The Adolescent Teacher:
A Psychoanalytic contribution to developing education

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Abstract

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Encounters with adolescence and its quest for truth, beauty and thought can be used as a psychoanalytic frame to understand the education of the helping professions. A significant conflict is the state of professional knowledge in psychical life that tends to be expressed as alienation between developmental theory and pedagogy. I treat my undergraduate teacher education course, “The adolescent and the teacher” as a psychoanalytic case study on the developing education of adults who grew up in school and return to work there. The paper focuses on problems in teacher education, an area hardly considered as affecting the imaginary of school psychology, counseling, and social work, and discussions about the nature of adolescence, yet provides a commentary on the impossible professions dedicated to education. The discussion leans on the psychoanalytic idea that adults working in schools are subject to their adolescence—elemental sets of internal conflicts, phantasies, and defenses—that return in professional knowledge as demands for certainty and as a belief that learning is a tonic to conflict as opposed to conflict’s delegate. Working with Kristeva’s (2007) formulation of “the adolescent syndrome of ideality,” the paper speculates on psychical life as our most radical relation to the self and other. But in this meeting a kernel of alienation is carried into responses to conflicts in the structure of schooling, self/other relations, the arrangement of professional knowledge, and reaches into the confusion between phantasies of a profession and the daily imperatives to act with certainty.
Can the adolescent and the teacher meet? I pose this question to undergraduate students in a teacher education course titled, *The Adolescent and the Teacher*. In handling the question the class repeats their own untimely history of learning along with an exemplary alienation between the fields of developmental theory and pedagogy. Variations on this alienation find their way into the well-worn conflict between education and psychology and teaching and learning, and climax in the discord between theory and practice. In all these conflicts the transference object of human learning creates more dissonance since the problem leans upon self/other relations, that is to say, our emotional world. But if pedagogy and developmental theory present urgent claims on the nature of adolescence and ready-made instructions on how the actual adolescent should express the quest for thought, beauty, and truth, they also present contradictory directions. All these *meetings* involve competing demands between the inner world and external world.

Encounters with adolescence, as both lines of development and emotional situation, as both symptom and object relation, and as both mental constellation and mode of response take us to the heart of phantasies of learning to teach with others. The larger problem concerns what else is met when the adolescent and teacher try to meet and why we might use this situation as a portal to understanding the education of the helping professions. At first, the students learning to teach need to believe that only the adolescent has psychology and the teacher must manage that. They want techniques that promise successful
pedagogy and imagine psychology as a last resort to explain a student’s failure. It is as if the backward glance of developmental theory is meant to destroy the presence of pedagogy by bringing things best left at the classroom door, namely the messy lives of teachers and adolescents and the murky underworld of subjectivity. The students in my course are not the originators of this phantasy, although they do live inside its anxiety. Indeed, their identifications with the ideal object of knowledge are already rooted in the profession they hope to join and are urged along by the daily routines, constraints, and rules of the institution they know so well since they grew up there. And yet, due to the ambivalence of projective identification, due to their emotional world, they also worry. Must they take in the lives of others and become emotionally involved with their students to learn as teachers?

The course, The Adolescent and the Teacher is designed to get to know the emotional experience of learning and teaching and reflect on why this relation to subjective life is so elusive and subject to what Bion (2000) calls “emotional storms,” (p. 321) or the atmosphere created when people meet. I invite the students to speak in the language of psychoanalysis. They read Sophocles’ play, Oedipus Rex and are asked, why can’t the adolescent or teacher be king? With Margo Waddell’s (2005) Inside Lives: Psychoanalysis and the growth of personality, I introduce the clinical writing of the British Object Relation School and its words: the breast, projective identification, internalization, anxiety, K and minus K, love and hate, and the paranoid schizoid and depressive positions. They also are
asked to think about uneven development as they watch a film called *The Class.* The reading road is bumpy, littered with objections, obstacles, and painful plaints. They want to know what clinical writing, novels, and plays have to do with education. They want to know what the breast has to do with pedagogy. But they do not yet know what their education has to do with themselves. I take all of this as our material and clinic.

My Freudian slip has renamed this class, *The Adolescent Teacher,* and my psychoanalytic training brings me to analyze this association and wander into the thickets of the dynamic unconscious, scenes of psychical continuity that gain momentum with each blink of the eye. And with psychoanalysis I ask myself, can the psychoanalyst and the teacher meet? This, too, brings a number of pedagogical difficulties since the psychoanalytic request invites the linking together of disparate things with an interest in the unknown, a curiosity toward the circuitous route of transference of feelings between people, and from the meandering words of free association, care for the detours and fragility of the symbolization. To stretch this invitation further and, perhaps, to welcome what is most unwelcome about psychoanalysis, one more turn is made: just as the human can be characterized through conflicts of maturation, points of fixation and regression, areas of fusion and confusion, and profound phantasies of education, so too, can the professions. Freud (1930) posed this radical relatoriality in his study of unhappiness, when he asked: Can the neurosis of culture be psychoanalyzed?
This essay treats my course, *The Adolescent and the Teacher* as both a commentary on the ordinary learning quests for thought, beauty, and truth that a study of both adolescence and teaching holds in store and as an extraordinary allegory used to analyze emotional life in the developing education of the helping professions. This psychodynamic approach emerges from my on-going research into the depth psychology of teaching, an area of inquiry into the emotional world of the practitioner from the vantage of what her or his formative years in education may mean to present views of learning (Britzman, 2009). I consider this psychology through the lens of a particular transference configuration that anticipates developing education. In a nutshell yet to be cracked, the adolescent with the teacher proposes the conflicts of their respective education while creating the soft ground of relationality that sinks under pressures for compliance, something the adolescent justifiably hates and the teacher feels she or he must demand and be subject to. Helene Deutsch’s (1967) insight into the adolescent world is relevant for both the teacher and adolescent: “The adolescent lives his life, after all, between two worlds: one that has thus far complied with his demands and one that now demands his compliance” (p. 34). Later in this essay, I link this tension of authority and psychical history to Kristeva’s (2007) formulation of the “adolescent syndrome of ideality,” (p. 716) a defense against the loss of the object. This complex involves both the adolescent and teacher’s struggle for having to assign meaning to what at first feels already set.
My discussion leans on the psychoanalytic idea that adults working in schools are subject to their adolescence and these elemental sets of internal conflicts, phantasies, and defenses return in professional knowledge as demands for certainty and as a belief that learning is a tonic to conflict as opposed to conflict’s delegate. This leads me to speculate on psychical life as our most radical relation to the self and other. When people meet, so too do their internal worlds with the mental mechanisms of identification and projection, defenses best described as unconscious object relations that compose and decompose what is intersubjective in intrapsychical life. I relate the contiguity of psychical life to our quest for meaning and influence. But it is in this meeting that I see a kernel of alienation carried into our responses to conflicts in the structure of schooling, in self/other relations, in the arrangement of professional knowledge, and in the confusion between phantasies of a profession and the daily imperatives to act with certainty.

For those learning to teach, anticipating the adolescent can feel strangely familiar, with the circularity and digressions of the return of the repressed. The adolescence my students bring to their teacher education is affected by well-rehearsed anxiety over the conflictive nature of school culture. In learning to become the high school teacher they want to be, they trade uncertainty about meeting the adolescent and thoughts about their own development for an idealization of the role of teacher. Such anxiety may touch the chaos of beginnings. As phantasy, it also carries a defense in the form of an idealization of
curriculum that is then symbolically equated with the teacher’s authority. Good students simply learn and then leave. Bad students are the fault of and problem for others. But the teacher—the one in the classroom and the one in the student’s mind—then faces an impossible decision: Should one be pedagogical friend or foe? Grossly put, they wish to know as much as they can about how to control adolescents and perhaps avoid the doorstep of developmental theory so that they can just teach their subject and believe in what they know. This reduction of education to management by objectives is well known, though usually is unmanageable since the world always intrudes and since the educational relation follows the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty.

There is a great irony to the reach of anxiety in school life, as it both impresses the professions’ object relations and animates its subjective situation and felt choices. This too is a quality of the transference as both an irruption of the past into the present and as orienting, with ambivalence, identification. Because the teacher only has words, my contention is that psychoanalysis proffers a new way into this learning complex, provided that one can see language as a treatment for thought and become curious about this research. Defenses against the wild side of learning expose the situation of adolescence—the one my students thought they left behind and the one that returns in their idealization of knowledge, the teacher’s authority, and the splitting into good and bad. This situation of adolescence is also where developmental theory meets pedagogy.
The subjective situation that occupies the rest of this essay is whether the psychical reach of adolescence can be pictured as affecting subjective conflicts within professional knowledge and its education. To do this work, I turn to the language of psychoanalysis and its words for developing education. How does the complex of adolescence—as figure, situation, object relation, and drive to know and as subject to displacements, reversals, and substitutions—repeat in the professional imaginary? Why is this developing education so difficult to symbolize? To put the question boldly, can the professions and the unconscious meet?

**The Impossible Professions**

So what can be said of the professions and its psychology? When Freud (1925) gave recognition to education, governance, and medicine as “the impossible professions” (p. 273) he enfolded psychical life within the subjective difficulties of the work and then extended psychical development into the education of the professions. With the idea of transference, Freud urged the practitioner’s involvement and the courage to symbolize practice as a relationship. He understood the heart of the helping professions, including their techniques, goals, and language, as affected by remnants of infancy, childhood and adolescence, as defended by screen memories, and as erotically charged by the family romance and sublimation (Britzman, 2011). From these developments in psychical life Freud then supposed that working with others brings to the professions the paradox of symbolizing inter-subjective history through intra-
psychical dynamics. Our doubts over the veracity of knowledge, our difficulty of knowing the other, and our desire to solve problems and to help, for example, are woven from the frayed threads of primary helplessness and dependency. Just as individuals defend against these feelings of helplessness, the professions have comparable mechanisms, though they are hardly diagnosed as disorders or even considered as ordinary pieces of psychological life. Nonetheless, the impossible professions are vulnerable to their impressive desires, demands, and condensations of the history of the developing emotional world.

But if our personal cause effectuates traces of our infantile roots — internal perceptions and their first tendency to hallucinate satisfaction and then cry out to the other — our adolescence introduces the new tendency of idealization. In the case of the impossible professions, the idealized object is its knowledge of others, while the defense is against the loss of love. Here the impossible professions are subject to adolescence through the ways in which the passion to know becomes confused with the need to believe. The handling of knowledge, Freud (1915) thought, conveys as much about our internal development as it does about the conflicts with transference in institutional life.

At least four of Freud’s ideas on the psychical body can be seen as pressing upon the vulnerability of experience in education and provoking new narratives for the impossible professions: that consciousness is not the sum of mental life; that there is a fluidity between sanity and madness; that the human subject is divided and affected by both internal conflicts and the ambiguity of
external reality; and, education is an unsolved problem. Within this design, Kristeva (2010) posits what is most creative about the speaking subject: the search for beauty, truth, and thought. So if the human professions are impossible, they are also thinking professions and have the added burden of questioning their own learning theories with the responsibility to protect and encourage the right to think.

It almost seems as though Freud, when speaking about the impossible professions, was really addressing the psychological fact that the human is an impossible, slow learner, caught within the drive to know objects in the world while anticipating its own reception. All this occurs in daily school life, where unconscious human nature flourishes and where people do not so much make up their minds, so much as worry whether their minds are becoming lost, ignored, or irrelevant. Because the origin of the impossible professions is rooted in both the social fact that we grow up in school and the subjective fact of transference of the emotional world, the professions carry on imagoes that anticipate mental life from the vantage of what the other holds in store (Britzman, 2009). So many conflicting desires are made from these events and what then makes psychoanalysis its own impossible profession is that it must begin from the complication that the human is a stranger, difficult to know and swimming against the tide of meaning. In his last unfinished book, Winnicott (1988) describes human nature from this vantage but also insists: “Human nature is almost all we have” (p. 1). But this gives any education a terrific problem: it is
psychical reality that is transferred and carried into our procedures for becoming a speaking subject. And the teacher’s work involves what already belongs to human nature: the desire for truth, beauty, and thought crafted from the situation of ambiguous reality.

**Psychoanalysis and Education**

In the psychoanalytic field, school life has a psychical destiny and developing education is contingent on that exchange between the epistemophilic instinct with the ambiguity of reality. This research desire proposes and registers phantasies of learning and creates our first theory of origin (Walsh, 2010). The human, then, is a creature of learning, impressed by what it cannot know and, as beholden to its own research, subject to breakdowns and the need to believe against all odds. These unconscious dynamics are as significant to understand as, say, the official school record. How this record becomes a broken one is also part of the story; for psychoanalytic action, perhaps this broken story is the most important one.

Freud (1900) began this argument in his inaugural text, *Interpretation of Dreams*. Scenes of school examinations serve as one of his examples of “typical dreams.” There, school life appears in the form of a set test but the answers have gone missing. In associating schooling with dreaming, he also pointed out the unconscious relation between “responsibility and fiasco” (p. 274), where feeling the burden of responsibility brings worries that a terrible mess has already happened. In the unconscious afterlife of schooling, what is it about the exam
that so mesmerizes and so confuses the boundaries between success and failure?
Why this nightly rewrite of the official record?

When the ego surrenders to sleep and is beholden to a primary logic, impressions of school life return through the vagaries of dream thoughts. The dreamer bungles the exam, forgets how to read, goes to the wrong room, is inexplicably late, cannot speak the language, has a ridiculous writing implement, finds that everything that was once clear is now uncertain, and so on. Freud notes that patients who report these dreams are already successful professionals, have no more exams to take and, more often than not, are the examiner of others. Along with the puzzling wishes to make a mess, to not understand, and to disappoint, success cannot resolve those left over feelings about what is most ridiculous, unbelievable, and inchoate in having to grow up in school, including the tendency to act out the infantile equation of learning with the need to be punished.

In the early history of child analysis, psychoanalysis was thought of as a cure for neurosis in school life and as on the side of sexual enlightenment. Anna Freud (1954) broke into this idealization when she generalized the terms of education as “all types of interference with spontaneous development” (p. 9) and then had to conclude, “the emergence of neurotic conflicts has to be regarded as the price paid for the complexity of the human personality” (p. 15).
Marcia Cavell (1993) takes a further step when she places neurosis into the heart of learning: “Freud found the source of human neurosis in our long dependency
on others and our capacity for symbolization” (p. 1). It is not a strong leap to suggest that both dependency and symbolization structure school life, although it may be difficult for teachers to see within these conflicts the neurotic tendencies of pedagogy and consider how learning relations carries its symptoms.

But if education is all types of interference, the teacher, too, is interfered with. Like the psychoanalyst, teachers must greet more than they know. François Roustang (2000) raises this dilemma when he places the difficulty of group psychology into the mix:

Pedagogy, which seeks to bring everyone to the same level of capacity, nonetheless comes up against collective and individual resistances as its accomplishes its program, and must take those resistances into account . . . . How will it inspire the desire to grow and progress? It will have to bring into play forces that cannot be itemized in books. (p. 83)

The clinical material of child psychoanalysis presents the other side of untold desire: young patients, while playing with toys, communicate a great deal of what they feel as their misfortunate education. They take on the character of good and bad teachers and punish those other students who have trouble with being told what to do. They are able to play all the roles and perform the fragility of communication as vulnerable to misunderstanding and to feelings of persecution punctuated by narcissistic injury. Even as school life is contemporaneous with the treatment and often the reason why there is an
analysis, these phantasies of education propose a history of disunity between feeling and experience (Green, 2000).

For both education and psychoanalysis, adolescence presents as a crisis to adult identity. Ladame and Perrt-Catipovic (1998) suggest that adolescence raises a theoretical problem of cure when they claim: “there is no adolescence without a crisis of adolescence” (p. 162). Their view places uncertainty into the heart of moral views that regularly amplify the divide between normality and pathology in developmental theory and between success and failure in pedagogical efforts. Winnicott (1984) highlights a more immediate crisis when he argues that it is normal and pleasurable for adolescents to wish not to be understood: “In fact adults should hide among themselves what they come to understand in adolescence.” (p. 145). And yet, what adults come to understand in terms of what the adolescent wants, is, in fact, quickly forgotten, perhaps because the adolescent asks for more than she or he knows, and because there is a remainder conveyed by the adolescent revolt.

**Impossible Adolescence**

For Helene Deutsch (1967) actual adolescence challenges the psychical body and presents a torrential storm dedicated to the other and made from the sharpest exaggerations of the mind’s wishes and defenses. She emphasizes its agonies:

The kaleidoscopically fluctuating changes on the inner battlefield:

victories of the instincts over the superego or vice versa; the rejection or
revival of previous identifications, the upsetting of the ego ideal; the
search for new identifications; narcissistic engrossment and masochistic
self-depreciation—all these are examples of the turmoil that occurs
during the process of maturation. (pp. 22-23)

Just as childhood impresses the adult’s mental life, Deutsch suggests there is no
final goodbye to adolescence. Adolescent tendencies are eternal and, for the
adult, unconscious.

Anna Freud (1969) turned her observations on adolescence back to the
psychoanalytic field, suggesting why adolescents are so hard to know and
relating this difficulty to her observation that “adolescence remain[s] a stepchild
in psychoanalytic theory” (p. 141). She identifies two difficulties for
psychoanalysis. First, adolescence cannot be reconstructed as one is undergoing
it. And second, in adult analysis, even within reconstruction, a history of affects
escapes:

What we fail to recover, as a rule, is the atmosphere in which the
adolescent lives, his anxieties, the height of elation or depth of despair, the
quickly rising enthusiasm, the utter hopelessness, the burning—or at
times sterile—intellectual and philosophical preoccupations, the yearning
for freedom, the sense of loneliness, the feeling of oppression by the
parents, the impotent rages or active hates directed against the adult
world, the erotic crushes—whether homosexually or heterosexually
directed—the suicidal fantasies, etc. (p. 143)
Anna Freud’s astute observation raises the question, why would any adult want to bring this atmosphere back? And yet, within contemporaneous relations between adults and adolescence, can atmosphere ever leave?

Kristeva (2009) draws upon Deutsch’s (1967) discussion of perpetual adolescence throughout the life span with the insight that while adolescence is a test of maturity, its answers are vulnerable and subject to the defense of ideality, where knowledge is either good or bad, where friends are either loyal or pretenders, and where the line between convictions and absolutism blurs. The adolescent, Kristeva proposes, is a believer. As a formulation of the mind, eternal adolescence, Kristeva writes, “also indicates a certain suppleness of agencies, an adaptability, a capacity to modify oneself according to the environment and the other, as well as against them” (2009, p. 51). Such metaphorical views of adolescence are difficult to keep in mind, partly because actual adolescents seem to demand a great deal of the world while asking the other, who am I really to you? And the question becomes a contest for recognition since the adult demands just as much from the adolescent.

Kristeva’s (2007) provocative formulation of “the adolescent syndrome of ideality” is where she sees the mind’s potential for flexibility grow rigid. She proposes adolescent belief as a mental constellation mesmerized by the force fields of culture and psychical development and captivated by the imaginary choice between beauty or thought. The adolescent, an incredible believer in the need to believe without knowing why, becomes caught in the atmosphere of its
own beliefs in the perfection of the object. The missing element is the actual other and Kristeva sees in the syndrome of ideality:

a new type of speaking subject who believes in the existence of the erotic object (object of desire and/or love). He only seeks because he is convinced that it must exist. The adolescent is not a researcher in a laboratory, he’s a believer. We are all adolescents when we are enthralled by the absolute.

(Original ital., p. 717)

Kristeva’s (2007) argument is that the adolescence trades the ambivalence of childhood research for the absolutisms of knowledge. In doing so, the other is always a threat if it cannot be perfectly controlled. Due to the force of belief—its ideality and tendency to foreclose the difference of meaning through the splitting of good and bad—the adolescent defends against her or his own depressive position. The belief is maintained with the painfulness of paranoid/schizoid anxiety. There is, for the adolescent, a terrible beauty in the belief in perfection: in an ideal object that is totally satisfying and therefore must be true and unchanging. From Kristeva’s formulation, one can see the force of certitude in “a rush to paradise” (p. 718), but also tragedy: a fall into suffering when ideality is disillusioned or fails to stabilize the subject. Kristeva likens these passionate attachments to Romeo and Juliet, where the couple, in the name of love or ideality, is destroyed or destroys themselves.

Must one take sides? This may be the teacher’s best question. In his advice to beginning psychoanalytic treatment, Freud (1913) urged analysts to be
modest, expect misunderstanding, and avoid suggestions, or the urge to prescribe to the patient their own values. Here, technique is impressed with its negativity because meaning is elusive and subject to self-deception and narcissistic gratification. Kristeva (2007) has described cure is a matter of making “a creative bond with others” (p. 716) that urges an abiding interest in what inhibits our bonds and destroys desire. But to understand this psychical reality, the analyst must share the adolescent’s ideality, “and thus be capable of metabolizing the need to believe not through acting out but through the pleasure that comes with thinking, questioning and analyzing” (pp. 724-25). It is here where the psychoanalyst and the teacher may meet their shared desire with putting things to new words to open the uncertain world of thinking.

*Entre les Murs* Or, *Between the walls*

The psychoanalytic approach developed throughout this essay becomes alive when my students view Laurent Cantet’s (2008) film, “The Class” (Entre les Murs). They feel the touch of their own history of education and the sting of the transference, sometimes through their identification with the film’s teacher and sometimes with the students, the young actors. Like the students in the film, my class is angry when the teacher is unfair or disappoints. But they also are worried about their own sense of fairness and whether they can avoid feeling conflictive life. Our discussion of the film slowly shifts from the anxiety of what the teacher should do to avoid mistakes to the more uncertain dilemma of how they interpret and why, for them, records are being broken. Can pedagogy also be an
urge for reparation? And they are amazed at the flashpoint of words exchanged: they are yelled, mumbled, cut off, and overthrown with affect.

The film follows teachers and ninth grade students throughout their academic year, and focuses on Mr. Marin’s French class, from the chaos of the first day, where the teacher worries about losing time to noise and disruption, to the last meeting when, before they say goodbye, he asks students what they have learned. By the last scene, viewers are privy to the students and teachers secrets but also to the rhythm of sparring matches: the ways communication fails and is revived, the young students’ mismatched strategies for truth, beauty, and thought, and how all these emotional events bring to truth its circuitous motion to convey both meaning and the forces that alienate it. As for the students in the film, they challenge the teacher’s pedagogy by asking whether he, too, is in search of beauty, truth and thought. Through talking back, through asking unanswerable questions, through meaning one thing but saying another, the students are also teaching a lesson in language.

The film is set in a large, working class, multicultural suburban Paris comprehensive High School. Mr. Marin, a young teacher of French, is dedicated to the students’ progress and to the idealism of innovative pedagogy but must always decide whether his time is being wasted. The film opens with an argument: Mr. Marin is trying to explain to his students that they are wasting thousands of minutes by not settling down to work. But the students challenge his math. They tell him the class is only fifty-five, not sixty minutes, and he has
to admit his calculations are wrong and feel the disparity between his desire and theirs. During one lesson, the students challenge his cultural bias. The examples he uses do not speak to their world. One student advises him: “Just change a little.” Viewers are privy to the pleasures of sparring and the painfulness that overtakes the class when the game goes too far and just as suddenly as it began, dissolves into hurt feelings, worries of revenge, and broken records.

Many of these fourteen and fifteen year old students have dominant roles, well known to anyone who has been to school: the class clown, the brain, the sleeping student, the bored one, the gossiper, the quiet one, the fidgeted one, the absent one, the bossy one, the one who will not make it, and so on. There are funny interruptions: exploding pens, bathroom requests, sexual innuendos and, when frustration erupts, name calling and humiliation. Mr. Marin is always faced with an impossible decision: will he be friend or foe, stubborn or passive, attentive or ignorant? Must he trade in his own beliefs to comply with school rules?

But the adolescents in the film also have a great many things on their mind: the foremost is whether the teacher is friend or foe. Mr. Marin’s first assignment is for the students to write a self-portrait and focus on what they love and hate. Their reply is that they have nothing to say and he urges them to make something from their entire nothing. He explains the assignment as a way to practice French grammar and use language as a means “to learn things from your feelings.” These students also want to know the teacher’s feelings, his loves
and hates, and whether they can influence him. Will he share his life with them? What of their divide? Indeed, as the film progresses, as misconceptions pile upon one another, the teacher becomes the adolescent teacher. The difference Mr. Marin needs to open some possibilities and foreclose others, to say both yes and no to the students, is momentarily lost. Adolescence has this timeless quality and proposes the paradox of the unconscious: it both urges immediate gratification and presents our greatest adversary to the thinking that delays action. Rather than symbolize the students’ distress and his own, Mr. Marin acts out his incredible need to believe and in the process, loses the language he needs.

In one dramatic scene, student representatives participate in the teachers’ meeting on student progress and witness a teacher’s frustration with a particular student, whom Mr. Marin tried to reach yet also sabotaged. The representatives report to the class what was said. During Mr. Marin’s French lesson, the students’ confront him with his own words. He loses his temper and angrily tells the young women class representatives that they are acting like “skanks.” But Mr. Marin denies the word its hostile meaning and a chain reaction ensues, leading to the expulsion of a student. While almost all of the film occurs between the classroom walls, near its end, Mr. Marin marches to the playground—the students’ territory—to confront the girls whom he felt caused him trouble. There is a long shot where the students surround him. He tells them, “A teacher can say things a student can’t!” and then one of the students calls him an asshole. Though he protests, a girl yells, “you say skank, we say asshole.” Through the
trade of insults, Mr. Marin has lost this fight. And yet, because he is both friend and foe, he too must be willing to “learn things through his feelings.”

Cantet’s (2009) commentary on the film’s reception notes that its controversy resided in the public debate over whether teachers should be emotionally involved in the lives of their students. This question may be at the heart of the alienation between developmental theory and pedagogy. It preoccupies my undergraduate class, so well schooled in their subject area, but so frightened as to whether their future students will find their loves as relevant. Indeed, that one must pass through the emotional world on the way to a shared reality is something that my students demand when they ask me why they have to do the assignment, question its application, and wonder whether I will take the time to understand their views and just change a little. This education develops by way of digression, works against the classroom clock, and presents the untimely question of the difference between the teacher’s knowledge and the student’s learning.

As for the film, all of us have difficulty remembering we are watching the fictions of education, or dramatic art. Perhaps this is due to our transference, the film’s verisimilitude, and the velocity of digression that language carries, often to the point of destroying meaning. As they discuss the film, my students wonder, what would they have done? Could they tolerate the teacher’s mistakes and deceptions, times when the teacher loses and disappoints? Can their identifications contain the work’s poignancy and comedy as they try to know
something more about the inevitable and needed mismatch between teaching and learning?

And what can be said of that other character, namely the school? My undergraduate students seem surprised that while the school has rules, the students have representatives in the faculty council. They know from their high school years that students as much as teachers create school culture, but they seem to have forgotten that. They also know that their teachers regress into adolescence each time they insist there is only one way to do things, act as if there is a perfect order, and split the hairs of time as either wasted or used well. Yet this rush to pedagogical paradise dissolves the human bond, leaving only the adolescent syndrome of ideality that comes with the acting out of the challenge of friend or foe. The teacher is both and each subjective position carries a transference history of ambivalence, love and hate. This, too, is the agony and creativity of the impossible professions, so dependent as they are on the capacity to metabolize the atmosphere and to put its force field into words that involve the symbolization of subjective life.

One of the curious paradoxes in my course and the film is that the study of developing education has no endpoint and cannot be perfect. This, too, is a quality of the impossible professions, where learning proceeds through breakdowns and reparation and often, it is difficult to decide their differences. But such radical uncertainty may disrupt the adolescent syndrome of ideality, found in institutional life, professional knowledge, and in the traces of
adolescence in the teacher’s mind that are also needed in the quest for beauty, thought and truth.

Yet to cast suspicion on education, as psychoanalysis does, and to see our development between these walls does raise questions on what else we do with one another in the drive for pedagogical relations. Admittedly, a psychoanalytic approach to these matters, specifically when teaching adolescents or teaching teachers, is contrary to most learning endeavors, and institutional mandates that require observable results and evidence of progress. The tension is that these uneven developments are also subject to the drive and to libidinal cathexis dedicated to the object of knowledge, or the adolescent syndrome of ideality.

The teacher is not an analyst, yet to understand others, to cultivate an interest in creative bonds, she or he can give attention to the involving emotional world by leaning upon her or his own. In the harried world of the teacher, who faces a group of students, this idea that the emotional world is difficult to understand because it affects understanding is where the adolescent and teacher meet. Curiosity toward this transference opens the idea that education, including professional education, is our emotional situation and, so carries the tensions between the internal and external world as well as the means to interpret its derivatives.
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