

# School Psychology and The Teachers' Work: The Importance of Care

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## Introduction

This work consists of a partial report on a university extension project, an action that contemplated practices related to the work of school psychologists on teachers, especially regarding care and support for these professionals. We aimed at sharing possibilities of action by psychologists in the education field, considering the whole trajectory Critical School Psychology has been building, and searching, in the psychoanalysis of D. W. Winnicott, for contributions in order to overcome the challenges imposed by educational issues (Freller, 2001; Ribeiro, 2004).

According to Meira (2000), for a school psychologist to be able to operate critically in the education field, diverse contributions are necessary not only from psychology, but also from pedagogy, philosophy, education philosophy, as well as other areas

... so that there will be a theoretical and practical commitment to school because it constitutes the most important focus of reflection, no matter what educational space a professional occupies. In other words, the work developed inside the schools is the source of great issues for which explanatory and methodological resources must be provided. Such resources will also provide orientation for action by school psychologists. (p. 36).

## Report

The practices reported here started as a result of a request by the school, made directly to the coordinator of a larger school psychology project, which had been in progress at this elementary school for over three years. It consisted of psycho-educational support for students with school-related issues who had been referred to a public university hospital in the State of Minas Gerais. Such project necessarily included close social interaction by its members – interns and supervisors – with the school professionals. This led to relations of mutual trust, which made intervention possible within the school context.

The school administration and teachers considered the project to be a priority. They perceived signs of stress, such as chronic tiredness, impatience with students, body pain with no identifiable causes, and general discontent at work.

In fact, the more overburdened professionals are, the less likely they are to reflect on themselves and on their own reality. The situation for teachers is no different. Low salaries, too much work, long working hours, and, concerning women, additional housework due to traditional gender roles still valid in our society, lead to consecutive medical leaves, unwillingness to tackle difficult groups or students considered to be difficult, and blaming families for students' difficulties at school, especially the poor ones. Thus, it is necessary to promote actions that benefit the teachers' health in order to improve the reality in which teachers are inserted as well as boost creativity, motivation and critical thought.

In this university extension project, we have attempted to think of actions that would compose a proposal of work based on investment on the teacher's person in order to empower teachers and provide them with the tools to overcome daily challenges, however incipient the whole thing might be. Yet, it would not be possible to find available time in the school schedule. The school operated in different shifts and dismissing students was not an option. Therefore, it was an impossible task to get all teachers together. One alternative was to take advantage of the students' recess time.

Although we knew that this was the only little spot in the teachers' busy schedules in which they could take a break and get together. It was the only possibility available for us to be able to get anything done then. That is the reason why it was so important for us to produce a proposal that would really provide an answer to issues pointed out by the school administration and, also, that would actually make sense to teachers. Now we will provide an account of some meetings realized with the teachers<sup>1</sup>. These meetings were greatly appreciated by the teachers and the school administration as well. We named this project, which had a duration of six months and was realized once a week, *intervalo cultural*, or Cultural Break Time.

<sup>1</sup> In Portuguese, we chose the feminine form of our word for teacher because, in this particular project, all participants happened to be women.

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The activities were especially planned for the teachers, and were designed in order to get to know their interests, dilemmas, and peculiarities. The activities also intended to provide them with opportunities learn things about themselves and gradually become more aware of the way they communicated with others. The activities were carefully prepared<sup>2</sup> in order to become true sources of inspiration for teachers and the way they would conduct their classes with the help of the new learned articulations.

As we have already mentioned, this school psychology action by the extension project took place during the brief 15 minutes of school recess because it was the only time teachers would be available and without the presence of the kids. Not only teachers at break time took part. There were also teachers who were at Module time as well as the librarian, the secretary and the coordinators – who were always around even though they were not able to fully participate for whole meetings due to their administration tasks. Thus, any school workers who happened to be at the teachers' room were allowed to take part in the activities, something that invariably happened.

The proposed activities needed to be diversified, creative, and designed to take full advantage of our precious 15 minutes. At every meeting, we would employ “triggers” as starting points. These triggers could be the lyrics of a song, a poem, a cooking recipe, an excerpt from a movie, a game, or even stretching exercises or group handicraft.

For every session, we also provided refreshments because it was traditionally a time for teachers to get something to eat. Another reason was that it was a further opportunity for interaction and the snack time could be optimized as a tool for the benefit of the activity to be developed. So, the small meal was thought out as part of the activities. For example, on the first day we presented a recipe for apple cake with prunes and then served the cake itself. This turned out to be a very good idea for the learning opportunity and for the added nutritional value. On the day we worked on stretching exercises – and discussed the importance of taking good care of our own bodies as well as taking the time to do some physical activity or even a massage – one of the items served was lemon balm tea, considered to have tranquilizing properties. There were days when the main activity was a discussion over a poem, the lyrics of a song while participants themselves prepared a large bowl of fruit salad.

Hereinafter, we will provide an account of two meetings – the third and fourth ones – although we are aware of the impossibility to translate into words all forms of communication that permeated these moments.

In the third meeting, we got started by serving lemon balm tea and reminded the teachers that it was really effective to relieve stress. Then we proposed a discussion on the signs our bodies send us when it is necessary to take a break and get some rest. The teachers shared with the group their

2 Weekly, the extension project participants would get together in order to think, based on reports and reflections over the previous meeting, of ways to better align the next meeting to our goals concerning collective growth.

own personal struggles with body pain, headaches, sore shoulders, backache, and so on. Their stories had something in common. The discomforts mentioned were invariably associated with *the times of the day when the teachers were the most stressed out, nervous, or tired*. We emphasize that the signs of the body are often ignored. We do not have a habit of listening to the messages our bodies have to give us, especially when it comes to work. The teachers tend to dismiss such daily signs as *silly stuff*, rather than important symptoms of what is going on with them as a result of their work activities<sup>3</sup>.

In a second moment, during this same meeting, we invited the group to do stretching exercises. The proposal was appreciated by most of the participants. In this occasion, one incident drew our attention. One of the teachers noticed a couple of kids peeking through the open window and imitating the adults' stretching moves. The teacher immediately headed to the window, closed it, and said rather emphatically: *This is just for teachers!* The teacher's attitude might lead to different interpretations but it seemed to us that that teacher actually wished to preserve the exclusiveness the teachers were enjoying then. Although the children did not seem to be a problem to us, they were perceived as invasive by the teachers. This is probably due to the fact that special attention was something so rare in their workplace and also to the fact that that moment proved so valuable to teachers.

In the fourth meeting, we had a discussion on the episode of the school recess that coincided with the cultural break time activities in the previous week. The most interesting thing is that most participants spontaneously contributed to the topic by reporting that it was a good idea to use recess time to take some good care of themselves and raise awareness of the symptoms mentioned before. They said they took advantage of recess time to relax, sleep or even see a doctor. Some of them chose to do things that would get them tired nevertheless but they did things they would not routinely do.

In this meeting, the trigger employed was a video of approximately one minute. It was an excerpt from an animation movie very popular among children. The excerpt has no dialogues. A young boy goes home under the protection of his own elephant friend. After watching the video, the group had a discussion and most participants, to our surprise, manifested their identification with the child being protected rather than with the elephant caretaker: “Oh, how I wish I had someone I could always run to when I was in trouble”, “Good idea!! I will get me one of those!” – referring to the elephant

3 Such reports led us to studies on workers' health, such as the one by Yurevna (2011) on the “professional incineration syndrome”, which manifests itself in professionals who need to communicate on a daily basis to too many people for too many hours, teachers included. The author explains that the syndrome can be defined as chronic stress caused but too much work. It is related, for example, to a great emotional load and the lack of skills to deal with tension. Thus, she proposes ways to work with these teachers, including “self-observation” techniques, in order to produce better self-care. However, she ponders that if the case is too serious, it should be referred to specialists.

friend. At the end of the meeting, one of the teachers, for the first time, brought the school into the discussion: "When it comes to education my opinion is that sometimes we need support, which does not mean they have to agree with everything we do." That statement drew our attention because it was the first time someone mentioned that necessity in such clear terms. The work of a teacher requires constant attention in order to ensure professional development, which includes personal attention<sup>4</sup>.

We understand that, for a teacher to work with children, it is necessary to have identification with children's necessities in order to be able to organize teaching activities that truly reach out to students. In situations where the teacher is in an unfavorable personal condition, communication with students is certainly compromised. Consequently, the teaching-learning process will be affected somehow, and the loss will be disproportionate in comparison to the difficulties faced by teachers in their attempts to adapt to students' needs.

At the end of the projects, we assessed that its success was especially due to the experiences promoted for those educators by means of a work that was simple, composed of common activities, but thought out for *the benefit of people* who took part in these meetings. That was the essence of our planning, and it was also what guaranteed the teachers' full engagement. The meetings, at a low cost, realized in the short sessions available at the time, led to very meaningful experiences, rich discussions, and crucial reflections, which pointed at how valuable such psychology interventions were for the school.

Tanamachi and Meira (2003) highlight the relations between an individual and education as an object of study for psychologists working in any type of educational institution. Psychologists must contribute, by means of knowledge, to the success of schools in their social role and of students in their learning enterprise. Institutions must be capable of producing responsible citizens and critical thought.

## Final Considerations

School psychologists must be placed in a privileged position that will enable them to effectively help teachers while navigating through diverse fields of knowledge and regarding the complexities of educational reality. We highlight the usefulness of D. W. Winnicott's theory on the maturing

4 In a text entitled "The Cure", in which Winnicott addresses physicians and nurses, the author emphasizes: "I believe that the cure, in fact, means care" (1999, p. 105), and elaborates in a very interesting way on this premise.

process of humans concerning school psychology and the importance of "environmental influence, as determining factor whether individuals, in their attempts to find validation in life, will fully embrace experiences or retreat" (Winnicott, 1990, p. 149). The school environment, whose provision is also a responsibility of the teachers, and of their working conditions, can be a great facilitator towards the integration of experiences students go through in the school environment. However, it can also become invasive for students in trouble, which could be a delaying factor in their development.

We believe the students, for whom institutions are responsible, will be the greatest beneficiaries when teachers feel supported in their work, which also implies solid formation in many fundamental pedagogical and political aspects not contemplated in this occasion.

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