

Conversation Circles Between Education and Psychoanalysis

Alice Lewkowicz

Co-Authors: Psic. Joyce Goldstein

In 2006 a partnership was established between the Porto Alegre Psychoanalytical Society (SPPA) and the Porto Alegre City Department of Education (SMED), based on an initiative of the Secretary of Education to provide a space in which to increase knowledge in child development from the psychoanalytic point of view, to the educators in Early Childhood Education Institutions contracted by the City of Porto Alegre.

The SPPA board welcomed the SMED movement and an inter-institutional partnership encompassing specific professionals, who began to invest part of their time to plan, implement, and continuously re-evaluate actions was created. Under a co-coordinated framework, in which both SMED and SPPA determined their representatives, a formal partnership was created without a corresponding legal entity. The professional participants change, but the same systematics and work structure remains, including:

- a) As philosophy, to develop knowledge applicable to the educator's practice, based on an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional effort;
- b) As main objective, to help in the training improvement of educators;
- c) As priority actions, to provide shared spaces for educators, SMED advisors, and SPPA psychoanalysts to listen to one another and work together.

The re-edition of informative courses, positively evaluated by all participants, generated anxiety as much as desire to extend the project. From the vantage point of the psychoanalysts, this dialogue with the educators raised important questioning: what is the extent of this work, which seeks to bring psychoanalytic understanding about child development? Does it have an effective preventive character? These courses arise from the demands of the curiosity and needs of educators, work with concepts such as the notion of the unconscious, the presence of psychological defense mechanisms, which permeate the pedagogical action in the classroom, are they effectively a new tool that assists the educator?

After the lectures, the topics were discussed. The repetition of this model demonstrated that this interaction had become the highlight of the meetings, and it was through it that the psychoanalytic knowledge became truly useful for the educators. As a consequence, the decision was to extend the conversations and use the "Conversation Circles". In this model, educators, psychoanalysts, and SMED advisers, in equal basis, think together about daily life in Early Childhood Education Institutions, based on their own experiences and knowledge. This exchange was only possible due to the environment of the small discussion groups. It was in these groups, in the warmth of the emotional interactions between educators and psychoanalysts, and among the psychoanalysts themselves, that it was realized that the transmission of our theories about child development was insufficient and even inadequate. The demand was of another order. We consider it important to

emphasize the participation of all the subjects involved in the process in this change of focus. Many of the educators live in areas of high social vulnerability on the outskirts of Porto Alegre and bear a traumatic potential consequent to their experiences and conditions. They live in an extremely violent environment. The Conversation Circles offer the possibility of speaking and listening to their experiences.

When the SMED-SPPA Conversation Circles came to life, it was understood that a formative methodology capable of contributing to the continuing education processes of all its participants, psychoanalysts, advisors or educators, was being created between education and psychoanalysis.

On Circles of Conversation:

1. The theme and its set of sub-themes (which in recent years has been about violence, endemic in Brazil), are the object of work in each of the seven meetings; the eighth and last, intends to evaluate and integrate the knowledge produced throughout the process; the definition of the general theme and its subthemes takes place in preliminary meetings;
2. In each of the first seven meetings an educator is chosen and, in a few minutes, describes a concrete situation lived in their school that illustrates the sub-theme. Still in the large group, an advisor and a psychoanalyst briefly comment on the situation reported. This introductory moment is the trigger for the small groups work;
3. The conversation continues in small groups, in free association, with an advisor and two psychoanalysts (always the same ones, for every meeting) working with educators in each small group. The eight meetings are held at the SPPA, lasting two hours each, with thirty minutes for the large group and the remaining ninety minutes for the free association conversation and under the coordination of two psychoanalysts;
4. In experiencing the shared construction of knowledge, which basically result in each one's subjective psychic structures (competences), forming a set that belongs to the cognitive-memory-function of its participants, the results for participants in this SMED-SPPA Conversation Circles process materialize.

In 2016, an Inter-Institutional and Interdisciplinary Research Group was created in order to study the work accomplished with groups during the Conversation Circles. Our research hypothesis is that this group experience of shared, systematic, structured and procedural reflection increases the resilience of educators to face the potentially traumatic helplessness generated by the non-understanding of certain situations in their professional practice. As a result, we suppose that this intervention, which perhaps develops competences in its participants, may also have value as an element of prevention for the mental health of the children served by the educators participating in the Conversation Circles in the municipal school network. In 2018 this Research Project received a grant offered by IPA. Throughout these years, the work carried out by the SMED - SPPA partnership served more than 500 educators, a group that works with more than 5,000 children.