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Center for Psychological Research and Counseling

**1/2026**

**DOI: 10.54664/ANXA5822**

# A SPACE FOR THE PSYCHIC IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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**Ethical approval:** The study was approved by an institutional ethics committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all legal guardians.
**Conflict of interest and funding**: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be considered as a potential conflict of interest.
**Acknowledgement:** N/A
**Author contribution statement**: N/A

***Abstract:*** *The present paper outlines key principles of an interdisciplinary practice within educational institutions. Grounded in a method informed by psychoanalytic thought, the paper demonstrates how professionals utilise this approach to address students' difficulties and behavioural manifestations, while also facilitating their inclusion within the educational environment. Clinical and educational examples are presented to illustrate the central arguments and conceptual foundations of the discussion.*

***Keywords:*** *psychoanalysis, school psychology, inclusive education, subjectivity, child accompaniment, institutional practice, social bond, psychological suffering, mental health in schools, Lacanian orientation*

## Introduction

### *Outlining a Space for Speech*

Almost every educational institution employs a psychologist or another adult professional to whom students may be referred. In most cases, a student's behaviour creates difficulties for teachers. Frequently, these difficulties emerge on an emotional level, where teachers experience exhaustion or resort to punitive measures toward the student. In relation to younger children, one may often hear the statement: "the child needs attention." This usually refers to a child who differs from the rest of the class in some noticeable way.

Any disruption of the established order and rules within the school may function simultaneously as a signal of distress and as a point from which an encounter becomes possible. The attention demanded by a child inevitably draws attention to their difference. The role of the school psychologist is to sustain this difference beyond the physical boundaries of the consulting room through the presence of speech and embodied engagement, thereby producing an effect within the space structured by institutional walls and regulations; to sustain and allow the child to be understood.

As children grow, they change, and school is one of the primary places in which this process unfolds.

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"Early in the morning, the principal encounters a sixth-grade student in the corridor during class time. The student follows an individualised educational programme and is currently attending classes selectively while his individual schedule is being finalised. The school psychologist happens to witness the encounter. After sending the student back to class, the principal turns to the psychologist and says: 'Call him to your office and tell him that if he does not attend classes, I will summon him myself.'"

"A 16-year-old girl is repeating a grade in a foreign-language programme. She is a new student and has not attended school for one or two weeks. Her homeroom teacher and the principal have been informed by the mother that the girl is unable to sleep at night, 'stares at one point,' and repeatedly promises her mother that she will 'get better.' The mother has sought advice from the family physician and has been giving her milk with honey. At school, the homeroom teacher contacts the mother regarding the girl's absences and invites her to a meeting with the principal. The mother promises the principal that the next day she will bring her daughter to school 'dead or alive.' The principal instructs the mother to submit a written request asking the school to 'show understanding regarding the child's condition, otherwise other measures may be taken, such as transfer to an evening school,' and subsequently refers the case to the school psychologist."

"A father of a ninth-grade girl visits the school psychologist. During the previous academic year, the student accumulated approximately 250 unexcused absences, which were later excused by the homeroom teacher at the father's insistence, since 'the problem is familial and the school should show understanding.' At the beginning of the new school year, the situation repeats itself. The father feels unable to cope on his own and seeks guidance from the school psychologist. From his perspective, the mother is 'crazy and responsible for what is happening' with the girl. He believes that if his wife receives treatment, matters at home and at school will improve. He asks the psychologist to contact the mother, but without informing her that the two of them have spoken."

"At the end of the working day, the psychologist encounters an eighth-grade boy speaking with the deputy principal. Upon noticing the psychologist, the deputy principal asks whether a meeting with the boy could be arranged. The boy appears visibly distressed, with tears in his eyes. The psychologist suggests that they go to the office and talk."

"In the office, the school psychologist is speaking with an adolescent when the door suddenly opens and five or six individuals enter the room (among them the principal, the school administrator, and several unfamiliar people). Carrying folders and pens, they begin inspecting the office—the walls, the windows, the blinds—and asking about recent additions made during the latest school renovation. Smiling, they ask the psychologist whether there have been any complaints, examine the newly installed items closely, and loudly remark that the window paintwork 'needs a second coat.' They then leave."

The examples are drawn from notes documenting my work in 2010 [1]. At that time, I held the position of "pedagogical counsellor," as the official position of "psychologist" had not yet been established within the educational system. One year later, I was formally reassigned to the role of "psychologist." The invitation came from the school principal following the inclusion of the profession of "school psychologist" in the National Qualification Framework of Occupations and Positions. From that point onward, I was assigned to this position within the school.

It is noteworthy that prior to this transition, my position within the school was largely defined through the language and intentions of the institution itself. Thus, whenever disciplinary action toward a student was being considered, I was referred to as "the pedagogical counsellor," whereas in situations requiring a different form of engagement, teachers addressed me as "the psychologist." When conversations shifted into a discourse less familiar to the institutional framework of the school—for example, discussions concerning children's rights—the principal would explain to teachers that these were "new ideas" connected to my qualification as a "clinical social worker," which was in fact part of my university education and the professional identity with which I initially identified.

The establishment of a space for the psychic within educational institutions appears to begin with the presence of at least one professional willing to sustain a place for language and dialogue on matters that lie in the background, beyond the child's overt manifestations. Such a position also creates the possibility of searching for the underlying causes of these manifestations.

## Discussion

### *The Surprise of the Relationship with the Child*

Even before children with specific needs enter the school environment, there is usually a period during which we speak about what lies ahead for us to do together, what concerns us at that particular moment, how we may support one another, who the participants are, and how responsibility is to be shared. Only afterwards comes the time for conversations about learning and education themselves, and even then, much of what is to be understood will emerge from the child, about whom we do not presume to possess prior knowledge. This does not mean that we disregard the documentation provided by parents. Rather, we aim to begin from the child him- or herself [2] and avoid "knowing in the child's place." In practice, this means orienting our work around what the child actually does.

In this way, we were surprised to discover that each member of the team may establish a privileged relationship with a particular child. Such a relationship is sustained through the desire not to retreat in the face of difficult situations. We came to understand that what the child does contains something both of the child's own activity and of the response of the professional who supports them. The child finds in that person an addressee. Any of us may become an addressee for the child.

Today, every school includes children who stand out from the others in some way. Yet not every school is willing to speak about these children, to ask questions concerning what should be done, or to regard them as part of the institution's own responsibility and educational mission. For the children referred to the school psychologist, our school had to traverse a long and difficult path before what initially appeared unbearable began to reveal the face of psychological suffering behind certain destructive behaviours.

We proceed from the assumption that we do not possess all the answers, and we recognise only one true leader: the team itself.

### *A Practice of the Many, Not of the One*

In our practice, we work together without prioritizing the professional role occupied by a given individual within the educational institution. The practice of "working together" represents a specific mode of institutional work developed at the *Courtil Medico-Pedagogical Institute* in Belgium, a specialised institution for children and adolescents with psychological difficulties, oriented by the teachings of Freud and Lacan [3].

We do not approach children as children defined by deficits, nor do we orient ourselves primarily through diagnosis. Each person involved is important because of the knowledge they hold about the child; each is valuable because of the ideas they contribute regarding how the child may be supported. The child occupies the centre of a network of human relationships and interactions. Every member of the team remains available, and when the child selects a particular person and directs their activity toward them, that individual becomes a point of support, serving in this role while the child gradually invents a place for themselves among others.

B. is a child in primary school. Becoming a student is deeply meaningful for him, something for which his mother had prepared him over a long period of time. Nevertheless, shortly after entering first grade, B. begins to struggle with remaining seated at his desk during class. He manages to stay until the second break, after which he rushes out of the classroom and wanders through the school building.

B. is quickly noticed by the cleaning staff. He enjoys talking with them, and they offer him breadsticks, which he gladly accepts. In this way, B. gradually creates for himself a small and predictable world—an island in which he feels comfortable. The cleaning staff enjoy spending time with him; they accompany him to the school food kiosk, where they buy him food that he immediately eats. B. becomes fascinated by the keychains they carry and with which they unlock and lock the rooms. He wants to hold the keys and perform these actions himself. Soon, he begins recognising the numbers and signs on classroom doors, enjoys unlocking rooms or entering classrooms where students are present, and wants to talk to them. His teacher remarks that B. has started showing an interest in letters.

B. is also fascinated by the school handyman, whose workshop contains a variety of tools. He wants to experiment with them and imitate the handyman's activities. On one occasion, he is found in the schoolyard holding a shovel that he had taken himself from the workshop, having quietly gone outside

to engage in an activity that interested him. The cleaning staff and the handyman participate in the team discussions concerning B. We understand the child's relationships with them as creating a form of human warmth and familiarity—a milieu within which he is organising something for himself and for others within the new social reality of school. B. himself has chosen these adults as interlocutors and wishes for them to become his partners.

This practice constitutes a complex human network of relationships operating at all levels of the institution, guided by the child. Team meetings function as spaces of emotional support. The "talking space" gradually becomes a scene for sharing each person's experience with a particular child. We value the articulation of questions and the verbalisation of difficulties provoked by a given case. We work on a case-by-case basis. Within this space, nothing that is said is subject to judgement; viewpoints are not imposed; there is room for the expression of different perspectives, and no opinion is dismissed [4].

Team discussions become moments of mutual support, particularly when situations become difficult or stagnant.

T. is a newly appointed member of the team and begins her work enthusiastically as a resource teacher. She is assigned to accompany a first-grade student who establishes social relationships by identifying what might be called the adult's "Achilles' heel." In practice, this means that he tests the endurance of anyone who places demands upon him. In order to make demands of the student, one must first be accepted and authorised by him.

The student has been placed in the class of an experienced and highly respected primary school teacher, and T. wishes to do everything possible to ensure that he manages successfully and that things proceed smoothly. Despite the preparatory work conducted before her engagement with the student, T. soon finds herself feeling desperate in relation to her work with him, overwhelmed by his oppositional behaviour and by the impossibility of establishing communication and relational connection. This leads to considerable emotional strain for T., as well as to multiple discussions involving her, the parents, and the classroom teacher. T. begins suffering frequent colds and absences from work.

During a team meeting, she shares the distressing experience of being this child's resource teacher, speaking about how easily he demobilises and discourages her, and expressing feelings of failure and inadequacy. T. believes that the child requires a different kind of relationship with an adult figure—someone whom he can recognise as an authority. During the discussion, she reflects on her previous professional experience as a speech therapist, a role characterised by structure, clearly defined tasks, and predictable expectations. She comes to feel that she is not yet prepared to work as a resource teacher.

The team eventually reaches the decision to change one of the central participants in the child's support network—the resource teacher. The participation of the classroom teacher during the meeting, along with her reflections, helps T. regain a sense of calm, while also allowing the team to identify another suitable specialist and reorganise the child's support structure. T. feels supported and soon begins working with children whose difficulties are more closely aligned with her strongest professional capacities.

***Accompanying the Child***

The greatest challenge in providing support within educational institutions lies in the individualised approach. This may be compared to the effect of a planetary collision with the system itself. Offering support to one child against the backdrop of all the others is often perceived as a violation of fairness, according to which the teacher is expected to distribute knowledge and care equally among all students. Support and assistance are commonly understood as acts of mercy or leniency within the context of authority—the one who holds authority may decide to lower expectations toward a particular student. In this way, the child becomes dependent upon the adult's discretion, while the adult positions themselves as embodying the law and institutional norms.

We understand the individualised approach as a form of engagement with the child that enables them to remain active within the social bond with others, to express their interests and concerns through effects manifested in speech and bodily presence—effects that exceed the formal assessment of special educational needs and the moral dichotomies often used to categorise children, such as weak/excellent,

right/wrong, or good/bad [5]. An individualised approach does not necessarily mean that we will fully understand the child. Rather, we must be capable of hearing what the child does and what the child communicates regarding what matters to them; we must listen to the child through their own words and body.

With the introduction of new regulations and institutional requirements concerning educational support, the process increasingly becomes technologised. Categorisation, measurement, and evaluation begin to position children as "deficient," standardising them and reducing much of the work to the formal completion of forms and support plans [6].

N. is a ninth-grade student who completed his primary education in another school with the assistance of a resource teacher due to learning difficulties identified as "dyslexia." Upon entering his new school, his parents decide that he should continue his education without being enrolled in a programme for additional educational support. Toward the end of the academic year, however, after discussing his poor academic performance with the homeroom teacher, they decide that N. should be included in the programme for students with special educational needs.

N. appears to be a confident adolescent. He wears fashionable and expensive clothes; speaks enthusiastically about his father's achievements and opportunities; wishes to continue his education after secondary school; and perceives himself as no different from other young people his age. Yet after his parents recounted the history of his learning difficulties at school and formally requested his inclusion in the SEN support programme, N.'s behaviour changes dramatically. His mood fluctuates: at times he becomes withdrawn and subdued, while at other moments he angrily protests against being treated as a "resource student": "I don't want to be a resource student!"

He begins behaving provocatively, refuses to follow instructions and rules, reacts explosively, argues with teachers, shouts, and leaves lessons. He speaks about comments made by a teacher in front of the class referring to him as "resource-supported," and says that he feels ashamed and does not want others to know about his learning difficulties. N. is unable to explain what "dyslexia" actually means. He admits that he experiences certain difficulties with learning, yet he does not know precisely what these difficulties are. He appears torn between his need to accept support and his shame associated with receiving it; being identified as a "resource student" becomes unbearable for him.

The identity N. has constructed for himself comes into conflict with the identity imposed upon him through the signifier "special educational needs" (SEN), and this experience takes on the character of psychological suffering. One may ask whether N. faces a dilemma that places him at a crossroads: is it perhaps more tolerable for him to be perceived as a student with "antisocial behaviour"—a label that appears more bearable to him, even at the risk of expulsion—than to be regarded as a student marked by "deficiency," and more specifically by a "deficiency of mind," experienced by him as a terrifying human destiny? Might N. perceive himself as a form of waste object through the gaze of his parents, particularly through the eyes of his father, about whom he speaks with admiration? [7].

Support within schools is not always welcomed by students with open arms. Accompanying the child requires travelling a path together with them, following them in the establishment of a relationship, and gradually building trust. We value and respect the child's dignity and their right to express themselves in a manner unique to them.

Behind violations of institutional rules, unexcused absences, school avoidance, aggression, and academic failure, there is a child who dreams, loves, and suffers. It is this child whom we seek to reach and with whom we wish to become partners in the process of growing up. For each child, we invent the particular way through which this becomes possible.

**Inclusion as the Ability to Work Through the Institutional Framework**

As professionals working within schools, we are constantly confronted with the idea that children's behaviour should conform to a standard, as well as with expectations that it is our role to change them accordingly. The administration of cognitive tests designed to determine learning capacities, the demand for the strict application of methodologies, and the measurement of outcomes through numerical scales and evaluations all form part of the process through which psychological work and the identification of children's specific needs are brought to the foreground.

The pedagogical approach frequently directs the school psychologist's work toward identifying the child's deficit in relation to a predefined norm. Consequently, the psychosocial dimensions of development often remain marginalised or become subordinated to learning abilities measured through indicators of memory, attention, thinking, language development, mathematical competence, and other cognitive characteristics.

Certain psychic manifestations enter the institutional stage of the school in the form of unexcused absences, disciplinary reproaches, motivational interventions, "second chances," escalating sanctions, or expulsion procedures. Some children, nevertheless, continue to elude these frameworks, persisting in irreconcilable ways that continue to disturb teachers, create challenges, evoke concern, and provoke ethical dilemmas within classrooms, along with feelings of undermined professional confidence and helplessness.

In our work, we acknowledge the existence of a dimension of psychic life that escapes the subject's conscious control and remains fundamentally elusive, yet exerts a powerful influence upon them. The manifestations of this dimension are unexpected and confront the subject with what is intolerable, excessive, or impossible to explain within ordinary understanding. In his psychoanalytic practice, Freud identified slips, errors, dreams, humour, forgetting, and the loss of objects as phenomena of the unconscious that unexpectedly intrude into everyday life, appearing in unpredictable ways [8].

Similarly, individuals may find their own behaviours, thoughts, bodily sensations, or repetitive preoccupations unfamiliar and enigmatic—elements that continuously engage or disturb them when speaking, interacting, or simply being alone or with others. Knowledge concerning these manifestations and their effects may only emerge within an encounter between the subject and another person willing to become a point of support and to assume the risk of receiving these manifestations.

Within the vital social scene of the school, the marks of a child's difference often become reasons for others to speak about the child, to define them through diagnoses, disability, or inadequate upbringing. The causes underlying behaviour may remain shrouded in the mystery of what appears irrational or inexplicable. Not every aspect of a child's behaviour can be fully understood or contained through mechanisms of social control.

The psychological service within the school occupies precisely this place—a place for encountering a child and their particularities, but also a place for supporting teachers.

**Conclusion**

***Pleasure and Joy in the Work***

For us, experiencing pleasure and joy in our work is of fundamental importance. What does this mean? It means that we do not seek to correct the child or force them into the moulds of normative expectations. Instead, we orient ourselves through the child's particularities, their suffering, and their difficulties, engaging with them through the knowledge that emerges from what the child says.

We respect the child's own knowledge and transform it into a form of shelter for them. Through the relationship established with the professional and through the professional's presence, the child may produce something of their own, come to recognise aspects of their difficulties, name them in their own way, and continue to develop. Such moments constitute the joy of our work and the means through which the child evolves.

In this way, we create a space in which the educational institution becomes capable of saying *Yes* to the element of novelty carried by the child [9].

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