

The School Teaching Process: Between Method and Representations

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Abstract

This article explains the unconscious psychic dimension of teaching sessions through the psychoanalytic approach, demonstrating how fantasies and representations of drives interact within learning situations and influence the pedagogical relationship. It also emphasizes the importance of imaginary scenarios in guiding choices, content, expectations, teaching strategies, and student behaviors.

Keywords: teaching, learning, fantasies, representations, imaginary scenario

1. Problem Statement

Teaching is an interpersonal process that primarily uses communication; it is a pedagogical situation led by the teacher as a means to provoke, foster, and ensure the learning of knowledge or skills. (Sillamy,1980)

Teaching is not simply the act of transmitting knowledge—it encompasses all pedagogical means and educational measures implemented to enable children and adolescents to develop all their abilities and possibilities and acquire skills. Thus, it simultaneously constitutes a process, work, and result.

This process of transmitting knowledge and developing skills is complex; it involves methods and pedagogical strategies suited to learning situations. According to Altet (1997), teaching and learning form an inseparable pair. In educational science, the teacher is seen as a mediator, organizer of learning conditions, facilitator, and transmitter, fulfilling a helping function for the learner.

School learning covers diverse domains and various phenomena. It is a complex construct that cannot be reduced to a single model. It involves adaptive changes in the organism, resulting from its interaction with the environment and depending on several personal factors such as intelligence, motivation, and affectivity (Sillamy, 1980).

The teaching method is central to any teaching process, closely tied to its objectives. It refers to the structured processes, techniques, and practices aimed at transmitting knowledge and developing skills.

The teaching style is often used as a synonym for the method. It indicates “a configuration of behavior and attitude (actions, gestures, interest, communication, and character) that characterizes teaching in regard to behaviors and various relationships in a pedagogical situation” (Legendre1988, p.119).

Beyond the conscious aspect, the psychoanalytic approach explains pedagogical interventions and teacher actions within the context of an unconscious dynamic. This dynamic organizes the teaching session according to several modes. This approach perceives the teaching/learning situation as a site of confrontation between representations and fantasies, both for teachers and students.

Psychoanalytic theory situates participants' behaviors in the teaching situation as the product of a process involving fantasies and imagination. This unconscious scenario, mobilized by the situation, unfolds in a regressive context. The fantasy field of teaching and learning situations acts on cognition and affect, thus influencing intellectual operations (Emmanueilli, 2014).

Within this approach, to understand the psychological process governing the educational session—and at the same time, identify methods likely to improve student learning—we develop an in-depth reflection around the following questions:

- What imaginary scenarios govern teaching sessions?
- What role does the teacher play in mobilizing these scenarios?

2. The Teaching Process in Psychoanalytic Theory

As with any practice carried out in a group context, unconscious representations organize experiences and guide behavior in an interactional dynamic between internal and external reality.

Teaching is a group process that organizes the psyche according to a specific mode. According to Anzieu (1969), all group processes mobilize the entire psychic apparatus of participants, including the id and superego, as the group is a container—a psychic envelope holding all individuals together. It is also a site of expressing desires.

The group is a specific tool for school learning, allowing “the construction of intelligence through social interaction” (Perret-Clermont 1979, p.15) and facilitating active interactions capable of mobilizing the entire psychic apparatus.

Even if teaching appears purely pedagogical and constructive, involving a teacher, a learner, and subject matter, the educational situation is dynamically organized as an interaction between the psyche of students and that of the teacher. This learning act involves a whole system of representations, drives, and fantasies. Psychoanalytic theory sees this activity as a psychic regression, leading to the establishment of defense mechanisms according to specific modes. It is a process of reproduction and creation that enables the mobilization of fantasies—first fantasies of creation, fabrication, and modeling— as students are treated by the teacher's unconscious as objects (Kaés, 1975).

2.1 Teacher Representations and Fantasies

The imaginary is conceived as the set of productions of a mental function called imagination, which is both productive—reviving already experienced perceptions—and creative, forming new images from unusual combinations (Giust-Desprairies, 2003) through its power to revive perceptions that have already been experienced.

Fantasies are imaginary scenarios; according to Ségäl (1969), they are mental representations of drives, accessible only indirectly and deductively to us. These unconscious fantasies exist

from the start of life, as the sensation of a drive becomes linked with fantasies about an object suited to it.

Unconscious fantasies are not merely products of reality but a constant accompaniment to lived experience, involving continuous interaction between internal and external reality. They can determine and control events, influence or alter perception and interpretation of reality. They also serve as defenses against internal reality by helping avoid frustration and enabling the subject to recognize unpleasant external reality (Ségal,1969).

In teaching contexts, fantasies act as interpretative frameworks, influencing how teachers view students, knowledge, and the didactic relationship; conversely, they generate representations of teachers within students.

If a representation is the mental image one forms of a situation, it is considered “not only as content but also as a set of processes aiming to reconcile interiority and exteriority, the individual and the collective.” (Giust-Desprairies,2003, p.16)

It is a construction of both individual and group reality, allowing interpretation of the world and referencing a system of meanings. This system consists of a core imaginary, organized by psychic life. This imaginary dimension operates within an unconscious scenario granting fantasy meanings or significations .

In teaching situations, teachers’ representations of students are organized according to prior intrapsychic configurations. These representations shape pedagogical communication and interactions during teaching sessions.

Kaés (1975) distinguishes several teacher models. This categorization depends on the unconscious representations attributed to the teacher and the pedagogical scene. They are linked to a play of fantasies that reactivate imaginary scenarios associated with archaic images within the unconscious dynamics of the teaching situation :

2.1.2 The Mother-Teacher

According to Kaés (1975), learning situations are organized by fantasies conflated with the motherly universe, arranging teacher-student relationships according to a drive-based play or pulsional interplay . Teaching activity is seen as realizing maternal fantasies, as this reality is governed by fantasies about the womb, gestation, birth, and bringing forth life into the world, that is, the symbolic production and emergence of new beings .

Teaching is about caring for babies or symbolically taking charge of infants . “It is about being like a mother, experiencing and making others experience the satisfactions reserved for her alone, enjoying the full power of possessing the children within oneself.” (Kaés,1974, p.24) In this perspective, the act of teaching reproduces the maternal position of containing, nurturing, and giving life.

Teaching is linked to the relationship between a person and their mother; the teacher identifies with her power and ideal: good, generous, unlimited in capacity to give pleasure, yet also worried about bringing forth babies and separating from them that is, anxious about both giving life and eventually letting the child become independent .

The school year’s organization proves the maternal fantasy as the annual cycle lasts nine months, matching gestation. In this sense, the temporal structure of schooling symbolically reproduces the rhythm of pregnancy. Kaés (1975) points to the teacher’s concern for student

success at year's end and the desire to teach as analogous to the mother investing energy to bring her child into the world. The teacher's emotional and intellectual investment throughout the year resembles the maternal investment during pregnancy. This is the reason why every teaching process seems to express the life drive.

Teaching is therefore tied to fantasies about pregnancy, gestation, and birth, expressed by the teacher's (male or female) commitment throughout the school year (three trimesters) for student success and through the continuous pedagogical investment devoted to the development and maturation of learners .

The teacher may also experience an imaginary scenario as a midwife or obstetrician , carrying and helping birth babies that is, assisting in the symbolic emergence of knowledge and intellectual capacities . These "birthing" processes can be active, skillful, and benevolent, but also sadistic and wild; sadistic and destructive components also exist in this relationship because the dynamics of drives may include both creative and destructive impulses . According to Enzieu (1976), teaching requires, in some sense, a willingness to confront symbolic death , to accept separation and even death in the other meaning the disappearance of the former dependent state of the learner and the acceptance of autonomy .

2.1.3 The Machine-Teacher

Programmed, rigid teaching is governed by fantasies about machines: "this machine for molding signals intense anxiety, revealing the threat of losing vital contact and the great deprivation of love" (Kaés,1975, p.30).

This representation gives the learning situation a horrific image, relating to the two-faced maternal image: omnipotent and destructive. It reproduces the double meaning or dual dimension of the maternal figure as both creator/destructor and liberator.

Representing the teacher as a cold, emotionless machine —monstrous and devoid of affect— stems from fantasies of destruction and organizes the process in an anxious mode, causing significant intellectual blockages in students. This fantasy depends on the teacher's attitudes and on the ways in which he or she represents students within the pedagogical relationship

2.1.4 The Teacher in Play and Modeling

The play and modeling that most children engage in shape teacher behavior. This psychic regression, manipulated by a fantasy about "shaping" students as inanimate materials that must be molded resembling an imaginary model, guides teacher motivations. It explains teachers' objectives aiming to steer educational projects toward creating specific models where students must fully submit to teacher power and conform to the model imagined by the teacher .

2.1.5 The Specular Teaching Fantasy

This is the desire to reproduce the other in one's image and to see oneself reproduced in the other. Teaching students in one's image refers the teacher to the mirror stage. Such fantasies, related to this stage of psychological development, reactivate the anxiety of fragmentation related to primary, fusion-based identification characteristic of early psychic development .

This psychic regression produces anxiety in students, who can only submit to teacher's wishes. According to Barus (1970), the learner can only be a mirror for the teacher, who is confused with the omnipotent, sadistic mother of archaic fantasy . The learner responds with

passivity: obedience, responding to questions, and revealing what's inside themselves that is, exposing what they have "in their belly," symbolically showing what they have internalized . This situation may inhibit the desire to learn.

2.1.6 The "Pedagogical Teaching" Fantasy

When René Kaés joins Brus (1970), he explains that the traditional teacher-student-object knowledge relationship is established through narcissistic identification with the internalized object. The student becomes an integrated substance within the psychic economy of the teacher —to become the teacher's product. This possession gives the teacher power and narcissistic satisfaction. Through the pedagogical situation, the teacher recovers authority via knowledge reflected back by the student.

Student failure is represented as expulsion or projection of the bad object upon them that is attributed to the learner , which is returned to the sender as poor results.

Kaés (1975) believes the learner receives teaching in a sadistic manner, regressing to the anal stage, which reactivates sadistic and masochistic positions. This fixation drives relationships toward active teacher authority and passive student submission, organizing teaching situations around aggression and reinforcing anxiety within the pedagogical relationship .

In this view, the teaching process bears the mark of fantasy attacks, with the student under the teacher's omnipotent control. Each attempt to escape this dominance triggers splitting as a defense mechanism. The "good student" or "bad student" labels result from this splitting within the teacher's symbolic classification of learners .

2.2 Conflicts Related to the Teaching Process

According to Kaés (1975), the teaching process is mobilized, energized, or paralyzed by intrapsychic conflict which organizes, activates, or inhibits the dynamics of the situation and manipulating participants in learning situations.

Any learning situation requires accepting being challenged, accepting a flawed self-image, reshaping oneself, and confronting an ideal self or a more accomplished image of oneself . Accepting learning means admitting a lack of knowledge and acknowledging the incompleteness of one's current understanding . The learner faces a dilemma:

- First, abandon the ideal to avoid further damage or deformation of the self-image and preserve the flawed self.
- Second, maintain the quest for the ideal to conform the defective self-image to it by transforming oneself in relation to that ideal .

The outcome depends on the student's ability to establish an illusion field in the teacher-learner relationship that is, a symbolic space that makes identification possible , engaging in identification with a group ideal shared within the teaching group .

The teacher's role is to maintain a learning situation allowing this work of psychic elaboration and identification in favorable conditions, with the conflict kept in a calm environment so that it can be expressed and overcome or worked through , enabling new relationships and new forms of psychic and relational organization .

2.3 Teacher Representations and Learning Situations for Students

The learning situation is governed by three fantasy poles linked to the teacher's representation generated by their method and style of teaching as perceived and constructed by the learner within the pedagogical relationship :

2.3.1 Enjoying Teaching

In this learning situation, the teacher identifies with the ideal mother: good, generous, with great capacity to give pleasure. This representation of the good mother is tied to fantasies of seduction, organizing the process wherein the teacher is loved for showing interest and benevolence toward students in a climate of well-being and satisfaction and emotional comfort .

2.3.2 Sadistic and Destructive Teacher

The image of the destructive parental power appears for both teacher and student and is linked to the representation of the destructive mother . This fantasy creates anxiety and a persecutory image; each represents the other as sadistic, cold, and indifferent. Persecution fantasies and death drives organize teaching in anxiety, threat, and persecution, resulting in rejection and refusal reactions in students and teachers within the learning situation .

2.3.3 The Reparative Pole

When learning is experienced by students as fulfillment and well-being, it is organized by fantasies of pleasure and satisfaction, making learning a work of pleasure or reparative rebirth that allows the subject to restore and reorganize his or her psychic balance .

This is possible when students feel protected, loved, valued, and safe thanks to teacher benevolence and supportive attitudes . The student experiences learning as pleasurable work carried out in the matrix represented by teacher and school institution (Kaés 1975) which symbolically functions as a containing and nurturing environment .

2.4 Phallic Quest and Castration Complex

Symbolic castration fantasies structure and organize the learning situation when teachers apply rules, impose limits and prohibitions, confronting students with an Oedipal or pre-Oedipal perspective. This fantasy scenario may place the student before the representation of a castrating father figure , which can weigh heavily on adolescent learners especially during adolescence .

On the other hand, containment in the situation of prohibition (symbolic castration) supports, limits, and protects students. It helps construct and internalize the reality principle; secondary processes thus help consolidate the sense of protection. Therefore, any teacher effort to instill rules may trigger both protective and castrating, limiting, and painful representations (Decherf,1986).

3. Transference and Countertransference in the Teacher-Student Relationship

Transference is a psychological process indicating a specific affective relationship determined by old psychological structures (Sillamy, 1980). It consists of actualizing unconscious desires onto relational objects within certain types of relationships (Laplanche,

Pantalis, 1967) and can manifest through repeated relational patterns from early life experiences projected onto current interpersonal situations .

Transference is a property of the imaginary, involving internal displacement movements within representations, scenarios, and affects—from an old situation onto a current one, resulting in a resurgence of former figures onto present ones (Giust-Desprairies, 2003).

Transference in teacher-student relationships is similar to that in psychotherapy: a tendency to replay past emotional and affective situations, leading the student to react as they would with a parental figure or other authority figure from early relational experiences .

This intersubjective dynamic in learning situations mobilizes representations and affects developed unconsciously regarding the dynamics of being and having within the teaching process and shapes the relational and emotional atmosphere of the classroom .

Opposition, provocation, rule-breaking, and absence are forms of negative transference, while idealization and submission to teacher omnipotence designate positive transference reflecting the student's unconscious attempts to cope with anxiety . These are two types of defenses students use to avoid anxiety generated by transference mechanisms and protect their fragile psychic equilibrium during learning .

The teaching process requires the teacher to act as group leader, while encountering resistance and rejection from some students who reject parental authority embodied in the teacher. Negative transference is particularly frequent among adolescents due to developmental challenges and identity formation .

Countertransference responses by teachers reflect emotional reactions provoked by students in the teacher's psyche. These reactions lead to repression and rejection or defensive withdrawal or to understanding and seduction expressing empathy and encouragement .

Therefore, the language used by the teacher evokes countertransference responses. The investment in speech with reference to transference takes place in the context of seduction and full language that evokes identification and idealization, or empty speech and sadistic behavior that evokes anxiety, castration, distance, and rejection and conditions the learning psychic environment.

The teacher is expected to identify and understand transference relationship issues, starting with their own countertransference by reflecting on personal emotional responses . This helps avoid inappropriate reactions and allows adjustment of the pedagogical approach according to learners' needs and expectations. This is "adapting teaching style to students' psychological needs" while maintaining the balance between authority and emotional containment .

4. Conclusion

In order to address the problem of the pedagogical process, it is not enough to focus on methods and teaching styles from a purely cognitive and consciously emotional point of view, or to observe only behavioral manifestations in the classroom.

Psychoanalysis provides insightful keys to understanding what occurs beneath the conscious surface in teaching situations. It emphasizes significant elements of internal reality that intervene in the teaching process. Identifying these elements and their influence on teacher-

student interactions helps adjust pedagogical practices and create a climate conducive to learning that nurtures both emotional security and cognitive development .

As with other practices carried out in group contexts, unconscious representations and fantasies linked to imaginary scenarios organize lived experience and guide teachers' and students' behavior toward an interactional dynamic between internal and external reality shaping both affective and cognitive responses in the classroom . The fantasy stakes of the learning situation are fundamentally dependent on the methods employed by the teacher and how these methods resonate with the students' unconscious dynamics .

Understanding these internal dynamics in their logic—and being able to illuminate teacher and student representations in their unconscious dimension—enables the participants in teaching to propose strategies that foster learner well-being, facilitate learning, and support the constructive engagement of unconscious drives in the educational process .

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