this manner, the issue led us to a research-action study in which we focused on co-production of socio-educational work (SEW) in an extra-school educational institution. It also inspired the reconstruction of the modern discursive conditions of SEW presented in this article.

### **Economization, psychologization, and educationalization: the discursive conditions for the institutionalization of SEW**

Fundamental to the Polish tradition of social pedagogy is the perception of SEW as a process of grassroots change co-created by pedagogues and exceptional individuals (Radlińska, 1961). Today, this understanding cannot be examined in isolation from the conditions of discourse. Conceived a century ago, the vision of a participatory process in mobilizing social strengths must now be critically revised to include the phenomenon of *subjectification* (*assujettissement*) with the key role of dominant neoliberal discourses as described by Michel Foucault in 1998. These discourses, with significant contribution from the social sciences, not only mold the external conditions of SEW but also possess the capacity to craft a semblance of subjectivity and agency (Foucault, 2011; Rose, 1999). In the article we focus on three primary discourses essential for understanding of “modern” SEW.

**Economization and New Public Management.** For many decades, heightened investment in social and educational services has nudged discussions and initiatives towards rationalization, optimization, or outcome-focused evaluation. The belief shared, among others, by Radlińska (1961), that the educational process itself, and driving environmental strengths and unmeasurable potentials, is already a success, has been replaced by the notion, taken out of the logic of market efficiency, of a time-bound project producing measurable results (cf. Ostrowicka, 2015). For a period, that approach to “management” of social services<sup>2</sup> was labeled as New Public Management and gave way to nuanced methods of infusing market principles into education.

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<sup>2</sup> A symptom of the changes presented here was the replacement of the traditional category of “duty” in social pedagogy with “services”.

In the end, contemporary SEW is conditioned first by bid expectations, measures of success, then by deliverables and learning effects. At the same time – given the low base salaries of educators – SEW is shaped by market incentives that encourage the pursuit of activities offering additional remuneration. These activities are typically designed to steer those in care towards living and acting in alignment with prevailing discourses, thereby transforming them into ideal consumers of material goods and services, including those related to education.

**Psychologization.** The term *psychologism* has accompanied the social sciences practically since their onset, and originally meant a cognitive perspective that sees the roots of social phenomena in internal processes within the individual. Years later, the concept of ‘psychologization’ emerges, with its expectation of interpreting social, political, and educational phenomena through predominantly psychological frameworks. This process is accompanied by a rise of “new specialists” who root their services– spanning training, coaching, hypnosis, and informal therapy – in widely accepted psychological “theories”.

However, the real change in the understanding of the psychologization of social life is only brought about by the post-constructivist interpretation of Foucault’s concept of governmentality (2011). This concept refers to the impersonal, discursive control of entire populations under the guise of freedom, supported by “psy- sciences” (Rose, 1999).

Contemporary, psychologization is very often combined with medicalization (Conrad, 2007), and therefore non-psychological problems (e.g. pedagogical) become the area of psychological and medical activity (cf. Jarkiewicz, 2016). The weaker (pedagogical) discourse is structured by the stronger and “lauder” (psychological) one, and this one by an even stronger (medical) one (Frazer et al., 2009).

**Educationalization.** Although pedagogy does not have a “psy-“ prefix, given its contemporary functions and uses in dominant neoliberal discourses, it can be put in the same category. Thus, educationalization will be a process of transferring the language and modes of action characteristic of education to almost all areas of social life (Czyżewski, 2013). This dissemination is global and involves simplified, and at times even modified, educational concepts. The primary, unstated, aim of this influence is to shape a form of perceived subjectivity that aligns with neoliberal societal norms: crafting individuals who believe themselves to be empowered with freedom and personal agency, yet concurrently aware of their inability to navigate decision-making independently in an increasingly intricate world. As a result, an individual

educated in this way is condemned to a permanent search for knowledge (life-long learning), and this knowledge is most easily obtained from dominant discourses that suggest the same answers to entire populations. Education, including approaches labeled as “emancipatory” or “constructivist”, thus transforms into a tool for uniformly aligning individuals with dominant discourses. This alignment is subtly packaged within the belief in their own subjectivity (powers of freedom).

**Discursive institutionalization.** The discourses highlighted above not only influence the practices of individual educators but, more crucially play a significant role in the institutionalization processes of SEW. Social institutions are in a constant process of transformation, or, more precisely, of readiness to adapt to changes in dominant discourses. In this sense, they are the warp of networked governance (Sørensen and Torfig, 2018; Shmidt, 2017). However, it would be an oversimplification to reduce the operation of the aforementioned network to mapping the tendencies of the dominant discourses. Especially for facilities involved with social welfare and education, the institutional discourse represents a mosaic of external influences and internal aspirations, ideologies, and, to borrow again the terminology of Helena Radlińska, *ideals* (Granosik, 2020). The reconstruction of this complex system of discourse conditions of SEW implemented in an educational institution was the purpose of our analysis.

### Methodological basis of the analysis

The presented analysis is a part of a broader action-research on the onto-epistemology of SEW<sup>3</sup>. Our study run in a Youth Club (YC), distinct offer within the framework of an out-of-school educational institution that operates with the status of a Youth Cultural Center, and, among its various activities, includes a Community Center (CC) /świątlica/. The Club became real through funding obtained under an external grant.

We applied purposeful sampling. That was the only known project in our city of co-producing an institutional change with young people form DNs, involving the detachment of a Youth Club from the conventional structures of a community center in an extra-curriculum facility in DS.

From among the participants of the CC's activities, adolescents were selected to become YC participants. Part of them agreed to join our study

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<sup>3</sup> The project was funded by the University of Łódź as a part of IDUB (23/IDUB/DOS/2021) grants.

and constituted its sample (a total of 8 people aged 13 to 17<sup>4</sup>). We conducted in-depth interviews with the staff and discussions with youth. However, the cornerstone was participatory observation and separate analytical discussions with the staff and with the youth. The method of interpretative analysis was the classical version of the Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to let us combine data from different sources through open coding and axial coding. Sampling was conducted until saturation was achieved at the level of key categories. We solved the problem of subjectivity of interpretation (individual attitudes) by research participants to group discussions of the working results of the research. In technical terms, we conducted the analysis using NVivo software.

### Results of the study

Research findings presented here are limited to the aspects relating to the socio-educational practices conducted in the YC. To identify the discursive conditions of co-producing SEW with DN youth, we used the juxtaposition of the club history we had co-created with the youth against individual and group interviews with the pedagogical staff.

### History of the YC from the perspective of its users

In the participatory (re)construction of the YC history from the interviews with the youth, the stages of the interactive place-making were revealed. As the result of this process a place that gave the youth a sense of familiarity, safety and the feeling of *being at home* emerged. This sentiment was explicitly conveyed in youth's meanings ascribed to the club: *second home*, place where it's cool (Y), making one feel comfortable, like in a family (X); it was also conveyed implicitly by juxtaposing the YC against the CC, where *there are fewer mouthy little kids* (X) and where, thanks to *separation from the younger ones* (O), they *no longer* experience conflicts while using the computers, when *kids push and make others fall off the chairs* (T).

The first step of this place co-production was **the founding initiative**.

The educators rather thought about X (name of a girl), because at that time she was already entering a more senior age, already fifteen, years old (...) since she is older, she shouldn't stay all the time with younger children... and then the educators probably hit upon the idea that they would create such a thing(Y).

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<sup>4</sup> The core of the youth group participating in the study comprised of 5 individuals (anonymized as Y, X, O, T, and U), the others were joining in sporadically.

The biological age as a criterion for selecting YC participants was negotiated. There were candidates' abilities to function in a place of adults' reduced control and a degree of bonding with the oldest attendees that mattered.

U: The YC in general is from the seventh grade up...

Y: ...or from the age of 13. O (name of a boy); theoretically doesn't fall under either of these statistics.

The socially constructed criteria of accessibility, coupled with the decision to name the club in a way that highlights the maturity of its beneficiaries (the youth), suggests an openness among the staff to the youth's perspectives during this transition. This approach reveals an understanding of the significance of group rites of passage in enhancing processes of self-determination and self-education. These rites influenced the collective identity of the young interviewees, manifesting itself in their self-identification as 'elders' in contrast to the participants of the CC.

When the club was formed, we had a strong influence on the rules of the club. The club set the rules, there was a council of elders. Its members were me, L. and I think Mrs. R., before the club was formed. At that stage they were gathering people(...) (X)

The collaboration between the *council of elders* and selected staff representatives to **conceptualize the space** marked the second stage in the co-creation of YC. It consisted of negotiations of youth's activities in there, the extent of the educators' control over them, as well as the regulations. Finally, they adopted the rules of the CC to YC.

Z: Who decided that the rules were taken from the CC?

Y: The educators, and we just added a few of our own.

As a result of that stage the YC was established as a deliberately non-coercion space for youth, where *no one watches over*. Activities were intended to be member-driven, with club members themselves responsible for maintaining cleanliness, deciding on décor, and choosing group activities there. The co-creation of the social layer of YC was integrated with its economic foundation, for which a grant was collaboratively developed. This funding aimed to support the design and running costs of the YC. The grant

awarded to the facility enabled the **co-creation of the material layer** of the place – the third stage. Its key elements were renovation and equipment purchases, but also slight reduce in youth agency.

We chose most of the things, but Mrs. R. decided at the end how it should look, because she liked it better that way.

At this stage, the narrators emphasized the category of **adult-limited youth participation**, in the scope of the aesthetic and functional layer of the space, and a **division of the staff** into **supporters and antagonists of the co-production of SEW** in this facility. The antagonists, for reasons unclear to the youth, have undergone an unfavorable transformation, that is now evident through their attempts to extend adult authority to the Club and exert pressure to limit the youth's right to self-determination.

The next stage of dynamic negotiation of rules between the youth themselves and between them and staff was **co-creation of the symbolic and social layer of the space**. The first entails negotiations of a social order within the “in-group” (our study participants), and between this group and another fraction of youth who presented different idea of the YC. They were negotiating rules relating to cleanliness or computer use, etc. This discord supplied some educators with arguments in favor of bolstering adult-limited participation within the social layer of the space. Our young informants also had a sense of injustice because the educators failed to acknowledge the acts of successful peer-led control within their subgroup.

Z: You are kind of self-controlling, in the sense that the group exerts pressure and that basically educators are not needed then?

Y: Yes.

Z: Is it also like that at the CC?

Y: At the CC it's the educators.

Adolescents recognize the distinct regulation mechanisms between the CC and the YC. The positive effect of peer-led self-education in the group, appreciated by the YC's supporters, was overlooked by the antagonists who were striving to bring the youth back to the CC (e.g. expecting from YC participants to spend time at the CC after school, before they join the club). This is an example of how adult-limited participation of youth in SEW intervenes in the youth's self-identification processes.

This **extending adult authority *per se* in the co-production of SEW** was also manifested in:

- **expression of constant discontent** from antagonists who *didn't like the fact that we were sitting here*, accusing the young people of inactivity, and leading to an attempt to close the YC.
- **unexpected inspections**, that is entering the YC suddenly to formulate criticism of some elements of the aesthetic or social layer of the space,
- **decision-making instability**, as shown below:

When we wanted to do a sleepover here, they said 'yes', and then one day before I learnt that we couldn't, that we could just hang out longer, but that the sleepover won't happen.

While the antagonists' attempts of power exertion over YC mobilized the youth's resistance, those made by the supporters, went unnoticed by them. The subtlety of power manifestation by the allies of SEW's co-production together with DN youth is a characteristic of the last of the stages of the YC's history captured in the study– the **(re)conceptualization of the space by its supporters**. We refer here to the emergency placement in the YC of computer equipment procured through a new grant aiming at supporting Ukrainian students.

In conclusion, the adults' power in the co-production of SEW uncovered how they may have hindered the development of in-group processes of youth' self-determination and self-education. The next step of the analysis documented the discursive conditions of this picture of SEW with DN youth co-production.

### **Configuration of discursive conditions of SEW co-production**

Analysis of interviews with staff showed how SEW is intricately woven into a network of interrelated public discourses. These elements are closely related to competitiveness in the market of socio-educational services and are perceived by professionals as determining the success of institutions. The staff recognize the many absurdities of such "trends" and "fads", nevertheless, as they stress, *it can't be done otherwise*.

In the study we uncovered three dominant discourses: economization; psychologization; and pedagogization.

**Economization** is the application of market-based economic mechanisms to other areas of social life, in this case to SEW. It primarily concerns the professionals' capacity to secure funding and participants for their

initiatives. This discourse has gained special significance, as the concept of projects has become popular and is related to the compulsion felt by management and staff to become more attractive in the market. The manager appreciates that projects enhance the financial capabilities of the institution.

We managed to get an EU project subsidizing this community center for three years, where for me the important thing was that in this project there was money for staff working with children.

Although the projects are recognized for their benefits, they face criticism from the staff and remain a source of tensions.

It annoys us when we are required to handle in some invoices for example, you know, that now there is an order for sports equipment 'ASAP, we need this now'.

When I hear about another project or similar, I get frantic.

The impact of projects on the co-production of SEW with youth could be noticed in many dimensions, starting with the **reduction in the amount of time staff spent with children and youth**.

They (employees) were toiling, they had no time for anything, they were very tired and what were these projects for?

The introduction of the projects also fostered **modifications to patterns of cooperation between educators**, as it introduced chaos into weekly staff rotation.

(...) we're just working different shifts(...) we were always blocked by something, it seems to me that also these project meetings distracted us a little bit and instead of meeting here, we were meeting to work on these projects.

The next aspect was SEW's responsiveness to grant competitions. Here the category of *butting in with projects* became evident.

Here comes J (name-Authors) and says that he is either in the process of writing a project, or the project has just been submitted, and we are put on the spot.

For employees, a sense of **destabilization in the institution's routine** becomes apparent, leading to a disruption of SEW, when it is understood as a deliberate, long-term process.

These projects just disturbed us so much, you know...we were bending over backwards...a lot of people were coming and going, these positions...it smashed our work, it allowed these...outings., go, well, you know...or going to cinema many times, or let's say bowling, is this educational, does it develop a child in any way?

The next impact of economization on SEW is the **disruption of the adapted line of SEW**, which in the history of the YC we recognized in its (re)conceptualization by its supporters. Even though the Club was supposed to offer the youth an escape from school related problems, a funding opportunity led to the partial appropriation of the youth's space for implementing the next project activity (IT equipment for school needs of the Ukrainian students). This involved introducing a subgroup of youth with educational needs prioritized by the funders for that particular year.

The staff indicate the adverse effects of SEW line disruption, including the paradoxes exemplified below.

We acquired projects, we have a lot of money to spend (...) so we were asking children to go to the aquapark, to the zoo. We had to persuade them, and we only taught them to use handouts, nothing more.

In conclusion, economization can bring about **reformulation the philosophy of SEW** in extra-school educational facilities. On the one hand, grants facilitate an implementation a new type of action (YC) to enhance youth empowerment, self-determination, and peer education, but on the other, the project-based nature of the initiative, driven by temporary funding, may have intensified staff disagreements regarding the role and structure of the YC. The need to apply for and implement additional projects, coupled with the spatial and social segregation of the new unit within the institution, may have contributed to a perception of the YC as extra, unpaid work.

**Psychologization** (generalized implementing psychological concepts and methods) is another discourse that strongly interferes with SEW. The tendency to enhance the institution's services with psychological tools does not always refer to the educators' perspectives of the youth's needs, but rather to social pressure perceived real by the staff. Its genesis can be seen in the typical reduction of the image of DN youth to the category of beneficiaries who are socially or behaviorally "at risk", hence in need of psychological support. Institutions like this one, recognizing the widespread perception of youth needs, begin to respond by incorporating psychological support into their project budgets. This move aims to meet the anticipated expectations of founders and address the competitive landscape of local educational

services. In result, an institution, despite not recognizing a specific need, and often against the expectations of youth, opts to offer psychological support.

When they saw her (psychologist-Authors) at the door it was like they saw the devil(...) It would be completely different if it was a person who just stays in her room and if someone wants to visit her, then they go.

Hiring with project funds a psychologist whose services the youth did not want to use also contradicted the originally adopted philosophy of this place - its (*non*)*therapeutic nature*. Our interviewees, when referring to SEW in the institution, emphasize the importance of creating place for socially mixed attendees, and not only for those with the dysfunctional family background, hence in need for therapeutic support. In the beneficiaries' act of avoiding the psychologist, we see the youth's resistance to the disruption of the line of action in the SEW agreed with them.

In our analysis, **educationalization** emerged as a discourse that mutually reinforces economization. It forces an institution with a unique philosophy of pedagogical action to supplement its services with typically "school" content. In the analysis of interviews with staff, the entire institution was given the status of "respite", "deliverance" from the school regime, which seems quite consistent with the importance attributed by young people to their place (Gulczyńska et al., 2023). This idea was reflected in the slogan *no to school after school*:

We are oriented to simply give the children space, (...) not every child needs support with homework, some don't want to do it (...) and there are some children who just want to be here.

I used to work in a school day-care room, where I could see that for children who come after seven lessons, organized activities, with all of them having to do the same thing at the same time, are the last thing they need.

Nowadays, education is recognized as a value, a remedy for the problems of the modern world. Due to adoption of such a belief, the idea of education begins to permeate most activities involving young people and those that are not perceived as educational (relaxation, being with each other, ordinary conversations) become recognized as worthless. Therefore, the institution under our study, by following the idea of the *no to school after school*, was sometimes perceived as the one offering insufficient support in children's education.

We had some conflict here with (school number-Authors) privileges one CC over others, (...), in which the rule was: if you didn't do your homework, you wouldn't be able to do anything else. In that school evidently the educators and school social worker told the parents to sign the children out from our CC and enroll them there.

The local network of extra school educational facilities gets regulated by market mechanisms, which means that the process of a positioning of out-of-school facilities depends on the way they fulfill the discursively imposed on them expectation of "educationalizing" their service users. The same tension seems to work in normative expectation of *doing something useful* imposed on YC participants by its antagonist.

## Conclusions

The research uncovers how various discourses can interfere into SEW. We have reconstructed many strengths as well as empowering activities in the institution. However, this article emphasizes critical perspective on discursive conditions of SEW with DN youth, which we present in the form of dilemmas.

## The language of reports in the face of structural change

The research findings reveal discursive conditions that embody the tensions within a neoliberal society: on one side, there's the explicitly encouraged expectation of empowerment, and on the other, there exists an unspoken yet implicitly incentivized necessity to conform to dominant discourses. This aporia overlaps with another, more traditional one, resulting from the modernization conflict of continuity-change: on the one hand, educators want to control the educational space, on the other, they expect the youth to be independent. Thus, the dynamics and scope of change in an extra-school education institution resulted in a chaotic implementation of DN youth empowerment through co-production of SEW. Its institutionalization is more discursive than extra-discursive (it's being talked about rather than causing real structural changes) <sup>5</sup>.

## Deprofessionalization and depedagogization

To be recognized as a professional, individuals sometimes begin, despite their own knowledge of service users, to perform activities deemed

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<sup>5</sup> Foucauldian *dispositif* is an assembly of discourse and non-discourse elements (Czyżewski, 2013).

valuable and important in the public discourse (professional paradox). An effect of such changes is the displacement of perspectives and various discourses traditionally belonging to pedagogy (not to be confused with educationalization anchored in the dominant discourse), which are dominated by psychological discourse (quasi-medical diagnoses and therapies as ways to counteract structural social problems) and economic discourse (focused on cost-effectiveness and short-term effects)<sup>6</sup>.

### **Resource-based competitiveness**

The process of educationalization extends school control over students' activities, including their leisure time. Activities going not in line with the school regime are deemed less significant. This reduces the chances of co-creation of educational practices running (both territorially and symbolically) outside the school, as an institutional resistance to educationalization requires financial autonomy. In such a context, the dissemination of the time-consuming co-production of SEW with the youth, which by definition does not produce predictable results, becomes quite a challenge, with the side effect of internal divisions of the institution's staff, since not everyone believes that the educational gains will be greater than the economic and prestige losses. Projects involving work with marginalized youth often are excluded from funding when they diverge in their rationales from the prevailing narrative of educational deficits, the need for 'therapeutic' activities, and educationalization of their leisure time. In contrast, the interviews with young people highlighted the deterioration of their mental health due to school experiences (academic pressure leading to tension at home, peer bullying, feelings of rejection). Furthermore, these discussions illuminated the role of YCs as sanctuaries for mental respite, valued for simple conversations, shared laughter, togetherness, *getting away from the problems* and educational regimes.

### **SEW as a political activity**

Viewing SEW as a political activity aimed at transforming social relations, especially structural power relations, has been associated with social pedagogy for an extensive period. Narrowly defined 'school success' directly relies on the economic and cultural resources accessible to students and their families. Youth from DNs have limited life chances in competitive societies, where not life experience but formal knowledge, aided by family position

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<sup>6</sup> Similar processes in mental health care were observed by Wong (2014).

and the availability of extra-paid educational services, determine social recognition and advancement (Honneth, 2012). This unfavorable position in the allocation of social prestige renders is especially prone to social reproduction and the escalating influence of populist political orientations among young people. Those with lower social capital are particularly vulnerable to the allure of collective identities.

In response to all these challenges, SEW that is co-produced together with its beneficiaries emerges as a crucial element in preventing these and related educational threats.

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