

A psychoanalyst in the classroom. Suggestions and reflections on psychological listening: between complexity, new adolescents, and the struggles of the school environment

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ABSTRACT. – This contribution is the result of various reflections developed by the authors in the context of listening experiences in schools. It is the result of many doubts and questions about working in schools, the people that inhabit it, and the role that the psychologist-psychoanalyst can play within it. In presenting our considerations, we are reflecting on the possibility of taking a psychoanalytic approach in a complex institution such as a school, to which we are often called to provide solutions or immediate answers, whereas we should be asking ourselves questions. This is an opportunity to reflect and dwell on the experience of listening in school settings, on what resonates inside psychologists-psychoanalysts, on what they personally experience and encounter once they enter the school. Most of these thoughts concern high schools or secondary schools, where most of our experiences have taken place, but what emerges from this article may also apply to other school contexts.

Key words: adolescence, school, psychoanalysis, complexity, psychological listening.

*“Schools must do more than avoid pushing young people to suicide,
they must create a zest for life and offer support and assistance
to them during a period of their existence in which,
due to the conditions of their own development,
they need to loosen their ties to their family and home.”*

S. Freud

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Being an Adolescent in today's schools

Together with family, school represents one of the most important “contexts” of growth for adolescents, who spend most of their days here from the early years of life. This is the case for younger children, as well as for adolescents and in general for the whole cycle of study and training of a young person. However, in adolescence, it has a different connotation, as the significant changes that take place at this stage mean that young people are increasingly divesting themselves from the family and turning progressively more towards the outside world. At this stage, peers are becoming progressively more important, while parents are taking a back seat and, if all goes well, remain a point of reference to call on in times of need. In this phase, therefore, the school becomes a place of primary importance, in which young people not only build their future and their education but also maintain relationships with their classmates and teachers, make new friends, fall in love, and begin to test their skills. Today's young people no longer have the unique role of a student, but they are subjects who inhabit the school, who experience it, bringing their world, their dreams, their expectations and even their difficulties into it. Teenagers in school not only learn but also experience themselves and others outside of the family, whether others are of the same age, or an external adult or institution. As Lancini says: “The boys and girls who enter the classrooms of primary and secondary schools today do not place their role as a student at the centre of their school experience but rather prefer to search for experiences of enhancement and recognition in a broader sense” (Lancini, 2015). It goes without saying how much this contributes to increasing the complexity of the school as an institution, a place that is increasingly subject to expectations and filled with new tasks and responsibilities, with ever-changing dynamics, arrangements, and mechanisms, which require appropriate understanding.

School: possible and impossible goals and functions

In today's environment, schools have the opportunity, if not the duty, to play a significant role in adolescent development, helping teenagers build their own sense of personal identity, define their relationships with adults and institutions, educate them about affectivity, help them develop their own thoughts, and learn to respect others. As Morin suggests, schools should train to have a binary, dichotomous type of thinking to approach the acceptance of a co-presence, of irreducible complexity (Morin, 2014).

As mentioned, within schools, young people do not only bring what they are but also their goals, abilities, expectations, and their anxieties, fears,

fragilities, and in some cases even their discomfort, their distress, which may come to light via behaviour, in relationships, or even in their performance. Symptoms of emotional distress that can be experienced daily, such as shyness and anger, undisciplined behaviour, arrogance and rebellious attitudes, inconsistency in results, failures, disinterest in school, continuous absences or “playing hooky” are frequent situations. These manifestations of adolescents in school are real windows of opportunity because they give us a chance to intercept a discomfort that does not always emerge in the most obvious ways. Sometimes, it expresses itself in other ways, through school problems that represent a first warning signal, an un verbalized request for help, perhaps that the individual is still not aware of. Intervening in this situation would, therefore, allow us to act before that discomfort turns into a real symptom or syndrome. Such difficulties often reflect typically adolescent problems, the expression of a distress connected to the changes of this period of development, but in some cases may reveal specific conflicting situations that express the presence of polarized intrapsychic conflicts in a setting or, more complex pathological conditions, the expression of a personality disorganization that originates from early childhood.

While it is (perhaps) true that it is not the school’s job to resolve students’ personal problems, we think it is still a duty to be aware of them, given that most of the time these difficulties end up interfering, more or less significantly, not only with academic performance but in the education of young and future citizens. Indeed, the school environment can play a fundamental role not only in the education and training of the young person but also in his or her psychosocial development. It can be a significant source of social support; it can support adolescents on their path to growth, fostering the acquisition of skills, autonomy, capacity for engagement and participation, and it can also provide opportunities for discussion, listening, and involvement in the young person’s life. Students who feel integrated in the school environment have better learning outcomes and better psychosocial well-being. The school can, therefore, contribute positively to the health of its students by encouraging positive experiences, promoting a sense of belonging, and involving their families, the school community as a whole, and local organizations.

The psychologist at school. Roles, functions, and a brief history

The complex individual, group, and institutional phenomena that are emerging within today’s schooling system require careful consideration, and it is precisely here that our role as psychologists and psychoanalysts can be useful, with our ability to be in complexity, to read it, and to try to give it meaning. Bringing a psychoanalytic perspective and mental setting into a

complex institution such as a high school, in which very diverse needs are intertwined, may be very important not only to answer specific individual or group questions or requests, but it may be fundamental to begin quite literally giving form and meaning to what happens in that school.

Being a psychologist with psychoanalytic training in a context such as a school, we believe, implies the ability to have in mind a complex vision of reality and specifically of the precise context that is a school, in order to guide those who inhabit it toward that irreducible complexity that Morin speaks of. It has to be a complex vision because both the human beings we are dealing with and the school system are complex. In this regard, it is very useful for the professional to be able to build those links and relationships with the school institution (headteacher, teachers) over time, as they allow him/her to understand how that particular system works in more detail.

To do this, however, it is necessary for the psychologist to become a practical part of the school system, and not only in critical times or emergency situations such as the one that resulted from the recent pandemic, or in those cases where there is a particularly difficult class or problematic student that needs to be managed. In these cases, there is a strong risk of confusing school psychology and the functions of the school psychologist with those of emergency psychology, that is, of providing clinical and social interventions in crisis situations. In this regard, it makes us reflect how, in the COVID decree and in the subsequent memorandum of intent, although we tried to introduce the psychologist to schools, we never discussed the figure of the school psychologist nor defined it; it was and is always only about “psychological support” (Federici, 2021). This suggests an incomplete reform of the school system that includes, as an institutional figure, the psychologist, but in reality, it is a use of emergency psychology used to deal with periods of social crisis (Federici, 2021).

But let us try to take a step back and see how, over time, psychologists have managed to “enter” the Italian schooling system.

Since the end of the 70s, the possibility of introducing psychologists in school has been debated in Italy, but despite several proposed bills, a clear and definitive bill on the subject has never been approved, creating over the years a regulatory vacuum on the matter in question, leading to a situation of serious underdevelopment in Italy compared to other European countries (Ammirati, 2023).

A first attempt to introduce the figure of the psychologist took place in the 90s with the establishment of the C.I.C. (Information and Counselling Centre). As a result of the steep increase in drug use among young people, so-called Information and Counselling Centres were set up, designed as addiction prevention services. The establishment of Information and Counselling Centres in secondary schools was provided for by Art. 106 of the D.P.R. (Presidential Decree) 309/90, Consolidated Act on the subject of

drugs and regulated with subsequent newsletters of the Ministry of Education. The indications contained therein are very general: they merely state that the C.I.C.s are established by the Board of Education, in agreement with the School Board and the Addiction Services, and that, in the implementation of projects, schools can be supported by auxiliary bodies recognized by the Region, operating in the field of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of drug addiction. The organizational model is open and adaptable: the legislator left ample room for individual realities to design the C.I.C.s depending on the needs and characteristics of the context in which they operate. Various organizational models have developed over the years, often being set up as listening and consultation spaces for students.

Subsequently, the figure of the psychologist at school was provided for in the Law on the didactic and organizational autonomy of individual institutions (Law No. 59 of 15 March 1997) and afterwards regulated by several other laws and newsletters. These rules provided for the possibility of schools being able to have a psychologist present through various types of arrangements. It was possible to establish direct contact with individual professionals or mediated by local health units, regional school offices, cooperatives, or associations. Unfortunately, however, the precarious nature of available resources and the inconstant investment in schools meant that interventions were limited in time and often characterized by an episodic, occasional presence of the psychologist in school life.

Only recently, due to the difficulties faced by the schools following the COVID-19 emergency, a Memorandum of Intent was signed providing for the systematic activation of specific calls for assignments, such as the school psychologist (Ammirati, 2023). For years, we have been talking about the decline of schools, about young people struggling, about the need for a general psychologist practitioner, a school psychologist, but it was not until the pandemic that we were finally able to deploy more stable resources to make all of this happen. As mentioned previously, such an approach, rather than reflecting a planned and thought-out intervention of a school psychologist, seems more like an emergency psychology intervention, which is activated too late, when the damage has already been done, with the aim of containing suffering and providing psychological support. This unfortunately reflects a tendency to conceive the psychologist's intervention almost exclusively from a reparative perspective.

The role and tasks of a psychologist at school should, however, go far beyond times of crisis and should be guaranteed only if they are included in the school system as an expert on the existential and psychological well-being of the components of Italian schools (Federici, 2021).

To date, Italian school appears to be an institution in crisis, sometimes undervalued, delegated with many tasks and responsibilities, all in light of continuous cuts and increasingly scarce resources. Schools are being asked

to be more and more than they are, often delegating them with tasks and responsibilities of our own society. As an exclusively educational institution, the school is asked to change and adapt to the needs of our society, while at the same time asking to teach, educate, train, evaluate, love, and sometimes even care for or help our children.

The school has gradually transformed over the years from a place of control and consent, of hierarchies, and of the teacher who punishes and represses, the so-called “school of conflict”, to a school where the scenario of informality prevails, in which exhibitionist aspects and the theatricality of gestures stand out (Lancini, 2015). This process, defined by some scholars as the “affectivization of school” (Pietropolli Charmet, 2003), has ended the vision of the school institution as a place dominated by the cognitive system and the role of a student, favouring other dimensions that have more to do with the affective role of a teenager: the body, desire, sexuality, creativity and expressive aspects of the self.

At school, today’s teenagers are increasingly showing their own unease, violence toward others or toward themselves, and engaging in disparaging behaviours or acts of solidarity (Lancini, 2015).

As can be seen, the context in which the psychologist operates today is different from what could have been the context of the 70s, 80s, or 90s. Given the greater complexity that has overwhelmed today’s school environment, the temptation to resort to well-known and reassuring educational models and disciplinary devices is strong, but it exposes the real risk that adolescents will completely divest one of the most important environments for their growth and turn instead to the proposals of media culture, that are more appealing to them.

For this and other reasons, there has been an increasing need to involve psychologists in the school staff. Psychologists who, according to the authors, should support the system (student, teacher, parent, headteacher, *etc.*) in its process of change and in the specific context. The goal should be to open up, or begin to open up to new possibilities, towards a fresh look at ourselves, to the possibility of taking charge of our lives, to seize the opportunities that transformations and changes of various kinds present us with the aim of increasing self-presence and awareness of what we are and/or the direction we are taking (Minolli, 2015). To do this, however, you need something other than “simple” listening, because it is listening to that complexity that concerns the subject we face. It is also the complexity of operating in that precise system that is a school, where it is generally required that we find quick and effective solutions as if the psychologist who is faced with that reality can intervene miraculously, having the solution at the ready. Listening to the complexity of subjects means welcoming them for what they are in their family and social and relational context. It does not mean looking for causes, or at least not only that, but it means considering who the subjects

are at that moment in their life and understanding with them why, at that very moment, a block occurred and suffering accompanied it.

The intervention of a psychologist/psychoanalyst who has a complex view of reality can help understand the behaviours and actions of adolescents, helping them to make sense of them and thus helping adults (teachers and parents) become more familiar with emotional matters. Taking this look into today's school is not an easy task.

The hard work of being in that school

A psychologist's work at school is an ever-new and interesting experience, similar to that of a pioneer in an unexplored land, a place to be discovered entirely, with its rules and its characteristics, where its inhabitants share a culture and also a vision of others, in this case of the external expert. It is like entering someone else's home, obviously with your own thoughts and baggage. Psychologists who come into contact with the school often feel that they are like a guests, sometimes welcome, sometimes a little less, but always guests. They are someone who, in any case, must learn to know and respect the rules of the house and who can bring their subjectivity up to a certain point because the culture of the school demands respect and servitude. As you might guess, for the professional, this means a lot of effort. A psychologist frequently faces several challenges when working in schools. In the early years of the introduction of the listening service, there was much reluctance to talk to the psychologist; there were so many prejudices and stereotypes, not to mention confusion about what a psychologist should or could do and how he/she could do it. Those who worked in schools in the 90s and early 2000s had to face the problem of consent, an unknown until a few years before. The fatigue of working at school is not, however, the same everywhere and is often a reflection of the encounter between the psychological system and the system of that particular school at that time. There are several anecdotes that we can cite from the rather common: "I sent this student to you because, in my opinion, he/she needs to talk to someone and I am not an expert", to the Headteacher who asks for us to see a student without the permission of the parents because he/she takes responsibility! Or even teachers who ask us to intervene in difficult classes because there are problem students and we have the tools to change them or even being included in school projects without any information because "you are the psychologist of the school", as if it were an exclusive skill! Or a teacher calls to talk about a situation in the hope that the psychologist will act in his/her place and take responsibility for it.

Therefore, when psychologists enter a school, they are somehow the object of so many fantasies and projections regarding what they should do,

should be, and how they can help, and it is often not easy to work on these projections because, indeed, they reflect emotions, thoughts expressed by someone about us, and in that moment, we become objects conveying a certain meaning.

Another aspect that is often strenuous that the professionals working in a school environment find themselves facing is the involvement of the parents or adults of reference in situations that require further evaluation or future clinical evaluation. So, the psychologist finds himself/herself experiencing that sense of helplessness in front of a teenager who has found the courage to go and talk to a stranger about his/her discomfort, hoping perhaps that the stranger, who operates in the school, and therefore technically is well-known, can be a mediator with the family of that distress, but sometimes families prefer to pull away.

Continuity is another important aspect for the psychologist. A professional who remains in the same school for several years can gradually become more and more part of the school system without pretending to replace teachers or headteachers but feeling free to move in a context that he/she will learn gradually more about. In this way, the psychologist can perhaps find the most suitable solutions with pupils, teachers, and headteachers for that specific situation in that individual school.

These are just some of the difficulties encountered in the different experiences of psychologists in educational institutions. Difficulties that, however, can be seen as challenges in a future school, perhaps a utopian one, but which will have to reorganize its way of not only training but also of providing services that have as their ultimate goal the social growth of children and help them orient themselves in the world as subjects that are part of a complex and constantly changing reality.

Conclusions

So, what are we going to do with the figure of a psychologist at school? What about a psychoanalyst? Can a psychoanalyst be useful to a school? Can adopting a psychoanalytic perspective be of any help to today's schools? If so, how?

There are many questions that could be asked and many doubts, but we also feel that there is some certainty, one of them above all the others: the belief that helping others to acquire more knowledge about themselves can only benefit the subject, the group, and the community.

Psychologists at school can make their contribution as "specialized" adults by offering the possibility to individuals, or the institution in which they are working, to experiment and experience self-discovery and uncover the world in a continuous process. With their contribution, they can help

open up new possibilities toward a fresh look, whether they are adults or young people, by co-building the conditions of that single experience, with that specific subject. Psychologists can help think of themselves as subjects who come into play to open up a broader perspective to themselves and others, a process of possibilities, perhaps starting with a single interview, but as subjects that set something in motion. To give the possibility of a space inside the school where respectful listening can be found, where others can speak, be welcomed, taken in, and act. In this sense, one of the things that psychologists/psychoanalysts can do in school is plant a seed, try to propose that complex overview to show that another view can also exist.

School, according to Galimberti, should take care of the training of adolescents, help them to develop a critical sense, help them to increase their research capacity, skills that contribute to the development of personality. The purpose of school, Galimberti says, is to train critical thinking and not a blind acceptance of current opinion, but rather a reasoned discussion, and not simple repetition. This is the only way for young people to feel active in a climate of attentive and mutual listening and emotional participation.

We, as psychologists, should ask ourselves how we can help the school in this project. How do we foster the ability of the school to be a place that can accommodate people, whether they are in development or adults? Perhaps one possible direction would be quite simply to start with the people who inhabit the school, that is, the adolescents themselves and the teachers.

In today's "technocratic" school, it is not always possible to authorize ourselves to "be", because the "doing" dimension is predominant. Today, a good teacher seems to be one who does so many things, is involved in many projects, and collaborates on many fronts to make the school work well. He/she is the one who simultaneously takes on more roles and takes responsibility for remedying the difficulties of a school that is flailing. Doing so much also implies a difficulty in stopping, in reflecting, and precisely this difficulty in maintaining a "suspension" of action reflects the tendency to "do" that is often observed in teachers: preparing tests, calculating averages, dealing with bureaucratic chores, and "teaching". These all represent the tasks that teachers themselves recognize as being the main ones involved in their profession (Tagliani & Dossena, 2014). Today's teenager, however, needs more than that, he/she needs to be seen not just as a pupil, but as a social subject. Unlike the young people of a few decades ago, he/she does not recognize the teacher as an authority to refer to, rather he/she tries to establish a relationship with the teacher. In school, the ability to relate to each other is increasingly crucial to fulfilling its tasks. If you can establish a good relationship between teachers and a class, learning and training benefit from this; otherwise, everything becomes much more difficult.

Thus, "starting from scratch with the people in the school" means helping the school to focus on both the teacher and the teenager, supporting the

young person in the process of taking responsibility for his/her self, and helping teachers to establish the best possible relationships to facilitate this process. Taking a psychoanalytic view involves supporting today's school in making sense of what happens, in giving meaning, and finding a key to what happens, in relation to what happens in the relationship between adults and children.

As some authors argue, one could help teachers feel the solicitations of their own unconscious in order to increase their ability to observe the dynamics that are established in a school context (Filipponeri Pergola & Rosati, 2022).

The authors of this article believe that a psychologist's work at school can be a work of connection, a bridge that helps connect adults with young people, a bond that can lead to seeing and understanding each other, in order to co-build the school of the future together, in which they can stay, live, learn and also grow, both as subjects and professionals. A school that cares about "healthy minds" (Morin, 2014) and does not only deal with filling them with facts.

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