

When the Teachers' Transferential Response Inhibits Learning

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Introduction

The relationship between pedagogy and psychoanalysis has an old history. Some well-known psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic theoreticians were teachers at the very beginning of their careers (Cifali and Moll, 2003). In 1908 Ferenczi wrote an article "Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy" for the Congress of Salzburg (Ferenczi, 2006) where he pointed out that the current 'conservative' approach to education was detrimental to young people and that it could be better organized on psychoanalytical principles. Furthermore, Anna Freud sought to use psychoanalytic theory in her teaching, as evidenced in the "Matchbox School" project which she undertook with her collaborators, Erickson and Aichhorn (Midgley, 2008). After the project was over she continued to work on psychoanalysis and pedagogy. Her famous conferences to parents and teachers stressed how the psychoanalysis of adults could help with the development of a healthy personality in children (Freud, 2003). Both Ferenczi and Anna Freud were concerned about the unrealistic expectations held by teachers about children, particularly in the area of the emotions. While their work taught that the application of psychoanalytic theory to pedagogy is no simple matter, it is of note that educators who are informed by psychoanalytical theory believe that it is an important perspective by which to understand human beings. Thus, it can be argued that there is still room for further work and research in this area, particularly in the investigation of patterns of interaction between students and teachers. This paper will focus specifically on research on counter-transference within the student-teacher relationship. In this sense it is crucial to differentiate a classroom from a therapeutic setting where the neutrality of the psychoanalyst is a rule.

Does Counter-transference exist in a school setting?

According to Laplanche and Pontalis (2004), 'transference' in psychoanalytic theory means the repetition of unconscious infantile patterns of interaction. In which case, every relationship will have a transferential aspect (Etchegoyen, 1999). Additionally, in the clinical setting, the concept of counter-transference is used to gain deeper insight into behaviour and

relationships. There are many views on counter-transference: Freud (2001) saw it as the analyst's unconscious response to the analysand's transference. This was a problem in that the analyst is not in control of their own unconscious, and this could derail the psychoanalytical process. Therefore, further analysis for the analyst was recommended to allow them to consider the origin of their emotional responses.

Later, theoreticians such as (Küey, 2008) developed and transformed the concept. Tükel (2003), in a review of the evolution in understanding the counter-transference, noted how the concept had developed into an important tool for the analyst to use in making sense of the analysand's material. Laplanche and Pontalis (2004) defined counter-transference as a set of unconscious reactions by the analyst in response to the transferences of the patient. In this case, it can be a useful clinical process. In a neutral analytical setting, the patient's infantile patterns of interaction are reactivated; they interact with the therapist's unconscious and become available for interpretation. In other words, counter transference occurs when the emotions projected by the patient into the therapist stimulate the unconscious of the therapist and evoke a set of feelings and reactions in them. When the therapist looks at their own thoughts, feelings and reactions, this can provide insight into the patient's unconscious. In summary, analysts, through counter-transference, can have a better understanding of the patient's unconscious with the help of their own. Laplanche and Pontalis (2004) are clear that the use of counter-transference should be confined to the psychotherapeutic setting, in which clear rules and boundaries apply, for example in terms of time, the neutrality of the analyst, the free association of the patient and payment. Etchegoyen (1999) too locates counter-transference firmly within the psychoanalytic setting, bounded by the same rules. He also maintains that counter-transference is a process which alerts psychoanalysts to their patients' transferences. Laplanche-Pontalis and Etchegoyen agree that outside the clinical setting, counter-transference is lost within everyday communication.

Britzman (2009), a psychoanalyst and educationalist, however, holds a different view, and has sought to use notions of transference and counter-transference in wider settings, namely the classroom. She maintains that an understanding of the transference, counter-transference relationship between the student and teacher facilitates a better emotional atmosphere, which helps to create a better learning environment. She argues that the teacher's unconscious feelings, phantasies and anxieties form a hidden dimension of what is happening in the classroom. Youell (2006) takes a similar view, pointing out that once the teacher is aware of the dimension of a dynamic unconscious, including the counter-transference, they will be able to adjust their attitudes towards their students. The teacher's view of the student's behaviour will be less dependent simply on the transference relationship and involve a consideration of their own feelings and responses. This view of counter-transference having a legitimate place outside the

clinical setting needs to be evaluated and developed. While it may be easy to accept the notion that the teacher's reaction to the student's transferences may be better understood by deploying the concept of counter-transference, and indeed may help with the creation of a more effective teaching and learning environment, it is problematic. Bearing in mind the advice of Laplanche and Pontalis, and Etchegoyen, is it legitimate to call this process counter-transference? The psychoanalytic setting requires, among the previously mentioned boundaries, the anonymity of the psychoanalyst, which means that the patient does not know much about the psychoanalyst's personality. It is very different in teaching: students remain with their teachers all year, in many different activities. Teachers have different roles, including dealing with problems between students, carrying out disciplinary procedures, as well as having fun with them. This is not equivalent to the counter-transference in a clinical setting. Thus, the counter-transference may not be the best term to use in a wider, less clearly delineated context. So there is therefore a question about what term can be used. Thus a new name is suggested for conceptualizing the attitudes of the teachers towards students, which is a *transferential response*. The *transferential response* is a concept used specifically for teaching and learning situations where there are intense emotional interactions on the part of teachers as well as the students. The use of this term enables psychoanalytical ideas to be used in education, but without the more precise clinical connotations.

Mourning

In his work *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud (1984) states that during mourning the world ceases to be interesting to the mourner as the person is aware of what has been lost and how the world has become poorer. The process of mourning is not easy and requires time and effort, with different cultures having their own mourning rituals that provide support for the mourners. These allow people not only to express their feelings, but they also set limits to the mourning and assign new functions to the survivors (Bowlby, 1980). However, the mourning that a child experiences for a lost parent varies considerably compared to that of the adult. The surviving parent's attitude seems to be an important variable for the attitude of the child who may react strongly or withdraw, depending on the situation. Through the mourning process, the investment in the deceased person is gradually withdrawn. For a parent who has lost a child the process is slightly different. Bowlby (1980) suggests that the parents of fatally ill children begin mourning when they hear the diagnosis. They have already experienced a loss, that of a healthy child. In the same way that a small child expects the deceased parent to return, so too the parents of a sick child expect that their child may regain health one day. The associated anger and denial disturbs the mourning process and causes complications

since reality is not accepted as it is. Additionally, unless it is not expressed in psychologically safe environments, such as psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, the anger towards the chronically ill or dead person may cause deeper problems such as chronic depression or manic defences against depression. The people who accompany the mourner have a difficult position since all the anger and disappointment which is for the lost or ill person may be reflected onto them. In that case the person who is offering support may feel angry and disappointed at the response to their good intentions.

Mourning and learning

This research is set within two institutions where there is a deep mourning due to the students who have lost their parents or parents who have lost the health of their children. This study focussed on the interaction between the teachers and the researcher and the teachers' relationship to learning. The researcher is also involved with the teachers as part of a teacher training program. Their attitudes towards learning have been studied using psychoanalytic techniques such as interpretations of dreams and the transferences and counter-transference.

Hunt (1989) suggests that in such an environment, psychoanalytically trained specialists will be able to be aware of emotional relations and associated counter-transference. They can offer a deeper understanding of the unconscious aspects of the mental life of the institution. Helpfully, Roquefort (1995) uses this unconscious functioning to differentiate between three types of institution: the psychotic, the perverse and the neurotic. In psychotically functioning institutions, words have no meaning, law does not exist, therefore the members are unable to express themselves and establish relations. Perverse functioning institutions have the law, but it is not obeyed. The validity of the rules does not last long and is useless after a couple of months. The neurotic functioning institution is characterized by feelings of a lack of power and depressive aspects. When a psychoanalytically trained expert works with these kinds of institutions they will need to understand their counter-transferences in order to make an effective diagnosis. The presence and skills of the expert may stimulate and facilitate the verbalization of elaborate thoughts and better understanding within the setting.

Inability of learning

All three ways of functioning have a major impact on the learning environment. Britzman (2003) addresses another angle: the teacher's defences against learning; learning can be experienced as a destructive process that demolishes previous knowledge. But thinking is the expression

of 'not knowing' and so prepares the way for learning. These two concepts are crucial since they suggest that "not learning" is the result of "knowing and not thinking". In the case of teaching, the teacher's rejection or neglect of psychic communication with the student may result in a cold mechanical form of education. The teacher will be using limited knowledge about the student and there will be no space or opportunity to think about them. When the teacher is open to 'not knowing' they are able to think about the emotional communication from the student and respond accordingly. However, this can be problematic as the teachers do not know how to cope with the double burden of their own feelings of helplessness engendered by the institution, and the feelings caused by students. They may respond by being cold and distant and sometimes by being inappropriately friendly with the students. It is suggested that such reactions may be termed '*transferential responses*' since they are shaped by intense interactions with the students. The inability to think about the unconscious aspects of the teaching and learning relationship impedes effective learning, which requires attention to both cognitive and emotional knowledge. When the thinking process is blocked by emotional tension, the teacher's learning ability is reduced. However, a psychoanalytically oriented trainer, with an understanding of counter-transference, and also able to make effective interpretations, may be able to help. This dimension is illustrated in the following cases.

Two Cases in point

Two cases will be discussed in this part of the study in order to explain the impact of unconscious processes on the learning problems of teachers.

The first setting is a boarding school for orphans. The researcher was invited to provide training for the teachers after a bullying event among the students. The intention was to provide teachers with the necessary skills to deal with this problematic situation or prevent further occurrences. The training program used a technique to encourage teachers to identify and work with their feelings. It took the form of a group interaction where teachers were discussing their problems and feelings about the students. The day before the researcher (who was also the trainer, as noted) started to work with the teachers, he had a dream: *I was in a classroom rather like a living room with lots of sunshine. Teachers were spread out chatting about a problem and met me with joy. They were thinking that I would put things in order.* One interpretation of this is that he had identified himself with the grandiosity of the institution and feeling that he will solve all the problems and put the things in order. This possible interpretation is supported by another event.

The teachers had forgotten their appointment for the third meeting but came to meet him on hearing of his arrival. When he asked about the significance of their forgetting, the teacher-leader took the responsibility for

not informing his colleagues, but the researcher insisted that it was important to think more deeply about the meaning of the forgetfulness. One of the teachers said there was a flood in the city, so they forgot about the session (there had in fact been a large disruptive flood in Istanbul). The researcher also asked what the flood meant to them. They all started to talk about the big flood and how the school administration decided to keep the students in school over weekends and holidays due to the problem. They talked of how they were stuck with the students in the school for four weeks, without a break and how they were overwhelmed with day and night duties. They complained about the administration not giving them enough support. The researcher then observed, interpretively, that they were also flooded with feelings of helplessness. The interpretation caused them to stop and think. They were feeling the same way as students, helpless and neglected. That is why they were making the researcher also feel neglected, by forgetting the session. In this way they were avoiding thinking and thus learning from experience. By starting to think about their forgetfulness they were able to understand the difficult behaviours of the students and learn from the situation.

The second case is based in a school for mentally and physically handicapped children. The researcher worked with this school on a voluntary basis. During the first year he met with the volunteers, monthly, to work with their concerns, feelings and thoughts. It appeared that the teachers were disappointed and angry with the parents, who they experienced as excessively demanding. They expected their chronically ill children to be cured, which, despite the teachers' best efforts, was impossible. Parents were, in effect, denying the sad reality that their children would never get better: denying, in other words, the mourning necessary for an unhealthy child. There came a point where the teachers declined to take part in any more sessions with the researcher, claiming that these raised too many dangerous feelings for them. The researcher sought to understand the meaning of the sense of danger for them. The teachers explained that they did not want to express their feelings, and some remained silent and distant. After that meeting the researcher, in turn, felt very angry towards the teachers, particularly because he was working for them on a voluntary basis. They were refusing the help he offered. He recognised, however, that these hateful feelings were out of proportion to the situation. After thinking about this, he came to realize that he was feeling the hatred the teachers felt towards their students, not least because he was willing to accept it. The stuck '*transferential responses*' of the teachers were projected onto the researcher. They made the researcher feel useless, as incapable as they had felt with the blaming parents.

The feelings of the teachers were influenced by transference responses, related to the mourning of parents and students. They were also accompanied by feelings of anger and hatred, which was the most difficult to express since it creates guilt. That is why mourning is a very difficult

process. The feelings of frustration, anger and guilt towards parents were part of daily life and, because they were so hard to face, inhibited the possibility of them learning from their own experiences. Their *transferential response*, in this case, the unspoken hatred towards the students and parents, had to be worked through in order for them to learn.

Learning, containing

These two examples may be diagnosed as emanating from within neurotic institutions where teachers are feeling helpless and neglected as Roquefort (1995) suggested. This is why they were, at least in part, unable to think and learn. These cases can also be understood using Bion's model of alphabetization (Bion, 2005). The teachers needed to understand, and make understandable, what they get from students, in ways that are analogous to the work of the good enough mother in relation to her baby. But this process is not simple: first of all the teacher must work on their transference responses, especially in the case of mourning where making it understandable for the child will not be easy. The ability to think about thoughts and feelings creates an area of containment for the other but this requires an ability to contain one's own thoughts and feelings. In these cases the inability to contain was caused by hate which was hidden behind other feelings. Thinking about thoughts and feelings was blocked and learning frozen.

The problem here, then, is how to understand feelings such as hatred in terms of the *transference response* rather than any counter-transference relationship. When Winnicott (2003) writes about the counter-transference, he takes hatred into consideration. He claims that a real relationship cannot exist unless it includes hate and love, simultaneously. However, people usually consider hatred as a dangerous feeling, capable of ruining everything; therefore it needs to be disavowed. However, as Winnicott points out, when hatred is denied, it gets enacted in a variety of ways. As in the case of these schools, where the teachers cannot even accept the existence of hateful feelings and resist acknowledging them. In this case, unexpressed hatred is enacted in teachers' attitudes towards students: as sadism or masochism, for instance, in which the teacher refuses any help and or rejects the opportunity to learn. It is important to note that feeling such emotions, in their totality, requires the ability to mourn. The teacher mourns for not being a great teacher, a saviour, or resilient to everything and then thinks about why they have chosen this profession. So, the process of thinking the unthinkable can help teachers gain some ability to learn from experience, by minimising their defences, but also to build a more realistic understanding of the nature and messiness of their work.

It should be noted that, in both the above cases, the teachers were able to move towards the ability to think, feel and learn. Nevertheless, they needed support from an expert and time for the process. The goal of the research

was to facilitate a discussion on the potential relationship between psychoanalysis and schools and to build a language of psychoanalysis in the service of teachers as Britzman (2009) has suggested. In this sense, as above, a new term *transferential response* is suggested, as an alternative to the counter-transference, which carries specific connotations from psychoanalytic practice. In contrast the term *transferential response*, derived from psychoanalytic theory, seeks to delineate unconscious emotional responses of teachers towards their students in a classroom and wider institutional setting. In order to illustrate the utility of the term, two cases on the processes at work in two institutions have been studied. It has been found that the teachers' daily interactions with the students have strong effects on their emotional lives. Thus what we can meaningfully call the *transferential responses* of teachers, interrupts their learning and capacity for thinking, unless, that is, there is an intervention from a psychoanalytically oriented expert in a sensitive way.

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