

## The intimate unknown: a reflection on infantile, psychoanalysis and education

*O desconhecido íntimo: uma reflexão sobre o infantil, a psicanálise e a educação*

*Lo íntimo desconocido: una reflexión sobre los niños, el psicoanálisis y la educación*

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### ABSTRACT

This article problematizes psychoanalytically and philosophically the affirmative discourses about childhood, which, starting from the supposed *in-fans* condition, have been limited to talking about and for the child, as well as defining, diagnosing, pathologizing and medicating her. For this purpose, it recovers the Freudian notion of *the infantile*, not as a condition circumscribed to a chronological phase of human development, but as the amalgam of archaic experiences structuring the, including from which the determining modes of relationship with others unfold. Such a premise produces important implications in the educational field, since it requires both an educator that is aware of the existence of this infantile in himself and in the other as well as the limits of his knowledge about the child and childhood; consequently, greater attention to the (im) possibilities of educating.


**Keywords:** Childhood. Freud. Uncanny. Knowledge.

### RESUMO


O presente artigo problematiza psicanalítica e filosoficamente os discursos afirmativos sobre a infância, os quais, partindo da suposta condição de *in-fans*, têm se limitado a falar sobre e pela criança, além de defini-la, diagnosticá-la, patologizá-la e medicá-la. Para tanto, recupera a noção freudiana de *infantil* não como condição circunscrita a uma fase cronológica do desenvolvimento humano e sim como o amálgama das experiências arcaicas estruturantes do inconsciente, a partir das quais desdobram-se até mesmo os modos determinantes de relação com o semelhante. Tal premissa produz implicações importantes no campo educativo, uma vez que exige tanto um educador advertido da existência desse infantil em si mesmo e no outro como dos limites de seu saber sobre a criança e a infância, conseqüentemente, uma atenção maior acerca das (im) possibilidades do educar.

**Palavras-chave:** Infância. Freud. Estranho. Saber.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo problematiza psicoanalítica y filosóficamente los discursos afirmativos sobre la infancia que, partiendo de la supuesta condición de *in-fans*, se han limitado a hablar del y por el niño, además de definirlo, diagnosticarlo, patologizarlo y medicarlo. Para ello, recupera la noción freudiana de *infantil* no como una condición limitada a una fase cronológica del desarrollo humano, sino como la amalgama de experiencias arcaicas que estructuran el inconsciente, incluso a partir de las cuales se despliegan los modos determinantes con el semejante. Tal premisa produce implicaciones importantes en el campo educativo pues requiere tanto un educador consciente de la existencia de ese infantil en sí mismo y en el otro como de los límites de su saber sobre el niño y la infancia, en consecuencia, una mayor atención a las (im)posibilidades de educar.

**Palabras clave:** Infancia. Freud. Extraño. Saber.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the idea of childhood having emerged in modernity, less than a century ago, the spaces for debate and research about it have expanded significantly, in addition to its political status having gained legitimacy. This is an effect of the promotion of children and childhood to the condition of subjects, making them the target of collective interest in the public sphere and of actions created specifically to meet their demands, especially educational ones.

This *infantile* condition, and all sorts of possibilities and difficulties that surround its formation, has become the subject of research by scholars in the most diverse fields: from psychiatrists, neuroscientists, neurolinguists, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and pedagogues, to religious scholars, mystics, politicians, and coaches. All of them are supposedly committed to articulating affirmative discourses regarding what childhood and children are, what they should be, what their respective places in society are, the role of adults in their formation, and what could be the most effective methods for giving concrete form to the ideal projected on them. But that is not everything. Most of them try to do so by reducing childhood and the *infants* to a categorical knowledge, both in scientific and metaphysical terms. Given their supposed condition as *in-fans*, those who do not speak,<sup>1</sup> they have begun to speak not with, but about and for the children, defining them, diagnosing them, often pathologizing them, and, ultimately, medicating them.

Freud (1905 [2007a]), however, gave us a very peculiar view of both childhood and children, conceiving them as beings capable of responding, but, first and foremost, of asking and theorizing creatively about themselves and the world around them; as revealing beings, according to Kofman (1996), and primordial creative sources, nourishers of the human artistic and poetic genius. It is important to observe that, in order to do so, Freud had to profane them, which is certainly one of the most daring and radical contributions from psychoanalysis to the understanding of the human condition and behavior. Besides supporting the existence of infantile sexuality — previously exclusive to adults — Freud indicated that these small developing beings, from the earliest moments of their existence, struggle with very dissonant feelings, stressed as their are by the presence/absence of the other. While helpless and needy, they develop a vocation for love and kindness, but they also

1 For the philosopher Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin (1997, p. 87), the word “infant” comprehends that condition of small children in which they are still deprived of sufficiently adequate resources for their expression, with the prefix “in” indicating something that cannot be expressed or treated discursively. Much more than an absence, it makes reference to a condition of this language and discourse, whose thought is still unfinished, and therefore unable to be expressed or communicated logically, linguistically and pragmatically.

present a drive field in which sadism, hatred, and aggression are developed. These young infants express, very early on, nothing more and nothing less than the ambivalent nature of our being in face of our fellow beings.

Regarding childhood, Freud resized its meaning and scope, avoiding restricting the experience of childhood to a chronological stage of human development, but instead considering it as the amalgam of our most archaic experiences, the structuring mass of the unconscious that constitutes the core of our being itself. From it, our subjectivity is structured, and we will keep it for the rest of our lives. Taking this into account, from a psychoanalytic perspective, it would be better to say *infantile*, since infantile and childhood are no longer the same thing. Rather, there is a distinction between childhood, a chronological time situated in a specific period of human life that begins and ends, and the infantile, which is perennial and accompanies us throughout our lives, being, interestingly, capable of updating itself at each moment of life, without ever ceasing.

Within this horizon of comprehension, education itself undergoes a redesign, particularly based on two decisive Freudian observations regarding the persistence of the *infant* in us. The first of them is found in the text *The Interest of Psychoanalysis* (Freud, [1913] 2007b), a context in which Freud affirms the continuity of the child's psyche in the adult's psyche, and the persistent and indestructible character of childhood formation, demonstrating that the first impressions from childhood are decisive in the later life of the adult subject, to the point, according to him, that "nothing later [...] will be able to oppose [it]" (Freud, [1939] 2007e, p. 173). The second one is present in *On the Psychology of High School* (Freud, [1914] 2007d). In this essay, Freud claims that education has limited effectiveness, there being an uncontrollable dimension inherent to the pedagogical relationship given the participation of children's unconscious contents in the course of the lives of all subjects involved in it, from educators to students, making both what is addressed and what is returned as a response to the educational investment singular and unpredictable.

Such Freudian propositions lead us to the formulation of countless questions with important implications for the educational field, including: What do the adults see, think, and assume they know about the child before them? What is this encounter and what subjective factors are at play? To what extent can adults isolate the infantile dimension of their beings from that object which is there for their understanding? What is the relationship between the persistent infantile fantasy in the adult and the child he is concerned with educating? And, above all, what is the infantile and what education is possible in the context of its irreducible existence?

The efforts undertaken here do not aim to provide answers to such questions, but rather to keep them alive throughout the reflections that animate these writings. They emerge from our interest in the intriguing and no less controversial relationship between psychoanalysis and education, as well as from the challenge that the philosophical-hermeneutical task inflicts upon us when we place ourselves before a text that is chronologically distant in time, but timeless in its potential to broaden our understanding of the contemporary human phenomenon. This is how we experience the encounter with a classic, such as Freud's work, and, consequently, with the research in the psychoanalytic and philosophical-educational fields.

To approach the topic, we will focus on some of Freud's texts, and also draw on some of his interpreters whose thoughts we consider to be important references. Besides, we draw on our extensive clinical experience — listening to childhoods that return to us in the most diverse forms, such as symptoms, dreams, Freudian slips, and, ultimately, the human unconscious — as well as our experience as professors and researchers working in the psychoanalytic, philosophical, and educational fields. The article is structured in three parts: 1. the specificity of the concept of *infantile* in psychoanalysis; 2. the relationship between the notion of *unfamiliar* and the structuring intervention of the human fellow human being; 3. knowledge about the *infantile* and its link with education.

## CHILDHOOD AND THE INFANTILE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Historian Philippe Ariès (1978) clarified that the notion of childhood is a social and cultural construction. In *Social history of the child and the family*, he shows that it was only in modern times that childhood began to be considered a stage of human development, as a period of life with specific characteristics, without the existence of any special place for the infant before it, once his weaning has been finished. He also revealed to us that educational concerns were the determining factor in defining a social place for the child, which is why their identity began to depend on their connection to the school institution and the schooling process. This means that not only did the social sphere institute childhood, it also dimensioned the time of childhood as a time correlated with schooling.

Therefore, besides being temporally dated, childhood has been narrated by each era and each culture in a different way, and is therefore subject, in its own conception, to the historical and social context of the authors of the narrative. Childhood varies according to the way in which the culture of each era interacts with the child of that time. Each era forges its model of childhood and of child. The digitally intoxicated child of today is not the same as the child of ten years ago. Two decades ago, the eagerness to classify autism spectrum disorders was not as prevalent as it is today; gender issues have entered the debate and produced subjective effects that are entirely different from what occurred two decades ago; and all of the above issues are different in Brazil and in Europe, just like in other countries, other continents, and within Brazil itself.

In psychoanalytic terms, this implies considering that human reality is always shaped by the language it will speak, having as a starting point the biological support, which is “the child” (Kupfer, 2013). Psychoanalysis, in these terms, does not ignore or reject the historical notion, but rather expands it, breaking with the chronologically defined limits of childhood. It recognizes it, even before the birth of the newborn, who is already being constituted in the ideals of their progenitors. These ideals are marked by unconscious traits unavailable to their bearer, irrecoverable from the point of view of their genesis and, at the same time, impossible to be undone along their existence. Hence the importance of treating the notion of childhood beyond its chronological origin, of a before and an after, even if it refers us to a certain moment in the development of a subject’s life. This is a notion that allows us to see the infantile as the founding and archaic soil from which the subject is constructed, constructs him/herself, becoming his/her own narrator and artificer.

This criticism of the exclusively historical-temporal character of childhood is at the heart of psychoanalytic elaborations regarding the infantile. Let us remember that Freud inaugurates a discourse on childhood that differs from the one prevailing at the time. He converted dated childhood into the source of the symptoms and pains experienced by the subject, a meeting place for their own structuring and the etiology of the psychic suffering existent in adult life. With this, he allowed us to understand the dimension of the unconscious — the domain of drive and repression — in the subjective constitution, therefore, in the structuring of the infantile, and its relationship with childhood and with the history of the subject.

From this perspective, we can assume that the infantile varies little. It is perennial because it is linked to the work that children do to elaborate the fundamental enigmas that have always aroused human curiosity: birth, conception, sexuality, fraternal jealousy, filiation, death. The infantile is in childhood, in the child, and it is in people of any age, nationality, class, race or gender; it is in any time and place according to each culture’s handling of the symbolic rites that it uses to surround these fundamental themes. The infantile is in the creativity of scientific research, in the original way we find to problematize the questions that an always renewed reality poses to us and which we use to construct the essays and books we publish, our dissertations, and theses. The infantile is in the art, in the ability of artists to capture on canvas and sculpture what escapes us; it is in the formation of culture, in music, in dance, in folklore. The infantile is in literature, in novels, in the great classics, in

myths, in fantastic tales. The infantile is hidden behind the fear of the unknown that fuels the search for religious protection, the bravado of military corporations and the pseudo-courage of bullies, militiamen, and misogynists. The infantile is the basic substance of the unconscious that shapes us, the power plant that provides the source of energy for all the transformative actions in the world that allow us to make it a better place to live.

The concept of infantile for psychoanalysis, therefore, goes far beyond the behavioral dimension that governs the construction of this notion in common sense, for which the designation of infantile assumes the connotation of ways of being that are inappropriate for the age, infantilism or childishness, which denounce the maladjustment of a subject to their time. For psychoanalysis, the infantile constitutes us and, although hidden, it never leaves us, forming the core of our subjectivity, remaining within us as a source of both creativity and anguish. The infantile is the symptom that makes us sick, but it is also dream and humor. The infantile is the civilizing cement of the feeling of solidarity that structures our culture and gives rise to all the achievements that the human genius has been capable of building, as well as what accounts for the most brutal forms of destructiveness. Freud is clear with regard to this malignant facet:

There is here a fragment of reality that is intended to be refuted; the human being is not a gentle, amiable being, in short, capable only of defending himself if attacked, but it is legitimate to attribute to their drive endowment a good share of aggressiveness. As a consequence of this, the fellow human being not only is a possible helper and sexual object, but also a temptation to satisfy the aggression, to exploit their labor force without compensation, to use them sexually without their consent, to dispossess them of their assets, to humiliate them, to inflict pain, to torture and murder them. [...] this cruel aggression awaits, generally, a provocation [...] and, under propitious circumstances, when the opposing psychic energies capable of inhibiting it are absent, it is externalized [...], unmasking human beings as wild beasts who do not even respect their fellow being. (Freud, [1930] 2020b, p. 363)

Thus, in this way, Freud continues:

Based on the study of dreams and failed acts, psychoanalysis has come to the conclusion that the primitive, wild, and malignant impulses of humanity have not disappeared in any of its individuals, but persist, although repressed, in the unconscious, waiting for propitious occasions to develop their activity. It also teaches us that our intellect is a feeble and dependent thing, a plaything and an instrument of these drive inclinations and affections, so that we all find ourselves forced to act intelligently or foolishly according to what our emotional attitudes order. (Freud, [1914] 2007c, p. 302)

Let us remember that Freud wrote these impressions in times of war, in which brutality is exposed and emerges in states of exception, in practices of slavery and precarious work, as well as in exclusionary actions aimed at the extermination of populations considered disposable. That is why it is impossible not to associate these passages with the current practices sponsored by the capital in neoliberalism and, particularly, with the regression observed in our country, which began in 2016 and crystallized in the government that was in power between 2019 and 2022.

For Freud, the drive domain is something that is achieved from the earliest times and at the expense of the immediate joy drive itself, through psychic work that gives rise to the refusal of this joy. Such refusal can only be achieved with the mediation of the other, an adult caregiver. It is the

intervention of this adult that allows for the construction of internal dikes that, taking advantage of the thinning of the primary instinctual force itself, transform it and apply it to other purposes. This civilizing gain is not built in one fell swoop, but it is rather a process that needs to be supported and that has in the adult its subjective support.

In *Three essays on sexuality*, Freud ([1905] 2007a) observes that disregard for the structure, existence, and nature of this infantile is a consequence of the romanticization operated by our culture when it produces its narrative about childhood. This aspect is reinforced by the amnesia that, in all of us, covers up these early years, ultimately covering up a very harsh but true reality: far from being golden years, filled with innocent happiness, in these years the child suffers, gets marked by an inescapable *pathos*, suffers from anguish without being ill, and has to deal with a powerful drive burden for which they do not yet have sufficient psychic resources. In these years, of which we little talk about, Freud continues ([1905] 2007a, p. 158), “[...] we knew how to express pain and joy in a human way, we showed love, jealousy and other passions that then agitated us violently and we pronounced phrases that adults recorded as evidence of a penetrating and incipient capacity for judgment”.

This load of experiences, even though covered by a comprehensive amnesia, transcends the temporal stage of childhood, remaining alive and actively present throughout life, shaping the infantile or, that is, the unconscious, which survives submerged within us due to repression. Its path to exteriority, Freud continues, is blocked by internal dikes erected by “[...] disgust, the feeling of shame, the appeals of the ideal in the aesthetic and moral fields. In civilized culture there is the impression that the establishment of these dikes is the work of the process of education”, a formative process relying on the resource of “[...] the deviation of these sexual [and destructive] drive forces from their goals and their orientation towards new goals, in a process that deserves the name of sublimation” (Freud, [1905] 2007a, p. 161). Transforming — without denying or eliminating — this *pathos* into an *ethos* is the formative task of the adult caregiver. Therefore, before projecting outward aspects of oneself that provoke disgust, modesty, and shame, the human being fights them within, imposing, with the support of the formative interventions of the adult, the dyke that will fix them in the unconscious. And, relying on the same subjective support from their fellow beings, they will seek the resources that allow them to transform these primary tendencies and direct them towards socially acceptable and collectively productive purposes.

## THE OTHER, THIS STRANGER

The human tendency to ignore what causes us strangeness, even excluding that which does not fit into our structures of recognition, is well-known and creates abysses between the Self and the other. Freud, in these terms, was prodigal in demonstrating that the human psychic phenomenon is not linear, nor can it be read from a reductionist and unilateral perspective, which makes ambivalence an important hermeneutical key for reading and understanding his work. The Austrian psychoanalyst introduced the game of kinship and difference, of relationship and continuity where, apparently, there were gaps, emptiness, rupture, disjunction (Kofman, 1996). The same happens with the notions of conscious and unconscious, normal and pathological, individual and species, familiar and strange.

In 1919, Freud wrote an uncanny essay which he named *The Unfamiliar* ([1919] 2020a). In it, he sought to demonstrate that feelings of strangeness arise not only by that which frightens, causes horror and repulse, but that the unfamiliar constitutes a particular class of terrifying thing that refers to something very familiar and intimate. What we feel as unfamiliar is close to us because it inhabits, albeit hidden, our core and unexpectedly comes to light. The category of the unfamiliar supposes a division in the subject, in which depreciated parts of oneself, precisely those

not recognized as one's own — and which are therefore repudiated — begin to be deposited in the other. What someone cannot recognize as belonging to them, but cannot bear to see, they separate from their field of thought with such violence that they can only find it again expelled from themselves and deposited in the other, making it possible to feel this other as alien, strange and, above all, as repulsive.

From the Freudian perspective, it is possible to understand that what is felt as distant and strange is, above all, an internal stranger. The unconscious, this part of us that we do not recognize, constitutes a psychic place, an internal other that divides us, that lives within us, but remains strange to the conscious Self. This unknown within us — that determines us, belongs to us, but causes strangeness, astonishment, and resistance — will unfold in a decisive manner in the ways we deal with the other.

Rejecting the stranger is an inseparable part of the constitutive process of humanization and differentiation between Self and non-Self; between what is one's own and what is foreign; between the strange and the familiar. However, at a later stage, knowing how to deal with the stranger is a condition for the humanization of one's fellow beings. In the process of early psychic structuring, the fear of the stranger is not present from birth. As Zygouris (1998) affirms, at birth and during the first days of life, the baby smiles indiscriminately at any human face that dedicates them care. From the point of view of psychic structuring, the genesis of fear of the stranger is located in the "anguish of the eighth month" (Spitz, 1980), the moment in which the baby begins to show reactions of withdrawal when faced with an unfamiliar face, which coincides with the origins of the Self, this psychic space that allows for self-recognition and the constitution of an "us". Based on this foundation, Zygouris (1998, p. 194) claims that "no one is born xenophobic, they become that".

The Freudian reference to familiarity and the feeling of the strange, something that lives within us, but has long been repressed, goes in this direction. After the acquisition of the "us" through socialization, the child begins to place the strange-stranger on the opposite side of what he recognizes as familiar. Nevertheless, archaic aspects will remain in the unconscious, always apt to connect with the stranger and make it look like them. The horror of the strange is an ordinary xenophobia that is part of the internal world of all of us; however, when the intimate fear overflows and establishes itself in the bond with the other, the danger of the mere existence of the strange-stranger to provoke exclusion, erasure of the other, his dehumanization. The reaction of each person towards the strangeness of the other, which is what makes them unique, modulates the possibilities of encounter.

It is not necessary to say much more for us to understand the priority place that the educational work of parents and educators assumes today. It is enough to highlight that it is the psychic attitude of the adult that modulates, in the beginning, the encounter with the other-stranger, establishing ways of relating to them, which can vary from attention, care, respect, and acceptance — recognition of the other —, to avoidance or indifference — denial of the other — to the extreme of rejection and xenophobia — the destruction of the other (Zygouris, 1998). Thus, if the infantile is exactly what resides in the most intimate part of each person, constituting an internal stranger, it is possible to argue that educators should have as a basic psychic attitude the recognition of this infantile in themselves, so that they can provide support and work towards acceptance of the difference that comes with the other. This acceptance also involves the educator's recognition of the radical incompleteness and unfinished nature with which they must permanently deal in the task of educating, allowing greater permeability to this condition that is inherent to their profession, as well as renunciation of the eagerness for domestication and training of the infantile they must face within themselves and in their students.

## EDUCATING THE INFANT: FROM KNOWING TOO MUCH TO KNOWING THAT ONE DOES NOT KNOW

If it is true that infantile experiences are the most archaic and foundational of adult life, it is equally true that our encounter with a child, according to Corso and Corso (1993), swirls all our memories, inaugurating a return to our previous existence. A child invokes this hidden infantile, this being that, when awakened, makes us feel small and incite very controversial feelings within us.

Françoise Dolto, who dedicated decades to her clinical work with children and to psychoanalytic research with these young subjects, arrived at the intriguing hypothesis that the child is “[...] the adult’s Achilles heel: the one who is apparently stronger is afraid of being disarmed before this real being” (2005, p. 111). According to her, a collective and unconscious fear would affect the adult due to the libidinal genius that the child expresses with greater freedom, especially because they are potentially capable of preventing and delaying the civilizational sclerosis, threatening the illusory adult security.

A typical example can be found in the classic stories that for centuries have fed on, and also fed, our childhood imagination. Stories that have found particular ways to symbolically veil and soften this denunciation, narrating the revenge of adults against children (Corso and Corso, 2016). Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, in all these stories something in common is the relationship with adults, particularly with parents: children are deprecated. This observation seems curious for a culture like ours, which is proud of itself for having reserved a central place for children — in the family, at school, in society. Because it has not always been like this, as demonstrated by Ariès (1978), the construction of this new relationship with children was not without a tacit unconscious counterpart. This overvaluation would have nourished an opposite fantasy, one that attributes a negative value to children and that is difficult for us adults to admit and verbalize consciously (Corso and Corso, 2016). We have a controversial feeling towards children, which can only be admitted in fantasy. Literature is fertile in this aspect, and its quick and easy social acceptance is proof that this controversial feeling is very (un)familiar to us. As we have seen, this thing to be revealed in and about us is related to the infantile, this thing we do not even recognize as our own. Let us remember that “the unconscious is the child immortalized in all of us”, to the point that “incest, scatology, sadism, perverse voluptuousness, masturbatory fantasies, irrational fears [...]” (Kehl, 2008, p. 37) are the expression of the child that inhabits us asking for passage and manifesting itself through the means consented by culture.

Dolto (2005) invites us to look at children, these little beings who “become,” not as fragile creatures, but in the light of their power, of what they have that is new, creative, dynamic, and revealing of themselves and others. Her proposition, in fact, is in line with Hannah Arendt’s (2014, p. 243) hypothesis that “[...] in benefit of what is new and revolutionary in each child education needs to be conservative.” Both make us observe that our understandings of children, childhood, and, consequently, of the infantile, are guided by very paradoxical impressions. The revolutionary promise attributed to each newborn child is an example of this: with it, we nurture our most enthusiastic hopes regarding the world and, in parallel, we suffer the bitter expectation that this “world of ours” might be denied or even destroyed.

A narcissistic question would be at stake here. In fact, for Freud (1914 [2004]), it is a modulator of our impressions, so that a narcissistic investment regarding childhood would set in motion an education guided by the idea of the child as compliant of our desire. With confidence, we approach children as if they were capable of replacing what we lack, deluded by the possibility of finally achieving our ideal of existential completeness. In the words of Lajonquière, when the adult



[...] looks into their eyes, the adult recovers the happiness they believe to have lost or of which they suppose to have been deprived. Thus, from the depths of this view, their own image reflected in reverse returns to them or, in other words, when they look at a child and truly focus on that ideal other, every adult is able to see themselves completely. (Lajonquière, 1999, p. 190)

It is, therefore, with very controversial feelings that we relate to children and educate them. Sometimes we bet too much that something will come from them spontaneously and perfectly in tune with our world project; sometimes we fear their barbaric unpredictability and no effort is spared by us to immediately have methods and resources available that are favorable to their rapid containment and control.

Modern pedagogy was skillful in this, seeking to define scientific contours for the educational enterprise rather than to produce subjective effects, as observed by Maud Mannoni (1988) in *Impossible Education*. Though modernity was decisive in the creation and legitimization of the place of education in the process of transmitting culture, in the constitution of the critical and autonomous subject, as well as in the affirmation and renewal of the civilizing pact, Mannoni's denunciation should be considered, since it opened the doors to a new way of conceiving education and investigation regarding their foundations. The psychoanalytic theoretical status on which it was based provided the basis for criticism towards the exacerbated scientific justifications of pedagogy. A pedagogy that was governed — and to a large extent still is — by certainty with regard to humans and how to appropriately educate them. Today we would add: governed mostly by the discourse of efficient and instrumental performance, which ultimately reserves a servile place for school education in the maintenance of the administered mercantile logic. In this context, the categorical definitions of childhood and infantile, as well as of the child's needs and ways of "functioning", have become indispensable to the attainment of effective educational actions that are capable of promptly meeting children's demands. For Francis Imbert (2001), an education with this bias, which assumes a scientific status and considers children and adolescents as beings with needs, ignores the fact that they are not only socially and culturally produced, but that the supply suggests the demand. And, most importantly, it eliminates all subjective contradiction, obstructing access to the desire for the production of "beings for".

The problem mentioned above highlights the purposes of education, not by chance performance, efficiency and control, even from the perspective of a discourse that assumes the individual as its agent, competent performance as an instrument and adaptation as destiny. Guided by the idea of the individual, the pedagogical discourse would be governed by the belief that there are natural tendencies and/or tendencies specific to a given "contemporary world" that can be mapped and known in their minutiae for the purpose of good pedagogical performance. When handled "correctly", school failure would be avoided and the "good" results achieved by these undivided beings would be augmented. These beings in no way coincide with the subjects of the unconscious of psychoanalysis, who are split and lacking, marked by a fundamental difference installed in their core. A difference that extends, in fact, to the relationship between adults and children, therefore to every generational encounter.

We soon realize that the challenge we are facing is enormous, since alongside this adult fantasy in relation to the perfect encounter and control of the other comes the promise of fitting in perfectly with the society of consumption and performance, the abandonment of parents and teachers in the name of an illusory youthful protagonism, the transfer of educational responsibility to the domain of specialists, medications, *experts* and therapists of all kinds. We see, therefore, that the problem is no smaller than the one identified by Freud and that led him to address a blunt critique of the hypocritical puritanism of his time and, consequently, of the excessive repression

that marked education. This is for a simple reason, because in both cases the pedagogical ideology points to the same thing: an education that aims at adequacy between ends and means, assuming that it is possible to foresee risks and to guard against them by mastering knowledge applied with high methodological rigor.

Such a conception of education goes against the psychoanalytic idea that there is an inherent risk in educating and that, if there is an end to education, from this perspective, that is to safeguard a place for the subject, guaranteeing them possibilities of expanding their own subjectivity. In other words: that, in education, results will always be unsatisfactory (Freud, [1939] 2007e), which is the reason why an education that is formulated around an a priori knowledge of the child and of the act of educating, aimed at achieving the perfect adjustment between the knowledge of the educator and the becoming of the student, is illusory. In fact, Freud ([1913] 2007b, p. 190) reminds us that “only those who are capable of empathizing with the child’s soul can be educators, and we adults do not understand the child because we fail to understand our own childhood”.

We know that, from the psychoanalytic point of view, a relatively satisfactory understanding of one’s own childhood would be achieved through the analytical experience. Nevertheless, before and above this, what Freud is warning us about is that there is a mismatch between the educational ideals that inspire adults and their own childhood, preventing an effective encounter with the child. An encounter that always requires a possible reconciliation of this adult with themselves, with the infantile inside them that is always at work.

This way, when addressing a child, the adult presents him/herself with either too much knowledge or with a lack of knowledge. If they believe they know enough, it is based on a certain science of educating that they do so; if they believe they know too little, it is by relying on specialized knowledge from others. In both cases, they are mobilized by self-conviction or by the promise of someone else who is certain of knowing. Furthermore, in both cases, it is a knowledge uttered, according to Backes (2011), by an absent subject, who is not exactly involved in what he claims to know. After all, it is much easier to be supported by impersonal knowledge, which circulates in the field of objectivity, scientific proof and determination, than by contingency and the imponderable.

By this we are not affirming that no knowledge about the child, childhood or the infantile is possible, nor that no one has it to some extent. In fact, by neglecting this we tend to *renounce the educational act*, as expressed by Lajonquière (1999). Undoubtedly, the adult occupies and should occupy this place of someone who has knowledge *about*. However, it is important to always be aware that no knowledge is capable of annulling subjectivity and that all pedagogical efforts find their limit precisely in this insurmountable universe that is the other. But not only in them; also in the impossibility of a full visibility of oneself, which makes all educational intention and all teaching content suspect in terms of objectivity.

All of this considered, what is this knowledge of the teacher, after all, and what is its reach? The teacher possesses knowledge that is, in part, specialized, formatted as knowledge as a result of their dedication to the study of what they deal with, without which they cannot authorize themselves or be recognized as a teacher. In part, however, the teacher’s knowledge resembles parental knowledge, because it comes from the teacher’s own experience, constituted in the very movement of their teaching practice and because both share the condition of being insufficient subjects and symbolically indebted to culture.

The problem of the teacher knowledge/non-knowledge arises when, as an adult, they see the student not as an other, as a subjectivity, but rather as an object over which they believe to have complete control if they have the appropriate knowledge and methods to access the student and

operate in the name of their learning. It also arises when they aspire to achieve quality in education, taking this student as a client, in the words of Biesta (2013), as a “potential consumer”, and placing themselves as “providers”. The problem arises when the teacher does not offer him/herself to the child as a subject from whom some knowledge may be extracted about the desire that motivates him/her as an educator, not even about how the child can be historicized, linking the latter to a structuring history which allows them to be part of a world that surpasses both. Instead, teachers think they can justify their actions by virtue of possible future benefits that are foreign to them, foreign to the child, to the humanization of those who arrive, and to the school itself. And they do it by disregarding the fact, after all, that anyone who speaks and acts in their own name takes the risk of making mistakes, since their choices put their own powerlessness to test, and, therefore, the ideal of accuracy, control, and efficiency that eludes them.

Although this game of misunderstandings is inherent to any generational encounter, it expresses a kind of adult forgetfulness: that above all it is in the name of a symbolic duty that teachers educate, of the maintenance of a filial tradition of which they too are heirs while also enrolling others in. In these terms, any educational action that is guided by a so-called prospection of the future by virtue of an agreement in relation to it and, consequently, of a gain, appears illusory. It is the entanglement with contingent histories, precarious in terms of planning and purposes, full of frustrations, deviations, encounters and misencounters, pains and joys, dreams and desires, that the adult allows the child to enroll it in the generational series and, thus, to make use of their own desire in the whole history of their ancestors.

It is no longer a question of searching for the perfect fit between our interventions over the childhood reality that a child embodies, but of unfolding the difference there revealed, even if we are reluctant to recognize it. And, far from what we could assume, the encounter is not compromised. It turns out that it also presents itself to us in terms of doubts and questions about ourselves and what is possible for us in relation to this child. Psychoanalysis shows us that it is in questioning our condition that a child can find the gateway to enroll itself as a subject in a shared history. It requires that we assume the place of adults that is due to us; a fundamental ethical position, in fact, to be assumed by anyone who is involved in the education of a child.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The child — a childhood — is the result of an equation that includes diverse aspects such as biology (birth, genetics), the quality of affective encounters (including phantasmatic ones) and the social or cultural representations of their time. And a lot more mystery that makes even the term “equation” seem inadequate. (Gutfreind, 2022, p. 20)

Of this excerpt from Celso Gutfreind’s recent work (2022), *The new childhood in analysis*, it is important for us to highlight the outcome: the mystery that makes unfeasible any equation in search of a definitive understanding of the child and childhood. We would say, of any gesture that reduces their semantic horizons and, thus, prevents us from finding the infantile. This infantile which, by referring to immemorial moments in our life history, we neither have at any time as an object at hand, nor are we immune to.

We have seen that childhood, as a special moment in the life of the subject that is directed to the child, has its genesis in modernity, whose enlightenment ideals began to guide both educational theories and actions. No problem would exist here if these ideals were not undergoing profound modifications in their meaning, to the point of losing their critical and humanizing character and

becoming a scientific discourse of education, thus incorporating a new goal: to shape productive and adaptable individuals, ready to find their perfect fit in consumer society, competent servants of its maintenance.

Psychoanalysis emerges against this (de)formative logic, putting in check the most varied specialized knowledge about childhood, redimensioning the meanings and understandings about the infantile, childhood, the child, and education. With Freud, particularly, we have seen that children lost all their naivety, and education its illusions. Childhood ceased to be a stage of development to be overcome, to be articulated with the drives, with repression, becoming a source that animates the subject and articulates their desire. Freud also showed us that the adult psyche is a tributary of childhood as a stage of life, and the most remote and immemorial childhood experiences, once repressed, remain pulsating in the subject throughout his entire existence, conditioning his choices, his pains, his joys. And since that which is repressed does not allow the subject peace, because it is always conspiring, waiting for an opportunity to return, it usually happens that the adult has to deal with it — the infantile — when face to face with a child. The unpretentiously invoking position of the child demands too much from the adult, because the adult stirs up what is sedimented, brings to the surface what the subject has worked hard to forget.

Thus, from the discourse of the potential child, preferably conformed to the adult ideal, psychoanalysis invites us to a new experience. Among these experiences, that we assume an education that can no longer delude itself that the child is immune to adult subjectivity and vice versa. Psychoanalysis invites us to recognize a child not as a being who is “not yet”, but as one that is always “being”. It also invites us to assume, along with our normative pretensions, an element of contemplation to guide us in educating — according to Bacha, simply because in every formative relationship a conflict is established in us, formative subjects, a conflict with archaic roots and, which is difficult to access and which “sends us to ourselves” (2002, p. 140). The adventure of this experience of introspection is perhaps the way to complicate education, rupturing with its supposed linearity and with any dogmatic immobility that might eventually come to regulate it.

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