

# Cross identification analysis in the class

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I am a specialist teacher in primary education and my work involves helping children with learning difficulties within a particular network. I help children to become receptive to school learning. Previously, over a long period, I taught classes which could be termed "ordinary". The general subject of my research is the study of unconscious transmission phenomena in the teaching space, from the teacher's viewpoint. The subject of this paper is to understand how the introspective work I undertook with a clinical analysis of professional practice group, followed by written work with a research aim, allowed me to analyse a professional situation which greatly concerned me as a teacher. Firstly, I shall present certain elements of the resources from which my research developed, followed by an illustration of certain prototypical aspects of the work derived from the material mentioned. Since this research is in its early stages, the work presented is clearly provisional in its understanding of a particular professional interaction.

## The Nanterre research team

This research stems from work initiated by the laboratory of educational sciences of the Paris Ouest Nanterre University, developed mainly by the *Clinical relationships to knowledge* team, which supports a psychoanalytically-orientated approach to educational science. In a synthesis published in 2005 (Blanchard-Laville, Chaussecourte & al.), the members of this group identify the analysis of practice as one of the sources for understanding unconscious processes in the teaching space, alongside the use of clinical observation and interviews with a research aim (note n°23, p.151).

## The facilities

The two stages for undertaking the work recorded here took place over two years. If the initial year of my professional practice and participation in the group of practical analysis is time  $t_1$ , writing the journal and the first university use for research aims is time  $t_2$  and the present time is  $t_3$ .

I benefited from several resources for my research. Within the group of practical analysis to which I belonged, I presented situations which allowed me to change my views on the situation described, progressively evolving from my involvement as a "reflexive practitioner", participating in a group

of practical analysis, towards an involvement as a researcher, representing an additional shift. This shift was supported by what we can term group research, but also by working on my Masters and more recently in the process of Doctoral study.

### **The clinic analysis of professional practice group**

I discovered the idea of professional practice analysis, with a clinical dimension, at Nanterre University during a Masters seminar. Following this preliminary awareness, I joined a group outside the University and participated for four years. It was a semi-open group with seven to eight participants, combining newcomers and experienced members. The group met every three weeks, with a dozen meetings annually of two and a half hours each. The members worked in activities close to education and training.

This form of work, explicitly referring to a clinic, with a psychoanalytical aim, is conceptually derived from the legacy of the psychoanalysts Michael Balint and Wilfred Bion. It has also been theorized in several publications by C. Blanchard-Laville (2005). A group meets, and is conducted by a leader who ensures a favourable framework for participants' involvement, both containing and reassuring in order to protect those who recount situations in which they took part. At the same time the group creates a space that is stimulating, making psychic processing and understanding more possible for participants' professional functioning. During a meeting, a participant describes a situation which is the cause of a professional problem. The situation is precise, and the speaker personally involved. An exchange follows, concentrating on the particular situation, with questions asked by other group members for clarification, plus additional details added by the speaker. Finally, considerable time is spent on exchanges, free associations, developing hypotheses, always keeping close to the particularities of the speaker's account of the situation, but broadening work perspectives and allowing the person offering the situation to arrive at a new perception of events. The aim of this group work is to transform elements of the participants' professional standing as a result of a release facilitated by psychic "metabolization". This in the sense defined by Bion in his digestive metaphor, i.e. involving a working through of the situations reported in the sessions and the capacity to metabolise various psychic elements. During the second year of my participation in the group, I explained situations, on several occasions, which were most difficult for me. They involved a pupil in my class, a boy of eleven I call Zohar: he had problems in learning, in school attitudes, and in his relations with other children and adults at the school.

## The research material

During the year following my participation in the professional analysis group, and within the framework of research work to obtain a Master's degree, I wrote a journal "one year with Zohar in my class". This ten page document was written when he was no longer my pupil. It is organised chronologically from September to June and presented as a record of real events (those I can remember), mainly class incidents which had caused tension between Zohar and myself.

When I re-read this journal from a follow-up perspective in order to theorize, I decided that I should leave it just as it was, as a testimony for certain events during time  $t_1$ , with the hypothesis that any interference entailed the risk of modifying the content of my account, and thus jeopardising its potential meaning. I therefore chose to add to the original text, rather than changing it, by elaborating on the elements the re-reading provoked in me.

In taking this work up again today, in time  $t_3$ , I study certain elements of these two distinct writing times, and try out hypotheses about the place each of them – i.e. the different phases of writing - takes in my psychic elaborations on just what was involved for me as a teacher then, within that teaching space.

### Zohar

The journal starts by recounting the arrival of Zohar in my class:

Zohar arrived in my class several days after the beginning of term. He was late. The headmaster accompanied him, with his mother, and introduced us briefly prior to the new pupil settling in. A table and space had to be found.

That particular year, (...) in order to free up a teaching job, we had to distribute all the fifth grade pupils into two classes. Every day that passed seemed to bring a new pupil at that level: we were approaching thirty pupils per class, a limit that seemed symbolically impossible to exceed (...) This uncertain situation worried me.

The start-up activities of the class had already been completed. The pupils had received their exercise books, the information forms to fill in, the school rules, and time had been spent discussing what we would do together throughout the year. Zohar arrived while the pupils were at work. We took the time to get to know each other, and then the pupils continued work while I helped Zohar settle in. I gave him exercise books and invited him to get to work.

These two paragraphs at the beginning of the journal indicate from the start my place in this story: the school teacher listing the facts and focussing on the difficulties met, difficulties due to the overloading of these classes and the pupil missing the start of term. These preliminary paragraphs underline, for the teacher that I was, the real constraints that form an obstacle to Zohar's satisfactory integration into his new class.

## The constitution of the psychic group envelope

But I also say more than that: I show a teacher creating the psychic space in which the class will work together, and struggling with a particular pupil.

This memory underlines in a certain way the 'ordinary' activities at the start of the new school year. Objects circulate: notebooks, forms, the school rules which every pupil receives but which the class takes time to read together. The uniqueness of each pupil is recorded in the inquiry forms, containing personal and biographical information, but also a group identity is constituted through everyone expressing their needs, which can become a group project at the start of the year, one to be shared. I think that these objects exchanged are not only material, but that they could constitute in some way psychic objects, particularly for the teacher.

C. Blanchard-Laville, in her work (2001: 221-248), has theorized the constitution of this group psychic envelope created by the teacher in the teaching space, an envelope whose dual qualities of flexibility and firmness make up an unconscious envelope that is "good enough", the qualities of which one can imagine serving to protect the pupils.

Zohar's arrival in this context, or more precisely in my own account in time  $t_1$ , seems to constitute an attack on this psychic space: the pupil arrives "late": did his arrival represent an unconscious threat to the group psychic envelope that I was trying to establish?

A year later, integrating the journal in my Master's dissertation, I wrote:

My welcome on that day was no doubt brief and lacking in warmth. It seems to me that I failed to distance myself from the unfavourable circumstances surrounding the arrival of Zohar: the staggered arrivals, too many pupils, his being late ...

The second text, during time  $t_2$ , reveals the shift in attitude towards the pupil by the teacher I was: she remains aware of the material conditions influencing Zohar's arrival, conditions felt to be unfavourable, but realises that her welcome to him "lacked warmth". These lines bear witness to the de-centring effect of the difficulty experienced in welcoming this pupil, taking more into consideration what this "poorly welcomed" pupil might be feeling. I hypothesize that a mechanism of *projective identification* is at work here. This psychic mechanism was first described by Melanie Klein as a defence mechanism which a person makes use of in order to protect her/himself from anxiety, by unconsciously projecting onto the other some elements s/he is uncomfortable with. Zohar was the repository for a range of anxious projects: he was a threat that needed to be defended against.

The work in the practical analysis group permitted me to start moving away from my position as a class teacher, towards a more thoughtful place, whereas the first more personal writing exonerated me from responsibility for Zohar's difficulties. These were real and evoked strong defence mechanisms, I came to realise. Thus it was later, during time  $t_2$  that a memory came back to me from my schooldays, which no doubt helped me

to feel empathy for Zohar, which is apparent in the second phase of writing.

When I was 14, I joined a new school when the family moved. After a week, just when I was beginning to feel accustomed, I had to change classes in order to continue a Latin option. I tried to convince my parents to abandon the language in order to avoid the change, but they refused, so that, unfortunately, I had to join the new class where it took time to integrate and above all to start working.

This memory shows two moments of separation, one of which remains in the background. It is the second separation that appears difficult, whereas the first school separation with which I was confronted when joining a new school is only mentioned. Everything takes place as though the second separation was "catastrophic" for me, whereas I had been able to absorb, emotionally and psychically, the difficulty of the first separation.

The return of this school memory, whilst I was trying to reflect on Zohar's arrival at the school, no doubt permitted me to reach a different understanding of the difficulty experienced by this pupil in his unexpected arrival. The psychic elaboration I undertook during time  $t_2$ , by including the account from the journal, allowed me to reach a certain capacity for empathy towards Zohar's feelings, by making contact with a split part of me, the pupil part.

But in time  $t_3$ , I suggest another hypothesis: through a projective identification mechanism, might I be projecting elements of my own psychic reality into this situation, putting Zohar in the role of that part of me, the "pupil in difficulty", and somehow asking him to (re)live this traumatic situation? In this hypothesis, the account I give in time  $t_1$  of a sort of "creation" of the class during the first days should be questioned: might it be an idealised account of a group where all doubts, all sufferings, are split away and projected on to one pupil, who in some way becomes the failure-carrier of the group, in the sense of Kaës' (1989) theory of the symptom-carrier. Thus the group could enjoy unmitigated pleasure. The time  $t_2$  account shows that my *capacity for reverie*, theorized by Bion, is not only endangered by this pupil, but also that the first account I wrote already embodies the sense of the attack I felt. It is recognisably there in the text.

### **The connection with knowledge**

I considered the question of the place I gave Zohar in my class in terms of the links I was able to establish with this pupil. In conceptualising the didactic transfer (2001: 193-219), C. Blanchard-Laville theorized the dual link between teacher and class, the link with the pupils, and also a link with the knowledge to be taught. I quote here an extract from the time  $t_1$  journal concerning Zohar's relationship with knowledge and the hypotheses that may be inferred from the teacher's own relationship with knowledge.

The beginning of term was forgotten. Rapidly, it became apparent that Zohar was not following the class rhythm. He seemed lost, often complained that he did not have what he needed to work, in particular the necessary sheets of paper. As this

repeated itself, I took a closer look. I discovered that he had only one exercise book where everything was piled in together, one thing following another and in turn, history, geography and science, with no separations. So it was impossible for him to trace documents, texts, maps, summaries... I looked at this exercise book unable to believe my eyes. Nothing seemed to make sense. I recall panicking: I wondered if this boy had his place in the class.

When I re-examine the journal in time  $t_2$ , I write:

Zohar came from another town. He had not finished the year in his former school: I know now that he left well before the summer holidays, and ignorant of the fact that he would not be returning. Zohar used the same exercise book for history, geography and science, whereas other pupils passed from one exercise book to another. History can be understood as a subject with markers in time, whereas geography is applied to markers in space. It seems to me now that that the "history" of Zohar's family had disrupted his "geography": the family had moved rapidly because of personal circumstances judged to be worrying enough to justify the departure. I make the hypothesis that history and geography are traumatically mixed for Zohar.

In the "journal", Zohar's requests concern what the teacher does not give him: "the necessary sheets of paper". There can be seen in this request, elements of paranoid-schizoid functioning, symbolised by the exercise book and the bits of paper. The exercise book serves as a passive receptacle: it fails to hold Zohar's objects of knowledge, and even more to transform them. The capacity for maternal reverie is also compromised in this situation as mess and muddle are played out in the transmission of knowledge. It is partly on the stage of knowledge that personal pain and even trauma are played out between Zohar and the teacher. I sense that the very objects of the knowledge transmitted – history and geography and all that they symbolise – are 'red-hot'. They are impossible to handle, since they closely touch on deep-seated anxieties in the pupil, both personal and familial. In the teaching space, a scenario is played out between teacher and pupil exchanging muddled requests and defensive anxiety (Blanchard-Laville: 2001, 151).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that Zohar's presence endangered my ability to contain the group and constituted an unconscious threat to the group psychic envelope I desired for my pupils. The phrase I wrote in the journal "I wondered if this boy had his place in my class" seems pregnant with meaning in this regard. Zohar communicated to me in his schooling certain elements of his worry of failure but also family trauma. I have attempted to show how that worry reverberated with elements belonging to me: what did Zohar represent for me? Blanchard-Laville emphasises that teachers should disentangle their professional practice and personal history, in particular by engaging in in-depth clinical analysis of professional practice. I have attempted to show what is possible by way of building

psychoanalytic understanding of relationships, thanks to a supportive structure of a clinical kind, and also to this kind of research.

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