# A POST-SOCIALIST RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL AND THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT
This article* discusses the tolerance of violence. Specifically, it explores the way violence is enacted and perpetuated in residential education in Latvia. The article explores the perception and experience of violence in these schools by combining ethnographic fieldwork and autoethnographic data. Violence within the institution coalesces around three main aspects of experience: violence as necessary for regulating relationships, the embodiment of violence, and the expression of institutional violence. I illustrate how the application of violence is often justified as developing independence in students and by offering opportunities that mask the role of the school system in the reproduction of inequality in society. I conclude with an exploration of how the tolerance of violence arises from reproduction of an unequal social order that is maintained through the duplicitous position of the residential school as simultaneously necessary and unnecessary, closed and open, violent and nurturing.

KEYWORDS: residential school • post-socialism • violence • inequality • auto-ethnography

# INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the experience and perpetuation of violence in residential schools in Latvia. Data were collected during my doctoral research project *Local Practices, Institutionalised Knowledge and the Identity Conflicts of Anti-Social Adolescents in the Baltics* (Pokšāns forthcoming), which concentrated on the reproduction of a violence continuum within residential education system. The project consist of 13 interviews with former inhabitants of residential schools including my own autoethnographic data, and school personnel.

I refer to residential schools as a specific form of education established during the 1950s in the Soviet Union. This system survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and has become a permanent, if often invisible, fixture of the Latvian education system. The Soviet residential school system can be perceived as a tool of assimilation similar to institutions used to subjugate Native populations (Grant 1996; Degagné 2007; MacDonald and Hudson 2012; Starblanket 2020), in which it differs from the upper-class boarding school as described by Judith Okely (2012). The current scholarship on residential schools has mainly concentrated on documenting the historical injustices and critiquing the treatment of indigenous groups (Grant 1996; Degagné 2007; MacDonald and Hudson 2012; Starblanket 2020), or outlining the cultural specificity of the different institutional settings across the globe (Grupper 2013; Shoshana 2016; Mursidi et al. 2021). Here, I focus on the specific experience of residential school inhabitants. My choice of research field, as well as the perspective, is closely linked to my own positionality within the field. From ages 8 to 16 I attended a residential school, making the journey to and from the institution almost weekly and spending most of my everyday life within its premises. This presents me with immediate advantages as well as limitations when researching residential education. First, I acknowledge that my interest in the topic is far from being a detached and disinterested scientific perspective once considered important for anthropological enquiry. However, the privileged position of a Western anthropologist looking from the outside into the life-worlds of the Other has always obscured the fact that this maintains the elevated position of Western ethnoscience above others rather than being an "objective" position (Gonzalez 2001). Instead, I follow the tradition of "native" anthropology (Jacobs-Huey 2002) and perceive my situatedness in the field as an ontological reality to be respected rather than being dealt with as a limitation. This demands a different methodological framework, i.e. including one's own experience and life history while also maintaining a critical perspective. For this reason, I have chosen an autoethnographic approach, following Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur Bochner (2011), who argue that autoethnographic research is based upon an attempt to create meaning out of lived experience rather than creating the most faithful description of it. As my experience is still limited by various factors, I complement the data with life-story interviews from two other research participants. While details of data collection are described below, here I outline the positive side of positioning myself within the field as it provided me with a semi-emic relationship with my participants. For example, during interviews with my research participants I was able to establish immediate rapport by being able to recognise the terms used by them and engage with them using the same language they used to describe phenomena. This

allowed a deeper relationship to be formed through demonstration of communicative competence (Hymes 1972; Duranti 1994).

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

My interest in tolerance and acceptance of violence in residential schools stems from my personal experiences and observations within a nationwide research project on non-violence.[1] The research was carried out by me and my colleagues in the department of cultural and social anthropology studies at the University of Latvia from 2018 until 2021. From my own experience, violence was never far from the everyday routine of the residential school. It could take many forms and range from emotional to physical, from institutional to personal. My colleagues have described violence as part of local infrastructure, connected to spaces as much as practices are (Zalāns et al. 2022). Violence is pervasive, ever-present and simultaneously hard to pinpoint. Luye Li, Ivan Sun and Deeanna Button (2020) have shown that tolerance of violence in cases of intimate partner violence are closely linked to larger structural inequalities such as gender relations. In comparison, Elizabeth Mumford, Bruce Taylor and Peggy Giordano (2020) have pointed to the importance of personal relationships in forming tolerance in cases of intimate violence among teens. Previous research has also identified that state actors such as law enforcement agencies may be tolerant of domestic violence (Lin et al. 2021) and that violence in health care was accepted and seen as an unavoidable part of working life by employees (Copeland and Henry 2017). Ilze Mileiko and Gareth Hamilton (2022) have explored tolerance of violence in the Latvian media and showed that it is linked to a wider acceptance and positive attitude towards an application of violence in society. These examples illustrate that tolerance towards violence is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to biological predispositions, class, or gender.

To address the diversity of violence I apply the concept of the violence continuum as outlined by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004). It was applied earlier in feminist scholarship, first proposed by Liz Kelly (1991) to illustrate how abuse and more everyday practices of male behaviour are not opposed to each other but rather connected. The concept has been further developed and applied in wider scholarship showing that violence can linger long after conflicts have concluded (Kostovicova et al. 2020; Wibben 2020).

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004: 24) theorise the continuum of violence to account for violence as a part of everyday life and politics, including interpersonal and structural levels. The theory of the violence continuum claims that the presence of violence in any given context is not entirely the result of the relations of domination between the structure and the individual and allows scholars to account for the impact of individual acts of violence on the establishment of violent structural practices, and vice versa. The approach allows me to evaluate critically the presentation of violence in the residential school and its use as a pedagogical tool with a seemingly positive association, and to uncover its role in obscuring inequality and preventing a critical evaluation of its causes. I argue that the residential school becomes a locus which allows marginalisation to be seen as opportunity, exploitation and humiliation to be viewed

as discipline, and everyday violence to be envisaged as tolerable, and even necessary, tools for establishing order.

## METHODS

As mentioned above, this article employs two types of data. Firstly, I used the opportunity to obtain data through a larger collaborative project, including questions related to boarding schools and education policies in interview guidelines. I collected eleven targeted interviews with school staff, state, and municipal officials to complement this data source. Twelve came from the larger project database. By combining the material from the larger data set and targeted interviews I was able to situate local policies regarding residential schooling in different parts of Latvia and to evaluate the significance of boarding schools in local communities.

Secondly, biographic data was collected using two methods: autoethnography and biographic interview. The inclusion of this type of data provided me with a deeper perspective on the research field by getting closer to the lived experience of residential school inhabitants. I chose to concentrate on life-story interviews and autoethnographical data due to my own positionality in the research field. Already while negotiating access to the research field, I became aware of my limitations regarding the types of data I might be able to acquire and the places I might be able to access. During one of the exploratory visits to a potential participant institution, I heard shouting from a classroom when leaving the principal's office. From what I could decipher, the class teacher was furious at a student and screaming at the top of her lungs: "Who do you think you are? You are nothing!" I did not end up carrying out my research in that particular institution for unrelated reasons, but I remember feeling almost physically ill at that moment and was looking for the nearest exit. This meant that I would not be carrying out participant observation within the institutions or interviewing children living in them as both of these experiences were likely to have a disproportionate emotional effect on me, so I needed to substitute this with other types of data. To overcome this limitation, I chose an autoethnographic approach which, as argued by several authors (Kiesinger 2002; Poulos 2008; Collins and Gallinat 2013: 11–14), can help one to make sense of oneself and one's experiences. To achieve this, I started by writing down my own story as I remembered it and identifying the important themes in it. This initial version of the story served only as an entry point for my autoethnographic data. Far from using writing to create sense or establish a new experience or stable narrative, in the tradition of personal narrative, as described by Keith Berry (2007) and Lisa Tillman (2009) among others, this first draft of my early life created a lifeless static version of a single reality that failed even to approach my lived experience. Therefore, the bulk of my autoethnographic data were produced much later in the writing process and in conjunction with other types of data. In this sense, I argue that my approach is closer to what Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011: 280) classify as "therapeutic writing". The autoethnographic data here emerge as fragmented, conditional and relational, closely linked to the wider field in which the researcher is embedded. This meant that while parts of my autoethnographic data emerged very early in my research, the largest

part and most vibrant reflections came as responses after interviews, field visits or, as was most likely to happen, during the writing process itself. While acknowledging that this led me away from traditional data analysis approaches, I align myself with Ellis, Adams and Bochner (ibid.: 282), who argue that validity in autoethnography is achieved through verisimilitude, by complementing data that might be acquired in a more traditional manner. Following this approach, I have attempted to use my story to communicate experiences that I saw as arising relationally from the stories of my other participants.

Autoethnographic data were complemented by life-story interviews with two former inhabitants of residential schools. This data allowed me to acquire wider perspectives from individuals who themselves had experience living in the residential school system. This was especially important as it allowed me to learn about the way everyday life in residential schools has changed over time as one of the participants had lived in the institution during the Soviet period while the other participant resided there during the early 2010s.

In both biographic interviews I applied the same strategy of allowing the participants to dictate the pace and breadth of the initial story, then following up with questions and a participatory timeline only after they felt that they had told me the story as they see it. I invited the participants to start where they felt comfortable, but in both cases the story quickly turned towards descriptions of their experiences in residential education. Both participants followed the model described by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1997) by starting with a relatively short synopsis of the story followed by an expansion on key aspects and details, explanation of complications and ways in which these complications were solved. This allowed me to see which moments and places the participants saw as important and the way they framed their own positionality in relation to their experience today.

All data were coded using MAXQDA software. My overall coding strategy was a mix of open and a priori coding (Grbich 2012) as I allowed the main topics to emerge from the data while also being aware of the central analytical concepts I had established before starting the coding process.

This approach meant that coding was done in stages, where every following stage led to the addition and sometimes removal of codes to achieve in-depth analysis. This meant developing an expansive system of codes and subcodes in order to fine tune my analysis and draw additional relationships between the themes and topics (Emerson et al. 2011 [1995]). During the initial coding the main topics, such as "upbringing", "violence", "social reproduction", "actors", were established. For the secondary analysis more targeted codes were created, such as "bullying", "independence", "attitude", "responsibility". As a result, the established codes were finally organised into four main families, analysis of which forms the basis for the sections of this article.

ANALYSIS

*Residential School as Opportunity: Justifications for Violence*

During the Soviet period, residential schools were used to support *neblagopoluchnaya sem'ya*, or "dysfunctional" (Russian for unsuccessful, troubled, with potential bad outcomes; see Ushakov 2012) families who were failing to take care of their child(ren) (Kelly 2008; Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010; Allemann 2018). While originally envisioned as a support mechanism, it soon became a form of exclusion for those children or their families who for various reasons were seen as troublesome. A residential school supported families with its boarding facilities and the provision of material benefits, such as clothing or school supplies, otherwise a parental responsibility. The perception of residential schools in Latvia was contradictory. While those parents who enrolled their children in a residential school were often seen as irresponsible or as shirking their parental duties, parents believed they were acting in the best interests of the child, especially in rural areas:

> And so, the [residential school] was one that was fully supported by the state. Starting with everything, everything necessary for a child's personality, with all the school stuff, with everything, books and so on. I was a so-called single mother, as Dana's father died. Dana was four years old when the father died. [It was] time to go to school, even though I was working in the kolkhoz [collective farm] at that time, what was the salary in the kolkhoz? As small as possible [laughs]. (FM 2019)

Thus, the residential school was not only a form of support for *neblagopoluchnaya* families but also a crutch that allowed the state to avoid solving larger structural problems such as poverty. As Elena Khlinovskaya-Rockhill (2010: 54) says of the Soviet period: "the problem of unsupervised children was seen as rooted not in poverty but in poor work of some Soviets, Party or Komsomol". After the collapse of state socialism and introduction of a neoliberal political system, contemporary Latvian parents were seen as individually responsible for their choice to send their children to a residential school. Applying individual choice to entering boarding school was a dignified solution in crisis situations such as in the case of Dzintars:

> there was a rather difficult moment within the family. Same with the car. […] We got out of it well, [but] there was kind of a small crisis. And we realised that I would have to go to [town's] residential school. (FM 2020a)

Dzintars' elder siblings both attended a different regional school without boarding facilities, as during their particular school years the family had not yet encountered financial difficulties. Although Dzintars did not describe the financial issues his family had, but judging from the period of his schooling it can be assumed that they were connected to the 2008–2009 financial crisis, which severely affected the livelihood of many families in Latvia. There is a significant consequence, though, of viewing residential school as an individual choice: one can avoid considering the structural role of poverty and inequality in relation to that choice.

In my own case there was no crisis in my family, rather, residential schooling was presented as an opportunity: at the time it was explained to us that as my sister was

excelling at sports, we should go to school in the local town to make sure she had access to additional support for her talent. What was less clear was why I needed to go with her as my own sports achievements were poor. Still, this was what my parents told me, and I believed them at the time. However, much like Dzintars, and Antra (described below), my case also was based on economic desperation within the family. My sister and I started our residential schooling in the late 1990s, which was a very precarious time in the Latvian countryside as collective farms and employment opportunities in rural areas had gone, and free economic migration in the EU had not yet begun. Social work or other support mechanisms in our village were not available. Our brother had already been placed in a residential school for children with special needs and this could have influenced our parents' decision. Furthermore, as my parents were suffering from alcohol abuse, this might also have been an attempt to protect us from living with addicts. Most of the families in the village were living in similar conditions and these circumstances were often perceived as natural rather than exceptional and problematic.

As noted by Margaretha Järvinen (2015: 806), there has been comparatively little qualitative research on children who live with alcoholic parents. Existing research indicates that there is often a lack of professional support for children who attempt to maintain the normalcy of family life and appearance (Werner and Malterud 2016) and this factor contributes to the invisibility of the issues present within the family. Relationships with parents suffering from substance abuse occupy a large part of children's lives even if they are living apart (Wangensteen et al. 2019). Both observations are supported by my own childhood experience. Attempts to maintain normalcy in our case included, for example, making sure that the fire did not go out in the local heating facility. I remember myself and my sister, both in our early teens, stumbling through the dark of night to make sure that the fire was still lit as we were scared that otherwise our father could lose his job. In these situations, we never asked for or received help from the village community, nor did we ever tell anyone in the residential school about our fears. It is, however, unlikely that the conditions we lived in were a secret to our community.

For Antra, residential school was also presented as an opportunity that would otherwise not have been available to her if she had stayed at home. It masks the fact that at the time Antra's family were going through their own set of challenges, including domestic violence:

> However, I had it in the family; my father was violent towards my mother and my mother was very young and my mother also became violent over time because at the beginning she defended herself and then she carried that on to the next person, to the weakest, and I do the same, the difference is that I am aware of it and I try to analyse it and talk about it. (FM 2020b)

Antra's case presents a family typical of a residential school child and the reason such institutions were originally established. However, the motivation and need for residential school was framed as being related to opportunities rather than needs, and there had never been any other intervention by the state into the everyday life of her family. Domestic violence was endured and, as Antra claims, inherited. It is important to note that one should not perceive violence as a prefigured trajectory. Social bonds outside a violent relationship can help to overcome previously learned behaviours (Lackey 2003). Here, I emphasise that residential school did not shelter Antra from family violence but

rather introduced her to a different variety, specifically, institutional violence, which at times was even more oppressive than domestic abuse. A continuum of violence is practiced where life conditions coloured by violence lead to institutionalisation and perpetuation of the cycles of violence. Indeed, if domestic violence was a hidden and shameful practice that the victims were reluctant to report and perceived as private (Hussain and Khan 2008), in an institutional setting violence was publicly witnessed but not discussed, legitimised as being normal and expected. Institutional policies are a dominant version of reality, disputing them inevitably becomes an act of rebellion which is used to justify the very existence of these policies (Goldstein 2005). This can contribute to feelings of guilt in the victim, as he or she appears to be complicit in these circles of violence. Thus, schools implicitly support and perpetuate violence at the symbolic level, with the discretion of state power (Bourdieu 2020 [2012]: 145).

Economic inequality was not questioned but rather confirmed and emphasised in the residential school. The violence that Antra experienced at home and violence experienced within the institution reinforced and confirmed one another, thus maintaining the continuum of violence as the pupils of residential school gradually accepted that it was indeed inevitable. The second important implication here is the connection between violence and 'opportunities'. In all cases, residential school students understood that only by experiencing violence were they able to access places and resources and improve their futures. This prevented pupils from questioning violence and led to acceptance of violent relations as a necessary condition for growth, contributing to the recurrence of violence between generations and the perception that the violence is indeed inherited.

*Bullying: Embodying Violence*

While justification for residential schools has changed over time, so has the public perception of problem families and the role of residential schools. PISA[2] reports show that Latvia has the highest overall level of bullying of all countries participating in their research (OECD 2016: 136). There are no separate data on boarding schools, but I believe this case analysis helps to shed some light on high levels of bullying in the Latvian school environment. I underline that interpersonal violence between students helps to reinforce social inequalities. Violence not only affects immediate relationships but can have troubling long-term effects even when the propensity to violence diminishes. Trauma experienced, and troublesome relationship skills gained, have effects on the pupils' opportunities when they leave institutional care and try to find meaningful employment. Inequality thus plays an important role in causing and maintaining violence as well as reproducing it in the long term.

Living in the violence continuum, students learn how to employ violence towards others. Bullying is thus ever-present in a residential school setting. However, the way it is done should be critically evaluated, as the naturalisation of bullying runs the risk of equalising it between instances and institutions. By claiming that bullying is something that has always happened between children and in every school, it becomes possible to overlook the fact that not all bullying is the same and not all institutions deal with it in the same way.

When residential school staff talk about more innocuous aspects of bullying, such as name-calling, this obscures more violent actions. Several authors (Sekol et al. 2016; Mazzone et al. 2018) argue that bullying in residential care is more akin to bullying in prison than bullying at school, for which there are two primary reasons. First, unlike children who experience bullying in a day school, children in residential schools often do not have the chance to experience a safe and protective environment outside the school. Second, in a residential context, "baroning", or the habit "in which goods are given to the prisoner by another person who later demands a high repayment", can also be observed (Sekol and Farrington 2009: 16). Goods exchanged can constitute different kinds of capital and are not always physical items. Researchers argue that it is important to recognise that bullying is often a means for the acquisition of social standing and material goods, rather than enjoyment of the victim's suffering (Volk et al. 2014). In relation to my argument, this shows how the inequality experienced by residential school pupils becomes embodied and recognised by them, leading to the reproduction of such relations among this group.

Actions such as those I described above were not uncommon during my time in a residential school and I remember many instances when I witnessed violence between peers, and was also on the receiving end of such violence. I remember being punched, kicked, smothered, drawn on and being forced to fight. Not all violence experienced in residential school was physical:

> Interviewee: Well, when it comes to such cases of violence, of course we had them, I have also been on both sides of ostracising […] I have ostracised people, and I have been ostracised.
> Interviewer: Ostracising?
> Interviewee: Ostracising. Either when there is a reason, or someone has said something wrong, or something has been stolen, or it seemed that something has been stolen, or the level of power is not so high that you can keep up with that pack and its leader. (FM 2020b)

Listening to the experiences of those I spoke with, and including my own experiences, makes me uncertain about accepting the staff's belief that bullying occurs equally in all locations. A mismatch in perspective is closely linked to what has been described as an anti-grassing culture, according to which children are strongly opposed to reporting cases of violence to staff members (Mazzone et al. 2018: 110). Almost none of my violent experiences during my years in residential school ever reached the ears of any staff member, including those whom I saw as trustworthy. The hesitancy to communicate with staff members could be connected to past encounters where reporting it did not provide any favourable outcomes, or rather where staff members actually responded aggressively. Such instances, preventing children from reporting bullying and to a lack of engagement from staff members, can still result in additional abuse due to severe responses against snitching in a residential school context.

My motivation for merely looking on as a younger pupil was to avoid being humiliated, and Antra's motivation for engaging in the ostracism of her peers cannot be simply explained by the idea that children are cruel or the need to survive in complicated circumstances. The subject needs to be viewed in relation to larger frames of violence that structure everyday life in residential schools and contribute to the creation of a con-

tinuum of violence where a violent response is neither the best nor worst but the only choice at that moment. In contrast to an environment where violence is the exception, in a residential school lack of violence often constituted the exception.

The possibility of resolving violent experiences could require substantial personal expense. Research shows that childhood maltreatment, including persistent bullying, can lead to heightened sensitivity to danger, which can have a long-term effect on one's capacity to develop relationships later in life (McCrory et al. 2011; Hein and Monk 2017; Asmussen et al. 2020). This lack of social skills is then used to justify why a person needs to remain in institutional care. In Pierre Bourdieu's account of schools as places for the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1970]), one of the main purposes of a segregated education system is the maintenance of social capital within the same, normally upper, class. In Latvia, residential school is an inverse version of the elite boarding school. Instead of acquiring useful social contacts and the know-how to maintain them, residential school lets pupils embody their inequality: the social connections and skills acquired by adolescents in residential schools might not necessarily benefit them and could even impede their ability to succeed in a capitalist economy, which some might have to navigate shortly after completing their schooling. Graduating from a reputable education institution can enhance one's opportunities for higher education and employment, although those who come from residential schools could face more significant obstacles and experience feelings of rejection that can result in the desire to oppose a system that has shown reluctance to accept them.

## THE ORGANISATION AND MAINTENANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

I argue that a residential school should not be perceived as external and pathological in relation to wider Latvian society but rather as one of the points at which the socially unspoken but accepted order comes to the surface.

Residential schools consist of boarding facilities and a school that educates two varieties of student: *internātnieki* (children boarding at the residential school), and *mājinieki* (students who live nearby and go home after classes). This division usually coincides with the income level of student families. Students from poorer families generally use boarding facilities. The relationships between *internātnieki* and *mājinieki* were thus openly imbued with socio-economic inequality, meaning that the *internātnieki* were envious of *mājinieki* while the *mājinieki* felt superior to the *internātnieki*.

This division between students based on socio-economic inequality was embedded in the everyday reality of school life, but was demonstrated most clearly through school trips. During my childhood, school trips were often partially funded by parents, which meant that I and other children who boarded at school were regularly either unable to participate at all or had to do so without any spending money. A stop at some large mall was a symbolically important part of the trip. During the early 2000s, shopping on a recreational basis was available only in large cities and the opportunity to shop there was highly coveted. I quickly realised that I could not go on these trips because they made me feel inferior to my classmates as I had to wait in the bus while the other children went shopping, or I had to hang around with them in the mall while not buying

anything. This feeling of poverty was so overwhelming that I decided to no longer go on any trips, and I stopped informing my parents about them. The lack of participation in trips by *internātnieki* did not escape the notice of our educator, who came up with a plan that *mājinieki* could donate the fare and thus take one of *internātnieki* on a free trip. Money was collected by the educator, who then proceeded to call a vote for which of us would go. Our names were written on the blackboard and the teacher drew tally marks next to our names while *mājinieki* cast their votes. I won easily but despite this I did not go. I remember sitting there and feeling indescribable indignation at the process, which in my mind was not a benevolent process of donation but rather an insult to all those children with names on the board. It was clear to me that everyone would like to go on trip but that only one would go, and that the choice was made through a popularity contest. The feelings of injustice reached the highest point once I had been declared the lucky winner, and it was no secret that I was going to win. Once it was announced that I was the chosen lucky *internātnieks*, I explained that I was not going – not because my parents lacked the money but because I had something else to do. I remember the look on my educator's face. I am not sure if she got my point, but it was quite clear she knew I was lying. Nevertheless, she accepted my decision, the 'prize' went to the next contestant (a relatively poor girl from the *mājinieki* group). I felt class solidarity approximately 20 years before I even knew what class solidarity was.

The case and reasons behind it were never discussed in class. Instead of protesting against the whole affair, I chose to resist by refusing to participate. Furthermore, my original opposition to field trips was motivated by a sense of inferiority due to the lack of spending money, which was still not solved by this apparent act of charity.

The difference between poorly performing students and so-called normal attainers can also be medicalised through special needs designations. During the Soviet period, children with special needs were segregated and placed in special institutions. Currently, Latvia is promoting inclusive education. Ieva speaks of the intended consequences of such an inclusive approach:

> And I also teach maths to those children where the whole class has visual aids. And they sometimes say of themselves: "We are such dummies". I say: "No, don't say that about yourselves, you will have to take the exam just like everyone else, only you have these visual aids". And it is very interesting. We have ten in one class where all have those visual aids. And in the second class, four with these visual aids are integrated. How do you think they use those visual aids, those four? No way in hell do they use them! Because they think: well, why should I use some visual aids here now? Others do not use them. (FM 2020c)

The internalised feelings of worthlessness for the students here are the result of a habitus of self-denigration. The use of visual aids was introduced with the aim of supporting students who were experiencing difficulties during their studies. However, as illustrated by the interview quotation above, these aids constituted only part of a successful integrated education approach. While the introduction of support materials helped to ensure that the practical aspect of inclusivity was realised, this did not help to overcome prejudice towards children with learning difficulties. In this institution, all those staff members I interviewed were in one way or another opposed to inclusive education, which may indicate a further cause of the children's reluctance. In this way, that

symbolic violence where children are arranged on a scale according to their capacity is not disputed by the inclusive approach taken; rather, it is reaffirmed, as the aids are perceived to be markers of disability rather than tools for learning.

The event illustrates the way in which socio-economic inequality is converted into symbolic violence. As argued by Jan Branson and Don Miller (1993: 26), gifts, loyalty and piety can be constructed as forms of violence towards the receiving party; in the same way charity can serve to maintain the unspoken order of relations in a residential school. Not everyone is equal, and the primacy of wealth is not disputed by this act. Through an act of charity, the teacher was affirming this difference instead of redressing it. As Bourdieu (1977: 494) argues, "by doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give". Such episodes are myriad throughout the residential school system and reinforce the notion that *internātnieki* are in their position not because of structural causes but through their own unwillingness to fit in with the *mājinieki*, thinking that reinforces the idea that different types of violence are permissible towards *internātnieki* to foster their transition to a better life.

The way transition is imagined is closely linked to the presentation of violence as an opportunity. Violence assumes pedagogical value with the use of a raised voice, threats, and physical abuse insofar as it facilitates the transition. The use of violence becomes strategic and ranges from complex symbolic events such as those described above to direct physical abuse. While physical violence remains exceptional, emotional and verbal violence may be present at all stages. Arthur Kleinman and Veena Das' (2000: 238) concept of everyday violence is defined as follows: "Violence […] is crucial to cultural processes of routinization, legitimation, essentialism, normalization, and simplification through which the social world orders the flow of experience within and between body-selves". In this definition, violence is no longer something that is external to the social life of communities but one of the constitutive processes of the way social life is organised.

While in the previous section I explored the ways in which physical violence is realised in peer-to-peer settings, it was also used by the staff. Educators and support staff such as night matrons, nurses, and the schools' administration could employ it. Not all employees of the residential school were violent; however, being violent was rarely condemned.

> Interviewer: You also had the 'standings'?
> Interviewee: Yes, we did, of course, yes.
> Interviewer: Sounds like it's a universal method.
> Interviewee: I think it's a universal method borrowed from the army. It has to do with the Soviet times and things like that. Although if you read the *Battle of Knipska*[3] and some other works, you know, maybe it used to be such a method – of course, with rulers, all those beatings it's all [stops abruptly] it's all normal, forcing students to do squatting exercises. (FM 2020b)

'Standings' was a method used by night matrons where the student was made to stand outside in the hallway in nightwear, which for boys usually meant their underwear, facing the wall until they were allowed to return to their room. This method was used by these matrons to ensure that children were, if not asleep then at least, quiet during

the night hours. The standings could be complemented by other methods when the offender did not seem sufficiently apologetic. I remember an episode from my early years of residential school in which my roommates were chatting and laughing before falling asleep. This attracted the attention of a matron who barged into the dormitory, took two of the older boys and made them stand in the hallway until they "calmed down". The method proved to be ineffective as the boys simply continued to talk and laugh in the hallway. The matron solved this by going outside, getting some birch rods (I know this because she loudly explained her plans) and spanking both boys on their naked thighs. One of them screamed and pleaded for mercy, the other stayed quiet. Both were sent back into the room afterwards.

In my residential school there were only two night matrons who seemed to enjoy hurting children. This extended to walking around with a flyswat which they used for hitting children and shining a torch into the faces of children to check whether they were sleeping. This shows how even if a residential school was not designed as an establishment that relies on violence, it may become one that enables it.

I never reported any of my bullies to the staff, and the children would also never report the actions of abusive staff members to the administration or even similar actions by their own parents. When interviewed, Antra looked notably taken aback when asked if she had the right to report the actions of abusive staff members to the authorities. The idea seemed bewildering to her, even as a mere possibility. As the violence is perpetrated by educators or other school staff, it is unimaginable for a pupil that it could be problematic or unjustified. Rather, it is further confirmation that the violence is deserved and necessary. Here, however, it is important to maintain a critical approach and not slide into the discourse of resilience (Barrios 2016) and argue that the solution for these situations is indeed an increased resilience that could empower them and lead to an increase in the reporting of such actions.

### Valorisation of Independence

In the Soviet Union, the presumed solution to problem children was to provide them with the chance to enter the work force; in contemporary Latvia this is replaced by claims of developing pupils' independence. The Soviet residential school used work in factories or collective farms to accommodate children who stood out from the standard social fabric; the contemporary institution operates on the presumption that pupils should be prepared for survival in a harsh and unforgiving environment. In both systems, the underlying assumptions of the role of residential school pupil were not disputed: the Soviet residential school pupil was never to become a party official, and the contemporary pupil would never acquire steady employment. As argued by Roberto Barrios (2016: 32), when discussing the concept of resilience in relation to disaster research, one of the potential consequences of using the concept of resilience is omission of the question as to why the communities needed to become resilient in the first place. Similarly, in relation to alternative care, there is a risk that by concentrating on the ways of improving children's resilience, we accept their vulnerability as the norm. A presumed lack of independence often translates into a lack of resources and skills to overcome past traumatic experiences. The fact that children who resided in

residential schools lacked these resources and skills becomes accepted and it is even expected that those who were able to overcome their problems could succeed in life. The way a child's independence is framed and imagined within the context of residential schools further contributes to the lack of connection between educators' imagined views of their pupils' lives and expectations of the students themselves. As Philippe Bourgois (2003 [2002]) argues, even if the adolescents managed to change their lives and enter the workforce, this often did not result in a positive long-term outcome as the mismatch between previous life experience and practice, and new life challenges, proved too much to bear. Similarly to how young Puerto Ricans felt indignation at office work as it was considered feminine, the perceived offences presented by residential school children due to their different understanding of interpersonal relationships could often lead to conflict and the inability to fit into the idea of a comfortable white-collar career.

One of my research participants, who seemed to be on the right track with his education and career (having graduated from a residential school and having acquired additional skills in photography and editing), ended up not finishing his university studies and instead focused on working in a lower position in a public transport company:

> Unfortunately, I had to leave [university]. I had problems with a couple of classes that unfortunately I couldn't pull off. No matter how hard I tried, and I tried, it was not as easy as I thought. And after two and a half years, I unfortunately had to leave my studies. And the moment that real life began, yet other expenses and other needs appeared. (FM 2020a)

Despite him admitting that dropping out of university was not something he had planned or hoped for, this did not affect his belief that the residential school had provided him with good skills for independent living. He had acquired skills that allowed him to make friends and the learning process helped him to establish a group of friends and get elected to his university's student representative council. While at residential school these skills were useful in surviving complicated inter-student relationships which were often a greater challenge than academic success, this was not the case at university which possibly led to him leaving. This also points to another possible shortcoming of the resilience model in which misinterpreted success at residential school could conceal issues in other contexts. A student who seemed to be independent and resilient could nevertheless experience traumatic events inside and outside the residential school that manifest later in life, even if during the school years these issues seem to be dealt with.

What, then, makes a residential school pupil independent? If the child is no longer seeking help when being bullied and has some friends does this count as independence? In my own experience, even after I had achieved more-or-less stable status within the residential school and I had a few friends in my own class and the wider school, it did not change the fact that during some classes I had no other choice but to hold it together while classmates sitting behind me were using my neck to play noughts-and-crosses. The status quo for pupils who are usually characterised as (not) independent is very often connected to conditions which are deeply affected by structural and physical violence. This becomes no longer problematised due to the shift in focus from a larger issue towards an individual's response to it. It is important to acknowledge that for the person surviving conditions that lead to development of independence, it becomes

their life and attempts to reformulate this as something that needs to be survived rather than lived can lead to resistance and aggression, as described above. This also leads to my final critique of the way in which the idea of independence is applied in a residential school context, as it glosses over the fact that the notion of resilience concerning past trauma and stigmatisation is a phantom concept. Throughout my work with children from various alternative care settings, including residential schools, a recurring theme has emerged. Children often share positive experiences and express the belief that no one cares about their past or current circumstances; however, this resilience is fragile, and a single comment, action, or smell can swiftly dismantle their perceived strength.

Former inhabitants of residential schools generally reflected on the sense of discipline and order as the main inheritance from their residential school years. The focus on disciplinary acts is long remembered by students and often used as evidence of developing student independence even though it is more likely to inhibit one's capacity to care for oneself. The need for clear structure and hierarchical relationships supported by violence is less likely to be useful in the contemporary labour market where flexibility and conflict-management skills are more likely to garner success (Bourgois 1996; 2003 [2002]; Willis 2017 [1978]).

## CONCLUSION

With this paper I contribute to the attempts to explain how interpersonal violence is maintained, tolerated, and structurally sustained. In order to explore how violence is operationalised to reinforce the existing power relations in society, I show the different types of violence present in the residential school setting in Latvia. The analysis thereof conveys the importance of recognising the way in which violence becomes a continuum for residential school inhabitants where different types and experiences of violence overlap and reinforce each other. These experiences should not be viewed solely as a result of systematic or structural violence, but rather of both personal and institutional decisions. The night matron's choice to abuse children physically cannot be explained only by the institutional setting but should also be viewed within the context of wider social relations which make such practices possible. To illustrate this process, I looked at how an educator's attempt to ensure that children from less affluent families were able to go on school trips is simultaneously an act of benevolence and reproduction of unequal relationships, experienced as humiliating and offensive to those on the receiving end. This episode is less dependent on state-wide policy than on social relations both inside and outside the classroom that are coloured by persistent social inequality. Finally, violence in a residential school setting is assigned a pedagogical function which becomes embodied by the pupils. This explains how symbolic violence (as described in Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004) can be tolerated and assigned a positive connotation in helping pupils to transform into productive members of society. The physical, emotional, and institutional violence experienced within a residential school becomes seen as necessary in ensuring that pupils overcome their current status and rise above their station.

I believe that this approach leads to two main outcomes. First, pupils learn to recognise the importance of violence in social relations, which leads them to reproduce

similar practices towards one another and later in life. Second, far from transformation, this leads to reproduction of a social order in which the residential school becomes just another step in the violence continuum and which, by simultaneously extending towards pupils' past and future leaves very little space for escape. In these conditions, it is unlikely that current efforts by the state to dismantle the residential school system will prevent violence and improve the lives of children currently residing within those institutions. The state has also seemingly adopted a duplicitous position where, on the one hand, residential school must be closed as it is detrimental to the wellbeing of children and, on the other, they need to be preserved to ensure that education is accessible to all. Similarly, the residential school needs to be reformed due to the number of complaints about the institution received in the past, and simultaneously needs to be preserved only for that part of the population which was least likely ever to be able to voice their opposition to the potential abuse as residential school is becoming primarily a place for children with disabilities. This shows the potential avenues for continued research on how state violence is enacted and realised through the residential school system.

## NOTES

**1** The fieldwork was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Latvia as part of the Strengthening Families, Communities, and Relationships: An Anthropological Approach to Violence Prevention research project. Depending on the preference of the research participants either verbal or written informed consent was negotiated. All research participants were informed about data usage and informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any time.
**2** PISA is OECD's Program for International Student Assessment.
**3** A novel by Jānis Poruks (1961) describing life in residential school during the 19th century in Latvia.

## SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork materials. The materials are in the personal archives of the author.
FM 2019 – 43-minute oral interview with Indra, November 2019
FM 2020a – 2-hour oral life-story interview with Dzintars, February 2020
FM 2020b – 2-hour oral life-story interview with Antra, January 2020
FM 2020c – 1-hour oral semi-structured interview with Ieva, October 2020

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