

## SECONDARY STUDENTS

### *Their Appropriations of Cultural Resources to Recreate their Condition as Young People at School*

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**Abstract:**

This article analyzes the ways secondary school students appropriate cultural resources (material and symbolic) from the school context or other contexts, to express and recreate their condition as young people. For example, through classroom games, the use of tools like the grade book and school assignments, and the handling of backpacks, students construct forms of participation for having fun, organizing power relationships and processes of inclusion/exclusion, and attempting to be recognized as fashionable young people. I also consider the perspective of school personnel regarding the use of cultural resources, but I sustain that students must be analyzed in their present situation, and not as adolescents who are expected to change over time.

**Key words:** students, young people, secondary education, cultural factors, teachers, Mexico.

#### **Introduction**

In the state of knowledge prepared by Guzmán and Saucedo (2005) and published by Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa, we explained that the number of research studies focused on students had showed an important increase in Mexico during the previous ten years. We now have a better idea of those students' identities, concerns, and references to their experiences at school, as well as the value they assign to school, the way they express elements of their identity, and the strategies they develop to meet academic demands.

In the case of secondary school, for example, research has helped us to gain an understanding of some of the survival strategies students put into practice to handle the required subject content; we have also learned how students adapt to each teacher's logic of work (or activity), and how their adaptation allows them to earn points in grading systems (Quiroz, 2000; Nieva, 1999). We have news, on the other hand, of students' tendency to request fun classes, in addition to fairness in teachers' application of the rules; they want others to recognize that they are teenagers (Rodríguez, 1999). We also confirmed the importance they attach to friendship, their view of the rules and school discipline, and their perspective of elements of their identity (Sandoval, 1998). Our study of secondary students has given us a better idea of school practices that promote certain values (such as equality and solidarity) and of the way students appropriate these practices in the process of constructing their subjectivity (Levinson, 2002).

Studies on young people in our country have been strongly encouraged in recent years. We researchers now commonly refer to the *Encuesta Nacional de Juventud 2000* (IMJ, 2002) (National Survey on Youth), which reveals a collection of clues about young people, their styles of cultural consumption, and their practices and concerns regarding sex, parenthood, and substance consumption. Not all of these young people are students, however, and not all students are young. Described behavior may vary, depending on if the individual is in a park, at a party, on a local street, or at school. In each one of these contexts, acting like a young person is carried out through forms of participation in which individuals integrate the cultural elements they can access; they may also carry out processes that involve positioning themselves or handling elements of identity.

Frameworks of action exist at school, in the form of delimited contexts where students cannot do as they wish in response to their condition as young people. Being a young person who is a student assumes a particular condition of living in which both school and activities generally occupy an important amount of time. Although young people have strong interests linked to various home situations, sexual matters, romantic processes, and fashion and entertainment, when they are students they invest time, effort and motivation in meeting school requirements. Thus both conditions are an element of identity that allows young students to differentiate themselves from their peers who are not in school (Levinson, 2002).

My focus in this article is to analyze the ways secondary students appropriate the cultural resources available in the school context to express their condition as young people. From my perspective, responding to students as young people assumes anchoring the school's social context, cultural resources and practices with students' possibilities of action. As students move each day from one context to another—home, school, community, and recreation centers—they appropriate the cultural resources available in each setting in order to make combinations and integrations that will allow them to position themselves as young people. Their modes of intervention vary, due to the unique positions, social relations, settings of possibilities and personal concerns that the diverse contexts represent for them (Dreier, 1997). As indicated above, the frameworks of action and regulations of secondary school permit the exercise of diverse combinations, different from the integration that young people attain in other social spaces.

Below I describe the framework of interpretation used for my study, followed by an analysis of appropriation practices that students at a secondary school expressed on a daily basis.

### **Framework of Interpretation**

One of the first dilemmas that appear when carrying out research on secondary school students is whether to call them young people or teenagers. Theorists in developmental psychology have endless discussions on delimiting the stages of life to determine when individuals are preteens, younger teenagers, older teenagers, young adults, mature adults, and so on. Categorization depends on the accomplishments, achievements, and skills that theorists believe individuals have obtained in psychological, social and cultural terms, according to the theories at hand. In practice, the adults and students in Mexico's secondary schools use terms like *adolescente* ("adolescent" or "teenager"), *jóvenes* ("young people"), *muchachas* ("girls"), *chavos* ("kids"), *chicas* ("girls") and *chamacos* ("kids") to refer to individuals who are neither children nor adults.

This discussion is not banal because our mental images depend on the terms we use. Thus, for example, when Corsaro (1997) analyzes children's cultures in their peer communities, he complains that developmental theories do not take needs, interests, searches and desires into account, but look at individuals only as a function of their stage of development and expected progress. I sustain that the case is similar when the word, *adolescente*, is used: individuals are visualized as developing subjects, and their concerns and forms of action are expected to change over time. The result is that the position and meaning of individual actions, as well as the forms of participation in the school context, are not taken seriously.

For the purposes of this article, I shall use the word, *jóvenes*, ("young people") to refer to students, because I believe it has fewer implications than "adolescence" for individual classification and evaluation. I turn to Corsaro (1997) to sustain that students who are young people hold subordinate positions at school, and are exposed to cultural information and social practices that they often do not understand in the same way as adults. Nonetheless, these students play an active role in the processes

of appropriating and recreating the cultural elements they find at school, in order to express their situation as young people.

On the other hand, we must also discuss whether we can refer to a “student culture”, or to cultural productions and appropriations. From my perspective, we cannot consider “culture” or “cultures” as homogeneous, monolithic entities that would correspond to social groups and explain the “cultural essence” of the population being analyzed (Keesing, 1994). Nor does culture exist as an abstract entity that determines individual actions from the outside, as if it were a giant umbrella under which individuals are socialized. Beyond the idea of culture, Shweder (1990) suggests the existence of sociocultural settings as intentional worlds with a real existence—worlds that are a product of a relation of co-construction in which individuals construct their environment while being formed within it. Sociocultural contexts have discourses, social practices, and multiple resources or cultural tools that are produced and updated by individual activity.

In an analytical tone, Wertsch states that we must not limit our study to an analysis of the agents, cultural resources or scenarios in which resources are employed as separate entities. The unit of analysis should be the mediated action, according to which we would have to observe “individuals-acting-with-mediational-resources” (1999:87). Rockwell (1996), on the other hand, discusses the difference between cultural production and appropriation, indicating that the concept of cultural production can lead to false determinisms. We may commit the error, for example, of analyzing new cultural productions and forgetting the historical/cultural aspects; or we may believe that such aspects determine individuals’ “cultural production”. The term, appropriation, however, simultaneously integrates a notion of agency as something active and transforming, and points to culture as something that constrains and enables. As a consequence, agency is located within the individual, who appropriates and uses the available cultural resources. At the same time, appropriation alludes to the cultural aspects that exist in daily life—in objects, tools, practices, and words—just as individuals experience them.

In the case at hand, the secondary school students must be viewed as individuals who participate at school by using resources to mediate their actions; in this way, they satisfy certain needs. Their actions are not independent from the school’s constraints, but neither are they absolutely determined. Analyzed below are some of the social practices and cultural resources (material and symbolic) that students encounter on arriving at secondary school. Also studied is the way students appropriate these practices and resources to give them personal and collective meaning—meaning that allows students to express their condition as young people.

### **Context of Research**

I carried out the study at the Morelos secondary school<sup>1</sup> in 2002-2004. This school is located in a municipality of Estado de México, in a working-class neighborhood. The school functions during two shifts, with more students enrolled in the morning shift than in the afternoon. My research is part of a more extensive project I have been developing to analyze processes of indiscipline in the school context. The data were compiled through an ethnographic method, involving observations in the classroom, school yard, and the social worker’s cubicle. I interviewed teachers, students, the social worker, the director, and parents. I also reviewed report cards and grades; I attended parent/teacher meetings and four sessions of ongoing teacher training in 2004. The classroom observations took place in four second-year groups: “A”, “C”, “K” and “L”; the first two groups were in the morning and the last two in the afternoon. The groups were selected by the director and the prefects, who mentioned that the groups were problematic and could not be controlled by all teachers.

For the purposes of this article, I shall analyze the data compiled in group “A” (in the Spanish and math classes) and in group “C” (in the math, history and physics classes), which I visited at least once

each week for six months. The groups had a average of thirty students. In this article, I consider the interviews completed with ten students (four girls and six boys), as well as the hallway conversations I had with the teachers of each class.

As I analyzed in another article, the discourses and social practices in existence at the Morelos secondary school served to position the students in the afternoon shift as “problematic, sly, and difficult to control” (Saucedo, 2005). They were perceived as individuals who had already been formed, but in a negative manner. In contrast, the school’s personnel agreed in indicating that the students in the morning shift “were more innocent”, “more childish”, or “children of professionals or two-parent families” who “responded better to school”. These viewpoints were evidently nourished by the perceived contrast between the students from each shift. Yet when the school personnel focused on the students in the morning shift, they moved to another type of polarizations to explain problems, mentioning that the students were members of either “complete” or “broken” families. Morning students were clearly developing individuals—adolescents with strong formative needs. For example, a teacher commented in a general workshop:

Thinking as students do, we can say that school is a repressive system and that students cannot express their feelings. But as a teacher, I believe that secondary school is a system that is more formative than repressive. We must teach them to be orderly with their notebooks, to keep them clean and covered. Sometimes they bring them damaged. We have to teach them to use them better.

On analyzing the historical roots of secondary school in Mexico, Sandoval (1998) sustains that its nature as a “school for adolescents” (as stated by Moisés Sáenz) has implied the implementation of discourses that emphasize adolescence as a stage of life. The structure of secondary schools responds to a view of students as individuals who must be oriented, controlled, advised, or disciplined. The teacher’s comment quoted above summarized the tradition of meaning of secondary schools: a formative space, as if the previous six years of schooling were insufficient to learn to be a student (given that students must still be instructed about caring for notebooks).

On the other hand, in one of the classes, the Spanish teacher told his students: “I know it is normal for you to be very restless because you are in adolescence, but start doing things as you should. Don’t be so wild. Right, you noisy girl? [spoken to a student]. Do your homework and study for your tests.” The teacher’s discourse associated adolescence with restlessness, yet also marked the road to be followed to greater responsibility and self-control.

The teacher’s words anticipated the comments made by Guichard (1995) to the effect that a student’s passage through the school years is associated with images of what will be obtained in the future: a diploma, certain knowledge and skills, and status as an educated person. In the secondary school under study, the advice from teachers frequently focused on the students’ stage of life: the fact that they are no longer children but “adolescents” who must begin to think about their future, whether near (exams) or immediate (diploma, letter of good conduct). Such concern, however, and emphasis on the stage of adolescence as a “formative” moment did not match the interests of the students, who were living the experiences of their present with intensity, and attempting to integrate elements from their condition as young people into the school context.

To what degree did the school context favor practices through which students could position themselves as adolescents and not children? In the classroom, teachers commonly addressed students as “young people” or “shorty” and used phrases like “Calm down, son!” and “What is that about, girl? Speak correctly!” Such terms moved the students from one stage of development to another, or assumed the need to instruct them on matters as diverse as speaking correctly, rather than academic

achievement. Although the teachers insisted on using the concept of adolescence to refer to their students, they employed various adjectives under differing classroom circumstances to respond to needs for control, recrimination, and advice.

The students' parents, on the other hand, were often required to visit school to receive reports on their children's absences, incomplete school supplies, fights, ignored homework, and so on. In this manner, the control of problems was transferred from students to their parents. In spite of the teachers' insistence in the classroom that students should no longer behave like children, school practices did not favor students' assuming responsibility and controlling their behavior as expected.

The general research behind this article led me to focus on students' actions regarding discipline and the ways they resisted, adapted, legitimated or made partial appropriations of the rules and school discourses on behavior. Throughout my work in the field, I discovered various routines of participation in which the students became involved with enthusiasm; such routines channeled their energies, allowed them to mediate their social relations, and most importantly, permitted their expression as young people. The students' forms of having fun, their exercise of power relationships, and their need to act like young people at school attracted my attention. I attempted to understand what the school was offering students to help them attain their goals. I began to realize that students often did not act outside of the rules, but used rules to mediate their actions; they employed the resources that the school provided, creatively and for their own ends. Below I discuss three ways such practices were used.

#### **“Dish It Out and Take It”: Effervescence and Animosity in the Classroom**

The school prohibits students from leaving the classroom if the teacher has not arrived or is absent for the day. In these cases, the students would request permission to go out on the basketball court to play a game (basketball, soccer, or volleyball) or simply to sit and talk on the benches around the court. The prefect mentioned that sometimes permission was granted, as long as other unsupervised groups were not present. If so, students had to remain in the classroom, and avoid bothering neighboring groups by going into the hall during class time. I often heard comments to this effect from school personnel: “Isn't the school peaceful? No students are outside of their classroom.” “You'll see that discipline is terrible; look, they're outside of the classroom.” “Today the director said no students are to be outside of the classroom.” Keeping the students in their classrooms was a measure equivalent to control, with reflections on the school's image in discipline. But if the basketball courts, gardens, halls, and patio at school were off limits for students when their teacher was absent, the students took charge of using the classroom in unique ways, for their own purposes.

When alone in the classroom, some of the girls would sit to talk, look at fashion magazines, or draw, and others would sit at the front with some of the boys to talk and joke. Common practices among many of the girls and boys included chasing each other, pulling on each other, laughing loudly, poking each other in the ribs, hugging, and so on. The students referred to such actions as “playing”, and carried them out with great animosity and physical effervescence. Among the boys, pulling and tugging often escalated to wrestling, to falling in a pile on top of someone at floor level, or to kicking the person on the floor; the kickers and the boy being kicked would all laugh with animation. On one occasion, one of the girls told me, “Do you see, Teacher? Tell the prefect it would be better to let us go outside to the courts because here we're going to kill each other.” The girl assumed that the students needed a degree of adult control to contain their play, believing that the classroom was an enclosed space where effervescence and physical animosity could be expressed only through dangerous actions.

In these types of games, both the girls and the boys used the social rule of “dishing it out and taking it” as a mediating element in their actions, and a regulation of their range of movement. If complete control was lost, the prefect or parents were called to the scene. For example, a girl, Sofia, once pulled

down Guillermo's warm-up pants, and he reacted by doing the same to her. Several students joined the game while laughing and running animatedly. Sofía became angry and looked for the prefect to accuse Guillermo. The prefect scolded them and asked their parents to come to school, in addition to threatening several days of suspension. The next day, the mother of Toño, one of the participants in the game, commented, "If they're going to be dishing it out, they have to take it." Guillermo remarked:

We were playing and I pulled down Sofía's warm-up pants because she pulled mine down first. If I get into things and they tell me things, I'm not going to go tell my mother. Sofía got mad first because I was playing with her. Then Toño came and pulled down her pants and she went to the prefect and told on me. She was dishing it out, and if she dishes it out, she has to take it. The assistant director told us: Take into account that she is a young lady. And we told her: No, teacher, if she dishes it out, she has to take it.

In a previous study I carried out with high school students, I sustained that the practice of "dishing it out and taking it" implied sharing actions among classmates and teachers that strangers could interpret as aggression or a lack of respect (Saucedo, 1998). At the high school level, "dishing it out and taking it" was expressed by exchanged blows, pinches, nicknames, practical jokes, and linguistic games that put the boys' masculinity to test. If the limits were passed in their actions, or if one person no longer wanted to "play", the game was stopped; the students would stop talking or move away. They had regulations that allowed them to contain their physical effervescence, as well as a more developed idea of the location of the limits. In addition, the girls often refused to participate in this type of exchanges.

For the secondary school students, an important aspect of "dishing it out and taking it" was that it allowed them to have fun, test friendships, and exercise skills, although sometimes requiring the help of adults to resolve conflict. We must note that this rule has wide social scope. It is not created in the school context, but represents, I dare to say, an important socialization tool that adults use to allow their children to learn to respect the limits of interaction in their peer communities. Blows, piling up in wrestling, and pulling down each other's pants are exchanges that test the mutual resistance of actions that could be intimidating or annoying under other circumstances. Physical and mental skill are exercised in reacting to attack, and modulate the limits for advancing or resisting, seeking revenge, or performing actions similar to the person who started the game.

The comment from Toño's mother, "If they're going to be dishing it out, they have to take it", implies recognizing that the students were in power in the exchange of pulling down each other's pants; there were no hierarchies, and resistance had to be mutual. On the other hand, Guillermo's response the assistant director that it did not matter if Sofía was a girl because "if she dishes it out, she has to take it" means that gender did not alter the application of the social rule the students were using. In fact, several girls "dished it out" with their male classmates by using obscenities, profane language and curse words, while others rough-housed with the boys, threw their notebooks on the ground, chased them and laughed. The limit was that the girls did not participate with the boys in wrestling, kicking, or falling on the floor.

I decided to analyze the animosity and effervescence of the physical play students carried out daily in the classroom because such play was the result of students' being confined to the classroom and unable to release their energy on the playground in the absence of academic activity. On the other hand, the students' application of the rule of "dishing it out and taking it" assumes that they make an effort to integrate and practice, in the classroom setting, a resource that is promoted in contexts like the home (in exchanges between siblings, for example) or community (in social interactions with neighbors, for example).

During teacher absences and the resulting absence of supervision, the students appropriated the classroom as a material resource, as a space that was converted into a playground, a ring for real and fictitious wrestling, and a place for applying the formula of “dishing it out and taking it”. Their situation as young people—who were rehearsing skills for resistance in encounters with their peer communities—took shape because of the regulations of the school context in which surpassing certain limits (such as fistfights) would lead to expulsion. The appropriation of this rule, along with its use for fun, play, the expression of energy, and the learning of skills in the peer community, was permeated by the presence of adults who entered into action when the students failed to attain mutual balance.

#### **“Give Me a Point”: The Use of Scholastic Tools to Have Fun or Power**

In the classroom context, students encounter each day a set of material and symbolic resources that teachers use to organize their teaching work. This section of the article analyzes three resources that were notably present in the context of student practices that I observed: the grade book, special responsibilities, and written notes. The first two had an important link with the logic of grading, which also served to help the teachers control student behavior. The notes were a tool that the students appropriated and used to exercise their skills in written communication. Students used these three resources to have fun, to exercise power relations in the group, and to exclude or include others. Thus the uses and ends the school planned for the resources were modified according to the students’ interests and social needs.

As other research has reported (Quiroz, 2000), the organization of teaching in secondary school is often based on a logic of evaluation that requires students to earn a certain number of points through homework, class participation, exercises, and special projects. At the Morelos secondary school, bad behavior could have an effect on the point count, due to the failure to accumulate points or the subtraction of points. In the classrooms I observed, the teachers based 40% of the eight-week grade on these points, and 60% on the examination. The explanation given was that the students scored very low on tests, and that many would fail if their grade were based only on the examination. As a result, many students made eager efforts to obtain points. Yet they also appropriated the use of the grade book for their own entertainment, as shown in the following observation:

In the “A” group, the teacher has not yet entered the classroom. Oscar is the group leader and has the responsibility of writing down the names of the students who misbehave, so that points can be subtracted from their totals. Tadeo approaches him, smiling, and says, “Give me ten seconds to throw away my trash.” Oscar tells him yes, and begins to count aloud until Tadeo returns to his place. Other kids do the same, laughing, while the leader counts. Then Oscar says, “I won’t take any points off anyone who can run around the classroom in ten seconds!” Two boys get up and begin to run, and all their classmates begin to count out loud. One boy stops one of the runners, who is not able to finish on time. Oscar tells him, “Too bad, I’m taking a point off!” Everyone laughs, except for the one who lost a point. He remains angry.

The student who has the responsibility of supervising his classmates evidently has the power to direct and organize entertaining actions to add or subtract points. Using this resource allowed the students to express their desire to joke and play with the classroom rules about remaining seated and not standing up without permission, by running a race to earn points.

In addition to generating fun, using the grade book and the responsibilities assigned by teachers favored highly marked power relationships of student inclusion and exclusion. The Spanish teacher explained to me that he supported the idea of assigning responsibilities to students to motivate them and encourage their participation. If he noticed, for example, that a student was bored, he would ask

the student to take charge of a task: ensuring that everyone had brought the correct supplies, that the classroom was clean, that the change was complete for photocopying the exam, and so on. The responsibilities of greatest weight, such as assigning points for behavior and for turning in homework, were offered to students with the highest grades; at times, these students did not hesitate to exercise their power. Paty, for example, felt she had control of her classmates' behavior:

The students had just come in the classroom. Tadeo's uniform was dirty because he had fought with Arturo on the basketball court. Paty saw him and said, "You don't have to come to school to learn to be dirty!" And Tadeo answered her, "Shut up, you snake!" She responded, "Shut up, or I'll lower your points!" The boy protested, "You! Why are you going to lower my points?" To which she conclusively responded, "Because we are in the Spanish class and I can tell the teacher that you didn't bring your homework!" Paty left and Tadeo commented, "She thinks that since she keeps the book she can tell us whatever she wants. The other day I told her to take two marks off and she said she would if I gave her 15 pesos. I'm not going to give her anything. Not to Alejandra either because we don't like them in the group.

Paty's assigned responsibility gave her the power to make derogatory remarks to her classmate and threaten him with lowered points. She used the logic that the hour for the Spanish class had started, to remind him that he was in her area of power, with the intention to dominate him. On other occasions, Paty and Alejandra used their responsibilities to exercise power among their classmates and exclude Nadia, a new student they disliked because of her good grades. Nadia represented a threat to their privileged responsibilities, and the girls reacted by failing to log her homework in the grade book or by lowering her points on every opportunity. Finally the teacher realized what they were doing and corrected Nadia's points, after taking the group responsibility away from Alejandra.

Taking into account the power relationships that students exercise in their own world of interactions is important because such relationships show they are practicing leadership skills and inclusion/exclusion. Although entertainment is the daily motivation behind their interactions, through which they express their condition as young people and their desire to have fun, not all of the students' relationships are cordial and friendly. More frequent were my observations of groups of girls and boys, as well as conflicts and tensions that had been gestating over the time they had been together. Their solidarity as a group was expressed only when they were attempting to obtain space and time for fun (going out on the basketball courts) or making efforts to decrease their work load (requesting less homework, or a postponed test).

On employing the resources of classroom organization for their own ends, were the students with special responsibilities reproducing the logic of power and disqualification inherent in the teachers' handling of points for grading? In part they were, because keeping a book of points implies actions of supervision and punishment; thus the activity itself determined their actions. From the teachers' viewpoint, using grade books and assigned responsibilities synthesizes teaching traditions based on the log of effectiveness, the distribution of labor, ideas regarding students' motivation and integration, and fundamentally, the need to evaluate students and control their behavior. The students' uses of the grade book and assigned responsibilities did not respond in a strict sense to those ends or logic of action: Paty and Alejandra, for example, were not interested in counting points in terms of scholastic performance, but used their responsibilities to organize social relationships with their classmates and exercise power. Thus we can refer to appropriation and the strategic use of existing resources for students' personal reasons.

Another widely used strategy was the written note, noticeably present in the classrooms during class time. Writing notes is a tool children learn in elementary school, and is appropriated in secondary school for the students' ends.

During my fieldwork, I often sat in the back of the classroom or among the students to make observations. From that position, I was able to see that they passed notes from one to another, or threw them from one side of the classroom to the other while the teacher wrote on the blackboard. Sometimes they pretended to be taking class notes while actually writing a message. If the teacher discovered such an action, he would scold the involved parties or lower their points, in addition to confiscating the circulating note. Yet the use of written notes continued on a daily basis.

The girls, and to a lesser degree, the boys, employed written notes with the justification of generating fun, eliminating boredom in class, agreeing on actions to be carried out after class, or simply staying in constant communication. But in addition to the need to keep in contact, the young people used notes to gossip about their classmates, based on a desire to have fun or express dislike. For example:

In the "C" group, the boys and girls added parts to a note that was passed around. I do not reproduce it here because it contained obscenities. The note said serious things about a girl and boy, and included codes to refer to the courtship of two others. It also expressed doubts about the reproductive capacity of another boy, stating "he's sterile". The note was confiscated, and the last students to have it in their hands were sent to the social worker's cubicle, where the assistant director began to scold them. The kids could not control their laughing and one of them had to run to the bathroom. Everyone present began to laugh and the assistant director sent them to his room so that they could not see that we were starting to laugh.

Corte and Sánchez (1997) indicate that notes, codifications as a means of communication, parodies of official documents, fun writing (guessing games), insults, and messages are samples of marginal writing that reflect students' knowledge of written language, as well as the way they communicate through writing. I believe students have dominated these uses for their ends, and that they can be considered marginal only from the viewpoint of logical adult uses in the school context. In other words, in students' cultural production, these messages are not marginal: they are instruments utilized to mediate their actions, and are found in the foreground of a boring class or behind the desire to bother a classmate. During the interviews, the students did not recognize the use of notes for annoyance, despite widespread practice. In addition to the notes that were shared among girls, some notes involving insults or slander were placed in the adversary's backpack or passed around the classroom.

From the teachers' viewpoint, notes did not visibly alter the class since they were almost always passed from hand to hand, behind the teachers' back. They did, however, prevent students from paying attention. Since students' true attention was focused on their own needs for communication and fun, it is not surprising that written messages were widely present in the classroom. They fulfilled important missions, such as staying awake in a boring class or expressing disagreement, or including and excluding classmates.<sup>2</sup>

### **"Short Hair and a Tucked-in Shirt": Positioning Students as Young People with regard to Institutional Regulations**

On a daily basis, the students at the secondary school invented ways to integrate their perspectives and resources as young people into the elements of regulation at school. When students participate in contexts of practice at home, in the community, or at sports centers, or when they read magazines, listen to the radio or watch television, they find forms of youthful expression out of which they make

selections and appropriations, in an attempt to integrate them into their condition as students. But their school offers frameworks of action and presence that modulate the expressions of youth.

In terms of clothing, for example, the secondary school insisted that students wear a complete, clean uniform, without extra items. In cold weather, they were asked to use sweaters underneath the school sweater, but no jackets. With regard to personal grooming, the boys had to have short hair, and the girls were to avoid the use of makeup, plucked eyebrows, and painted fingernails. The social worker and a prefect explained to me that the zone inspector visited the school each month and asked them to supervise the students' appearance. During a meeting with the parents, the director commented that:

... the complete uniform, worn correctly, is a way to identify students. It is a guarantee when they are outside of school because we know they are students and not vagrants. Besides, if they did not use a uniform, you parents would spend more on stylish clothing and the some kids would show off while others would feel inferior about what they own.

The school personnel's requests regarding the use of the uniform and physical grooming responded to the need to have a homogeneous vision of students, to meet the evaluation requirements of a higher level in the school's institutional hierarchy, to position students as children (and not as adolescents who can use makeup), to have the uniform serve as an identifying element counter to public danger, to consider family budgets, and to prevent student conflict based on possessions. Once again, these needs were not focused on the students' experiences.

Many students insisted on having long hair, and used large amounts of styling gel to achieve effects like spikes, crowns, horns, and waves. The prefect would force them to put their head under the faucet to eliminate such hairdos. Both boys and girls used their warm-up pants at hip level, attempting to show the shorts or boxers they wore underneath. The daily struggle was expressed by the phrase, "Pull up your pants!" They also wore bracelets and perfume, and brought along stuffed toys, CD players, electronic agendas and many objects that allowed them to share their position as young people with their classmates. Although they were prohibited from using clothes other than the uniform, they would add decorations to express their need to be in style, or wear their pants at the hip.

A boy who had been forced to change his hairstyle told me, "In other words, it's OK if they ask us to look neat with our hair combed. That way we don't look sloppy. But I think that my hair is OK. I can't have it any shorter, and the front is not so spiked." The dilemma for the boys and girls was to accept the validity of the arguments regarding the school rules, such as "not looking sloppy", while integrating and negotiating their perspective of style.

The expressions of being young deserve special attention with regard to the use of backpacks. The ways of transporting school supplies from home to school have changed over time, depending on the economic possibilities of the students' family. Previously, students carried books in their hands, in market bags, or tied together with leather belts, followed by the classic, heavy leather schoolbag that not all children could own, up to the present styles of bags on wheels for elementary children and sports bags slung over the shoulder for older children. We find it difficult to picture a student without a backpack: it is not only an object for transporting books, but also plays a powerful role in the mediated activity among students, and between students and teachers at school.

At the Morelos secondary school, the backpack was a treasured object for students. They used it to express themselves as young people, through the brand, color and design, or the objects hung from it and carried in it to show others. The students would sometimes throw their backpack in anger to demonstrate their disagreement with a reprimand, or the impossibility of answering the teacher. In addition to relating to their own backpack, students could relate to the backpacks of others, in different

ways. Common practices in their games of “dishing it out and taking it” were kicking each other’s backpacks, hiding them, emptying them, scratching them, putting written notes inside them, or taking things from them without asking for permission. Many of these actions, while done in jest, were an annoyance. Thus students exercised their animosity and forms of physical struggle by relating to each other through their backpacks.

Another very common practice at the secondary school was the prefect’s or teacher’s “confiscation” of the offending student’s backpack, until one of his parents reported in for a visit. This measure was taken to obligate the students to tell their parents they were required to visit school; otherwise, without books and notebooks, they would be unable to participate in class. Faced with this action, the students would become angry, and struggle or beg for the backpack to be returned. Yet their pleas were in vain until their parents came to the rescue.

The backpack was therefore part of student identity, a material, symbolic resource because it served to contain books, and also expressed the students’ ways of being young people. Through backpacks, students and prefects structured diverse forms of relating, such as “dishing it out and taking it”, being in style, or supervision and punishment. Within the school context, different forms of association through backpacks were promoted; they did not generate respect or privacy, but served as a vehicle for power and entertainment.

A final dilemma for the students with regard to the regulation of their actions was expressed by their strategic use of school rules to control each other, and the degree they accepted adult control. The first aspect was evident when the teacher was absent and the students wanted to go out to the basketball courts. They would shout, “Shut up so they’ll let us go outside!” “If you don’t sit down and shut up, it’s your fault if they don’t let us out!” “We have to sit down so that they take us to see the Halloween display.” Group solidarity was expressed by using the rule to stay orderly, in order to be able to go outside and have fun. The students demonstrated that they had the power to regulate each other, by transforming loud noise into complete silence. The shared intent was not to become orderly students, but to use a resource for their own ends. Once authorized to go outdoors, the students exploded in noise once again.

On the other hand, the students themselves could be bothered by classroom noise or a teacher’s inability to control the group. Someone might shout in these situations, “Shut up! I have a headache!” “Tune it down because I can’t hear a thing.” Sofia, a girl who participated in class but was also watched carefully by the teachers and prefect because of the time she spent passing around written notes, talking to her classmates, and laughing loudly at their conversations, complained: “I don’t like the physics teacher because she always explains when everyone is talking. She explains very fast and the group is not paying attention. Then when you pay attention, she doesn’t want to explain it any more.” Students’ demands for order may seem to clash with their needs for fun and effusiveness in class, and the idea may exist that they would be more at ease with a teacher who understands them as entertaining young people. But in reality, the students did not accept the teachers who were unable to control the group; they had implicitly appropriated the fact that being in a classroom assumes a certain organization, with which they were dissatisfied. The situation is complex because the students also rejected very authoritarian teachers. For a class to be considered good, it had to integrate elements of fun and order—a balance not easily attained by teachers.

The students oscillated between regulations they followed jointly for their own ends, and regulations they expected to be issued by adults. Sofia reflected on what she expected from her teachers:

Claudia: Do you think it’s good or bad for them to be checking on you, and not letting you leave the classroom?

Sofía: Both at the same time. Bad because they don't let us go outside and have fun, and good because they calm us down.

C: Do you need to be helped to calm down?

S: Not help by constant pressure, just a call to attention. But just one.

Sofía's comments summarized the dilemma I frequently observed in students' forms of participation: the need to express themselves as young people through fun and effusiveness, and the imperative (often implicit) that they be helped to control themselves or complete their tasks. Sofía expressed an image of students on the way to "calming down", an image somehow related to the teacher discourse of restless adolescents; however, the following step was not "to horse around so much". For Sofía, the problem was the way the teachers rebuked the students. She expected a single, and not insistent, call to attention.

Because of their actions, however, many students motivated constant supervision by the prefect and teachers. Gerardo, for example, although not poorly behaved in the classroom, was irresponsible about doing his homework and bringing school supplies to class. The prefect often took away his backpack and sent for his parents. The boy commented, "For everything, they want your parents to come to school. For everything. We're grown up now and we know what we're doing. Don't they know that my father has a job? That he has other things to do besides coming to school to see what I did?"

Both the teachers and students at the school referred to the transition from childhood to adolescence as the culture broth in which many problems were gestated. Many actions were mediated by this explanatory resource. The teachers and prefects saw students as individuals who needed to become responsible for their actions, or who did not yet have control over their behavior. But these messages did not correspond to the teachers' practices, which did not allow students to assume the consequences of their actions. Nor did the teachers promote actions for students to learn to become responsible. In contrast, they often sent for the parents to come to school, or supervised the students in various ways. Students referred to themselves as young people, and no longer children, as in Gerardo's case. Yet many of them still required adult intervention to control their games of "dishing it out and taking it", to do homework, and to stay organized in the classroom.

Research on students refers to opposition and resistance to the rules as a way of enforcing student rights or challenging the authority.<sup>3</sup> From my perspective, students move in a fluid manner, often in conflict with adults, in their interpretations and use of school rules under various circumstances. They try to find valid elements in the rules that will help them regulate behavior, but at the same time, they protest rules as a threat to their condition as young people.

### **General Analysis and Conclusions**

Throughout this article, I have attempted to identify the way the students at Morelos secondary school appropriated the existing cultural resources to mediate their actions and express their condition as young people. I have emphasized the need to accept the analysis of students as young people according to their possibility of action in the school context. On a daily basis, the students participate in and through a set of contexts in which they are young people who have access to a certain type of cultural resources, and who express and defend their rights or specific interests—which are generated according to the demands and social relationships in each context. In this article, my intention has been to discuss the diverse ways students use the resources of their school context, in addition to resources that are more common in other spaces, in order to express themselves as young people. In this sense, I have wanted to underline their role as active individuals in the appropriation of cultural elements and in the co-construction of school practices.

Within the school context we can identify a set of cultural resources that are material, such as the classroom, the grade book, the backpack, and the uniform; or resources characterized as symbolic, such as special responsibilities, the rule of “dishing it out and taking it” or discourses regarding students being educated. These resources have a history, and if we wish, we can reflect on them according to analytical scales of broad scope; for example, by understanding the teacher traditions of evaluation, the historical social struggles for the construction of schools and classrooms, the socialization processes in which the rule of “dishing it out and taking it” is practiced by various social groups, and so on. In this sense, these resources are not exclusive to the Morelos secondary school, but are handled in a specific manner to mediate actions in the social practices that exist at the school.

In the case of the school’s teachers and personnel, I found it important to try to explain the reasons for their actions, and in particular, their understanding of the ways a certain resource should be used. I sustain that research on processes of indiscipline has a strong tendency to point out the sarcasm, mockery, authoritarianism and abuse of power of the adults at school. Based on my observance of various situations, I believe that teachers use sarcasm and refuse to allow their students to express opinions, in an attempt to discipline them. I believe that very few of the teachers’ and school personnel’s actions and mediation of activities in handling resources are irrational or illogical. I also believe their desire to control students is not based on a simple need to dominate them.

The truth at Morelos secondary school was that the absences of certain teachers and the shortage of school personnel left the option of using the classroom as a resource to contain the students. The good intentions of the Spanish teacher made him depend on special responsibilities to motivate student participation. The teachers’ work load often requires them to use their students as helpers for the grade book, in order to maintain the evaluation system. The organizing difficulties of teachers and counselors caused them to use the backpack as a means of control. Thus the teachers used material and symbolic resources in specific ways, according to their own ends and the needs of daily circumstances.

But these purposes and interests were not always shared by the students. Wertsch (1999) mentions that cultural resources exist only to the degree individuals use them in social contexts and with certain objectives. The students at Morelos secondary school were skilled in using resources in a very flexible and dynamic way. In the case of “dishing it out and taking it”, for example, they used the rule in combination with their learning in other social contexts, and within their practices of physical play in three situations: implicitly during games in which each participant knew if he should intervene or support his classmates; explicitly when students wanted to regulate themselves, or when they turned to an adult for control, and the rule was used in discourse; and explicitly when the students invoked it to justify their actions. In the practices of play that I have characterized as effervescent and enthusiastic, the use of the rule of “dishing it out and taking it” allowed the students to express and channel their needs to have fun, release energy, and organize their social relationships.

When using other resources that were possibly more appropriate in the school context, the students also expressed great dynamism. The grade book and special responsibilities became instruments for organizing fun and power relationships, as well as certain processes of classmate inclusion and exclusion. Cultural resources are not static elements with a single use. They are suitable for diverse ends, and the students granted them meaning in their practices.

In their encounters with teachers, the young people changed the meaning of resource use to justify the absence of punishment (for example, when Guillermo argued, “If she dishes it out, she has to take it”), to express disagreement or anger (by throwing their backpack or requesting its return), to express their style preferences (by using their warm-up pants at hip level), and to use the rules of orderliness to give an image (and obtain permission to leave the classroom). By using diverse cultural resources in

interactions among themselves, as well as with the adults at school, the students were making an effort to implement the expressions of being young people.

Being a student and being young at the Morelos secondary school assumed utilizing the cultural resources available at school and adding other resources imported from different contexts, to have fun, to conduct power relations, and to look for recognition as young people. These needs arose amidst the demands and possibilities of the school context.

In the eyes of the school's personnel, the students were individuals in the process of being educated, and therefore had to be directed and controlled through various strategies, including their parents' presence. Although the discourse insisted they were adolescents and no longer children, and thus needed to behave in a different manner, no school organization existed to promote ways of behavior that would help students regulate their conduct. On the contrary, the students devised their own ways to regulate their encounters, identify their limits of action, and make different uses of cultural resources. As we have seen, when the students' actions were not successful, adults entered the scene. Constant debate centered on how much the students were defending their condition as young people who were no longer children, versus how much they were unsuccessful because of the structure of school participation that failed to treat them as responsible individuals.

In conclusion, I insist on understanding the meaning of students' experiences as young people living in the present—young people who attempt to meet their needs in ingenious and entertaining ways not always free from conflict and tension, both in their peer communities and with adults.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The school's name as well as the teachers' and students' names were changed to protect their anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> For a broad discussion on the implication of paying attention or not paying attention in class, see Antelo y Abramowski (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Levinson (2002) analyzes, for the cases of the United States and England, the tendencies of ethnographic research that have centered on students' opposition and resistance to school rules. An important conclusion of his analysis is that schools in these countries operate by classifying students into systems, in which unequal opportunities are a function of race, social class, gender, or ethnic group. This author states that since Mexican schools do not have the same logic of functioning, separate analysis must be made of their students' opposition to school rules.

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