

## **A material core of education: the adolescent disease in the scholastic experience**

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### **Abstract**

Nel cono d'ombra della crisi sociale della società contemporanea, è possibile cogliere i contorni di una figura in cui si potrebbero riconoscere i tratti peculiari di una soggettività adolescenziale emergente dalle radicali trasformazioni dell'epoca attuale. Si tratta perciò di volgere lo sguardo alle forme che può assumere il disagio esistenziale in rapporto alle mutazioni dei contesti in cui si determina materialmente l'esperienza dell'adolescente contemporaneo. Porre attenzione al *tempo*, allo *spazio*, ai *corpi*, al loro reciproco intrecciarsi e al loro divenire nelle trasformazioni sociali, economiche, politiche, culturali e, conseguentemente, esistenziali, produce esiti interessanti che ricadono nell'interpretazione dei fenomeni psicopatologici dell'epoca contemporanea. Sullo sfondo dei mutamenti del contesto sociale e scolastico e degli effetti che vengono a determinarsi rispetto alla qualità dell'esperienza degli adolescenti, rintracciamo costantemente delle alterazioni che toccano e modificano il legame con quelle dimensioni strutturali.

In the shadow cast over society by the contemporary social crisis, it is possible to trace the outline of a figure with the peculiar characteristics of adolescent subjectivity in the current era of radical change. Doing so means turning our gaze on forms of existential distress given by changes in the contexts in which today's adolescents materially live out their experience. Exploring *time*, *space*, and *bodies*, their mutual relations and how they are evolving in the midst of social, economic, political, cultural, and hence also existential, change, can produce valuable insights into the psychopathological phenomena of our contemporary era. Against the current backdrop of change in the social and school contexts, and the effects of these changes on the experience of adolescents, there may also observe changes in how adolescent subjects relate to the structural dimensions of existence themselves.

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### Forms of adolescent disease in the contemporary crisis

The social, economic and cultural transformations currently underway demand the human sciences in particular to focus on the structural dimensions defining contemporary existential contexts and experience. Critically, we need to situate the new forms of psychic distress issuing from everyday relations, within the broader trend of deep and radical change that concerns all the main aspects governing the development and growth of individuals in today's world. We cannot describe the multiple and, to some extent novel, forms of contemporary adolescent malaise without reference to this change and its effects on the quality and modes of educational, relational, affective and cognitive experience encountered and enacted by adolescents in these early years of the new millennium. There is a link between the psychopathic profiles (Marcelli, Braconnier, 1983) described in the literature and the more problematic features of contemporary society. We cannot, mistakenly, ignore the key implications of the contemporary social crisis for each one of us. But what do we mean by "social crisis"? What are the components of this "crisis"? What are its specific features?

The scope and meaning of the dramatic crisis now convulsing the structures of Western society amplify and even exceed the imaginary of threat that has been pointed up and analysed in the work of key intellectual figures of our time. We face a crisis that is not only reducing the West's margins of prosperity, impinging on spending power and imposing more sober, and arguably more appropriate, patterns of consumption. This crisis profoundly challenges our very possibility of "being". It is a "crisis of meaning" that invades our daily lives and encroaches on our very existence. Individual experience today appears to be deeply affected by the confusion and loss of direction that have followed on the collapse of the "master narratives" of the twentieth century. However, the decline of the ideologies that characterized the modern era does not fully explain the current scenario. The crisis marking this change of millennium is vast in scale and bears extraordinary force of impact. It touches the individ-

ual existence of each of us – whether we are young, mature or elderly. This is because we have shifted from a feeling of *omnipotent illusion* typical of positivist ideology, which anticipated an era when scientific progress would enable humankind to overcome all adversity and happily prosper, to a feeling of *impotent disillusionment* in light of the irreducible complexity of the world, in which humankind appears destined to succumb to irrationality and unpredictability (Benasayag, Schmit 2004). The emblematic expression of this impotent resignation is technological progress, which the more it amazes us by offering new possibilities of communication, interaction and production, the more it becomes “alien” and complex for the majority of people. The unlimited nature of technological research and the difficulty of humankind in establishing any limit whatsoever underpin the reversal of power relations between man and technology. Or even more appropriately, we might follow Heidegger by defining the technological era as the age of nihilism, arguing that the supremacy of technology carries with it a “desacralization of the world” whereby all entities are reduced to mere manipulable matter (Ferrante, 2012). From this perspective, the dominant role of technology provokes a sense of confusion and loss because nothing is of value in itself if it does not fulfil a rational function. “Technology [does not] allow us to truly cultivate knowledge, ideas, ideals, to identify goals and values, to discover truths, or to create works of art whose beauty reflects the depths of the human soul. Its functioning [is] only driven by a reason that is purely calculating, and completely taken up with the aimless use of resources” (Ivi, p. 117).

Nihilism, the characteristic expression of the present age, is seen by many contemporary scholars<sup>1</sup> as one of the most telling signs of crisis. It is linked to the problematic nature of lived experience in a society increasingly marked by emotional detachment, indifference or affective aridity, which in turn are associated with phenomena such as exasperated subjectivism, a drastic reduction in processes of solidarity, the progressive loss of connection, belonging and participation in community life. In particular, the nihilistic form of contemporary malaise seems to reflect something that has been taken away, or something that is “lacking” and would appear to be the outcome of the disassociation between “desire” and “the Law” (Recalcati, 2010): “There is a new psychopathology on the horizon that presents different symptoms and demands a totally new psychoanalytic therapeutic approach. Anorexia and bulimia, addictions and drug

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Nietzsche and Heidegger, on the one hand, and that of Freud, on the other, have exerted a key influence on the thinking of those scholars in the fields of philosophy and sociology who, in recent decades, have thematised the issue of the contemporary social and existential crisis.

abuse, libidinal withdrawal and depression, somatization, panic attacks and states of disorientation; these are the new disorders” (Orsenigo, 2012, p. 64). Thus, while for twentieth century psychoanalysis, neurosis was the characteristic form of distress and was generated by the unconscious repression of desire, today’s malaise is underpinned by the anguish of no longer having anything to desire: by the impossibility of desiring as the outcome of “forced enjoyment” (Ivi, p. 65). The principle of acritical enjoyment encouraged by the commodity fetishism theorised by Marx, who discussed its alienating effects on the human being, is underpinned by an unintentional pedagogical model specifically created by the economic and social organization of global capitalism. In this educational model, founded on the demand for an extreme orientation towards performance, it is critical to social survival to be able to perform – with determination, force, aggressiveness – almost to the extent of becoming abusive, rejecting all forms of otherness and affirming individual totality.

However, this coercion to “enjoy” which is part of “capitalist discourse” (Recalcati, 2011) is not only reflected in the consumeristic trading of commodities – in which the subject is free, without restraint or limit, to seek enjoyment or pleasure – but also in the desperation of those who fall into a state of impotent anguish when the illusion of omnipotence produced by frenetic consumption disappears. A sense of emptiness, of feeling useless, and the conviction that one will never be able to meet the demands of society, never able live up to the existential model of the “performing wolf (*loup performant*)” (Benasayag, Schmit, 2004, p. 104), are all correlated with this “passive nihilism” (Palmieri, 2012, p. 87) which appears to strike the younger generations in particular. The “submerged distress” (Barone, 2009) of contemporary adolescents takes the form of inner malaise, relational issues, and an inability to communicate; it has claimed new territory with respect to the past, primarily within the individual’s inner space. The underlying issue for adolescents appears to be their incapacity to bring into the present and manage the dimension of “desire”, more so than, or in addition to, a lack of fulfilled “needs” (Ivi, p. 122). This suffering bears the risk of a dramatic dual outcome. A teenager’s tormentful experience of impotent frustration can give rise to uncontrollable anger that may find release in a destructive act of extreme, unexpected and irrational violence, or, alternatively, be transformed into the unspeakable pain that rocks the youth’s existence, fostering the idea that there is no point in going on living, that nobody cares, which in turn may lead to the idea that he or she should “withdraw” from the world, tragically and increasingly often, by committing suicide. “Because living means responding to pressing demands to perform, in order to enjoy, at

all costs: this places adolescents in a paradoxical situation that is difficult for them to understand and accept [...] they experience an indescribable pain that periodically explodes into action of some kind, perhaps because they have not been able to find or construct tools enabling them to hear, think or share it” (Palmieri, 2012, p. 85).

A crisis of being, therefore, that inevitably also speaks of a crisis in educational prospects. Riccardo Massa called this the “crisis of an educational milieu”, referring both to the decline of the cultural-existential settings that in the West – at least up to the 1970s – typically guided the formation of the young person, and to the end of education as an intergenerational process of acculturation, socialization and learning (Massa, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. The crisis, that is to say, of a particular formative environment, constituted by social models and values that today appear to be obsolete, not because they have been culturally superseded, but because they have been made superfluous by transformations in the very structure of contemporary educational experience. A crisis of this nature calls into question one of the most significant and longstanding principles in the cultural history of civilization: that of the authority issuing from the social and cultural value of anteriority. “The dominant ideals in our culture have clearly undergone profound change. We have been taken over by the notion of *seriality*, according to which the only authority and the only hierarchy seen as acceptable or accepted are those determined by success and personal power, as evaluated within the universe of commodities” (Benasayag, Schmit, 2004, p. 29). Anteriority, or that which existed prior to the birth of the new generations, loses meaning vis-à-vis an omnivorous and totalizing present: it follows that there is no longer any culture worth handing down. The disappearance, from educational models, of the value of *anteriority* has implied the progressive weakening of the dimension of “passage” among the generations. However, thematising transition is of key interest, given – amongst other factors – the light shed by social, psychological and cultural anthropological research on the historical function of rites of passage in human societies, for both the individual and the community. Drawing on the pioneering work of Van Gennep, which was followed by many other studies on the theme in ethno-anthropological and other

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<sup>2</sup> In the words of Riccardo Massa: “I do not know if educators perceive this, but it seems to me that this is truly the end of education. Not so much on account of the schools crisis, or the disinvestment in socio-educational policy, but above all due to modifications in experiential, belonging and life contexts that lead today’s youth to grow up outside of any educational context, outside of any environment from which they can draw values allowing them to join or even connect with the older generations”. Cfr. R. Massa, “*Tre piste per lavorare entro la crisi educativa*”, in *Animazione Sociale*, n.2 - 2000, Torino: pp. 60-66.

disciplines, the British anthropologist Victor Turner analysed the social function of rites of passage, understood as an intergenerational phenomenon. Specifically, he argued that there is a strong link between initiatory practices in rites of passage and the resolution of intergenerational conflict. In Turner's view, the rite of passage is a sort of "social drama", similar in function to the ancient Greek drama: it allows a community to give symbolic and material form to, and represent, an explicit or implicit conflict. The rite of passage, like the theatrical drama, creates a "fictional" time and place, in which conflict may be staged and resolved via a sophisticated but effective symbolic-material process (Turner, 1986). For Turner, the initiation rituals implicated in rites of passage serve to ensure the community's historical continuity, while simultaneously incorporating the innovation contributed by the younger generations into the group's social traditions. Thus, in the past, rites of passage helped societies to approach the difficult task of achieving generational succession, through the symbolization of a conflict that was actually generative and key to the survival of the community. The rite symbolically and materially embodied the handing down of leadership from one generation to the next. The contemporary social crisis reflects profound cultural change that is threatening the viability of enacting this passage. It would seem that the adolescents of today are unable to take over leadership because there are no adults able or willing to pass it on to them. A symbolic rupture that is also reflected in a material lack of places taking on and embodying the "fictional" value of the social drama: places that pedagogically speaking might function as symbolic and material dispositives of "passage" (Barone, 2015). The adolescents of today live out / experience this dramatic change whereby the initiatory function that was once fulfilled by social institutions has gradually disappeared, reducing the sociocultural issue of the the younger generation's "transition" to a private psychic issue to be dealt with in the family context or within the peer group. This cultural revolution appears to bring about a paradox: Most of the psychological research conducted in the twentieth century found that, among the developmental goals of adolescence, the processes of individuation and separation represent a key step towards psychic, emotional and affective maturity. However, the contemporary social crisis forces the new generations to test their "ability to transit" (Fabbrini, Melucci, 1992) within the space of family and friendship, which from a relational point of view is not designed to support this passage, with the inevitable emotional fallout caused by an excess of affective proximity.

### **The scholastic experience**

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We may be surprised to observe that school is characterised by an extraordinary tendency to “resist” change, even in the face of the multiple attempts to re-define it that have been the object of lively debate in recent decades, and even in the face of the modest reforms that have been put in place with a view to altering its “organizational culture”. In practice, school retains the same form and structure, the same – seemingly unchangeable – material dimensions that for over three hundred years have defined a certain mode of experiencing learning: the superficial organizational changes currently pushing European schools (in emulation of the North American model) to adopt an increasingly “corporate” paradigm of education, have not had significant effects on the framework of the “school dispositive”. A dispositive that is centred around single-subject learning, producing educational and learning experience that might be described as “normalizing”, in that it draws attention to non-conformity and certifies inadequacy. A form of school generating an idea of the student that is highly abstract and distant from the lived school experience of contemporary adolescents, an experience that by virtue of its richness and chaotic nature in reality eludes the control of the system: “Reading education manuals gives one the impression that school is a matter of curricula and objectives, tests and communicative behaviours aimed at implementing certain programmes. In contrast, school is characterized by a specific everyday reality of its own that transcends and conditions all of this, by an underground life, and by latent processes of socialization and existential routines, in which the more heavily we are implicated, the less we are capable of recognizing them [...] It is all very well to say that school is not for socializing but for teaching. [...] When you ask young people to narrate the role of school in their life stories and educational histories, they are more likely to evoke memories of making friends and enemies, or not making them, of being let down by classmates, of receiving humiliation or praise from teachers among whom they loved some and hated others” (Massa, 1997, pp. 79-80).

The repressed dimension par excellence in reflections on school as an educational context for adolescents, continues to be the “affective” sphere; affect is perceived as alien in relation to the focus on single-subject knowledge, the key intended outcome of school learning.

However, there is a broad psychosocial literature documenting the relationship between school success and affective and relational patterns: the changes that take place in adolescence, at the bodily, sexual and relational-affective levels, play a crucial role in determining the quality of an adolescent’s school life



(Marcelli, Braconnier, 1983). The impact of changes imposed by the school itself thus need to be considered in any analysis of developmental risks: for example, the move from primary to secondary education involves a significant restructuring of students' school relationships and affective and cognitive responsibilities, with implications for their relationship with the dimensions of time and space. And chronologically speaking, this coincides with a phase in adolescents' metamorphic trajectory that sees them very much taken up with developing towards maturity.

The difficulty of introducing change into the school system, is underpinned by difficulty in re-examining the structural conditions that determine the quality of experience of both teachers and pupils. Times and spaces of learning are still predominantly thought of in relation to the learning of individual disciplines: this means that time is administered and divided up on a serial basis, arranged into sequences, decomposed and parcelled out; space, on its part, follows principles of homogeneity and seriality: students are divided into class groups on the basis of age, and classrooms are divided into rows of benches; the use of cellular space defines a biunivocal correspondence between desk and individual. "The parsimonious use of time, the monotonous and predictable passing of the hours of the morning, week or month, the subdivision of the activities into segments and procedures, levels and target outcomes [...] the capitalization of school time as entirely useful..." (Orsenigo, 2014, p. 69); this is the structure that continues to underpin daily school life. Although the last two decades have seen the launch of a number of projects that have directly "tackled" the issue of the structure of school experience by revisiting of its temporal and spatial dimensions<sup>3</sup>, the lecture-style class remains the most commonly adopted mode of teaching at all levels of schooling.

A meaningful reflection on school as a key context of experience in the adolescent developmental process, cannot overlook the question of the quality of school experience and this necessarily involves taking a close look at the form that schooling takes: i.e., the dispositive and setting that determine how schooling is imparted. We will thus be forced to recognize that the school system remains anchored to two principles that have historically determined its social

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<sup>3</sup> In the Italian context, valuable research has been carried out by the Istituto Nazionale Documentazione Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa (INDIRE): for an introduction to INDIRE's work on the role of space in learning, see the "Architetture scolastiche" section of their website: [www.indire.it/progetto/architetture-scolastiche/](http://www.indire.it/progetto/architetture-scolastiche/). At the European level, see the work of the Group of National Experts on Effective Learning Environments set up by OCSE. Finally, at the international level, the "flipped classroom" method, has enjoyed great impact, due to its efficacy and ease of application; for background, see Johnathan Bergmann, Aaron Sams (2012), *Flipyourclassroom*, ISTE, U.S.A.



function: on the one hand, the drive to normalize, which produces effects of subjection and practices of self marked by conformism and homogenization under the aegis of the dominant ideology; on the other, the use of intellectual performance as a criterion for the differentiation and social stigmatization on which the assessment apparatus of school is based (Massa, 1997, pp. 130-133). These principles are practiced to the detriment of students' affective and psychosocial dimensions and corporeal expressivity, viewed as marginal to the education process.

Nevertheless, because schooling is by its nature educational, it inevitably displays an ambivalent duality of its own: on the one hand, the earlier cited drive to normalize puts the subject under pressure to "conform", while on the other, an "emancipatory" drive fostering individual independence, responsibility and critical awareness is also set in motion.

Thus school is simultaneously both an agent of social reproduction and an agent of change: learning is invariably the outcome of these two opposite but complementary tendencies or dispositions, one of which concerns the learning process and the other the creative process. Through the first of these patterns, subjects enter a network that both contains and subjugates them and draw learning from their daily experience of their main life contexts (family, community, school); through the second, subjects draw on their expressive capacity to transcend the cultural constraints of the contexts in which they find themselves, striving to create new connections of meaning. Educational action is therefore dual, because it holds together the drive for conformity and the drive for emancipation, both intrinsic dimensions of education itself. By definition, educating means setting up a context, a structure or a dispositive within which it is possible to make significant experiences happen. Education thus represents the framework of meaning that endows instruction with formative value and significance. As Raffaele Mantegazza and Gabriella Seveso have observed: "We need to lay aside the misleading and specious opposition between education and instruction, recalling that the mission of schools is to instruct, and that if they manage to efficiently impart sufficient knowledge, in a way that is respectful of individual paces of learning and based on a diversity of methods, while remaining sensitive to relational aspects, they are implicitly also implementing an educational process: thus, education is transversal to different school subjects, not a substitute for them" (Mantegazza, Seveso, 2006, p. 37).

It is precisely this reconfiguration of the relationship between education and instruction that allows us to attend to the materiality of educational processes enacted at school, clearly distinguishing them from socialization in the family

context or in any of the adolescent's other life contexts. The school must mark out the boundaries that divide it from the outside world, thereby maintaining its artificiality. This does not mean that it should be exclusively self-referential, but that it needs to clearly define the specific nature of school experience; thus, fortified by awareness of its institutional identity (currently in a state of crisis) and associated sociocultural role, schools will be able to manage these boundaries flexibly to receive the meanings and codes of society, process them and treat them as educational and learning opportunities.

Addressing adolescents' school-related difficulties thus requires a critical perspective that allows us to interpret the individual problems of boys and girls who come up against the experience of academic failure - which may be followed by more serious phenomena involving behaviour and psychological dynamics - in relation to the latent affective and cognitive factors influencing an experience which, as we have tried to show, is more than a question of scholarship or strict assessment of students' intellectual performance, but comprehends the complex interweaving of codes that materially regulate everyday life at school.

Currently, most school systems have yet to implement state-of-the-art recommendations for change issuing from educational research – although, as mentioned earlier, grass roots movements have been taking significant and "contagious" steps towards implementing a "flipped" model of school<sup>4</sup> –, retaining a rigid structure that imposes a single "right way" of engaging with the dispositive, and cognitive and intellectual ability as the only criteria with which to evaluate a student. Other kinds of ability, such as practical, manual or artistic, or other types of learning, are rarely adequately recognized. The students who best adapt to this type of study and learning, which rewards and encourages docility, attention and concentration, are stimulated to persevere. However, even those who successfully progress through school do not necessarily get the opportunity to assimilate this experience or to grasp what it is that they find appealing, motivating, or meaningful about what they are doing, given that they spend most of their school career worrying about meeting their performance goals. As summarized by Riccardo Massa: «Young people are undergoing increasingly violent and distressing social abuse, from the colonization that is school, to the senseless pressurization of university courses, from the lack of

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<sup>4</sup> Another Italian project that merits being cited here is the "Scuola senza zaino" model, designed and disseminated by Marco Orsi, first in the Tuscany region and later in other parts of the country. For background see the website: [www.senzazaino.it](http://www.senzazaino.it); see also the book: Orsi M. (2006), *Scuola senza zaino*, Erickson, Trento.

jobs, to the disintegration of family settings in which they have no choice but to remain. School, in the name of an enculturation that makes no sense, obliges them to renounce all vital and creative expression of their inner worlds, all constructive relationships with the external world, forcing them into the mould of long and exhausting school hours» (Massa, 1997, p. 126).

Given that the school system and teachers are unable to fulfil a proper guidance function, responsibility for choosing a meaningful educational path falls to the individual students, each with their own degree of maturity and self-awareness; more often than not, they succeed in defining their potential thanks to experience gained outside of school. A typical expression of distress in contemporary students, which is connected with the fact that they are not allowed to express themselves, is the phenomenon of “school problems”, which encompass a hugely diverse range of situations: while it is true that most adolescents adapt to the school dispositive without particular issues, the past ten years have seen a significant increase in cases of students who are unable to meet the demands of the dispositive and thus develop generalized behavioural difficulties, loss of attention and concentration and non-compliant conduct.

It appears that the new generations are less capable of adapting to a rigid school dispositive that, as earlier outlined, continues to be based on single-subject learning. However, this inability is not an implicit “rebellion” against a meaningless and anachronistic dispositive, but reflects profound change in the younger generations' very mode of experiencing: a mode that is in conflict with the requirements of the school dispositive. Recent high-profile studies in the fields of sociology, anthropology of the contemporary and cognitive psychology all converge in suggesting that information technology, multimedia and other new forms of communication are changing not only how people take in and process information but also their ability to pay attention and concentrate. Time, space and the body are all implicated in the process of reconfiguring the learning experience, which is now mediated by the new technologies.

Adopting a critical view of school as a subject-learning laboratory, a place that implements the social and cultural drive to “normalize” and which therefore inevitably differentiates and produces “rejects”, also means revisiting the growing epidemic of “school problems”. A school of this kind, in which time and space are organized so as to daily reproduce an experience of compliance and conformism; in which bodies are stripped of the expressive and vital possibilities of an embodied subject; such a school, we might say, cannot avoid creating dynamics and “disturbing” processes such as non-compliance and rebellion against the invisible mechanisms of “standardizing” education. Therefore,

if contemporary schools are places that themselves generate "school problems", it is critical to reframe the entire issue by enquiring into the role of the material context underpinning everyday school life: specifically, we need to ask whether it worsens or alleviates the burden of the adolescent with problems. In pedagogical terms, this means attending to the variables that can be manipulated to draw out and foster students' potential rather than the factors disrupting their social and affective relationships and academic performance. Acting on the environment, as suggested in the pedagogical literature, is a key necessity. However, if we understand this as a question of functionally readapting the body of the child or adolescent (for example by primarily working to improve students' posture or motor coordination, or to limit their hyperactive behaviours), or their relationship with space and time (by seeking to improve how they go about a task or helping them to execute it more rapidly and efficiently) with a view to facilitating learning<sup>5</sup>, we risk once more basing our educational practice on treating the young person as inadequate and in need of rehabilitation, assigning a marginal role to the material and symbolic variables organizing school experience<sup>6</sup>.

Attributing poor student outcomes to a set of biological or organic causes, along with a pedagogical science informed by the field of medical and psychiatric knowledge, cause the material and symbolic factors determining students' experience of school to be overlooked. We therefore need to recognize and explore the role of the material dimensions of education in supporting learning and developmental processes or vice versa in hindering them; this entails broadening our perspective to include analysis and questioning of the settings and dispositives that form subjective experience, and therefore the subjects themselves, with a view to promoting individual expression. It is my profound conviction that these variables reside in the material structures of educational events: thus, by acting on the spaces and time made available for learning; on

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<sup>5</sup> It should be clear that all these aspects are far from irrelevant to addressing more general school difficulties on the part of students. This is because intervention aimed at reducing individual distress due to self-perceived inadequacy in relation to one's context, significantly contributes to enhancing broader educational processes. As research in this area has shown, there is a strong link between subjectively experiencing inadequacy, mechanisms of self-esteem, and the opportunity to avail of an educational path that isolates problem behaviours and allows individual potential to emerge.

<sup>6</sup> It is clear that we cannot and must not deny the intrinsic problems of a child who rebels, so to speak, against the school system with inevitable fallout for class group as a whole; it is equally clear however that focusing all our attention on the personality of the disturbed child can encourage those in charge of his or her education to abdicate their part of responsibility out of a sense of exasperation or impotence, delegating the problem to neuropsychiatrists and developmental psychologists.

the didactic approach brought to bear - not only in terms of teaching methods and techniques but also, and most importantly, in terms of “peculiar ways of doing school” (Cappa, 2014) –; and on the objects, materials, procedures, and rituals characterising our schools, in practice we are acting on the pedagogical *setting* that expresses and implements our particular form of school. Examining the issue of students' school problems from a purely pedagogical perspective, means inverting our approach: rather than taking the problem children or teens themselves as our starting point and attempting to bring them into line with the demands of school and society, we will instead focus on how we might act on the form taken by school, that is to say, on the educational setting, and on the dimensions that procedurally and symbolically underpin the daily actions of teachers and students. This will entail, for example, discovering and acknowledging the importance of the affective dimensions that are implicit in the relational commitment between teachers and students and among the students themselves. It means going back to the material core of education, to the factors that enable - or prevent - the creation of a space for learning, growth and experience in the school setting.

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