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## Teacher-student relationship and its impact on students' desire for knowledge

**Ruzhena Voynova** <sup>a\*</sup>, Department of Art Education, Faculty of Education, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette 1009, Luxembourg.

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### Abstract

With this paper, we would like to discuss the impact of teacher-student interactions on students' commitment to academic achievement. We conducted interviews with teachers from a high school for young adults, and students from the same school. Based on a psychoanalytic approach, preliminary results show that professional engagement of teachers takes place founded on three levels: the institutional framework; their personality; and their relation to the unconscious. Teachers establish a personalized relationship with students and their commitment to the student's academic success seems therefore to be strong, due in part to tutoring and small number of students in the classroom. The relationship thus established has a significant impact on the way a student approaches school and learning. Students are more likely to pursue their education when they feel comfortable and supported by their teachers due to the singular bond encouraged by the institutional framework.

Keywords: School dropouts; relation to knowledge; teacher-student relationship; desire for knowledge; subject.

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\* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Ruzhena Voynova**, Department of Art Education, Faculty of Education, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette 1009, Luxembourg.  
E-mail address: [ruzhenavoynova@uni.lu](mailto:ruzhenavoynova@uni.lu) / Tel.: +90 352 2076666

## 1. The school in the context of postmodern society

The essential mission of schools, goes far beyond the transmission of knowledge. School education is to prepare for the exercise of citizenship, to live together, to work, as far as aiming for equality (Thélot, 2013). Although, nowadays schools are being asked deliver student performance based on international education policies. Our society, focused on measurement and educational outcomes (Biesta, 2009), constantly creates new recommendations; guidelines and pedagogical paradigms change depending on the ideological and economic context (Eurydice European Unit, 2008). "Educational policies across Europe have focused on improving the quality of education, in particular through increasing the capacity for innovative teaching and reinforcing the professionalization of teachers." (Eurydice European Unit, 2008, p. 3).

Therefrom, new frameworks arise in scholar system to "heal" the increasing school failure, school dropout, etc. Discussing their adjustment and sustainability is essential to face an increasingly heterogeneous school. "This places new demands on teachers increasing their responsibilities, widening their duties and, more generally, changing their working conditions and status." (Eurydice European Unit, 2008, p. 3). Undeniably, the global educational ambiguity related to constant innovations in the field, causes teachers to feel torn between tradition and innovation (Pechberty, 2003). Teaching has become a joint activity as teachers are encouraged to build partnerships with other professionals, parents, associations, etc., which made the profession more publicly questionable (Chartier & Payet, 2014). Teachers are nowadays particularly open, capable of renewal as well as a loss of references.

Therefore, the school is inclined to tolerate very few deviations from both teachers and pupils. Consequently, the demand for help in schools does not come from the student himself (although he is the one suffering), but from the disturbance caused to the parents and the school (Foucher, 2008). "*It is well known that they (teachers) know that if the student continues like that, they will send him away and this is it, he is no longer a problem for them.*"; "*If someone fails in the education system, he is rejected.*" (interviewe student).

Although, it is a matter of opening the way to knowledge to the pupil who can then understand that the existential questions about life, death and being are common questions of every human being. It is about building a bond within he will learn to understand, accept and respect the otherness (Lacadé, 2013). The school must be a place where knowledge is articulated and carried by a body of teachers, inscribed in a subjective bond and not the anonymous one of the Web (Lacadé, 2013).

The act of teaching appears to take place based on three aspects: the transmission of knowledge; the relationship with pupils; the relationship that each actor maintains with his own unconsciousness, which is deeply complex and which, nevertheless, has so far not been sufficiently recognized as an essential part of a teacher-student relationship. Teachers have a multifaceted position: hold the classroom, be prepared for any possible situation (which they must be able to contain), pay attention to what they are saying but also to listen attentively to what the students are saying, etc. The act of teaching is conditioned by a teacher's subjectivity, his unconscious, his desire to transmit knowledge (Weber & Strohmer, 2015), but also by the impact of institutional discourses. The teacher is thus an expert in his subject, an educator, a reference figure, whose work consists of building a valid and respectful bond with pupils.

Within this context, we would like to call into question the impact of teacher-student relationship on students' desire for knowledge by exploring the concepts of relationship to knowledge, of desire for

knowledge of both teachers and students, and the necessary teachers' commitment to build a subjective meaningful relationship with pupils.

## **2. Research Project SDropSy**

Dropping out of school has an individual and an institutional component. Thereby it is important to develop an understanding of dropping out of school as a long-lasting process of disintegration, for which schools partly must take responsibility (Stamm, 2015). Students with a tendency to drop out of school often say that they have trouble with teachers, face boredom in class and/or have a general aversion to school (Hillenbrand & Ricking, 2011). *"Many of my teachers, I don't like them. There are many who, in my opinion, do not assume their role as professor. When you're a professor, in my opinion, you should love your job, you should make us want to learn."* The way students relate to school, and particularly to their teachers, seems to play a significant role in their commitment to educational obligations.

### **2.1. Methodology**

Based on a psychoanalytic approach, our interest is mainly in interviewee's discourse by identifying signifiers (Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XX (1972-1973)*, 1975), which allow us to understand links, unconscious conflicts, desires, inhibitions, etc. Human communication, from a psychoanalytic perspective based on the existence of the unconscious, is not a simple exchange between two individuals, but a discourse in which the subject speaks to another whom he creates by himself even if that other can be incarnated in a fellow being. Lacan defined the unconscious as being structured as a language by the signifier chains, one signifier always refers to another signifier. Our approach principally refers to Lacan's theory of the divided subject, notably to the tension between unconscious knowledge and academic knowledge, as contained by an institution, leading teachers to concede and compromise (Carnus, Garcia-Deblanc & Terrisse, 2008; Weber & Strohmmer, 2015).

We conducted three narrative interviews, one hour each, a couple of months apart, with teachers from a scholarly establishment for young adults, and students (20-29 years old) from the same school. This institution welcomes young adults who had left school without certificate and who have decided to go back to school to achieve their secondary education. Our methodology brings a two-fold point of view on the institutional framework. On one side, we acknowledge the institutional discourse appearing through interviewee teachers and their opinion on their mission within the school. Based on psychoanalytic analysis of their discourse, we could identify, beyond the way they approach the institutional policies, how they manage to build a bond with students via tutoring and its effect on their professional as well as personal experience of this type of outside the classroom relation to the student. On the other, we collect personal impressions of students of both the institution and the teachers as executives of the institutional strategies. Likewise, these young people know well the classic school system which they've left, for most of them; thereby, they have a further reflection on pros and cons of school. The analysis of their discourses shows the primacy of subjective aspect in their way of considering school and teachers, governed by their own previous experiences.

Preliminary results show that the professional engagement of teachers goes beyond statutory identity, because of their relation to both knowledge and desire to transmit it, which is essentially unconscious. Thereby, teachers consider themselves committed to students' scholarly achievement. *"I am passionate about my work, I want to see them (students) succeed."* We discover that their commitment shows their unconscious desire to transmit the knowledge beyond the scholarly program, which sustains students' desire for knowledge. *"He did it very well, his teaching, he was brilliant because he marked a problem for example on the board and if, if the students needed an hour to solve it, he let them this time to solve it."* Let see how it works.

## **2.2. The relation to knowledge**

The relation to knowledge is supplied through institutions, such as family, school, group of peers. We consider the knowledge as a psychic object, the relation to which is strongly influenced by both those institutional bodies and personal long-lasting life experiences, which include unconscious conflicts. Thereby, we identify two relations: the personal/unconscious relation to the object of knowledge; and the relation to the institution providing the knowledge.

For Lacan (Lacan, 1966), the knowledge constitutes "an easy mediation to place the subject." Through the "relation to knowledge" the subjects are inscribed into the symbolic dimension and so they are divided by the signifier, which also conditions them as beings of desire. Thereby, the relation to knowledge is an emotional bond (Blanchard-Laville, 2013), understood as such, it is a matter of involving the students into learning by acknowledging their questions as worth asking, and leading them to understand their own complexity. "*By the end, is it important that they know how to solve an equation or is it more important to have social skills than knowledge?*" The teacher would be the support allowing the emergence of interests and motivations of the student. His mission is to guide him to define himself as a person, to accept himself and to progress. In other words, the school has the role to contribute to the development of everyone as well as to teach a common knowledge that will enable students to participate in the social community.

Knowledge as an object, in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, represent a support for the emotional and unconscious investment, submitted as such to projections and fantasies. Knowledge involves a relation to a symbolical boundary; therefore, it is something of the order of a space in which the subject can find his voice within his discourse. Desire plays an essential role here.

## **2.3. The desire for knowledge and the desire to transmit the knowledge**

Within psychoanalysis, the concept of « desire » doesn't suggest a goal to reach or a full satisfaction to find. It is about reproducing itself as desire. The knowledge of drive assumes a form of knowledge of the subject's fundamental fantasy which regulates the admittance to jouissance. It is not about the target; it is about the motion which is driven by the object-cause of desire. This object is not what we desire, what we chase, it is what set our desire in motion, a structure that confers consistency on our desire, regarding social bonds and interdictions. Every individual originates his own fantasy.

Teachers, unconsciously, represent modes of incarnation of knowledge through which learning takes place, each teacher embodying a mode of transmission of knowledge, per his very motivations, his personality, the way in which he apprehends the profession and the class (Andrieu, 2004, p. 118). The teacher cannot control how it will be perceived since each student perceives it in his own way. Thereby each student could feel comfortable with a teacher and not so comfortable with another. Students can enjoy different matters just because of the presence of the teacher.

For Lacan (Lacan, 1975), the relation to knowledge would be the passageway from an interest which does not know itself to an interest that knows itself. The active presence of the teacher is a necessity so that he consents to take this step aside or forward to get the pupil out of his blind alley. This could not happen without his desire to be involved beyond his simple teaching practice. "*My favorite teachers, you could see that they like their job. It really encourages you to want to go into their class.*" It is a complex act involving challenging the law of simple pedagogy (I must transmit this knowledge) by the law of desire, the law of the subjective aspect. We could say it is a crossing point between the desirable dimension of the teacher and the subjective dimension of the student as a subject. "*If the teacher is*

*involved as a teacher and wants to do well his course and everything ... and after there is no ... class response or even ... that also discourage them."*

The most important aspect is not the transmission of knowledge but the transmission of the desire for knowledge. This desire is the little 'bypass' which challenges the teaching discourse and which is not included either in the official program of the year or during the initial training. For Lacan, the set of signifiers constitutes the nucleus of knowledge and discourse, which represents all that can be put into meaning and exchanged with the other side of the relation. Knowledge is therefore the set of signifiers, the set of accumulated past experiences, linked to each other. The relation to knowledge is thus not a fatality, something fixed, which once built, can no longer change. On the contrary, and this is the whole importance of the Lacanian theory of discourse: the places change, there is possible transformations of the relation to knowledge as much in the young as in the teachers.

#### **2.4. Teacher-student relationship and its effect on students' desire for knowledge**

The relationship established between student and teacher has a significant impact on student's way of approaching school, and particularly knowledge. *"I like that the teachers of languages tell me that I have quite high capacities in writing and all that."* Students are more likely to pursue their schooling when they feel comfortable and supported by their teachers due to the singular bond encouraged by the institutional framework. *"We pay greater attention, from the very beginning of the course, if we know that it is a teacher whom we like and his course is interesting."* Therefore, we can say that interviewee teachers establish a personalized relationship with students, thus demonstrating a systematic adjustment of their professional position throughout their carrier. *"I want them to learn so I will always try to make the first move so that there is something that is created."* Their commitment to the student's academic success is therefore strong, due in part to tutoring and a small number of students per classroom. *"I have the impression that there are a lot of teachers here who are here not because someone put them here, but because they wanted to be here. That already changes a lot."* This is a two-way approach: on the one hand, teachers receive a feedback from their students and are more likely to call into question their practice. On the other, the students feel supported by both the teachers and the institution which authorizes the parties to get more involved; the question of third party is present. This type of institutional framework favors the relationship between teacher and pupil, under the condition that the institution supports and encourages it.

The teacher-student relationship must remain within a symbolic space framed by the transmission of knowledge as a common object, bounded on one side by the one who wishes to transmit knowledge, and on the other by the one who wishes to learn it. *"The authoritarian way of conducting a course, I find it awful."* It is therefore necessary to find the right balance between statutory indifference and attachment to a case. *"They accept us as adults. Because we respect them too."* Teaching is favorable to attachment because it is addressed to available human beings. It would be necessary to distance personal judgments to ensure the modalities of symbolization of relations by the interrogation of knowledge.

Students should feel the availability of teachers who have an interest in the students' active or passive behaviors. *"During class time, I try to limit myself to the course topic, and if there is need to discuss something else, will be during the break or it will be on another time."* The teacher is the driving force in the construction of a shared psychic space in which the desires and needs of each other circulate by tolerating risks and uncertainties, *"If, with a pupil at the beginning, the relationship does not go well, it is my duty to try to make it happen, especially if we block each other either at the personal level or at the level of the lessons. Will not work "*. This allows a distance from the risk of an identification with the idealist and idealistic professional role. *"Personally, I think we should play fair game, say things the way they are and not announce something we will never do."* *"There must be a little spark that makes us*

*really well together.*" Each teacher has in him traits, values and principles that are transmitted, voluntarily or unknowingly during his / her relationship with the student. *"Teachers do not always have reasons, students are not always right, I think we have to hold together and try to sustain each other."*

### 3. To be continued ...

The importance of teacher-student relation is a widely studied topic in the educational research field in general (Petiot, Visioli, & Desbiens, 2015); (Baker, 2006); (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). The originality of our research study remains in our methodology based on the psychoanalytic theoretical framework. Psychoanalysis is a heuristic that consider unseen phenomena, which do not cease to have an effect (Herfray, 2013). Therefrom, the psychoanalytic approach identifies and studies these effects which appear in the discourse of the interviewee and which indicate concepts to be developed. It is a research always in movement. This approach, referring to the unconscious, allows us to investigate by considering not the logic of causality but the logic of meaning and significance, "the significance conveyed by the constructions of the unconscious" (Herfray, 2013).

Solely, students' academic achievement could not be improved upon the quality of the relation with the teachers, but it is an essential part of it, as we discover in our preliminary results of the SDropSy research project. How students' relation to knowledge could be improved? What had been the blockings throughout the life experience of adolescents dropping out of school? Under what conditions a possible transformation of their desire for knowledge could've been improved to bring them back to school? To be continued ...

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