

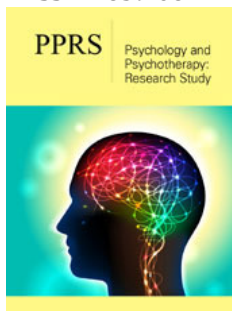
# The Unconscious in the Classroom

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## Opinion

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Teachers are no psychologists: The logic that structures communication in school teaching is primarily a pedagogical one. On the basis of a pedagogical working alliance, teachers communicate with their students about a „subject matter“ with the aim of opening up this matter and the education of the students. In this process, particular didactics always come into play and education is always involved [1]. All actors-both teachers and students-participate in the classroom as subjects, each with their own history, participating as „persons in their entirety“, so that communication in the classroom always has a psychological dimension. And the actors are not always fully aware of this fact.

Assuming that classroom communication also has a psychological dimension does not mean that teachers act therapeutically. Their action is primarily a pedagogical one. However, this action has a relation to therapeutic action, as argued by professionalization theory, insofar as teachers must be careful not to cause psychological injury to students [2]. Furthermore, it can be helpful for teachers to understand psychological aspects and processes that have an influence on pedagogical communication. If the psychological dimension of teaching, if the unconscious in teaching is to be taken into account, or more precisely, if it is to be tapped with the means of science, then psychological research based on behaviorist premises-which intends to measure factors that may influence instructional communication by operationalizing them-is not suitable for this purpose [3]. Such psychological research using quantitative methods is fundamentally not able to adequately address the complexity of pedagogical communication in the classroom, which is always overdetermined. With psychoanalysis it is different. It is based on other anthropological premises, always takes the whole person into consideration, and can be combined with hermeneutic methods so that pedagogical communication in the classroom can be reconstructed in detail in its complexity [4].

In his outline „On the Psychoanalysis of the High School Student“ Sigmund Freud has set out what is to be assumed from the perspective of psychoanalysis, when the psychic dimension of classroom communication is to be considered:

„Already in the first six years of childhood the little person has established the nature and affect tone of his relations to persons of the same sex and of the opposite sex“ [5].

This is true, of course, not only for the students on whom Freud focuses in his remarks, but also for the teachers. In the pedagogical communication in the classroom, all actors act against the background of their respective individual biographies. And for them, the early years, the relationships formed during this time with parents and siblings, are of particular importance. Through them, according to Freud’s thesis, the „nature and affect tone“ of all future relationships are shaped.

Freud uses the term „transference“ for the phenomenon that actors actualize „nature and affect tone“ from early relationships, that is, from family relationships, in other relationships - not one to one, but rather more or less strongly modified, but not completely different. Seen from a psychoanalytic perspective, pedagogical communication in the classroom always has a „double bottom“ because it is grounded by psychic processes of transference and countertransference. In relation to students, Freud roughly lays this out in his sketch: On the one hand, teaching communication is about the transmission and acquisition of knowledge,

of scientifically based knowledge. On the other hand, however, it always has an „undercurrent“ (86), which results from the fact that students deal with the personality of teachers<sup>1</sup>. This confrontation is precisely shaped by experiences that students have had with their parents and siblings in early childhood. The ambivalence that adolescents develop in their relationship with their parents reappears in the discussion with their teachers and is transferred to them. Recalling his own school days, Freud writes:

„We were from the outset equally inclined to love as to hate, to criticize as to revere against them“ (86).

It is „a kind of emotional inheritance“ (87).

For the male students, the experience of the Oedipus complex is particularly significant, in which the emotional ambivalence, „the tender and the hostile impulse against the father“ (87) is most prominent. In the struggle with the teachers, the struggle with the father is reproduced.

On the one hand, Freud's reflections, which refer solely to the pupils, must be supplemented by those concerning the teachers. For them, too, it holds true that they participate in classroom communication with their individual history and that those experiences which they made during the first years of their lives are actualized in later relationships - also in those with their students. In the case of teachers, however, it is not only early childhood experiences, but also those experiences which they made with their teachers when they were students themselves, which are actualized in the relationships with their students. This means that transferences can also be made from these experiences to current situations. On the other hand, it should be remembered that for all actors in the classroom, not only diffuse relationships are significant, those that existed between persons in their entirety, but also relationships of a different kind, those that result from roles that the actors take on. As far as students are concerned, in school they are confronted for the first time in their lives with specific expectations that are bundled into roles. It is here where they fundamentally learn what a role is in the first place. The first role they take on in their lives is therefore the student role [6]. In other words: While adolescents are imbedded in diffuse

social relationships in the family, interacting within them, they learn a first specific social relationship in school, the pupil role. For teachers, on the other hand, it is self-evident that they act in a role, the teacher role. But this does not mean that they are not also present in the classroom as a whole person. Professionalization theory has highlighted exactly that: Teachers and students interact on the basis of a pedagogical working alliance characterized by the contradiction of diffuseness and specificity, that is, they encounter each other both as whole persons and as role bearers [7].

From a psychoanalytic point of view, of course, it should be noted that the way actors take on a role is also shaped by early childhood experiences, specifically by the superego, which was formed primarily within the framework of the Oedipus complex. More specifically, how the ego ideal is formed during this phase of psychosexual development is of importance for the role behaviour of both students and teachers: in the process of assimilation of the student role, adolescents form an ideal of themselves as students [8]. And teachers, within the context of their education, develop an ideal of themselves as teachers, a professional ideal. Both ideals also influence that „undercurrent“ that is always present in classroom communication.

How is it possible to empirically research the „undercurrent“ of instructional communication, the unconscious in school instruction and teaching? It has already been said that quantitative methods are hardly suitable for this. However, with the means of hermeneutic methods other „undercurrents“ have already been reconstructed, especially the image teachers have of their students. In this context, speech acts of teachers were interpreted with reference to their implicit „anthropology of the student“. It turned out that these anthropological premises are of fundamental importance for teachers' pedagogical actions - for the way they act didactically as well as for the way they educate [4]. Indeed, all pedagogical communication in the classroom is ultimately dependent on these premises [9]. It would be worth examining to what extent it is also possible, within the framework of hermeneutic classroom research, to reconstruct those transferences and countertransferences that are of interest from a psychoanalytic perspective<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>What is more important for the students and their education, Freud explains he cannot ultimately say.

<sup>2</sup>Through the analysis of interviews, this has already been attempted [10]. The question is whether teaching transcripts can also be used for this.

Last but not least, the psychoanalytical perspective provides a critical view of current trends in didactics. These problematic current tendencies often aim at redefining the role of the teacher, or more precisely, at reducing the teacher's action to that of a management of classroom communication or a learning guide for students. The intention behind these developments to reduce the asymmetry in the relationship between teachers and their students and to encourage students in the development of their autonomy, is plausible and correct. However, these trends should not lead to a situation in which students' engagement with the person of the teacher, which, as Freud pointed out, is no less important than engagement with and acquisition of knowledge in school, is no longer possible. On the contrary the two should not be seen as mutually exclusive: on the relationship between teachers and their students depends essentially whether and how students learn and educate themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to consciously shape this relationship, but not only abstractly, but above all concretely in the common reference to the „matter“ of teaching. In other words: In the effort to make the thing accessible, the teacher should become „the common superego, the ideal of all“ [8-12].

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