



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

For a Sociology of Defences Against Emotions at School: Work Discussion Groups as an Action-Research Method

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Article first published online

February 2023

HOW TO CITE

Morciano, D., Polito, A. (2023). For a Sociology of Defences Against Emotions at School: Work Discussion Groups as an Action-Research Method. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 15(1), 101-118.

DOI: [10.14658/pupj-ijse-\(2023\)-1-5](https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-(2023)-1-5)

For a Sociology of Defences Against Emotions at School: Work Discussion Groups as an Action-Research Method

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Abstract: The importance of bringing to light the cultural structures that shape professional practices can be found in research that draws on critical sociological perspectives. For example, Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been adopted to uncover structured and structuring dispositions that influence educational work below the level of consciousness. In addition, sociologists belonging to the tradition of Institutional Analysis have focused on latent institutional factors influencing the life of organizations and the work of their members. The purpose of this article is to explore possible cross-disciplinary developments between psychoanalytic and sociological theories by drawing on the practice of Work Discussion Groups (WDGs) oriented by the psychoanalytic theory of social defences. Applied to the teaching practice, WDGs help teachers to critically reflect on social defences at work, i.e. subjective escape routes allowing to avoid emotions in a work situation, in particular when teachers perceive such emotions as an immediate threat to their well-being. The article discusses the potential utility of WDGs as an action-research approach for possible future research on the impact of structural-cultural factors on teaching practices, particularly given the long-term implications of the pandemic for schools.

Keywords: *Teaching practices, socio-emotional skills, professional habitus, pandemic impact*

Introduction

The pandemic disaster has, in a sense, caused the collapse of boundaries among different social roles: we all shared the same emotional storm and the need to make sense of an unexpected, unusual event. However, although we all have experienced the same feelings of risk and uncertainty, helping professions had to tackle specific emergencies, brought about by the impact of the pandemic on their specific targets; at the same time, they had to continue relying on the opportunities offered by their professional context, without trespassing its limits.

For teachers, the need to tackle their own sense of disorientation triggered by the pandemic, has been added to their ordinary work in a high emotional density environment such as school; moreover, teachers had to deal with fears about the impact of the pandemic on the growth of their pupils, whose emotional reactions inevitably affected the teaching-learning relationship.

With specific reference to the working environment of the teaching profession at school, the objective of this article is to explore new lines of research on how to transform an emotionally complex situation, i.e. the pandemic emergency, into an experience to be kept in mind and learn from. To this end, the article presents a theoretical framework and an action-research approach on the structural factors affecting teaching practice at school, especially when these very factors operate below the threshold of awareness. Special attention has been devoted to emotional difficulties that may hinder reflexivity of teachers “on” and “in” their daily practice (Schön, 1983).

More specifically, the article presents the underlying theory and the process of application of a specific method developed in the 1960s by the Tavistock Institute, known as Work Discussion Group (WDG). Although this method was developed in the field of psychoanalysis applied to organizations, the article will explore its potential applications to sociological research dealing with reflexivity and reflective learning among teachers. Some cross-disciplinary connections between WDGs, the sociological research of Institutional Analysis (Bouilloud et al., 2020) and the sociology of emotions (Hochschild, 2003; Naussbaum, 2001), will be pointed out for this purpose. Within this framework, we will seek to understand how WDGs may inform sociological research on the impact of professional *habitus* in the work of teachers (Bourdieu, 1990; Perrenoud, 2002) and on how to create favourable conditions for a reflexivity-based improvement of teachers’ practices. The possible application of WDGs and its theoretical background in future research on remote teaching occurred during the pandemic emergence and the post-pandemic recovery phase will be discussed in the conclusion.

Overall, the article is a contribution to the design of theories and methods useful to investigate on a specific social and emotional competence of teachers, i.e. the ability to reflect on personal defence mechanisms protecting themselves from the high levels of emotional stress generated by relationships with other people in their working context (students, colleagues, managers, parents, etc.). The triggering of such defensive mechanisms may impair the effectiveness of teaching and even shape practices aimed at protecting the teachers themselves from overwhelming emotions felt at school, rather than achieving their professional goals (Rustin & Bradley, 2008).

The birth of the WDG method in the critical culture of the 1960s

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, social sciences were animated by a particular urgency to critically analyse the *latent* social conditioning of subjectivity, at both the individual and the collective level. Subjectivity was meant as the possibility of self-determination and disentanglement from a state of heteronomy and social conformism. In those years, social research proved significantly sensitive to the deconstruction of control mechanisms concealed in the fabric of institutional and everyday-life culture, mostly activated by mass media and by the products of the cultural industry.

This is the cultural environment which led to the development of the psychoanalytic Work Discussion Group method (WDG), thanks to the initiative of therapists and psychoanalysts from the Tavistock Clinic of London. This method was first applied in the educational field, in particular with teachers and psychologists working with groups of primary school children with severe deficits of educational opportunities in their family environment (back then and still today, these groups were called *nurture groups*). The methodological basis of WDG was strengthened especially by child's psychoanalyst Marta Harris, who used the method to train young therapists. WDGs have been active in schools (from kindergartens to high schools) and other educational contexts, in addition to other fields of social and healthcare activities, such as hospitals or family counselling centres (Rustin, 2008).

In the same period when WDGs started to be practiced, the critical culture that permeated human and social sciences also inspired a composite group of scholars belonging to the area of Institutional Analysis (IA) whose research activity focused in particular on the life and functioning of organizations and institutions. Several scholars gravitated around it, in Europe, Latin America, and Canada. They came not only from the field of sociology, but also from the domains of cultural anthropology, social psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and pedagogy, applied in a diverse range of contexts (schools, hospitals, psychiatric, detention, and police facilities), with a significant tendency to work across disciplines. A recent review curated by Bouil-

loud et al. (2020) has identified the main scholars of reference: Cornelius Castoriadis (a sociologist, economist, and psychoanalyst), who developed the theoretical base of IA; Georges Lapassade (sociologist and anthropologist) and René Lourau (socio-pedagogue), who refined the methods of field research; and, finally, a group of researchers (especially psychoanalysts Félix Guattari and Jean Oury and pedagogue Fernand Oury) who have applied these methods in the social, healthcare, and educational domains.

No specific area of collaboration is known between researchers of IA and psychoanalysts practicing the WDG method. However, as specified further in this article, the theoretical frameworks and the action-research approaches developed in these two scientific communities are characterized by interesting convergences when applied to investigate on the role of reflexivity in teaching practices.

Blocked working situations as keys to access reflexivity

WDGs in school contexts (Jackson, 2002, 2005, 2008) consist of small groups of 4 to 10 members who are part of the teaching and/or managing staff. The members meet regularly for a prolonged period of one to two years. The duration of these meetings ranges from 30/45 minutes to two hours. WDGs imply voluntary participation and a certain degree of self-management with regard to the location and scheduling of meetings. Participants must abide by strict confidentiality requirements regarding the information provided by group members. The groups are supported by a facilitator specialised in psychoanalytic theory applied to organizations and professional practices, in the domains of education or, in general, of helping relationships.

Since the very first meetings, participants are encouraged to identify work situations perceived as particularly *resistant* and hard to manage with the help of familiar knowledge and methodologies. More specifically, we are talking about work situations defined as “blocked”, because they generate complex emotions, which overwhelm teachers or are difficult for them to understand. The reference literature often describes situations exposing individuals to feelings of rage, anguish, concern, sense of guilt, uncertainty (Rustin, 1989). The initial need, serving as the starting point of discussion, is clearly exemplified by this teacher’s statement: “It is not what a student says or does that I find difficult, but the way it makes me feel” (Jackson, 2015, p. 272).

It is also possible to work on situations which do not necessarily stem from the teachers’ relationship with their pupils, but also from relationships with colleagues, parents, managers, or external institutions. Although some experiences of mixed groups are available, it has been observed in practice that the most effective groups are those involving professionals working at

the same hierarchical level. For example, the presence of the headmaster in a group of teachers generates some resistance when teachers are asked to express and freely discuss their difficulties and concerns.

We can point out to a similarity between the start of a WDG in the psychoanalytical domain and the social research tradition of IA mentioned in the previous paragraph. Also in the case of IA, the working group focuses on issues which are particularly relevant for participants, because they carry with them a great deal of emotional tension. For example, as reported by Mendel & Prades (2002) in the case of a school working group, teachers were afraid of relating with the parents of children from the most problematic classes. As is the case with WDGs, such situations serve as *analysers*, that is, keys allowing participants (and researchers) to access possible hidden factors affecting the initial problem (Bouilloud et al., 2020).

If we go back to observing how WDGs come into action, the choice of focusing on the work situations that the operators perceive as particularly complex (because they trigger emotional reactions), is based on the assumption that these are exactly the situations which may end up generating counterproductive or ineffective working practices.

If we draw on the theory of Social Defence (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015), we recognize that in organizations and professions involved in helping relationships (including schools), particular work situations may emerge where professionals feel overwhelmed by unbearable levels of anxiety, which, in their turn, are generated by the emotions potentially triggered by a prolonged relationship with others. In psychoanalysis, anxiety is meant as any state of psychic tension whose reasons are unknown or unclear (Hoggett, 2015). When the levels of anxiety exceed a certain threshold, professionals start perceiving anxiety as a threat to their wellbeing, something which exceeds their abilities for control and understanding (Perini, 2013).

In such circumstances, professionals may look for possible escape routes: in the language of psychoanalysis, these are called *unconscious defences from anxiety*. Such escape routes may take the form of working practices being assigned this defensive function, in a more or less conscious way. For this reason, it is possible to talk about *defensive practices*. Going back to schools, the more anxieties tend to disseminate and circulate throughout the organization, the more teachers and other school staff may develop certain practices aimed at protecting themselves from these anxieties.

From containment to the improvement of practices through reflexivity

In order to understand more thoroughly how WDGs operate in practice, we are going to examine two examples reported by Jackson (2008). The first

case involves a middle school teacher: she was so deeply distressed by one of her pupils, 13-year-old Charlie, making a transgressive gesture with sexual implications, that she considered asking the management to expel him from school. Another teacher reported her difficulties with Sarah and Emma, two 15-year-old pupils who, she felt, were “bullying” her: they laughed when she approached them, said that she was not their actual teacher and embarrassed her in front of the whole class. She had noticed that the two girls behaved in this way only when they were together, and she was considering splitting them into two different classes.

Work situations like these are described more in detail in the observation reports that each participant brings and illustrates to the group. Participants are encouraged to report some detailed micro-sequences of what they have been observing in especially problematic work situations, the ones they want to focus on. This observation material becomes the ground for a group debate, facilitated by a discussion leader: thus, the meaning of what has been observed is co-constructed by the group.

In a WDG, reflecting on careful and detailed observation reports is considered a priority; in addition, it is important not to anticipate any answers and participate to the unpacking of the aspects which most trigger anxiety and, consequently, activate resistance and defence mechanisms. Therefore, the facilitator encourages the group to maintain an attitude which is free from pre-constructed theories and judgement (Rustin, 2008). This implies observing the work situation with curiosity and imagination, while adopting the right amount of scepticism with regard to what is already known; however, first and foremost, it is also necessary to tolerate the emotional distress which may derive from questioning already well-established practices.

For this to occur, psychoanalytic theory applied to WDGs implies the availability of a space to contain the emotional stress which may be especially difficult to tackle in working contexts (Comelli, 2009). Otherwise, emotional strain can be perceived as so devastating as to activate excessive defensive reactions, and, consequently, defensive *working practices*. A WDG functions exactly as a containment space for complex emotional experiences encountered during work; the aim of this space is to make operators feel themselves accepted and listened to when expressing their anxieties, anguish, and frustrations. Thanks to the containment provided by the group facilitator, complex emotions are turned into food for thought and, ultimately, into the ability to observe reality, but also to reflect on one’s own work, identifying its limits and its potential, and take it into account when reconstructing practices and designing new solutions. The role of the group facilitator is vital in this “emotional decontamination” process, enabled by the transformation of those emotional aspects which are the hardest to tolerate. The effectiveness of the facilitator’s role, in particular, is linked to the ability to listen to and

welcome certain emotions perceived by the operators as deeply distressing and destabilizing, then verbally reshape these emotions into something that is more emotionally sustainable and open to reflective thinking. The two cases introduced at the beginning of the paragraph help exemplify this specific work of emotional containment in the context of a WDG.

Let's go back to Charlie's case and to his transgressive, sexually connoted gestures, which his teacher had never had the courage to discuss with anyone. This example reminds us of a central role played by WDGs in schools: creating a space where judgement is suspended and teachers can feel "able to share issues, concerns, and preoccupations that they would previously not have wanted others to know about", taking into account that "it is often what we do not want others to know about our professional practice that leaves us feeling isolated and burdened" (Jackson, 2008, p. 59-60). When given this opportunity, this particular teacher felt encouraged to reflect on Charlie's family situation; what emerged was that Charlie was particularly exposed to the sexual life of his mother, who was separated from Charlie's father and had recently started a new relationship. With the help of the facilitator, the group formed an empathic connection with Charlie and started to imagine how the boy was feeling when he was at home: frightened, distressed, afraid of telling anyone how he felt, exactly the way his teacher had felt. It was at this point that the group was able to start reflecting on how to tackle this problem, especially how to create the conditions to talk with Charlie's mother or ask Charlie whether he felt talking about his difficulties would help him.

Going back to Sarah and Emma, what their teacher reported had provoked strong reactions marked by hostility, rage, and resentment in the group's participants. The group thus became a safe place where participants could feel free to express certain feelings, without feeling guilty. Jackson (2008) points out that it is important to offer this opportunity to teachers, although there is a difference between "teachers simply venting their frustrations (...) in the staff room and the work discussion context in which teachers might, at times, let off steam in the spirit of thinking" (p. 67). Only by taking these feelings seriously and allowing participants to express them was it possible to create an environment favouring reflection on the two students' situation. For example, the group started reflecting on how to present the school's decision to place Sarah and Emma into different classes as a way to help, rather than as a punishment.

For a sociology of social defences against emotions at school

If the decisive role played by emotional dynamics at school is recognized, the theory and method of psychoanalytic WDGs have some interesting con-

nections with sociological research in the educational field. In particular, in the next sections we will describe two some possible interdisciplinary interactions: one regards the emotional defence function potentially activated by some components of the teachers' professional *habitus*, in the framework of a sociology dealing with possible irrational drivers of educational practice; the other concerns external sources which may release unbearable levels of anxiety in school organizations, especially during crises. The interdisciplinary, theoretical exploration will be completed with some possible connections with the sociology of emotions in working environments.

Possible defensive components in the teachers' professional habitus

WDGs' experiences and their theoretical basis enable critical reflection on the seemingly rational nature of the teaching profession practice. Indeed, teaching practices may sometimes respond to the need to protect themselves from disarming or even intolerable levels of anxiety, without being fully aware of it. Some seemingly rational practices, therefore, may be unintentionally adopted to manage an irrational element, that is, anxiety and the emotions triggering it. These logics of action may impair the effectiveness of educational practices, because their main aim is to protect the operator from anxiety, rather than designing practices based, as Schön would put it, on the values of "accurate information, free choice, and personal commitment" (Schön, 1983, p. 11). Schön wrote this as he reported a group experience with school superintendents during which he had discussed possible "implicit theories which shape practices in an automatic way, often in threatening situations, which are very likely to generate feelings of fear, shame, and embarrassment" (Schön, 1983, p. 11).

When observed in the school context, a defensive function against anxiety may be hidden in individual teaching practices, or be widespread among the teaching staff of a school, or, more generally, the whole professional category (Perrenoud, 2002; Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2019). From this point of view, WDGs may be effective in exploring and bringing to light the defensive function of certain aspects of the teachers' professional habitus, i.e. the *general principles* which shape the teaching-pedagogical practice and are generally applied in an automatic, unconscious way, i.e. not as a conscious reaction to an external pressure, nor as an intentional act (Bourdieu, 1990). These principles serve as "teaching organizers" (Vinatier & Pastré, 2007), because they have been internalized by teachers during their training, through the reiteration of practices over time and, more in general, in their role socialization. They may consist of *action schemes* (Piaget, 1968), usual modes of adaptation to specific situations (Vergnaud, 1996), *routines* implemented to make some aspects of one's work recurrent or cyclical (Nuzzaci, 2011).

In this regards, Pentucci (2018) suggested the concept of “pedagogical format”, i.e. micro-sequences of action whose persistence is such as to allow constant observation over time, but whose emotional load is, at the same time, particularly intense, for teachers and pupils alike. Some examples taken from research are: participated lessons, lecture-like lessons, individual written tests, the teacher walking among desks during individual tests (Veyrunes, 2016), the reiterated use of well-established teaching tools over time, e.g. the Framework of Civilization (*Quadro di Civiltà*) in primary school (Pentucci, 2018) and other recurring schemes often reiterated in some specific subjects, such as asking pupils to demonstrate theorems and mathematical statements by writing them on the board (Santagata e Barbieri, 2005). Other examples may concern practices aimed at keeping good order and discipline students, the composition of class groups, or homework assignment.

Of course, we do not wish to affirm that these components, so deeply rooted in teachers’ professional habitus, are by nature a form of protection against anxieties in a working context. However, possible defensive mechanisms may develop in the professional habitus in those work contexts or recurring situations which generate a great deal of anxiety.

Critically reflecting on the possible defensive function on one’s habitus is even more difficult when certain well-established practices become firmly rooted in the school organization, in the form of thinking and action patterns acquired by new recruits, including those who would not need to use them to protect themselves from unbearable levels of anxiety. According to the definition provided by Mary Douglas (1986)’s theory of organization, we are referring to practices tending to promote a specific “thinking style”, that is, a certain way of thinking and acting, which ends up disseminating itself, more or less consistently, among the members of an organization. Once certain thinking styles become established and institutionalized, they may lead everybody to think and act similarly, regardless of whether they agree with the specific thinking style or not (Papadopolous, 2008). This may happen because adjusting oneself to certain practices may become a tacit condition to be accepted into the school community. Therefore, the risk consists of a defensive work culture developing over time, also when the anxiety levels circulating in a school are not as high as to require defensive mechanisms; this, in its turn, hinders reflexivity on practices.

Social sources of anxiety

Research conducted in the field of IA mainly revolves around tensions, contradictions, and conflict areas which can be found in the life of an organization. Investigating and bringing to light the hidden or removed part of an organization’s functioning means to force its members to tackle potentially

uneasy situations and aspects which the institutions tends to forget or repress, including power-related issues (Bouilloud et al. 2020).

IA emphasizes the substantially *cultural* nature of the tensions, blocks, or contradiction areas, which can always be found in an institution, where a significant role is played not only by the image of the institution itself among its members (*imagination*), but also by the collective representations of that same institution in society (*imaginary*), that is the meaning commonly attributed to it, the social expectations about its function and the value judgment on its work.

The additional levels of anxiety which circulate within an organization may, therefore, be the result of changes and pressures coming from the social, institutional, and cultural environment the organization operates in. This point of view allows to overcome an excessively psychology-oriented vision, which attributes mainly to human nature the tendency of individuals to project their subjective anxieties into groups and organizations. As suggested by Hogget (2015), it is also possible that “powerful anxieties may be located *out there* in society and become taken in the organization” (p. 56), triggering defence strategies and processes which, in their turn lead to the development and dissemination of defensive practices .

For example, in the work carried out by Tucker (2015) with head teachers in the United Kingdom, it was found that the “fear of failure” was among the main sources of excessive anxiety at work. The defensive practice, in this case, was the continuous internal pressure to “work harder and try harder”, and, subsequently, a working style obsessively focused on solving problems and achieving results: this tended to absorb all the effort and energies in a pervasive way (the rest of the school staff was asked to act in the same way). However, this form of defence could, in its turn, become a source of stress, threatening to cause a psychological and emotional collapse. In this regard, the author reports a set of statistics on stress indicators among head teachers at the national level (e.g. medical examinations, alcohol abuse, depression, hypertension, insomnia, gastrointestinal disorders).

Tucker’s research points at two possible sources of the anxiety caused by the “fear of failing”. On the one hand, this anxiety seemed connected to the personal history of many head teachers, for example those who had had excessively strict or anxious parents, overconcerned with their children’s achievements at school. However, the author observed that another possible source of anxiety may have derived from the increasing social pressure on schools and their role in society in the face of an increasingly uncertain economic scenario. As observed by the author, the collective and political imaginary, for example, seems to be essentially based on the illusion that school may ensure opportunities of upwards social mobility to all students. In addition, we tend to think that educational and professional success is crucially

connected to how school works and to people's experience of school, for example by underestimating the importance of other out-of-school learning experiences. The result, therefore, risks to be an excessive shifting of anxieties and concerns towards school. As a consequence, the figure of the head teachers takes on a specific symbolic significance: they are seen as individuals with over-human abilities (a sort of "super-hero"), ending up absorbing the fears, apprehensions, sense of disorientation and uncertainty that the families and the political system itself project onto their role.

Teachers as 'sentient professionals' and the heuristic potential of emotions

The theoretical foundations of WDGs recognize the existence of what Hocshchild (2003) has called the "sentient self", a concept that refers to the individuals' ability to consciously reflect on their own emotions. From this perspective, WDGs operate as learning opportunities on *emotion-management* (ibid., 1979), in response to the tasks and the challenges imposed by a working context, insofar they are aimed at exploring and understanding the informative content of emotions, what Nausbaum (2001) has called the *intelligence of emotions*. Reflection on emotions, in fact, can bring about new knowledge of one's own reactions to certain work situations which sometimes trigger defense and resistance mechanisms.

In the face of emotions experienced as overwhelming, therefore, a WDG may support a reflective investigation into the possible psychological and relational dynamics put in place as a form of defense. The group experience in a WDG, therefore, help to develop a specific *heuristic-cognitive* technique of emotion work in professionals, as they strive to research and analyse the possible counterproductive effects of their emotional experience in a work situation.

This work appears in line with the idea suggested by Nussbaum that the emotions we feel have a *cognitive-evaluative* value because they allow exploring our background of ideas, information, knowledge, beliefs, values, desires, intentions etc. (Millan, 2016). As specifically recalled by Nussbaum, in fact, our emotions are always related to an external object (*aboutness*), that we see from our specific perspective (*intentionality*), which in turn, is shaped by our specific personal history and culture.

Future research directions on social defences against emotions at school during the pandemic and beyond

How the psychoanalytic WDG method may help us understand the conditions teachers had to work in during the pandemics? May WDG be an

instrument for research and intervention on the social and emotional competences of teachers at school, in the post-pandemic recovery phase?

First of all, it is important to recognize that some rethinking and reworking of teaching practices in remote learning terms has occurred during the pandemic: teachers have striven to create teaching-learning online environments taking into account the limitations and potential of the digital platforms, but also of the contents provided by the Internet, the devices granting access to the digital space and, finally, their pupils themselves (Corbella *et al.*, 2020; Parisi, 2020).

However, some defensive reactions to the condition of emergency caused by the pandemic can be identified in the first pieces of research investigating remote learning. The psychoanalytical theory of social defence, for example, offers a possible reading key for the following types of reaction observed among teachers dealing with remote learning: transposing to the digital space the usual timing and patterns of face-to-face lectures (for example resorting to long lecture-like video lessons, individual oral testing and written tests); or, as an alternative, uploading learning materials on digital platforms, thus preferring individual study (Colombo, Poliandri e Rinaldi, 2020; Ranieri *et al.*, 2020; Santagati & Barbanti, 2021). In both cases, the quality of the teacher's presence has been impaired, for different reasons: in the first case, the interaction with teachers risked to become difficult to face at the cognitive and emotional level, because the teaching-learning process had not been specifically adjusted to the digital medium; in the second case, the teacher was almost replaced by digital tools and study materials.

If observed throughout the lenses of social defence theory, such remote teaching practices may have been unconsciously affected by the pre-pandemic professional teaching habitus, and, therefore, by the way teaching was conceived and practised before the pandemic (Scorrano, 2020). In a situation characterized by emergency and risk, such as the pandemic, teachers may have instinctively "held on" to their habitus as to their comfort zone, that they strove to protect and extend even to remote teaching. Taking into consideration the "emotional storm" everybody found themselves in during the pandemics, the usual teaching practices may have acted as forms of defence against powerful and overwhelming anxieties.

Furthermore, shifting the attention towards the formal, red-tape aspects of digital teaching may also have been a defence mechanism. For example, the absence of a group reflection on how to shape a new form of online teaching emerges from what a teacher reported in May 2020 in an online journal¹: her colleagues were mainly absorbed by the most urgent issues, such as recording which students were online and which weren't, reporting

¹ <https://laletteraturaenoi.it/2020/05/11/didattica-a-distanza-domande-retorica-burocrazia/>

on teaching activities or design assessment grids in a situation of total uncertainty, including about what was reasonable to assess in such an unusual situation. As the teacher reported, it was as if teachers were trying at all costs to “bring back to normality something which was not normal at all”.

The attention for the red-tape aspects of teaching may also have been triggered by the need to provide formal evidence (to the headmaster or the Ministry) of the actual implementation of digital teaching activities and the ability to “stick to plans and schedules” which had already been established before the pandemic. While the school management and ministerial orders were increasingly requiring forms of accountability of remote digital teaching, the defence mechanisms may have taken the form of a shift of attention towards the professional recognition of one’s work. To this regard, a survey conducted by Matteucci, Soncini & Floris (2021) has pointed out that the loss of awareness of one’s role as a teacher is one of the risks generated by the pandemic most commonly perceived among school staff.

The teachers’ reactions to the pandemic emergency mentioned above seem to be in line with the patterns of typical defensive mechanisms described by the psychoanalytic theory on institutions: for example, the *separation of practice from emotion* (i.e., when teachers focused, in a totally impersonal way, on the formal aspects of their work), or the *strict ritualization of activities* (allowing to move one’s anxiety on scrupulous and obsessive compliance with procedures) (Halton, 2015). In addition, the same defensive practices may, in their turn, have generated further stress and discomfort. This may have happened to those who tried to replicate the usual practices applied in the physical classroom in a distance learning environment. For example, most teachers were anxious about the possibility of students cheating during written or oral on line tests.

Similar defence mechanisms may have amplified the risk for students to end up with teachers in a state of psychological absence in role (Kahn, 1992) due to their excessive focusing on the formal, institutional, or accountability aspects of their job. On the contrary, students may have needed to count on their teachers’ capacity of listening and expressing empathy, and, therefore, to be supported in what Bion (1970) called “negative capability”, i.e. the ability of transforming difficult situations by necessarily having to tolerate the pain of not knowing, rather than adopting ready-made solutions, especially in uncertain, ambiguous or challenging situations. In an unusual and dramatically uncertain situation, such as the pandemic emergency, being able to contain the students’ emotional difficulties would have meant to transform their anguish into motivation, including the possibility to participate in the redesign of learning activities in order to adapt them to the digital world (Colombo, Poliandri & Rinaldi, 2020; Di Bari, 2020).

On the other hand, it is impossible to think that the school system might have applied critical scrutiny to some defensive practices - which were already deeply rooted in the professional habitus of the teaching profession - to prevent them from hindering the change that the abrupt interruption of teaching and learning in the physical classroom required. However, today the remote teaching carried out during the pandemic emergency and the post-pandemic recovery is a repository of unique and unrepeatable working experiences, providing empirical material for sociological research on emotional competences, defensive practices, and professional habitus in teaching practices. It is also an opportunity for teachers to become aware of how defence mechanisms may come into play, helping them to understand *when* and *why* the way they work may sometimes meet their needs to defend themselves from anxiety rather than achieve their goals in terms of effectiveness.

Moreover, as a group method supporting reflexivity on practices and focusing especially on emotional factors, psychoanalytical WDGs are a potential professional support for teachers in the face of the flows of anxiety generated by the long-term impact of the pandemic. In such a context, WDGs can help to identify possible defensive practices which may reiterate (recovering the pre-pandemic ones) or develop themselves.

As for sociology is concerned, since WDGs can also be applied as a method of action-research², its implementation in the post-pandemic phase could be an opportunity to advance our knowledge of latent institutional conditioning of educational practices adopted at school. In line with the tradition of sociological research of Institutional Analysis (IA), WDGs may be encompassed among the methods aimed at bringing to light the hidden and removed aspects of an organization's life and make them conscious. To this end, IA had designed action-research methods aimed at destabilizing the seeming order of institutions, especially throughout group activities serving as opportunities for reflection, free expression, and sharing for all participants (Bouilloud et al., 2020). Indeed, without a method able to cause a *crack* in the taken for granted ways of thinking and acting, some aspects (which are not visible to researchers or to the members themselves) will hardly

² Micheal Rustin (2008) investigated the potential of psychoanalytic WD as a method of qualitative research on how emotional unconscious factors affect the work of helping professions and the functioning of related organizations. In particular, according to Rustin, WD may come into play in the explorative stages of research. While doing this, the author illustrates and brings arguments to the characteristics of transparency, methodological soundness and rigorous of WD as practised so far. In addition, the author suggests ways to further strengthen WD from the methodological point of view: for example, by systematically comparing cases, selecting cases observed in similar or different contexts, recording and transcribing what is being said and done in working situations to supplement observation reports, etc.

emerge. As a consequence, they will not become the object of research, debate, and collective redesigning.

However, we should never forget that this type of research implies possible significant risk when carried out exclusively by researchers. Bringing repressed or latent aspects of the organization's life to consciousness only for the purposes of research itself would be ethically questionable. The reason is that this type of action implies bringing to light conflicts, needs, and complex emotional patterns, which require a specific support to be transformed into creative and innovative processes, with a positive effect on the organization itself, the organization's users, and the professionals involved. WDGs were developed, in theoretical and practical terms, with the aim of providing such specific support; they are still practised by experts in psychoanalytic theories applied to organizations. Decontaminating emotions from their potential defensive component is, indeed, necessary to activate reflective thinking applied to the improvement of practices; as Schön (1983) would put it, that *second loop of learning* which, without a specific function of emotional containment, may prove difficult to activate.

Acknowledgments

This article further develops a piece of research presented by the authors on June 1st, 2021 at the international conference "Reinventing Education" organized by Scuola Democratica; more specifically, the work was presented during the session "Social And Emotional Skills In Sociological Perspective. A Fresh Look On Learning And Assessment", Chairs: Andrea Maccarini, Luisa Ribolzi.

Furthermore, this article was a joint effort by both authors, though Daniele Morciano contributed most substantially to the paragraphs Introduction, The birth of the WDG method in the critical culture of the 1960s, For a sociology of social defences against emotions at school, Future research directions on social defences against emotions at school during the pandemic and beyond, while Aurora Polito contributed specifically to the paragraphs Blocked working situations as keys to access reflexivity, From containment to the improvement of practices through reflexivity.

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