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## PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION IN EDUCATIONAL INTERACTIONS: MECHANISM ANALYSIS AND A CYBERNETIC PERSPECTIVE

### IDENTYFIKACJA PROJEKCYJNA W RELACJACH WYCHOWAWCZYCH: ANALIZA MECHANIZMU I CYBERNETYCZNA PERSPEKTYWA

**Streszczenie:** W artykule analizowany jest mechanizm identyfikacji projekcyjnej, będący prymitywnym mechanizmem obronnym często używanym przez małe dzieci w kontaktach z opiekunami. Omówiono funkcjonowanie tego mechanizmu oraz sposoby radzenia sobie z nim w różnych relacjach, zarówno między rodzicami a dziećmi, jak i między dorosłymi.

Za pomocą modelu cybernetycznego systemu autonomicznego pokazano, jak sprzężenie zwrotne między uczestnikami interakcji wpływa na zjawisko identyfikacji projekcyjnej. Zbadano rolę reakcji partnera (szczególnie rodzica, wychowawcy lub psychoterapeuty) w radzeniu sobie z tym mechanizmem oraz w tłumieniu jego intensywności.

Artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób wiedza o sprzężeniach zwrotnych może pomóc w kontrolowaniu i modulowaniu dynamiki relacji, aby zminimalizować negatywne skutki identyfikacji projekcyjnej i wspierać zdrowe interakcje.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** identyfikacja projekcyjna, projekcja, rozszczepienie, omnipotencja, reaktywność

**Abstract:** The article discusses the mechanism of projective identification, a primitive defense mechanism often used by young children in their relationships with caregivers. It explains how this mechanism operates and explores ways to manage it in relationships between parents and children as well as among adults.

Using the cybernetic model of an autonomous system, the article illustrates how feedback loops between interaction partners influence the phenomenon of projective identification. The role of the partner's reactivity (especially that of parents, educators, or psychotherapists) is examined in terms of managing this mechanism and reducing its intensity.

The article explores how knowledge of feedback loops can guide the modulation and control of interactions, aiming to diminish the negative effects of projective identification and encourage healthier relationships.

**Keywords:** projective identification, projection, fission, omnipotence, reactivity

## Introduction

Projective identification is a defense mechanism that allows the transfer of unwanted thoughts or feelings onto others (Grzesiuk, 2005). It is frequently used by children in their interactions with parents, educators, and psychotherapists (Forrester, 2006). In children, it serves a developmental role by facilitating communication with caregivers, allowing parents to understand what the child is experiencing (Holmes, 2016). In adults, projective identification can be an indicator of mental disorders, such as borderline personality disorder (Grzesiuk, 2005).

In psychotherapeutic processes, projective identification plays a significant role in understanding the patient and aids therapists in addressing the patient's experiences (Grzesiuk, 2005). In education and pedagogical relationships, its application differs from the therapeutic approach. The article introduces the mechanism of projective identification and describes how feedback loops between individuals occur during this process. To explain these phenomena, the model of the autonomous system by Marian Mazur is utilized (Mazur, 1966).

The article aims to provide a comprehensive scientific description of the phenomenon of projective identification, which can be beneficial not only for psychologists and psychotherapists but especially for educators, parents, and teachers. It illustrates how projective

identification can affect educational relationships and how to effectively work with it to support the development of children and youth.

The issue discussed in this article is of particular importance for educational practice, where teachers and educators often experience unconscious emotional processes that shape classroom dynamics. Understanding projective identification provides a valuable framework for analyzing teacher–student relationships, the regulation of emotions in learning environments, and the prevention of professional burnout. This perspective helps to link psychodynamic insights with pedagogical reflection and practical classroom management.

## **Projective identification in psychoanalytic theory**

Projective identification is a defense mechanism that enables the unconscious transfer of unwanted feelings or thoughts onto others (Klein, 1946). This phenomenon was first described by Melanie Klein in the context of object relations theory.

According to Klein, projective identification involves "expelling" negative emotions onto an object, typically the mother, followed by attempts to control that object (Klein, 1946). She describes this as a process where a child "projects" their negative feelings and fantasies onto the mother or other significant figures, then tries to control these figures through the influence exerted on them.

Wilfred Bion expanded this concept, arguing that projective identification can be seen as a way of transferring emotions onto others to avoid experiencing them (Bion, 1962). The mother plays a crucial role as a "container" that can receive and transform the projected emotions in a way that allows the child to process them.

Thomas Ogden viewed projective identification as a process of interaction in which both parties play an active role (Ogden, 1992). He noted that this mechanism not only transfers emotions but also affects the behavior of the other person, which can lead to various types of interactions between individuals.

Betty Joseph focused on the clinical aspect of projective identification, emphasizing the importance of the therapist's conscious response to the projected feelings (Joseph, 1985). She pointed out that it is crucial for a therapist to distinguish between their own emotions and those of the patient for effective therapeutic work.

Robert Hinshelwood analyzed projective identification within the context of group dynamics, noting its impact on relationships within the group and the structure of therapeutic organizations (Hinshelwood, 1989). He highlighted that projective identification can lead to the

formation of roles and behavior patterns that may perpetuate certain interactions within the group.

## **Differences between projective identification, projection, and transference**

Projective identification is different from projection and transference.

*Projection* is a defense mechanism where a person transfers their unwanted feelings or thoughts onto external objects or people. Projection does not assume interaction or control over what is transferred. In Grinberg's (1990) view, it constitutes the basis of mental processes that influence interpersonal relationships.

*Transference* is a phenomenon in which a person transfers feelings and emotions associated with other people onto an interaction partner. Transference involves emotional engagement but not necessarily an impact on the behavior of the interaction partner.

*Projective identification* differs from projection in that it assumes interaction and influence on another person. From transference, projective identification includes an impact on the other person's behavior, as well as on the way a person tries to control their feelings through influence on others (Grzesiuk, 2005).

Projective identification differs from projection and transference primarily in its interactive nature. While projection is a defense mechanism where the individual attributes their unacceptable feelings or thoughts to external objects without expecting interaction (often unconscious and unilateral), projective identification involves the active participation of another person. This person not only receives the assigned feelings but also reacts to them, which can change the dynamics of the original emotional state of the projecting person. Projective identification is therefore a two-way process involving a dynamic emotional exchange between the involved parties.

In therapeutic practice, projective identification is an important tool but also poses challenges for the therapist, who must be able to recognize and effectively respond to projected emotions (Grzesiuk, 2005). The difference between these mechanisms is crucial for understanding the dynamics in therapy and its impact on working with patients.

## **Projective Identification – The Mysterious Phenomenon of the Psyche**

Projective identification is a phenomenon that defies simple definitions. It is a process where one person unconsciously transfers their emotions and thoughts onto another, often without the knowledge of third parties. The recipient of this communication—whether a

therapist, a family member, or a teacher—may experience unexpected feelings originating from the projecting person. This phenomenon can be helpful in understanding emotional needs but may lead to complex situations if not properly understood.

In a therapeutic context, this process plays a key role in working with patients, allowing therapists to work through emotions that the patient has projected. The therapist, acting as a sort of "container," processes the projected emotions and then helps the patient understand them. However, care must be taken not to lose one's identity in the process of receiving and transforming these emotions. This delicate balance requires great empathy and a strong sense of boundaries (Grzesiuk, 2005).

Projective identification is not limited to the world of therapy. In families, especially between parents and children, it can play a significant role. Children who are not yet able to fully express their feelings might transfer them onto their parents. This phenomenon can be both a challenge and an opportunity for parents to understand their children's emotional needs. Teachers and educators may also experience projective identification in their interactions with students. Recognizing and managing this phenomenon is crucial for effective pedagogical work.

In therapeutic, familial, or educational practice, understanding the mechanism of projective identification can help build better relationships. However, it is a delicate process that requires those who experience it to maintain their own identity and resist being influenced by transferred emotions. For teachers or parents, it involves maintaining the right distance to not take on emotions that originate from others.

The phenomenon of projective identification, while complex, offers unique insights into emotional processes. It requires therapists, families, and teachers to be vigilant and skilled in transforming these emotions in ways that promote development and understanding. Proper management of this mechanism can lead to more harmonious and supportive relationships (Groth, 2011).

An important aspect of projective identification is that it diminishes in the developmental process in favor of more mature ways of dealing with emotions. However, in adults, it can be an indicator of psychological disorders such as personality disorders (Grzesiuk, 2005, p. 368).

The three main phases of working with projective identification are: reception, transformation, and communication (Grzesiuk, 2005, p. 381). In the first phase, the projected emotions from the child/patient are received, requiring a passive orientation of the mind and engagement with one's own experiences. The second phase involves transforming these

emotions in a way that allows the caregiver/therapist to maintain distance. In the third phase, the caregiver/therapist communicates understanding of the transfer and countertransfer, which helps the child/patient process their emotions (Grzesiuk, 2005, p. 382).

Effectively dealing with projective identification requires refined skills in regulating one's own emotions and maintaining professionalism in the face of projected feelings. For educators, teachers, and caregivers, this is equally important, as this mechanism is commonly encountered in relationships with children. Therefore, those working with children should be aware of the defensive mechanisms that may arise in such relationships and know how to manage them.

## **When Projective Identification Becomes a Problem: The Effects of a Persistent Defense Mechanism**

Many children go through various stages of emotional development where they might employ primitive defense mechanisms. However, if these mechanisms do not fade with age, they can become more destructive, including projective identification. This article examines what can happen if a child does not outgrow this mechanism and the potential consequences if projective identification becomes a permanent element of functioning.

Projective identification occurs when an individual transfers unacceptable feelings or traits onto others. In childhood, this may be a response to difficult emotions or a misunderstanding of one's place in the world. If not properly understood and overcome, this mechanism can become problematic in adulthood. Instead of dealing with their own emotions, the individual may attribute them to others, often leading to conflict.

The person using projective identification may lack awareness of certain aspects of their self or be unable to experience their feelings constructively. Otto Kernberg describes this mechanism as a primitive form of defense often associated with splitting and primitive idealization. The individual attributes to others what they cannot tolerate in themselves, leading to attempts to control the behavior of others (Kernberg, 2018).

Over time, this mechanism can lead to situations where the individual seeks a victim to transfer their feelings onto. For example, someone experiencing shame or helplessness due to their actions might blame others, using the maneuver "it's not me, it's you." The individual unable to cope with their own weaknesses might burden others, thus creating "scapegoats" who unjustly bear the emotional load (Shay, 2011).

If projective identification is not understood and properly directed, it can lead to emotional exhaustion for both the user and their victims (Grzesiuk, 2005). Therefore, it is crucial for children and youth to understand when this mechanism is used and how to help them develop healthier ways of coping with emotions. If projective identification is normalized or overlooked, it can lead to permanent behavioral patterns that affect the individual's entire life.

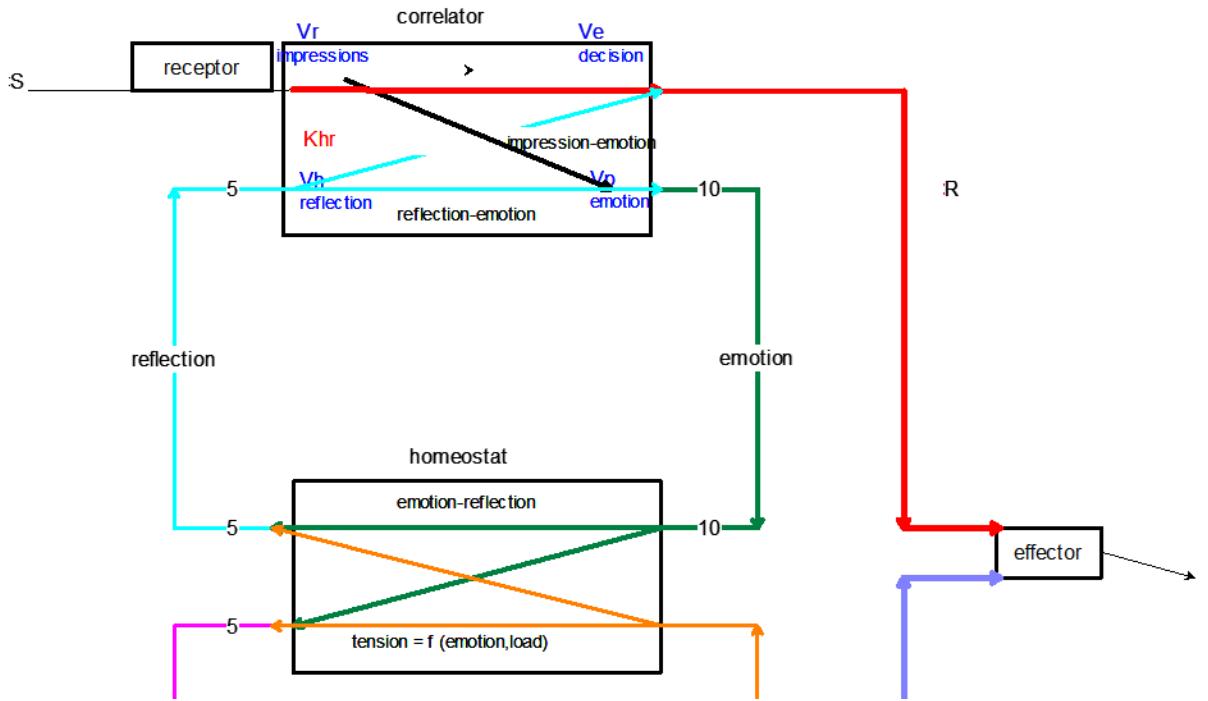
For this reason, educators and caregivers must be aware of the potential for this mechanism to arise and take steps to support children in developing healthier emotional coping methods. Otherwise, projective identification may solidify as a defense mechanism and take forms that are difficult to manage, affecting the individual's entire life and their surroundings.

## **Feedback in the Phenomenon of Projective Identification**

Projective identification implies interaction and can evoke feedback mechanisms that affect interpersonal relationships, both between a child and an adult, and among adults. In this process, the person projecting the identification redirects their feelings and experiences onto another person, treating them as an emotional regulator. Consequently, the person endowed with projective identification becomes responsible for maintaining the emotional balance of the first person.

In the normal functioning of the psyche, external stimuli evoke emotional responses, which are corrected by the ego function, restoring homeostasis. The ego function acts like a homeostat, regulating emotional potential to restore balance. However, when the ego function is weak or underdeveloped, the responsibility for regulating emotions may be transferred to another person, creating feedback. In this case, one person transmits their emotions to another, who responds with their own reactions.

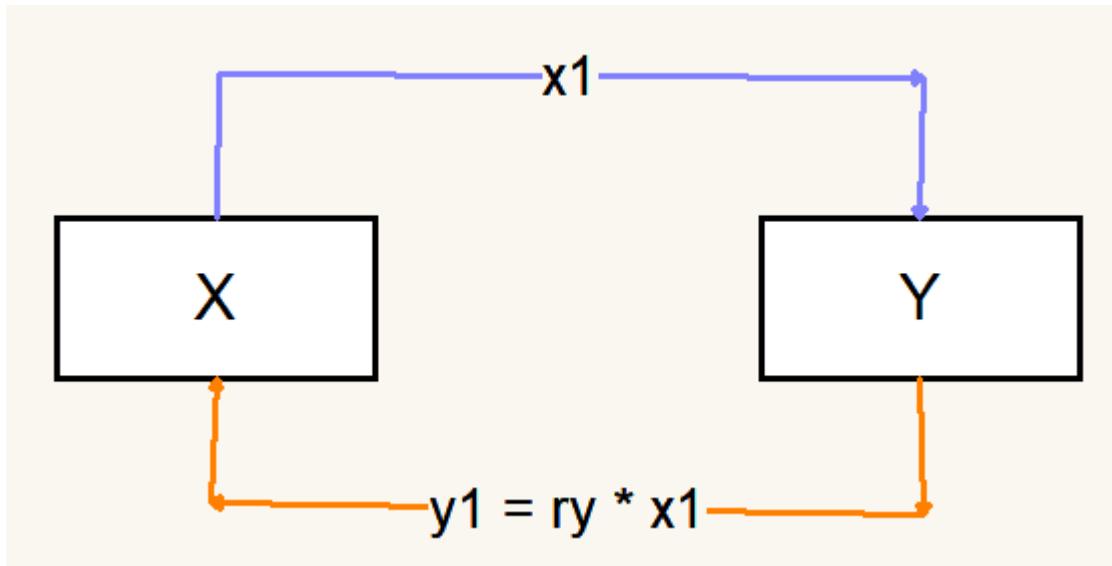
In the case of projective identification, the perceptual potential ( $V_r$ ), generated by external stimuli, leads to an emotional potential ( $V_p$ ). A strong emotional state is controlled by the ego function, which is compared to the cybernetic concept of a homeostat. The homeostat regulates the emotional potential through the reflective function ( $V_h$ ), creating feedback that helps maintain emotional balance (Mazur, 1966). Figure 1 illustrates this mechanism, showing the cooperation between the correlator and the homeostat in regulating the emotional potential ( $V_p$ ) and the reflective potential ( $V_h$ ), leading to the achievement of the boundary potential of the reflective potential ( $limV_h$ ) and the induction of the estimation potential ( $V_e$ ) in the decision center (Mazur, 1976).



**Figure 1.** A fragment of the autonomous system showing the cooperation between the correlator and the homeostat in regulating the emotional ( $V_p$ ) and reflective ( $V_h$ ) potentials.

To ensure balance and homeostasis, the system must have a well-developed ego function. In other words, the homeostat needs to be strong. What happens when the ego function is weak or not fully developed? In the case of the autonomous system, this can lead to a loss of control (Mazur, 1976). In humans, such a situation may result in a disruption of psychic functioning, and another person must take over the regulatory function.

As a result of the interaction consequent to projective identification between two people, a coupling similar to that between the homeostat and the correlator arises. In this case, the person "Y" acts as the homeostat, endowed with projective identification, or the emotions unconsciously experienced by the projecting person, called "X". Figure 2 illustrates this feedback loop between person X and person Y.



**Figure 2.** Feedback loop between person X and person Y

The feedback in projective identification can lead to varying outcomes based on the reactivity of each party involved. If one person's reactivity is higher than the other's, it can escalate emotions and conflicts. Conversely, if the reactivity is lower, it tends to extinguish emotions, restoring balance (Mazur, 1976).

To better understand the feedback mechanism, a cybernetic notation can be applied. If person X sends a stimulus ( $x_1$ ) to person Y, then person Y responds to this stimulus according to their reactivity ( $ry$ ) and sends a reaction back to person X. This reaction is proportional to the stimulus, taking into account the reactivity. This can be represented by the formula:

$$(1) y_1 = ry * x_1$$

where:

- $y_1$  – the reaction of person Y
- $ry$  – the reactivity of person Y
- $x_1$  – the stimulus received from person X

Person X reacts to person Y's reaction according to their own reactivity ( $rx$ ). This reaction is proportional to the reactivity, which can be expressed by the formula:

$$x_2 = rx * y_1$$

By substituting the values from the first equation into the second, we obtain:

$$x_2 = rx * (ry * x_1)$$

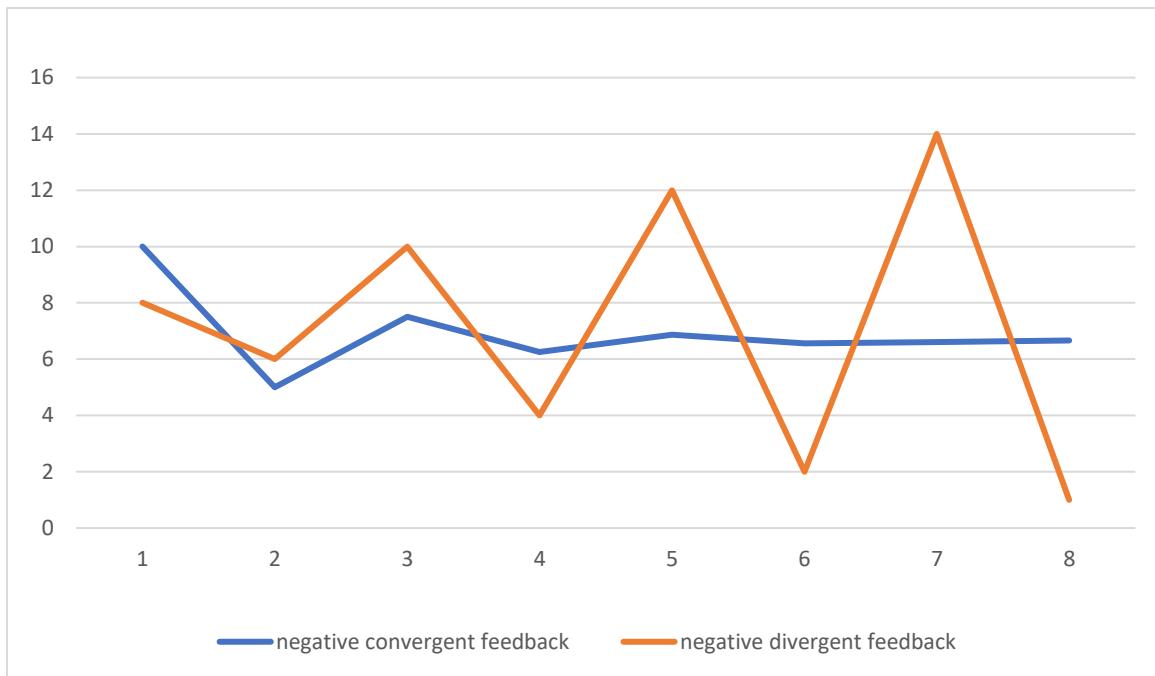
**This indicates that subsequent reactions of person X become responses to their own stimulus, taking into account the reactivity of person Y.** Different levels of reactivity on both sides can lead to different outcomes. Feedback can be convergent (extinguishing emotions) or divergent (escalating emotions), affecting the dynamics of interaction between individuals.

Projective identification can lead to feedback mechanisms that affect interpersonal relationships. Redirecting emotions from one person to another creates an emotional burden that requires an appropriate response to maintain balance. If one person's reactivity is greater than the other's, it can lead to an escalation of emotions and conflicts. Conversely, if the reactivity is lesser, emotions are extinguished, restoring harmony.

The ability to regulate emotions in such a way as to avoid overburdening one person is crucial for healthy relationships and preventing burnout, especially in educational or therapeutic contexts.

Reactivity is a key factor in this process. Person Y reacts to external stimuli according to their level of reactivity, which influences their interactions with person X. If person Y's reactivity is less than that of person X, there is a chance for negative convergent feedback, where reactions are gradually extinguished. Otherwise, divergent feedback may occur, leading to an intensification of emotions and conflicts (Mazur, 1976).

Each participant in the interaction is assigned their own reactivity. If person Y's reactivity is less than that of person X, there is a chance that even in a challenging interaction, negative convergent feedback will occur, resulting in the extinguishing of the initial emotional potential ( $V_p$ ). Conversely, if person Y's reactivity is greater, the feedback may become divergent, leading to synergy, enhancement, and imbalance. This is why it is so important how the person endowed with projective identification reacts. Negative convergent and divergent feedback are illustrated in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Negative convergent and divergent feedback

In convergent feedback, reactions from both parties are "extinguished," while in divergent feedback, reactions are amplified, which can lead to conflict escalation. This can be particularly relevant in the relationships between teachers and students. A teacher experiencing aggressive behavior from a student who is transferring their emotions must remain calm and act as a "container" for the student's emotions, while also avoiding professional burnout (Grzesiuk, 2005). When a teacher calms a shouting student, they may experience aggression and frustration that are not their own emotions. Thus, it is crucial for teachers to handle emotional burdens effectively, maintaining mental balance.

If a teacher responds according to the emotions conveyed by the student, the feedback can become divergent, leading to escalating tensions. Conversely, a teacher who controls their reactions and prevents the escalation of emotions can break this cycle, creating a more stable and harmonious school environment. This balance is essential to ensure a safe and conducive learning environment.

At home, where relationships between parents and children can also be influenced by projective identification, feedback can lead to tensions or closeness. A parent, burdened by projective identification from their child, may feel the pressure of being responsible for regulating the child's emotions. In such cases, it is important for the parent to maintain emotional distance and not react impulsively, which could lead to escalated tensions at home. Maintaining a calm approach and understanding that the child may be conveying emotions not

directly related to actual events is key to handling feedback in the context of family relationships.

## **Projective Identification and Pedagogy: Impact on Teachers and Students**

Understanding projective identification is crucial in pedagogy, affecting how teachers approach students and the dynamics in the classroom. This phenomenon enables teachers to better interpret often irrational student behaviors resulting from unconscious emotional communication. Recognizing these signals can lead to more empathetic and effective communication.

The unconscious transfer of students' emotions onto teachers can cause frustration or professional burnout. Awareness of this mechanism allows for better differentiation and management of one's own emotions, which is key to avoiding burnout.

Projective identification also affects classroom interactions, potentially escalating tensions or provoking conflicts. Teachers who understand this process are better equipped to manage the classroom, fostering a positive educational atmosphere.

Hargreaves (2001) described the *emotional geographies of teaching* as patterns of emotional closeness and distance that shape relationships between teachers, students, and parents. These emotional geographies emphasize the importance of regulating proximity in educational interactions — maintaining enough emotional closeness to understand and support students, while preserving sufficient distance to think clearly and act effectively. In psychoanalytic terms, such regulation often requires the teacher to temporarily contain the child's difficult emotions within themselves, functioning as a “container” that helps the student to gradually learn emotional self-regulation. This process corresponds to the dynamics of projective identification described in the present paper, where emotional containment and transformation are central to the development of healthy educational relationships.

Recent research highlights that teachers' emotional awareness plays a crucial role in maintaining a positive learning environment (Frenzel, Daniels, & Burić, 2021; Lee, Pekrun, Taxer, Schutz, Vogl, & Xie, 2016).

The awareness of this mechanism enables educators to consciously build emotionally safe and developmentally supportive learning environments, which constitutes a crucial competence in contemporary pedagogy.

## Summary and Conclusions

From the described mechanism of projective identification, several implications for practice emerge. It is essential, primarily at a theoretical level, to realize that in the case of projective identification, the other person's "ego" serves a regulatory function not only in relation to their own personal experiences but also—and crucially—for a while, in regulating the feelings and experiences of another person. As shown, not only psychotherapists but also teachers, educators, and all individuals involved in the educational process are susceptible to projective identification, which may originate from their charges. Studies show that even elderly people may use this mechanism to communicate with their caregivers, especially when they struggle with difficult feelings related to illness or fear of death (Terry, 2008).

Projective identification is associated with the suffering of the person undergoing the process—not only the individual who projects but also the one who must process this projection and who experiences it. Thus, the service that educators perform in relation to children often also involves their own pain, as projective identification is a particularly challenging phenomenon to endure. Psychotherapists collaborate with supervisors who assist them during such times. Educators, parents, and teachers must also be aware that they too experience this mechanism.

Collaboration with other educators, psychologists, and trained psychotherapists, who can assist in processing such phenomena, is undoubtedly crucial in the process of working through projective identification. However, having knowledge about what happens during this phenomenon and how one can defend against projective identification is also vitally important.

In any work where one of the interaction partners has a weaker ego function—such as working with youth and children—projective identification is a phenomenon that cannot be absent. It is simply impossible. The golden mean then involves the following steps: a) separating oneself from those feelings, sticking to one's own feelings; b) patience in working with the charge; c) discussing the child's experiences with them. This is crucial in processing projective identification so as to assist the charge and also to prevent the caregiver from burning out professionally, ensuring that no harm comes to the educator or caregiver. Especially vulnerable to this phenomenon are caregivers who work in children's homes or with children from difficult environments, who have many experiences they themselves cannot cope with.

Knowledge of this phenomenon, how it operates, and how a teacher should behave is a significant aid. It should, therefore, be imparted to educators and caregivers. Just as psychotherapists are trained, so too should people working with children be familiar with the

phenomenon of projective identification, to be able to work with it effectively. It is important to remember that the way a caregiver manages a child's feelings significantly affects the reduction of tension in the charge and serves a modeling function, showing them a "safe world" where even in the face of very bad feelings and experiences, maintaining integrity is possible.

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