

# **Margot's Red Shoes: When Psychic Reality Challenges Teaching**

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*It almost looks like analysis were the third of those "impossible" professions in which one can be quite sure of unsatisfying results. The other two, much older-established, are education and the government of nations. (Freud, 1925)*

## **Presentation**

Educational environments can be studied from a wide and valuable variety of perspectives: historical, sociological, philosophical, didactical and psychoanalytical. The question tackled here is how can psychoanalytic theory be used in the study and understanding of the relationships and psychic processes at work in the educational experience of a primary school teacher? From a researcher's point of view, the area explored will focus on the teacher/pupil relationship and deal with the role of the intrasubjective and intersubjective in teaching, displaying aspects of the ambivalent dynamics of love and hate likely to occur in an educational process. The authors' theoretical background is that of French clinical research undertaken within a psychoanalytically informed approach in the field of education and training. This approach acknowledges psychic reality, unconscious phenomena and processes, and attempts to characterize, understand and explore them in educational contexts (Blanchard-Laville, Chaussecourte, Hatchuel, Pechberty, 2005). The present contribution is focused on teaching practices and comments on a short episode, (taken from a monograph composed by the teacher), while she was participating in a professional practices analysis group. The teacher/researcher, Anne, is fully involved in the clinical vignette presented since it centres on an eight year old girl whom she has been observing in her own class during a school year. It will therefore mostly be written down in the first person. The experience shared in this paper has marked a formative turning point in the teacher's awareness of the intricacy of the teaching position. Today, in a similar situation, considering the psychical transformation that took place, she presumes, with some justification, that she would think, feel and act differently, as well as consider other aspects of the interactions and environment.

After outlining the framework in which the present research has been undertaken an illuminating episode will be presented. It will be concisely analyzed and followed by commentaries. These sections are mainly written by Anne, and thus the personal pronoun 'I' will be used.

## Framework

As a primary school teacher, I became acutely aware of the fact that the quality of my relationship with children in my class was influenced by intrasubjective and intersubjective processes beyond consciousness and will. My professional experience has convinced me that, indeed, unconscious phenomena do not stand waiting patiently outside the classroom door, a fact that affects both teaching and learning abilities. I have named the little girl whom I chose to observe "Margot". My observations were recorded in a class log while, in parallel, I was attending a Balint type group in which I could share the professional difficulties I was experiencing. Thus the study carried out consisted in combining complementary processes, bringing solitary writing work to an exclusively talking group work. This setting's dynamics have generated what Michael Balint (1957) might have called a "*limited though considerable change of personality*," a change that has definitely challenged my professional identity and practice.

At the core of my monograph (Bastin, 2009) was the class log on Margot that I carefully kept. To this end, I had set up a framework composed of three steps. Step one consisted in writing down facts related to the little girl that I observed in the class and in the playground, during a break or after the class. In step two, when the school day was over, I recorded my immediate reactions to these facts, unelaborated feelings and thoughts. Between step two and step three, I reported in my seminar group some of the difficulties that emerged in my relationship with Margot, and tried to work them through with the help of the group. Step three was a rewriting process through which I reconsidered the situation in question as well as my understanding of it in a more profound and psychoanalytically informed way. This last phase could have been endless since the more I worked on a situation the deeper was my understanding of it. However, I decided to put an end to this rewriting process in the month of July immediately following the end of the school year in question. This paper could be considered as a fourth step in the whole process since it takes into account the previous steps and invites me to reconsider the situation from a perspective that has been renewed by further experiences, reflections and working-through, related to my teaching practices. The subsequent ideas will be conveyed in the next section.

In the *professional practices analysis group* (Blanchard-Laville and Pestre, 2001a) that I attended, we were invited to share our professional difficulties and voice our emotions and thoughts. It was a closed, on-going group, including teachers, social workers and other educators. We used to meet

every two months for three hours in a comfortable place during the whole school year. There were eight participants then and we did not know one another nor did we work together outside. The group leader was a highly qualified person trained in group analysis, who provided an ethical, benevolent *container-contained* (Bion, 1963) environment. No notes were allowed. The group was ruled by confidentiality, respect and responsibility. The group feedbacks were aimed at increasing the understanding of what might be going on, with factual questions or personal emotional reactions, but no advice. Each of us worked in two consecutive sessions. In the first session, the presenter would describe a current case giving cause for thought or distress. In the following session, s/he would share with the group what had happened between the sessions both in *external or shared reality* (Winnicott, 1971) and on a psychical level. Personally, recalling some elements that had been worked through in this group, significantly helped me gain some psychical relief and deepen my comprehension of the hindrances I was confronted with professionally.

### The episode with Margot

I shall now share some of my understanding of the psychical processes perceived in the particular teacher/pupil relationship between myself and Margot. I began by keeping her in my mind at the end of the preceding school year because her former teacher had drawn my attention to the little girl, who was presented to me as needing to be "handled with care" because of her delicate family and school story. Her parents were denied custody of Margot. Consequently, her elder sister (aged 20) had been designated as Margot's legal protector and they both lived with their grandmother. It was the first time I encountered such a situation professionally. Her school achievements being very poor, it had been decided that she would be repeating her second grade in my class. The whole year had been dotted with family events that disrupted the child's schooling. The following episode took place in February.

Step one: factual notes

*This morning, Margot looks restless. I see her making large gestures and wanting to speak a lot. We are correcting a math exercise. Walking between the aisles of tables I notice that she has found the correct answer and quickly conclude that she has understood the lesson. She puts her hand up and talks "nonsense". It makes me unhappy and I send her to the blackboard in order to correct what I believed she had done right in her exercise book. But she walks awkwardly, limping, the red boot on her left foot half on. She looks all bothered, writes something on the blackboard, then turns back to look at me. I am so overwhelmed that I cannot recall what she has written down.*

Step two: notes on my immediate reactions and questions

*This morning I find it difficult to cope with her agitation and her interventions that I consider inappropriate. I wanted to give her the opportunity to show herself in the light of a successful pupil and correct an exercise that she had got right, but she accentuates her neglected and "unbalanced" aspect. Maybe this sends me back to the little girl I once was? Yet, I imagine I had been quite the opposite: invisible, inaudible, but sharing maybe something of this "unbalance"? Could Margot be a caricature of the pupil I once was that I was ashamed of? I do not forget that acting stupid can also be a defence. Did she try to provoke me and to test something in me? To what extent could I accept her, love her? Or did she have a role to play in front of the class as a pupil repeating her year? It is also possible to make a parallel between Margot's elder sister and a situation I once was in myself. As a "tutor" wouldn't I want to see this young 'plant' grow straight? [In French, the word "tuteur" means law guardian, study tutor and garden stake.]*

These notes reveal a certain awareness of the echo existing between Margot's present family story and my past personal story. What could be called a "resonance effect" has most probably generated my immediate empathic feelings towards this little girl. Despite a certain familiarity with psychic reality, I have felt totally disorientated in front of this sort of unconscious staging of repressed wounds that suddenly burst into this seemingly ordinary class situation. Keeping the class log helped me to lay down on a sheet of paper the confusion that took hold of me then, and that I could not assimilate, which I would associate with Bion's *beta-element* being expelled from me to be contained in words by a blank page. This process of writing indeed helped me transform the chaos into something less strange, more digestible. I then reported this situation in my seminar group because I was still struck with my attitude and mixed feelings of guilt, distress and anger. By the end of that school year, I could write the following analysis of the episode:

Step three: a more clinical analysis

*Am I seeing in Margot a younger sister of mine or am I projecting onto this pupil the child I believe I was? I altogether wish that Margot would grow up and stop speaking "nonsense." I would like her to write the correct answer on the blackboard and at the same time I expose her to possible mockery from the other pupils by not anticipating that she would be limping towards the blackboard. Why didn't I simply tell me that her boot was not properly attached without feeling upset? Why didn't I concentrate on the school work? I think I would have acted differently with another child and I dislike this. Regarding the math exercise, I make the hypothesis that if I had felt I mastered this subject better, I would have been more interested in the didactical content and centred on the task that was pushed into the background. What would have happened if it had been a French or an English lesson? The question of the teacher's link to knowledge may also be raised here.*

## 'Today's' commentary

Many years later, I would confirm that individual writing, together with group analysis, sustained me psychically, enabling me to *think my thoughts* and find a more appropriate professional posture. At first, I did not clearly realize that the type of link that had been automatically established between Margot and me could be considered as *projective identification* (Klein, 1952) on my part regarding her and her family situation. It caused me to lose grasp of reality whereas Margot, struggling with my confusion and her own feelings, would accumulate "mistakes"; that is, after she had said "nonsense", she went to the blackboard limping and did not, could not, write an appropriate answer. Hence, she was acting so differently from the child I had imagined she was, that my reactions became inadequate. The defence mechanisms I had built up to protect myself from intrusive emotions and memories that I could not deal with then, also comprised a good part of idealization of the teaching profession and of the pupils. In order for Margot to restore part of her alterity then, wasn't she somehow compelled to exaggerate her clumsiness for me to see the little girl she really was? I am also questioning the meaning of Margot's attitude that could possibly be identified as self-sabotage, but do not feel I can confidently develop this assumption.

Yet I would say that this unexpected confrontation with reality has awakened feelings oscillating between tenderness and rejection. I was aware of the affection I had for Margot and my conscious motivation in sending her to the blackboard was to enhance her self-esteem. The next minute I reprimanded her and sent her back to her seat. These acts were neither pedagogical nor centred on the task for which we were supposed to be together in a classroom. Similar reactions surfaced in other specific moments of the year which were resonating strongly with parts of my own story that were still sensitive. They generated internal conflicts in me due to the feelings of helplessness and inadequacy that Margot awoke, and because of the struggle to avoid causing her pain. Therefore, the more I could work these affects through, the better. Sharing this experience in an appropriate environment allowed me to learn from it, somehow in the same way as that which Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg et al. reported about a group of teaching staff beginning a course she gave at the Tavistock Clinic in London on Aspects of Counselling in Education: "*Of course, everyone knows about feelings of insecurity, but we tend to pay lip-service to these, hide them, ignore them or ride rough-shod over them. (...) The purpose of engaging the teachers in such scrutiny of their here and now experience was neither a therapeutic one nor a model setting intended to be used in school situations. It simply provided an opportunity for learning from experience that such feelings, which we usually relegated to infants and very young children, are indeed ubiquitous, that such anxieties continue to exist to some degree in all of us throughout life. Knowing about them from within ourselves increases our perceptiveness and understanding of others.*"

*It made the group of teachers identify and sympathise with those they taught..."* (p. 5).

Since I consider that I cannot speak for the pupil, or put myself completely in her place, I shall unfold further interpretative propositions using counter-transferential insights. They lead me to make the assumption that Margot might have been unconsciously holding four uncomfortable places, two of them belonging to reality and the other two echoing her teacher's phantasy: the former refer to Margot as the actual child and pupil, the latter refer to her as the teacher's phantasized younger sister or daughter and as the *pupil-self* of the teacher – a concept developed by Claudine Blanchard-Laville (2001b) referring to the pupil whom the teacher phantasizes s/he has been. On my part, I could say that four roles were an issue too: I was at the same time the actual teacher and a woman coping with reality, and might have been an imaginary elder sister and mother for Margot. Besides, since unconscious phenomena tend to venture into external reality more strikingly in moments of anxiety, fears and expectations unwittingly lay beneath this tricky situation. *"We never completely outgrow infantile wishes and attitudes and they are bound to some extent to invade our private and intimate relationships. It is important, however, that we strive to become aware of them so as to minimize their interference in our professional life."* (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983, p. 41).

As far as fears are concerned, Margot might have been afraid of being abandoned again or unloved by her teacher and anxious not to fail again in her school achievements. I might have been anxious of being overwhelmed with the affects that Margot's family situation could revive and also in fear of failing in my teaching ability to help her. Regarding expectations, I assume that Margot could have been searching for some kind of unconditional love from me and some form of reparation of her present family situation. As for me, I might have been trying to offer Margot the symbolic reparation she sought, repairing in the process my own past that was being repeated in front of my eyes and eliciting mixed feelings of helplessness and anger. Some of the internal conflicts we were both confronted with could have been articulated this way by Margot: "I would like my teacher to be a good mother for me but she is not my mother and never will be." Whereas I could have said: "I would like to 'save' Margot but she is neither my little sister nor my daughter and never will be; I cannot and I must not do so." On a more institutional level, this raised the question of a teacher's responsibility: where is the happy medium, the *well-tempered holding* (Blanchard-Laville, 2001b), between excessive involvement and undue neglect?

Little by little, all this turmoil cleared up, Margot became a pupil among other pupils again, and, as Donald Winnicott might describe an ordinary mothering person, I felt like an ordinarily *failing and mending* (Abram, 1996) teacher again. These changes might have been linked to a feeling of inner security that Margot managed to develop, knowing she was accepted, understood and taken care of by her teacher as she was, in her specific

situation. She thus became available for learning again. Then, she might have been able to think: "At school, I am in my place, I am a child of my age, allowed to develop and play safely, and I am a pupil free to think and concentrate on school activities." Similarly, given the psychical release that occurred for me, I could have said: "I am sensitive to the well-being of the child who has been entrusted to me but have no feeling of guilt regarding her situation. I am (solely) responsible for her as the pupil she is as well as for her learning achievements."

## Prospect

To conclude, even if only a very small part of the psychical processes at work in an educational setting has been considered here, I can assert that the present research carried out has transformed my perception of teaching. The experience of writing, together with my participation in a professional practice analysis group, has operated as a containing process that I could internalize and nurture. I associate it with Bion's digestive model of the *thought-thinking apparatus* and specifically with what he stated about a mother's ability to welcome and "digest" her baby's intense archaic bodily feelings and emotions, i.e. what he called the *capacity for maternal reverie* (Bion, 1963). In some similar way, it helped me make sense of and better tolerate the states of anxiety I encountered, as well as develop some of my own *alpha-function* - if I may say. Fostering such skill could be transferred in class to the benefit of the pupils. It has also made me more alert and less helpless in front of unconscious phenomena occurring in educational settings, either in myself or in my relationship with the children. Imperceptibly, this work has had an impact on my professional identity. I can, for instance, set more adequate professional boundaries and clearly differentiate between being a teacher and acting as a therapist or a social worker. Furthermore, in a positive way, my profession is less idealized, which also contributes to ameliorating certain phantasies of omnipotence and helplessness. There is more room for alterity and creativity, and being a *good enough teacher*, as C. Blanchard-Laville says, paraphrasing Winnicott, becomes a sound and demanding enough aspiration.

Nevertheless, psychical realities and external realities will necessarily continue to collide even in the most ordinary-looking teaching settings, since at school as well as in other helping profession settings, intersubjective interactions are highly complex. The fact is that a teacher faces vicissitudes s/he hasn't always been adequately prepared to cope with, and, more often than not, these happen to revive the specifically human archaic feeling of helplessness, for instance. Will they be greeted, repressed or creatively transformed? The teacher's response may vary according to her/his personality but is likely to grow more and more inadequate unless s/he is sufficiently supported. Defence mechanisms such as denial, splitting, projective identification, idealization, may become

friendly warning signs, should teachers be supported to accept and recognize them. As a matter of fact, when unconscious disruptive phenomena arise, although they are inherent to the particular professional status or situation, they still tend to be attributed to personal failure, which adds intensity to the ordeal that the teacher is enduring. Claudine Blanchard-Laville's research findings have defused this equivalence drawn between professional suffering and incompetence (Blanchard-Laville, 2002). The extreme complexity of the teaching profession as one of the three Freudian *impossible professions* (Freud, 1925), requires continuing attention. In his GP groups, Balint supported "the courage of one's own stupidity". Likewise, each move in the direction of teachers' psychical growth and release is a courageous and responsible step forward that alleviates troublesome and worrying teacher/pupil relationships. It can also liberate the teaching space for actual teaching and learning whilst placing at the heart of these interactions the best of their human dimension.

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