

# Complex situations recalling the game of hide-and-seek: pupils hiding mistakes and deplorable actions

## Situazioni complesse che richiamano il gioco del nascondino: alunni che nascondono errori e atti deprecabili

Giombattista Amenta<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The article focuses on ways of dealing with complex educational issues recalling a kind of psychological game of hide-and-seek, characterised by the student's scope of hiding the fact that they are responsible for certain mistakes or reprehensible actions, and the teacher's intention of discovering the culprit. Starting from a case study of a pupil who tried to hide the damage they caused, the paper will examine what was done by the teacher to manage the situation. Considering that breakage can take place intentionally or accidentally, both the former and latter hypotheses will be explored, in order to assess options for intervention that are useful in both cases.

**Keywords:** Educational difficulties; Problem behaviour; School disaffection; Reprehensible conduct; Mistakes and perfectionism.

### Sintesi

L'articolo focalizza l'attenzione sulle modalità per fronteggiare complessità educative che richiamano una specie di gioco psicologico del nascondino, contraddistinte dal proposito dell'educando di non fare sapere di essere responsabile di qualche errore/gesto riprovevole e dall'intenzione del docente di scoprirlo. Partendo dal caso concreto di un alunno che tenta di nascondere il fatto di essere l'autore di un danneggiamento, si esaminerà cosa è stato fatto dall'insegnante per gestirlo. Considerando, poi, che un guasto può essere causato intenzionalmente o accidentalmente, si esplorerà sia la prima, sia la seconda ipotesi in modo da vagliare opzioni per l'intervento utili in un caso e nell'altro.

**Parole chiave:** Complessità educative; Comportamenti problema; Disagio scolastico; Condotte riprovevoli; Errori e perfezionismo.

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1. University of Enna Kore, [giombattista.amenta@gmail.com](mailto:giombattista.amenta@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

In this paper we intend to show how, by using the model offered to manage discomfort (Amenta, 2004)<sup>2</sup>, one can face situations that recall a kind of psychological hide-and-seek, marked by the pupil not wanting to let people know that they are responsible for some mistake or damage and the will of the teacher to find out.

In agreement with Montuschi (1993; 1997), educational situations can be considered “complex” when the interventions normally used to deal with them, such as scolding, punishing, direct criticism, and reprimanding prove to be mostly unproductive and even damaging. Moreover, these are actions which, focusing on the level of complexity, underlie partial and reductive interpretations. Above all, these interventions aim more at adaptation than at changing the problematic behavior on which they are made to act which, subsequently, tends to recur in a cyclical manner.

On the contrary, it is necessary to: a) explore the mechanisms and processes involved in the issues that one has to face; b) identify the underlying needs; c) devise qualified methods to solve them, i.e. strategies that take into account both manifest behavior and its hidden or psychological level.

In order to be as clear as possible, we will describe the case of a pupil who tries to hide the fact he caused damage and analyze what was done by the teacher to manage the situ-

ation; this in order to identify what works and what does not. Considering that damage can be caused either intentionally or accidentally, we will then move on to explore both the former and the latter possibility to identify useful methods to intervene in either case.

## 2. The case of the pupil clogging the school toilet

As anticipated in the introduction, in order to prevent certain superficial and reductive interpretations of educational issues, i.e. to offer alternative and functional ways of reading the situation to identify effective interventions, we considered appropriate to start by describing the case study<sup>3</sup>:

During a training session led by the writer, a teacher, whom we will call Gabriella for convenience, told us about a time when, while she was working in a third-year class, the janitor angrily entered the classroom to inform her that one of her pupils had introduced toilet paper into the sink drain which, consequently, got clogged. The teacher, therefore, interrupted her lesson and asked the children to tell her who had caused the damage. Since no one answered, the teacher warned them that, if the name did not come out “there would be no more parties at school”, “there would be no Christmas play”, and “there won’t be any school trips”. Seeing that even such threats achieved no results, the teacher decided to change her method: she promised the children that if they told her who had done it, “there would be no consequence”. Gior-

2. The theory taken as a frame of reference in the elaboration of the aforementioned model, as well as of what is proposed below, is mainly that of Transactional Analysis (see, for example, Filanti *et al.*, 2017; Stewart *et al.*, 1990; Woollams *et al.*, 1985).

3. This is a situation that occurred in the branch of a rather prestigious comprehensive school, told to the writer by a teacher who was clearly proud of her educational methods. For obvious reasons, the names reported, both of the teacher and of the pupil, have been appropriately changed.

gio, a child just over nine years old, asked her for further clarifications, starting the following dialogue:

- «Miss, you won't tell anyone?»  
 «Of course! Nobody will know!»  
 «Not even our parents?»  
 «I promise: it will remain between us and it will be as if nothing ever happened!»  
 «You know, miss... Maybe it was me!» Giorgio said.  
 «What do you mean, maybe it was you?»  
 «Yes, miss, it was me! »

At this point, contrary to what she had previously assured him, the teacher 'transformed': first of all, she brought the child outside the classroom to scold him ("What were you thinking?") and then, although the tearful pupil promised never to do anything like that again, she wrote a disciplinary note on his diary to take home to his parents. Finally, "to teach everyone what they're not supposed to do", she brought him back in to tell his classmates what he'd done, to apologize to them, and to promise never to do it again. Satisfied, the teacher considered the case closed.

Of course, no one can say that the situation described was handled well.

As we will see in the following pages, the teacher's behavior risks causing counterproductive reactions.

### 3. Analysis of the actions undertaken

In order to find ways to better manage situations of this kind, it is necessary to first of all analyze what has been done, i.e. what

works and what doesn't.

#### 3.1. Looking for a "culprit", criticizing and scolding

What emerges from the description of the case study is how, immediately after learning what had happened, the teacher started an investigation to discover the author of the damage. Once she found him, in order to obtain repentance as well as the promise not to do it again, the teacher resorted to criticizing and scolding, ordering him to return to school with his parents.

To summarize, the key moments of the implemented method were:

- a) a stop in teaching;
- b) the beginning of a sort of investigation to find the author of the damage;
- c) blackmail, upon seeing that entreaties did not bring results;
- d) use of deception to get the pupils to talk and the "culprit" to come forward;
- e) blame and reprimand towards the person who caused the damage;
- f) invitation to the "culprit" to admit to having made a mistake, to tell his classmates it was his fault, to promise not to do it again;
- g) written note with the order to return to school accompanied by his parents.

The logic underlying the interventions carried out seems, essentially, of a moralistic type while there is a lack of understanding the reason and needs that can be identified behind the behavior deemed improper.

By proposing to teach good manners, admitting one's mistakes and taking responsibility for them, the educator implemented a

sequence of actions that follows the claim of those who intend to fix issues by removing the warning lights that signal them.

More specifically, these actions recall the style of those who propose to cure diseases by eliminating the symptoms that reveal them. Therefore, despite her good intentions, the teacher risks leaving the present complexity unchanged and achieving goals other than those desired.

Moreover, in addition to the overreacting that marks the teacher's attitude, her 'transformation' risks encouraging children to believe that it is better not to trust adults. Indeed, by betraying children's trust, one runs the risk of consolidating the idea that, if they make mistakes or act inappropriately, it is better not to reveal it and not to be discovered.

If we consider that these are beliefs that mark the behavioral paths that are observed in certain personality disorders contemplated in the DSM5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2014), we cannot consider it suitable to reinforce them in pupils.

### *3.2. The definitions of child and education that are at the basis of the actions undertaken*

Focusing on the superficial level of improper behavior and appealing to a child's self-control to change it and/or to eliminate it sees an idea of education and pupil that is worth explaining and analyzing.

Indeed, the idea of child at the basis of such type of interventions does not seem

that different or more evolved compared to the one privileged in education at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, as Dell'Antonio (1992) pointed out, pupils at the time were considered as small adults, an intrinsically immature individual that needed help to mature.

The degree of maturity was then assessed on the basis of the comparison between the child's and the adult's condition to discern 'good' from 'evil', to behave 'well', to control oneself, to dominate one's instincts and vices.

Even in some school books such as *Giannettino*<sup>4</sup> and in some children's books such as *Cuore. The Heart of a Boy* and *Pinocchio*, the child who behaves like a small adult, who stops being mischievous, who controls and restrains his or her impulses to make room for commitment and a sense of responsibility is praised; even playing is considered a waste of time and a source of potential danger.

A child's discomfort, therefore, was rarely considered and dealt with in a qualified manner. Pinocchio's lies, for example, were interpreted as deviant conduct with respect to social norms and good manners. As is well known, Pinocchio is allowed to become a child again only when he becomes judicious, when he begins to behave well and stops telling lies.

In conclusion, the educational intervention focused on the evident level of conduct and on external signs of discomfort: indeed, in the face of Pinocchio's lies, the intervention consists in teaching him not to tell them. Educational action, therefore, translated into

4. This is a school book intended for elementary schools in what was the Kingdom of Italy which, in addition to academic content, features episodes from the life of a child named Giannettino as an educational function.

the containment, control, change, and elimination of any problematic behavior, i.e. in the promotion of compliance with rules.

## 4. In search of effective interventions

In order to identify useful interventions in managing complex educational situations of the kind described, it is important to keep in mind that the teacher in the case study previously discussed did not bother identifying any emotional needs and/or lacking underlying the child's behavior. If we consider that she is even satisfied with the results achieved, it is clear that she is unable to go beyond the evident level of the pupil's behavior. Above all, she does not understand that, through her actions, she risks producing results that are radically different from those that she proposes to achieve.

### 4.1. *The pupil's and the teacher's problem*

Faced with educational complexity, it is necessary, first of all, to decide what issue to focus on. Although it may seem obvious, it is far from a simple operation (Montuschi, 1997) also due to the numerous devaluation mechanisms that can further invalidate and complicate the problems that one means to address.

In this case study, at least two different types of problems can be identified: that of the child and that of the teacher. Clearly, in

the latter case, it is not a question of personal but educational difficulties: the teacher needs to understand the processes and dynamics underlying the situation described, and to plan appropriate interventions to solve it.

Although focusing on the pupil and their possible problems represents a practice that is still rather widespread, it is worth highlighting that this can lead to the devaluation of the teacher's role as well as his or her need to understand the complexities of the role and find useful ways to manage them. Indeed, if an educator's needs remain unfulfilled, should they find themselves facing similar difficulties again they will probably fall back into the initial condition of not knowing what else to do apart from what has already been done.

Focusing solely on the child and on their behavior can make even interventions on the part of experts from within or from outside the school vain. Indeed, it is not a given that help of the type indicated is an asset to the teacher doing their job or understanding what to do differently or with greater vigor with a particular pupil or with others who may present similar difficulties and/or problem behavior.

If we consider that it is a teacher who, more than others, works in contact with the pupils, it follows that it makes no sense to leave them alone to manage important problems of the type described, thus ignoring the difficulties and educational needs that arise<sup>5</sup>. In the following pages, therefore, the attention will be focused mainly on the teacher's educational issues.

5. One of the inherent contraindications in the way Italy carries out inclusion in the classroom is related to the fact that, while there are many courses to train teachers specialized in supporting pupils with disabilities, teachers already working often do not have the necessary support. Increasing the

That said, in order to decide how to deal with the situation described, it is necessary to first ascertain and establish whether the child has intentionally or accidentally clogged the sink as the actions to undertake will be radically different according to the case.

## 4.2. First option: the child was intentional in his actions

If we consider that, usually, anger and punishments are milder when behavior is judged accidental and, on the contrary, they are amplified when it is considered intentional, it can be assumed that the teacher of the case study examined believed in the latter option.

In any case, if in such a situation it is ascertained that the child's gesture was deliberate, then it is necessary to identify which intentions, feelings and/or emotional illiteracy caused it. Indeed, it is possible that it is a passive-aggressive behavior that underlies feelings of anger as well as a preference for indirectly regulating any pending interpersonal issues. In this case, emotional illiteracy would be the result of a chronic internal prescription to "not feel anger" and/or "not express anger", which the inspective and punitive attitude privileged by the teacher risks to further reinforce. Indeed, the teacher's actions risks consolidating, both in Giorgio and in his classmates, the belief that, in the event that they do something wrong, it is better not

to trust adults and be careful not to be discovered.

So what to do differently?

### 4.2.1. Promoting emotional competence

Numerous studies have shown that intelligence does not exist in a pure state or separate from other components and basic processes of one's personality and that the promotion of full maturation cannot be separated from the development of emotional competence.

In the Anglo-American world, the expression emotional intelligence is preferred (Goleman, 1997; 1998), which, among the first Salovey *et al.* (1990), defined as a series of abilities including the awareness of one's own and other people's feelings and, in particular, the skill of monitoring and mastering them as well as that of using them appropriately to guide thoughts and actions. The writings cited have pushed the beginning of numerous research studies as well as a rich and lively debate on the subject.

The expression 'emotional intelligence', however, risks inducing the idea that it is not easy to teach it, i.e. to produce significant changes in the short term through pedagogical-didactic interventions. Therefore, as Montuschi (1993) proposes, it is preferable to use the terms 'emotional competence' and 'emotional literacy'.

In order to understand the problems involved in case studies of the kind described,

number of support teachers and/or the amount of hours they spend in the classroom does not automatically improve the quality of inclusivity. Indeed, the design and implementation of qualified interventions are not guaranteed by the increase in the number of support teachers if, together with regular ones, they are left alone to cope with the educational issues. On the contrary, they must be allowed to rely on a good educational counseling service.



it is useful to recall that the studies conducted by transactional analysts have made it possible to identify and distinguish natural feelings and feelings of blackmail (English, 1971; 1972). In the latter case, it is a question of feelings that have gradually replaced and covered some of the natural ones. Therefore, happiness can be used instead of sadness, fear instead of anger, sadness instead of anger, anger instead of sadness, and so on.

Indeed, from an early age children might be encouraged and/or discouraged to feel and use certain feelings. In particular, sometimes any manifestation of anger or rage is devalued and even punished with phrases such as “Be calm!”, “Don’t you dare!”. In other cases, sadness is not accepted and, if the child suffers and/or complains, it is easy for them to receive messages such as “Don’t cry”, “You act like a girl”. In other cases, feelings such as fear and even joy and enthusiasm are not allowed, if they contrast with the atmosphere of mourning and tragedy that is sometimes predominant in some families.

It is interesting to underline that, in such situations, it is easy for children to find themselves in front of a kind of crossroads: to please or to rebel against the expectations of parents and/or significant people. Indeed, prompted not to feel and not to use a certain feeling such as anger, children might find it useful to remove it and/or replace it with another such as, for example, fear. Subsequently, in situations where it is useful and appropriate to get angry, it is easy for such

children to show fear.

Children who intend to remain faithful to themselves can also decide to live in secret a devalued feeling and/or to use it indirectly. In particular, if a child has been told not to feel anger, he or she could find it useful to play ‘pranks’ in order to experience, albeit indirectly, the feelings denied. Obviously, these are behavioral patterns which, if not adequately identified and treated, can become chronic and even evolve into much more important and destructive passive-aggressive forms.

Although the fundamental criterion to identify emotional illiteracy is congruence with the context, in the analysis of complex situations it is common to focus one’s attention on accentuated behaviors, for example of an aggressive type, and to ignore all or part of those that are milder, attenuated, and reduced<sup>6</sup>. Given that both over-reactive and under-reactive patterns can determine rather destructive endings, in the absence of clear anger, hatred, and aggression it is easy to be misled, forgetting that some subjects prefer to express such feelings indirectly. It follows that, in order to understand educational complexities and to intervene adequately to manage them, it is essential to observe amplifications and reductions, or exaggerations and attenuations that can occur alternately.

Incongruent answers in one sense or in the other, therefore, always hide specific chronic internal determinations, taken on in conjunction with previous strong traumatic experiences which must be duly identified

6. In pedagogical and/or psychological literature, there is no shortage of writings concerning manifest problems of an aggressive and destructive type while there are not many studies concerning “submerged” (Pieretti, 1996) or “hidden” (Montuschi, 2004) issues such as, for example, those who hide themselves behind excessively adapted behaviors, marked by the exaggerated determination not to disappoint the expectations of others and especially of significant people in one’s life.

and treated (Boals, 2018; Merrill *et al.*, 2016).

Keeping this in mind, in the event a child does not manifest and does not use feelings such as anger and/or rage, it is necessary to help them regain possession of such feelings, i.e. consider that these are not improper or bad parts of oneself but, on the contrary, precious ones from which one can draw strength, assertiveness, and energy to better respond to problems. “He who is angry at what he must and with whom he ought to and, furthermore, how, when, and for how long he ought to, can be praised!”<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4.2.2. Instructions for the intervention

Rather than merely discovering and punishing the “culprit”, the teacher of the case study described could ask herself what to do to allow Giorgio and his classmates who might show similar instances of emotional illiteracy to regain the permission to experience a full range of emotions and feelings. Specifically, she could help the child to understand what he thinks and feels when he clogs the sink (e.g. rage, anger, fear) and then to find appropriate options to respond to his need, as appropriate, to be heard, considered, respected. She could help him to identify the fear of manifesting and using anger and, therefore, teach him to verbalize it and/or to communicate it directly.

Specifically, it is possible to plan and start educational programs aimed at a single pupil or at the whole class. Since the possibilities are manifold, some of them are indicated by

way of example.

If one opts for an intervention aimed at the whole class, one can start working by inviting the pupils to arrange themselves in pairs or small groups and, afterwards, offer them an exercise of the following type:

*I am wronged or have a pending matter with someone:*

- a) *What do I think?*
- b) *What do I feel?*
- c) *What do I do?*
- d) *What can I do differently?*

Question a) aims to activate the cognitive dimension; b) intends to activate the emotional dimension, i.e. to encourage awareness of the feelings experienced; c) is aimed at stimulating awareness regarding the decisions taken, including those that may be taken automatically; d) aims to stimulate problem-solving skills and, in particular, divergent thinking in order to overcome any functional rigidities and to facilitate the discovery of new options.

In the next phase, with the full class, pupils can be asked what their answers were and, thus, help them to identify the feelings that each of them entails.

Taking advantage of the options identified by their classmates, each pupil can take note of which ones he or she tends to devalue and, therefore, can consider re-appropriating and using them.

This intervention implies a predominantly cognitive-emotional level.

It is possible, however, to go further and propose, for example, a play to allow those who have difficulty with a certain feeling to take on the roles of characters who give

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII



themselves permission to feel it, to manifest it, and to use it appropriately.

Alternatively, students can be invited to choose a character or animal to identify with and to explain the reason for this choice. Similarly, pupils can be divided into small groups and then invited to invent and stage a play or a mime in which each will show the opposite characteristic to the one they think belongs to them. Thus, if a child has chosen the lion, believing that it resembles him and/or that he likes it for its strength and aggression, he can be invited to act out the opposite polarity: in the play, he will become a sweet and gentle lion.

Hiding behind characters or roles of a play, it is easier to think about, feel, and use any denied feelings, i.e. to identify them, give them a name, and give oneself the permission to express and use them appropriately.

### 4.3. Second option: the child accidentally clogged the sink

If, unlike what has been hypothesized up to now, the damage to the sink is the outcome of an accident, before implementing any intervention it is necessary to establish what aims one means to achieve. Specifically, it is worth asking: What do we propose to achieve by identifying the author of the damage, blaming them, punishing them, and making them promise not to do it again? What do we want them not to do anymore? Are we expecting them to be careful not to cause damage in the future? Do we want them to learn to take responsibility for their actions? What else?

Focusing on the child's attempt not to

be discovered, as in the initial stages of the situation described, can help us identify important educational purposes such as loyalty, honesty, and responsibility. To understand the importance of the qualities described, imagine, for example, a motorist who, while trying to get out of a parking space, inadvertently damages the side of the car near his. Even if he had no intention of causing damage, at that point there are two options: a) run away before anyone notices what has happened; b) find the owner of the damaged car or leave them his name and address so that they can get in touch and obtain the compensation they are entitled to.

Although both in the case of the child and in that of the motorist the damage is the result of some misunderstanding, once determined, it is essential that those who caused it assume their responsibility.

However, even if promoting these qualities is a basic goal to reach, one must pay particular attention to the ways used to promote them. Indeed, an excessively inspective and punitive atmosphere risks being unproductive. Above all, as one can be seen from the case study, appealing to one's fear might make the pupil repent of having admitted to being the perpetrator of the damage. On the contrary, it is necessary to explore in depth why he tried to hide, i.e. to identify his fears and the possible mechanisms that amplify them.

#### 4.3.1. Moral conduct: anonymity and social control

In the previous paragraph it was noted

that, if a pupil has made a mistake or damaged something intentionally, it is necessary to identify which reasons may lead him or her to fear discovery.

The first, rather obvious, assumption is that the pupil thought of hiding behind the anonymity they felt in that specific context.

To understand how the perception of social control can prompt different ways of acting, it is useful to mention an interesting experiment conducted by Philip Zimbardo (2008). Having noticed the feeling of anonymity of some streets of Palo Alto and of New York, the professor had a car without a license plate and with the hood open left near the campus of the University of New York, in the Bronx, and another similar one near the University of Stanford, analyzing the reactions of passers-by in both contexts.

In the case of the Bronx, Zimbardo and his assistants had not yet finished fixing the video recording equipment when, in broad daylight, an entire family stopped and began to loot the car: while trying to disassemble the battery, the man ordered his wife to empty the trunk and the son to check the dashboard. Twenty-three similar acts of vandalism followed, mostly perpetrated by ordinary citizens: adult, white, and well-dressed.

On the contrary, in Palo Alto, in a whole weekend it was not possible to record a single instance of destructive conduct: passers-by looked but without touching anything. At a certain point, when it started to rain, a gentleman approached the car to close the hood and, after it was taken away once the experiment was over, three different people called the police to report the theft of an allegedly

abandoned or stolen car.

On the basis of what has been reported, it is tempting to conclude that those who live in the Bronx, unlike the citizens of Palo Alto, have within them a different operational sense of community and pro-sociality. Instead, we must consider that the degree of anonymity, i.e. the feeling they cannot be identified and recognized, is different between one context and the other.

It is therefore clear to see how a pupil like Giorgio or the car driver who inadvertently damages a car when exiting the parking lot may feel tempted to hide behind anonymity and, therefore, to behave like the passers-by who preyed on one of the two cars used in Zimbardo's experiment. From an educational point of view, therefore, it is necessary to verify whether and to what extent the pupil has in him an adequate sense of belonging, community, and pro-sociality or if he prefers to regulate his actions on the basis of possibility and/or the risk of being seen, identified, and judged by others.

### *4.3.2. Respecting the rules: free choice or forced choice*

In the previous paragraph we focused on the relationship between different ways of acting and conforming to the values, rules, and cultural models of a given group, and the different degree of anonymity that marks a given social context. Considering this, it is tempting to assume that conformity and a suitable conduct represent ideal educational purposes. Indeed, making sure that children learn to respect values and rules and to act

in a careful, diligent, and respectful way is of paramount importance. Nonetheless, it is advisable to: a) check whether, from time to time, compliance with social norms and rules represents the outcome of a free or ‘forced’ choice; b) identify behavior marked by the persistent and pervasive desire not to disappoint significant people; c) avoid encouraging behavior that is overly adapted in order not to produce unproductive and even damaging outcomes.

First of all, it is necessary to ascertain whether the respect of social values and rules by a child constitutes the outcome of a free, independent, and autonomous choice or of a ‘forced’ choice, i.e. deriving from the desire to fulfill the expectations of others and, in particular, of significant people in one’s life (Amenta, 2017). Indeed, the former case configures a way of acting expressive of oneself which has its roots in the objective, authentic, and profound meaning of the principles observed. On the other hand, the latter represents more a way of being dependent, carried out in order to obtain something, which has as its reference others and their expectations, and is diversified according to the range of conformist/complacent vs. oppositional/rebel (Montuschi, 1997, p. 15ff; Woollams *et al.*, 1985, p. 28ff).

Secondly, one must pay attention to some extremely ‘forced’ ways of conduct that one can observe in “good children” (Simmons, 2010) as they can hide the pervasive

and inveterate will to fulfill the expectations of others. Indeed, feeling constantly under scrutiny, some resort to one of the following two styles in order to be judged favorably<sup>8</sup> (Dickinson *et al.*, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2016): a) evade any negative judgments and reactions by impressing the interlocutor, for example through the display of qualities, merits, and personal successes; b) avoid being rejected, humiliated, (Casale *et al.*, 2016; Giusti *et al.*, 2011, pp. 64ss) or ostracized (Zamperini, 2010) by monitoring even the slightest reaction of one’s interlocutor, i.e. acting in a cautious, thoughtful, attentive, and inhibited way (Besser *et al.*, 2010).

Thirdly, before implementing moralistic and punitive interventions in an automatic and repetitive way, it is necessary to evaluate what contraindications can derive from them, especially for those who prefer extremely ‘forced’ or adapted behavior. In order to understand what results this can lead to in terms of strengthening and chronicizing inappropriate decisions, it is considered useful to cite two case studies. The first concerns a young novice driver who, after being in a car accident, avoids informing his parents and asking them for help. The second is that of a teenage boy who, after a collision between his scooter and a car, decides not to go to the hospital despite severe pain in the abdominal area so as not to have to tell his parents.

Indeed, the aforementioned behavior is

8. In this regard, two different types of simulation can be identified: the deliberate will to lie and the automatic and unconscious tendency to deceive oneself and/or others. The accentuated propensity to build a positive image of oneself in order to obtain particular attention and avoid rejection can sometimes be found in certain personality disorders and, in particular, in the narcissistic one. Obviously, those who act in a hyper-compliant, hyper-mature, hyper-adapted way do not always and do not necessarily have this illness. Furthermore, the question of whether to diagnose Narcissistic Personality Disorder before the age of eighteen is relatively controversial (Kernberg, 2006, p. 74; Kernberg, 2001, p. 95).

excessively adapted and is implemented in order to prevent unfavorable judgment, i.e. blame, reprimand, and/or punishment.

In conclusion, in the case of behavior marked by the intent not to let people know that one is the author of some mistake, damage, or reprehensible act, it is reductive to intervene expecting an admission of responsibility and repentance. The conduct of the child who hides having clogged the sink, like that of the subjects involved in the aforementioned road accidents, underlies the attempt to prevent negative judgment, criticism, and punishment. Therefore, instead of stimulating its chronicization to unproductive levels by reinforcing one's determination to not make mistakes and avoid negative judgment at all costs, it is necessary to explore the underlying fear and find useful ways to reassure the person and reduce the feeling. Instead of ignoring the feeling, it is therefore necessary to fully explore the concern that pervade the experience of the protagonists of the case studies mentioned and prevent them from rising dramatically to the point of stimulating decisions that can degenerate into sometimes dramatic endings.

### 4.3.3. *Instructions for the intervention*

The different types of 'adapted' behavior

can be considered the outcome of specific internal paths that stemmed from the activation of five different types of chronicized parental messages, technically referred to as drivers, orders, or counter-orders: "Please Me!", "Be Perfect!", "Hurry up!", "Try Hard!", "Be Strong!" (Kahler *et al.*, 1974; Kahler, 1975; 2008). Once activated, each internal order can give rise to a specific type of behavior which is, however, a way of responding to the expectations of others (Bastianelli *et al.*, 2013; Ware, 1983)<sup>9</sup>.

In the case of the child attempting to hide having clogged the sink, it is possible to identify, behind his behavior, an internal order such as "You cannot allow yourself to make mistakes" or, if we assume the language of Transactional Analysis, the counter-order "Be Perfect!".

Given that careful and polite actions can degenerate into reluctance, inhibition, blocking and even inaction<sup>10</sup>, two criteria are crucial to identify the driver "Be Perfect!": the inability to enjoy successes and despair in the face of failure. In other words, those who are inclined to the driver "Be Perfect!" tend to attribute little or no importance to success and merit: on the contrary, they tend to overestimate mistakes, living them as a kind of disaster to be avoided at all costs.

For observation in the classroom, it is useful to take into account the frequency and

9. By virtue of the order "Please Me!", the subject acts to respond to the internalized duty to please others. The subject therefore acts on the basis of what others ask, desire, or on what he assumes they want. The second driver is "Be Perfect!": in this case, the subject acts stimulated by the idea of becoming better and improving by doing more and more, and better. Also, in this case the underlying need is to be appreciated and admired by others. The third order is "Hurry up!" and it manifests itself in the concern not to waste time. The origin, also for this type of order, is similar to the others: to silence the parental figures mentally present who cannot bear to waste time. The fourth order is "Try Hard!" and it manifests itself in the subject's attempt to show good will. This counter-order also indicates self-depreciation and the expectation of benevolent consideration on the part of others. The last order is "Be Strong!" and it is based on the attempt to hide and not experience one's needs and feelings in order to pursue predetermined results.

10. From a technical point of view, violence, together with abstinence, inaction, hyper-adaptation, agitation, and inability, belongs to what Transactional Analysis classifies as 'passive behavior' (Schiff *et al.*, 1971, pp. 71-78).

intensity of behavior of the type indicated below:

- remaining seated composed while the others play, joke, move around;
- shyness, inhibition, and control;
- overly diligent and judicious traits;
- tension and rigidity when with others;
- inactivity and inaction;
- embarrassment and shame;
- inhibition during oral tests;
- repeatedly goes over strokes when drawing;
- deleting and correcting often when writing;
- reducing font size when writing;
- taking more time than others to complete a task;
- procrastinating and doing things at the last moment;
- repeatedly review an assignment before submitting it;
- using intercalations and accessory phrases, to specify things before saying others;
- avoiding to openly express one's opinions, feelings, tastes;
- reduced description of concepts and examples;
- requests to postpone oral tests;
- "strategic" absences to avoid tests;
- worry and anxiety in the face of a relatively new and/or difficult task;
- little enthusiasm in the face of success, which he or she seems to experience as futile and unimportant;
- despair in case of mistakes or failure.

As regards possible interventions, it bears repeating that encouraging behavior that imply the internal driver "Be Perfect!" past certain limits by resorting to blame, reproach,

and punishment risks raising the underlying fear to a new level. This, once again, risks encouraging the renewal of the resolve not to make mistakes which, paradoxically, can result in an increase in the risk of getting distracted, making mistakes, and incurring in further accidents.

It is therefore worthwhile to identify and act on the fear of making mistakes, i.e. to help children who show perfectionism, inhibition, blocking, and inaction to give themselves the permission to act in a natural way. Useful tips on how to avoid pushing children towards excessive scruples and meticulousness and promoting a constructive relational atmosphere can be deduced from contributions on pedagogy (Binanti, 2005; Perkinson, 1983; 1984; Zanatto Orlandini, 1995; Benes *et al.*, 2017).

More practically, educators can teach pupils that, once a situation has occurred, it can only be accepted since persisting in denying it and/or trying to reject it has no advantages. They can, therefore, suggest for the pupils to think about important discoveries made thanks to mistakes and, similarly, to reflect on how to use their mistakes in a productive way, for example by perceiving advantages and positive implications. Finally, they can help students express and verbalize what they feel and what they think in case they have made a mistake that they would like to hide.

## 5. Concluding remarks

After describing a case study featuring a child trying to hide a mistake and the teacher's intention to discover the author of the

damage, the present paper moved on to analyze the way in which the situation developed, which recalls a kind of psychological hide-and-seek. Subsequently, considering that any mistakes and reprehensible actions on the part of a child may be the result of intentional or accidental behavior, the paper moved on to identify which educational purposes, in both cases, can be identified, as well as what interventions can be carried out.

Obviously, referring to a real case study when elaborating reflections and proposals for interventions to carry out, as the writer chose to do in this paper, on the one hand guarantees effectiveness and practicality, yet on the other involves limitations as regards the possible generalization of the results. In any case, the proposed reference framework and the working method followed, from the initial analysis to the identification of appropriate interventions, can certainly be adapted and re-adapted to examine and cope with similar complex educational situations.

In conclusion, focusing solely on the manifest level of problem risks heavily reducing the range of valid options to manage it. In the same way, it is of little use to limit ourselves to identifying the “culprit” of some damage

and, afterwards, blaming and/or punishing them. On the contrary, it is necessary, first of all, to understand whether a mistake is the result of intentional or accidental conduct and, then, to identify and act on any blockages and emotional illiteracy present in one case and/or in the other. In particular, if a pupil has intentionally caused harm, it is easy for their behavior to constitute a passive-aggressive way of handling pending interpersonal issues. Subsequently, educational interventions can help them regain permission to use anger in an open, frank, and direct way. If, on the other hand, a child tries to hide mistakes or accidental damage, it is necessary to investigate and act on their fear of making mistakes and on the mechanisms that amplify such fear. Above all, one must avoid reinforcing any internal intention not to make mistakes.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that, since teachers work for several hours a day in contact with children and young people, it makes no sense to leave them alone to struggle with educational complexities of the type considered. Above all, it is not useful to devalue and ignore their need to fully understand educational complexities and to prepare qualified interventions to manage them.



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