

## **LOVE IN TRANSITION TIMES. THE EDUCATORS OF ADOLESCENTS AMONG CARE, LOVE AND POWER**

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**Abstract.** *By this paper, I want to develop the analysis and the reflection on the problems the educators meet, working with difficult adolescents into the socio-educational services, managing the emotional and love relationships of the young. Authoritarian or punitive interventions, when applied to matters that are highly delicate and complex, are bound to generate consequences that are not always positive or under the control of the educators. If educators are not open to exploring the affective dimensions, they may inadvertently reiterate the abuse that their clients have already undergone. It is necessary to give the right space to the expression of the emotional needs and difficulties of adults, educators, youngsters.*

**Key-words:** *Education, Love, Power, History of Life, Ambivalence*

### **Introduction**

Here, I would like to develop an analysis and a reflection on the problems the educators meet, working with difficult adolescents into the socio-educational services<sup>3</sup>. In particular, I want to discuss on how educators have often grown up and lived in an historical period of the twentieth-century, full of great cultural, social and historical upheavals, which have partially transformed the previous individual and social behaviors, starting from their way to live affective and love relationships. The teenagers urge very much educators about these issues because, for their biological and social needs, they are opening up to the outside world. Educators who take care of them are often taken by surprise from the impetuosity of the children's feelings and react in an authoritarian manner, according to the model they have learned in their personal life history. Last year, as quoted before, I presented and discussed a study case related to a Community for minor, where the 60 year old Coordinator and the educators were very ambiguous and authoritarian with the adolescents, especially with regard to love relationships, often repressing them. The study aims to highlight and to stress the necessity to give the right space to the expression of the emotional needs and difficulties of adults, educators and youngster because the lack of attention to these needs can result in depression, burnout, deep conflicts, disease for the individual and the community. The reflection is based upon the critical and clinical pedagogy, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy researches, sociology of knowledge and qualitative sociology.

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<sup>3</sup> I discussed the first part of this analysis last year at the International Scientific Conference "Society, Integration, Education", Rezekne Higher Education Institution, Rezekne, 24-25 May 2013

### **Love in transition**

Sentimental relationships have become particularly challenging since the collapse of the traditional models of family from the 1970s onwards, that has disturbed the usual fit between the demands of society and conformity to same on the part of the individual. In the past, men and women for the most part adhered to the dominant social model, which defined a priori male and female roles, the relative positions of husbands and wives, the type of family to be formed and how sexuality was to be managed. In the wake of developments in much of Europe and the world – including the protest movements of the 1970s, the sexual revolution, the challenge to the authoritarian model, the female emancipation movement, and the enhanced value attributed, at least in theory, to childhood – the traditional models of romantic relationships have been totally swept away (Mitchell, 2002; Passerini, 2008; Benasayag, Scavino, 2013). Nonetheless, the generation that was growing up during the time of change had already internalized the old rigid normative models that obliged individuals to conform to the dominant social model (Miller, 1980). Even the younger generations that grew up over the following decades partly identify with those models, because their families of origin – parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, educators and teachers – transmitted to them – on a more or less conscious basis – the models that were challenged by the youth movements of 1968 (Kaes, Faimberg, Enriquez, Baranes, 1993). In consequence, in living out their romantic relationships, all of these generations have been faced with conflicting behavioral models – more traditional and rigid on the one hand and more modern and libertarian on the other -. The educators of today, especially the older generation, have lived through historically difficult periods from the point of view of discerning how to live out and define romantic relationships: the majority has swung between reverting to the more judgmental and censoring models of the past and opening up to concessions of freedom previously unthinkable (Coontz, 2006).

They have had to deal with the emancipation of their female partners and with pressure from the Catholic model which has always viewed sex and romantic partnerships outside marriage as sinful. This has given rise to hybrid identities, and a frequently unconscious binocular perspective combining old and new ways of viewing the world, romantic relationships and education. In the example of the community described above, it is obvious that the coordinator – who had been young in the 1970s – had drawn the rest of his team, made up of educators aged between 30 and 45, into his own personal model that was influenced by traditional models of romantic relationships and specifically of how adolescents should live romantic love. Along with his traditional views of how young people should manage romantic relationships, he also applied a traditional authoritarian model (Miller, 1980) of the educational relationship between adults and minors: this meant that the adult decided a priori what was good for the minor, without

having to listen to the young person's viewpoint or needs. With difficult youngsters from disrupted and unstable family backgrounds, often characterized by a conflicting relationship between the parents themselves, the authoritarian model can often fulfill a valuable holding function, by giving the young people the feeling of being contained by someone who is strong and clear in their views. This is borne out by the fact that the staff of the community in question generally obtain positive educational outcomes. Thus, in a certain sense, the overwhelming need of these problematic youths finds a match in the educational model adopted by the educators. Adolescents suffering from a strong lack of love and affection, are not overly fussy when they find someone who is seriously committed to providing care for them (Winnicott, 1990). On the other hand, although this strong and decided approach to taking on responsibility for the clients may come across as reassuring, it is also partly manipulative, because the educators impose their unilateral, directive and ultimately castrating perspective on the youths: you must not fall in love. However, in any case, this injunction by its nature is impossible to respect because falling in love is outside of our control.

### **Pedagogical models and representations of education**

It is as though education were based on the deeply rooting notion that human beings may be conditioned, shaped and regimented (Foucault, 1975; Miller, 1980; Massa, 1993), and that they can and should be inculcated with ideas, beliefs, values and feelings. The youth protest movements of the twentieth century, as well as advances in the social science debate and in recognition of the rights of the weakest (see the many international conventions and charters of rights), have provided ample evidence that there are alternative ways of understanding education that are more respectful of the rights of children and youths. Psychology has documented the complexity of human development and the fact that the human subject, while predisposed to be conditioned by its social and cultural environment and to internalize norms and models, nevertheless retains some scope for personal agency. The specific case of reeducation poses a further complication, because the clients have already internalized the rules – whether good or bad – of their home background. Therefore, if the educators adopt an educational model based on the inculcation of norms and rules, they find themselves clashing with the set of prescriptions previously internalized by the youths. If the reeducation of the clients is based on a model of conditioning via the imposition of norms, both educators and adolescents will experience great difficulty. Adolescents because, even if they would like to immediately conform to the new rules, are unable to do so because, inside of themselves, they are experiencing cultural and cognitive conflict between the old and the new educational cultures. The educators, on their part, are challenged (Palmieri, 2012) because they have selected a blunt instrument with which to fulfill their educational role: blunt is the sense of structurally ineffective in relation to the

declared aim of reeducation of the youth. Lack of awareness of the dynamics, governing the internalization by the individual of his or her social environment, makes the team of educators blind to the efficacy of their chosen tools of work. If, on the contrary, they had such awareness, they would firstly be able to clearly identify the given, that is to say, the existing and significant levels of educational conditioning that their clients had already internalized. These levels cannot be wiped out either with a magic wand or through an authoritarian approach or on the basis of the so-called educational pact, stipulated with clients when they enter the community. The educators would realize that, by imposing predefined changes, they actually force their clients into a corner, leaving them to deal single handedly with the internal conflict between their previously internalized educational models and those currently demanded by the educators (Winnicott, 1987).

It may be that the adolescent clients wish to follow the new models and the new rules that they have been set, and they genuinely set out to do so, but then they come up against internal barriers, automatic behaviors and fears linked to past traumas, that frighten them and drive them to activate strong defense mechanisms. When they experience such anxiety and fear they are disorientated and desperately need help to make sense of their fears. If the adults understand where these fears come from, they will also manage to be supportive of the youngsters; otherwise, they will believe – as unfortunately is frequently the case – that the youths are merely being awkward and that they are deliberately contradicting or rebelling against the adults. When anxious and insecure adolescents are not fortunate enough to encounter adults, who are aware of the psychological mechanisms that are playing out inside of them, they begin to defend themselves from anxiety and conflict. Firstly they raise barriers in the relationship with the adults, they become locked up in themselves, communicating in monosyllables or set phrases. However, behind this facade they continue to unconsciously experience multiple cultural and emotional conflicts (Vegetti Finzi, 2001). The educators' demands for them to change their behavior, in practice mean modifying their base culture, assimilated from the familial and social context in which they grew up. Thus, asking youths to change their behavior is a source of great distress for them, because of the strong affective and emotional valence of internalized culture. Although this same culture is often at the root of adolescents' deviant behavior, it is connected to their affective ties with their parents and siblings, for better and for worse. Changing behavior means demolishing the culture assimilated together with the care, nursing and assistance received in early childhood. It is not a neutral operation: for example it can evoke strong guilt for betraying one's own roots, one's own family. In addition to internal guilt, at times the external context also intervenes in the shape of the family who truly may not approve of the changes, and refuse to recognize their own child any more. Therefore, the adolescents feel crushed between the two groups of significant adults, their own family and the

educators (Bertolini, Caronia, 1999). The latter are slowly becoming a new and significant reference point for the young people in their care, especially for those who are physically or psychologically alone in the world.

No matter what, adolescents remain attached to their parents, even though they have been maltreated and neglected by them in many cases. The psychological phenomenon of abused children's attachment to their abusing parents, or battered women's attachment to their violent husbands is well known. In spite of the constant suffering and humiliation, the abused party never wishes to be separated from the abusers, especially if they are his or her parents. These considerations highlight the complex nature of the changes that clients are invited to make. It is not a question of willpower, as a particular educational ideology doggedly continues to insist, but of requesting a deep transformation of personality structure and of the core of individual identity that has formed over time. Youngsters' personalities were formed within the affective world of their early childhood experiences with their families. Their adolescent and adult experiences of love will be influenced for their entire lives by the type of attachment established with their parents as young children (Bowlby, 1979). The subject's personality and the love that he or she displays are closely related to one another.

### **Which power, authority and rules for Education?**

Nonetheless, the educators in question did not modify their own educational model or beliefs as a result of the negative episode. On the contrary, rather than modify their rules they continue to expel the young who are unable to respect them. Basically, the team of the Community for minor we studied has barricaded itself behind an ideology that is widespread in educational contexts in general and in this type of educational service in particular, according to which, with difficult clients, it is necessary to be strict about rules and norms, define narrow limits and make sure that these are respected at all costs. To this end, an initial pact is made between the team of educators and their clients, such that the minors are informed of the rules of the community and of the need for them to respect the rules themselves, otherwise they will be expelled. At first sight, this educational perspective may seem sensible and appropriate, especially in so-called reeducation contexts. However, on closer critical and clinical analysis (Riva, 2000; Kincheloe, 2008), we can see that the development of the subject and the characteristics of human beings are defined in ways that are altogether arbitrary and unsuccessful in attaining educational goals, because they do not reflect the true nature of human development. Therefore, cultural background, educational history, personality and identity and the type of love experienced must be jointly analyzed within a framework of reciprocal relationships. This level of understanding allows a solid platform to be created, from which to plan an appropriate educational intervention for the specific situation. Authoritarian or punitive interventions, when applied to matters that are highly delicate and

complex (Lizzola, Tarchini, 2006), are bound to generate consequences that are not always positive or under the control of the educators. As usual, imposing rules is used as a crutch when a deeper and richer understanding of the problem is lacking. If educators are not open to exploring the affective dimensions underpinning manifest behaviors and attitudes, they may inadvertently reiterate the abuse that their clients have already undergone, reproducing the conditions characterizing the original abuse.

For example, in the case of the Community for minors, quoted before, all the responsibility and the blame were attributed to a boy, fallen in love with a girl living in the same Community for minors, who was expelled from the community. There, love is forbidden. It is clear that what the adult educators do not properly understand is unloaded onto the recipients of their educational actions. Furthermore, the educators – as representatives of the surrounding social and cultural macrocosm – confound aspects regarding the requirement to conform to the social norms of the context – in this case the community – with aspects of the subject's psychosocial development, such as early adolescent love. The injunction is paradoxical not so much with regard to specifying appropriate behaviors for the expression of love, as with regard to forbidding the youngsters to fall in love in the first place, because – as the educators remind them – they already have enough problems of their own! It is true that they have serious affective issues because as children they have been neglected, abused and manipulated. However, adolescent love, as well as being part of normal development, is also a sign of hope that something of beauty in life may still be aspired to. Therefore, the intransigent order not to fall in love, because this will only augment their problems, inadvertently impacts on a very delicate area of adolescents' existence. This has to do with holding on to the meaning of existence itself, because it is practically impossible to live without even the tiniest glimmer of hope (Benasayag, 2003). Love is an intimate and private dimension, that draws on the deepest wellsprings of one's sense of self and lays the foundations of the most hidden core of identity. Love is connected with the very founding of existence, not to mention the fact that every human being is generated because a man and a woman came together, on the basis of some form of mutual attachment, whether good or bad. The situation, that we have described, could lead us to comment that it almost seems as though the educators have chosen their profession more for themselves than for their clients. It is as though the educators approach their work with a preconceived vision of what is to be done in a certain type of setting, before having carried out a pedagogical diagnosis of the situation, of the specific issues affecting it and of its unique characteristics. It is as though they wish to work as educators in order to make events happen in line with their plans, replacing so to speak the territory with the map, as Alfred Korzybski and later Gregory Bateson have expressed it. It seems as though there is an invisible split between educators' intentions and their educational programs – based on a linear and simplified logic – and the

complex reality (Morin, 2005) of their clients, who often have no notion whatsoever of having to fit into educational programs.

The adolescents are going through adolescence for the first time in their lives and they move in the world on the basis of their own life experience and internal needs, even though they may not always have a conscious perception of the latter. This factor underlies the lack of understanding between educators and teenagers, because the former take for granted that the latter have assimilated their requests and provided their willing consent, whereas the teenagers on their part may be light years from even contemplating such a thing. In addition, these adolescents have often been remanded to the socio-educational services by the Juvenile Court and the local social services. Their lack of choice in the matter inevitably heightens their sense of disorientation, feelings of anger and resentment, and inclination to engage in conflict. Often, in these cases, the young people feel doubly constrained by society to adapt and conform. On the one hand, they feel oppressed by the institutions of the Court and the social services with their tough verdicts imposed from on high and, on the other hand, by the educators. The latter attempt to implement educational actions that translate into practice the recommendations of the Court. The educators are professionals who work with human beings, trying to modify them and coming up against the demanding educational challenge of reconciling the demands of society with the needs of the individual. The educators' task, bordering on impossible, is therefore to find a way to put together the distinct needs of leading their charges to adapt to social requirements – which obviously vary from one society to another – and facilitating them in constructing a relatively independent self (Levesque, 2002). Within this arduous dual task, educators and youths come up against the further challenge of falling in love and love which, by their nature, overturn the pre-established order and rules and linear thinking. This is frightening both for educators – whose pedagogical castle comes tumbling down about their ears – and for adolescents – who are living this intense and meaningful emotional experience from the inside.

### **Conclusions**

In the case examined here, it seems evident that the educators were frightened by the dimension of budding adolescent love, which required them to accompany their charges' growth through a turbulent phase of individual existence, such as adolescence. They were afraid of being caught up in the tensions, conflicts and typically adolescent – and amorous – behaviours of the ' Sturm und Drang' kind (storm and stress), in other words of being obliged to ride on an emotional rollercoaster. While this emotional intensity is perfectly understandable in light of the characteristics of adolescent development outlined about, it nonetheless disconcerts and causes anxiety in adult educators, who are no longer in touch with their own adolescent part. Educators are, in this case, more than ever called to enter into the complex dimension that Bion –

borrowing an expression from the English poet John Keats – has defined as ‘negative capacity’ (1970). By this, he means the need for those in the helping and caring professions - who support the development of children, youth, adults and the elderly – to tolerate conditions of uncertainty which, in turn, can lead to a deep-seated feeling of insecurity. Love, by definition, involves a movement to change an established state of affairs, in the direction of a new phase in which one becomes open to the unfamiliar and the unknown and to the uncertainty. Furthermore, given that love implies openness to the relationship with the other who is distinct from oneself, it also involves a significant amount of adjustment in order to coordinate oneself with one’s romantic partner. Educators are already under pressure on account of the difficult job that they do and so the sentimental ups and downs of their charges may represent an increase in their burden of stress and worry, which they are not able to tolerate.

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