

Training teachers: psychoanalytical issues in the teacher-student and institutional relationship

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Introduction¹

This paper is concerned with training teachers working in difficult situations in Southern Italy. It describes a number of the interventions undertaken, and reflections on those experiences. Generally speaking, it is always difficult to promote interventions in very structured organisations; in such contexts it is important to keep in mind that even when an intervention is directly requested, many resistances to any change can be expressed. Moving from this general consideration, we believe that any intervention should be respectful of the particular characteristics of each organisation, of its history and of relationships between individuals. Any intervention by an external professional can be perceived as by an 'external stranger', whose knowledge and 'know how' are, on the one hand, important instruments to use, and on the other, elements that threaten the pre-existing equilibrium. Based on a range of theoretical, largely psychoanalytical perspectives, such as the work of Bion (1961), Kaës et al. (1979) and Winnicott (1965), we believe that any training is a transformative process which alters the practice of those who take part (Urwand, 2002).

In line with these views, we want to highlight that any training process needs a willingness to learn and to change in response to that process. However, such motivation cannot be taken for granted and needs to be developed as part of the training process, particularly with those working in the field of education. Furthermore, we see the training process as a constant work in progress, rather than leading to a finite mastery. The teaching of knowledge and skills are two aspects of the training, but, we argue, the training is a relational process which challenges trainees and trainers to encounter deeper and more personal feelings. We therefore use the term *formative relationship* (Blandino & Granieri, 1995) to describe an interaction between two people to recognise the part played by the individuals' inner worlds and particular emotional experiences. In this paper we will explore this approach illustrating a psychological intervention located within the frame of Operative National Programs (PON) conceived by the Italian government, with financial support from the European Commission (F.S.E. 2007-2013).

1. The 'Introduction' section was written by both Anna Zurolo and Alessandra Delli Veneri. The other sections were written by Anna Zurolo.

Context for the intervention

Before we consider the intervention itself, it is important to introduce more of the context in which it takes place. The Italian system of schooling has recently been re-formed into a tri-partite model, comprising: school, job training and apprenticeship. A student can choose to attend either a high school, focusing on art, humanities, sciences, or a professional one. In professional schools, preparation for employment in a range of careers is the main aim; these schools provide a certificate which enables the student to find a job at the end of the third year: when s/he is about 15 years old. Alternatively, a student can choose to complete the other school route to obtain the diploma required to undertake university courses, or to find a more specialized job, when s/he is about 18 years old. There is much concern about what students actually achieve and the extent to which they engage with, and complete, their courses. In this paper we use the term 'school dispersion' to cover a range of issues surrounding the achievement and success of students. These include irregularities in attendance, being late for lessons, failing work and interrupting courses.

Our intervention took place in Southern Italy where schools in certain areas are characterised by difficult work environments, a preponderance of teachers on temporary contracts and a high rate of student 'dispersion' and drop-out. The reasons for the high rate of student dispersion and drop-out are complex, the problem not being confined to areas of economic or social problems, but also affecting areas of high productivity. Arguably there are two key factors: the cultural acceptability of an early start to working life; and the availability of jobs not requiring any degree of specialization. Data from the Italian Education Ministry indicate that the drop-out rate is high in the first year of secondary school, when the student is about 12/13 years old, and is particularly marked in professional schools. The Italian government, using the framework of the Operative National Programme (PON), with financial support from the European Commission, has sought to address these issues in a number of ways, including through school development programmes, in accordance with the European Union's priority for developing a knowledge-based economy. Specifically, PONs have a range of specific goals which include: the reduction of school dispersion; improved gender equality awareness; teacher training; and more integrated links with the world of work. To this end, schools have been allocated resources to develop their own PON.

It is usual for psychologists to be called upon to help with the delivery of such a school development programme, to offer alternative training approaches and to focus on the particular needs of that institution. It is a fundamental tenet of this work that the psychologist keeps in mind the relationship between the individual teacher and the context in which he/she works, an element defined in the "analysis of a request" (Carli & Panicia, 2003). When responding to a request made by an institution or a group, the psychologist should consider that such a request often corresponds to a

break of some pre-existing equilibrium in the work environment. This equilibrium is based on processes of collusion that are centred on how emotions and affections are shared between individuals working in the same context (Carli *et al.*, 2007). When the collusive processes, which are at the basis of relationships, fail, the consequence could be to fracture and disrupt the emotional relationships between the individuals and the context. As a consequence, the psychological intervention aims to enhance relationships between the individual and the context, and to improve approaches and communication.

The intervention described in this paper took place following a request for training made to the University of Naples Federico II by a school in Southern Italy. The training was to include learning facilitation and the management of student-teacher interactions.

The interventions

The intervention consisted of about 10 meetings, and 25 hours of total activity. The following techniques were used: circle time, psychodrama activities, narration and group discussion.

Circle Time

The request for training with a psychologist with experience of clinical work and group management related to the need to deal with teachers' specific job and work related emotional demands.

During the first meeting, in order to encourage the discussion and to provide the opportunity of comparing experiences with each other, the psychologist, with the help of a co-facilitator skilled in observation of in-group settings, suggested the use of 'circle time'. The implicit purpose of using the circle time technique is first of all to create a space for thinking and sharing aspects related to participants' own job and professional identity. It also creates a mutual dialogue, in a manner different from the more typical formal discussions of technical questions between teachers. Circle time was shown to be a very effective technique for improving emotional communications and to allow them to be recognized in themselves as well as in the others (Colasanti and Mastromarino, 1991, Francescato *et al.*, 2000).

The most frequently recurring themes of the discussion were related to the teachers' professional identity, which was perceived as uncertain and precarious, particularly for teachers managing their role inside a school that was defined a 'frontier school'. These teachers feel their jobs could come to an end at any time and therefore feel discouraged from investing in the emotional side of their educational role. The permanent teachers, for their part, describe the school as a *temporary parking area* for students who are not really interested in learning. It is noticeable that all the communications during circle time are related to the individual participant's circumstances

and the wider school context. The communications are clearly based on the difficulties that the specific school context brings to the teachers.

The most distressing difficulties discussed are generally related to a lack of motivation of the pupils. When the facilitator asks participants to think about what could be done to create a successful learning environment, the teachers respond with a form of hopeless acceptance. They defend their own practice, and focus instead on the students' lack of interest in learning and disinclination to engage with the learning on offer. The discussions reveal deeper concerns, more or less common to all the teachers, concerning the kind of pupils attending a professional school: they are frequently characterised as problematic pupils, coming from socio-economically disadvantaged families, speaking slang and immune to any disciplinary punishments.

The teachers appeared despondent about their jobs. Some of them viewed their job as a mere collection of duties without any place for a thought about themselves, their teaching style, the relationship between the teacher and the student, or between the student and the class. A very restricted perception of the job had emerged, a job perceived as performed in a problematic context and impossible to change. Furthermore, the teachers did not believe they could take action and make a contribution to the educational and emotional development of the pupils, limiting themselves solely to the delivery of blocks of information. The earlier meetings were about the creation of a sense of the complexity of the role of the teacher as well as the emergence and recognition of the problems entailed. After consideration of the problems which emerged during Circle Time, the facilitator and co-facilitator programmed a different set of training activities to give the teachers the opportunity of examining, further, these emotional and communication difficulties.

The psychodrama activities. A typical lesson: who is bothering whom?

The analytical psychodrama technique, often used in a French training context, comprises the dramatization of significant events, followed by a discussion to create what we can term a *group breathing space*. In other words, the group elaborates on the experiences expressed in the psychodrama. Kaës *et al.* (1999) suggest that three steps contribute to the overall process, namely, the choice of the theme, the dramatization itself and the ensuing discussion.

It is interesting to note that there were mixed reactions to the sessions, with some teachers being sceptical of the scenarios selected, while others enjoyed the opportunity for training. In one session, after an initial hesitant discussion about the selection of topics and allocation of roles, it was decided to perform a 'typical' lesson. In this scenario, one member of the group (the only male teacher) takes the role of the teacher, while the rest of the group, comprising female teachers, takes the parts of a mixed gender

class, with more males than females.

The group depicts a highly chaotic scene: the students are disrespectful of any school rules, interrupting the teacher, without respect for the speaking order, throwing papers about and chatting amongst themselves. The students are constantly asking if they can go out and there are continuous comings and goings. One of our team also participated as a female student asking impertinent questions: 'How old are you prof? Are you married?'. The teacher, presented as inexperienced, struggles to manage or discipline the class and awkwardly attempts to apply the teaching rules he had been taught. During this dramatization an actual student – female – bursts into the classroom and asks one of the teachers taking part in the psychodrama to come out. Initially the teacher replies that she cannot do this, but then agrees and leaves. The dramatization subsequently resumes.

The teacher performer carried on without reference to the disturbance, and this seems to reflect what happens in real classroom. When the teacher returns after a few minutes she does not resume her role but stands back awaiting the end of the dramatization.

The narration: building a collective story

During some subsequent meetings the group is asked to use the narration device to create a further moment to pause and reflect on the teacher-pupil relationship. The group is invited to build a collective story, in which each participant can add a narrative fragment to build a global plot. After a brief period of disorientation, the teacher who had seemed the most active during the psychodrama activity began the narration, and a global story slowly unfolded. The first statement of the story was "my job is useless", followed by a tale in which the figure of the helpful teacher takes form; a teacher putting all his efforts into trying to enable his undisciplined pupils to gain an adequate education – ultimately unsuccessfully.

A male pupil is described, screaming and disturbing the regular course of the lessons, arguably trying to get the attention he misses in his family. The pupil has a "good heart" and is not malicious, but he also promotes rage, because of his continuous attempts to get attention; he disturbs and generates chaos inside the class group. For some teachers the job is described as "a nightmare", to which they are unable to react, a nightmare represented by this undisciplined, disordered, pugnacious and violent boy. In other words, he is a figure that collects the teachers' projections of dissatisfaction and the powerlessness inherent a job that itself seems to be at risk. They do not know how to help the disadvantaged pupils, who then become the object of certain feelings: they tolerate the trancies, and wait for the time that the pupils will inevitably drop out. The narration of the pupil's character becomes more complex, expressed by the dichotomy "good-bad". He is different from the class group, his behaviour does not yield to the rules of cohabitation, but at the same time he deserves more attention, more mothering perhaps, to understand and, sometimes, justify

his weaknesses and impetuous behaviours. His behaviour is not conducive to the rules of being with others, but, at the same time, he deserves more caring attention to understand and, sometimes to justify, his disturbing and impetuous behaviour.

Final remarks

These training experiences allowed us to think about the complexity facing the psychologist organising a training programme for an institution, even one specifically requested by a school. In terms of the institution, we note the comments of Montesarchio and Marzella (2002) on the importance of preserving the space-time aspects of the training setting, in particular when the training is taking place within the institution which requested it. In fact the participation of the teachers in the programme was often complicated by room changes, finding time within the school timetable for the programme, and keeping to that time. Often other school meetings, which the teachers were supposed to attend, were organised for the time the teachers were supposed to come to the training. Arguably, this reflects the school's ambivalence towards the training it had requested, the tension between the need for change and the fear of it. On the one hand, the approach we took was problematic because it flew in the face of the teachers' expectations of training being about 'how to do'.

On the other hand, it facilitated a more intimate experience. Teachers had the opportunity to recognise and talk about difficult and potentially debilitating feelings, some of which they might share with their students, in particular about the social and economic context, or the perceived immutability of the school. The psychologist in this situation is seen as someone with the duty to solve the crisis and *impasse* magically, without touching on, or involving, the subjectivity of the teachers themselves. Furthermore, as the external stranger, the psychologist is the repository of a 'messianic hope' (Bion, 1961), collecting the most primitive aspects of circular dependence in the group; we know that Bion identifies the dependence as a function that can characterise some moments of a group life, in a structure where one group waits for one who can solve and realise the group's wishes.

However, the possibility of thinking about the situation made the discomfort of working in a so-called 'frontier post school' much clearer. The teachers could experience a deeper insight into the anxiety and bewilderment which often features in a school abandoned by its students. The school drop-out is perceived as inevitable by the teachers, and is one of the causes of their feelings of disinvestment, powerlessness and resignation. Losing a pupil is often experienced as losing a part of themselves, or losing a child who leaves the comfortable place represented by the home/school, despite the efforts and the care of the parent/teacher. In this sense, the different activities, e.g. the narration technique, the psychodrama sessions and the

subsequent sharing of the emerging themes, succeeded in creating a facilitating environment (Winnicott, 1965), in order to make emotional thought and hypothesis making possible. This is made by bearing in mind that the training route 'aims to a revision, to an expansion, to bring into question the reference systems of a specific organization. This is accomplished by introducing a new value system for the organization and for the single subjects' (Montesarchio and Marzella, 2002, op. cit.). In these terms, the psychodynamically-based training can provide a suspension of the teacher's own role, activating self-thinking mechanisms and the possibility of thinking about a way of working which is free of the usual organisational constraints.

However, we agree with the remarks of Blandino and Granieri (1995), who underline the importance of not just seeing the school as a social organization (Rice, 1965), having a major purpose, but also as a system that can exhibit defensive mechanisms and resist change. In this sense, the school as a social organization can, on one side, aim to change, while conversely, it may also block any moves towards change. This seems even more likely when external conditions prevail which prevent the pursuit of the goals on which the organization is founded. It is, therefore, as important to address issues of anxiety, powerless and resignation in relation to the institution, as it is to encourage the development of interpersonal relationships, if real change is to take place. In conclusion, "It is not possible for any real change, any real professional cooperation, if the members of an organization (in our case the teachers of the school) do not question the way they use their structure, the meaning that their own professional role has for themselves, (and) the fears and expectation they have in respect to any novelty or change request" (Blandino, 1995, p. 93).

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