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**“SCHOOL PERSONALITY” – A MODEL FOR SYSTEMIC  
EVALUATION AND INTERVENTION**

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***Abstract***

|Within the school setting, the core task of the educational psychologist is systemic work. Yet, despite the centrality of this function, many educational psychologists find it difficult. In this article, I propose to look at the school as a system with its own personality. I hope to show how the use of personality theories and psychological tests, designed to assess personality, can serve as a basis for evaluation and systemic intervention. Freud's structural model is proposed as a framework to analyze the different parts of the personality. The “Draw a Person” test and guiding questions for story-writing (similar to the Thematic Apperception Test) are offered as tools for assessment and systemic intervention. This tool is appropriate for (1) educational systems (involving the full teaching staff or the administration only); (2) courses for educational psychology interns on systemic work; and (3) working groups of educational psychologists in Educational Psychology settings. The School Personality Model was found to be an effective tool for educational psychologists in systemic conceptualization and intervention. The model was shown to be particularly successful in schools in which the principal was an active participant in the planning and implementation of the intervention. |

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## 1. Introduction

One of the central functions of the educational psychologist is systemic evaluation and systemic intervention. While this task distinguishes the role of the educational psychologist from that of the clinical and developmental psychologist, it is also a task that educational psychologists find difficult. The highly complex nature of the school system - comprised of teachers, students, parents, administrators and assistants – partially accounts for this experience. Additionally, systemic work is informed by a wide range of theories: sociological, organizational, group dynamics and more. Such a multiplicity of perspectives can produce both conceptual and practical confusion.

The psychoanalytic literature that deals with organizations suggests considering the system as a whole, with unconscious parts, defenses and symptoms. For example, in "Organization on the Couch," M.F.R. Kets de Vries (2003) details the unconscious processes that operate in various types of organizations. The classic study of a nursing service within a general hospital, authored by L. Menzie (1960, 1970) lays out anxieties and organizational defenses found among individuals. D. Armstrong (1977), for his part, discusses "the organization in the mind". Building on Winnicott's concept of transitional space, A. Ambrose (2001) describes transitional thinking among organizations in processes of change. Finally, Gökhan Özkoç Aziz and Çalışkan Nurgül (2015) investigated the impact of envy on the organizational climate among employees.

The above-noted studies relate to the system as a whole and employ different personality theories to understand the processes that occur in it. I propose that we view the school system through such a conceptual prism. Thus, we can conceptualize the conscious parts of the school system, its functioning, its self-image and its sense of cohesiveness. Like the individual, the school can be approached as a body that suffers from anxieties and traumas, and as a unit that displays symptoms and defenses. School symptoms may present as tasks that are not carried out, behavioral problems, problematic relationships among staff, exhaustion, and staff or student absence. Not infrequently, such difficulties are attributed to overly strict parents, challenging students, ineffective classrooms, inadequate teachers or overbearing principals. While these factors may indeed play a role, sometimes a strict parent is symptomatic of an inflexible system, a challenging student is symptomatic of a chaotic classroom, a problematic teacher is symptomatic of staff insecurity, and an overbearing principal is symptomatic of a sense of threat from within or from without. In other words, when the problem is conceptualized an individual issue alone, the larger picture can be missed. In practical, school-oriented terms, once a troubled child has been expelled, for example, another one will surely take his/her place.

Moreover, when the school is conceptualized as whole, we are able to evaluate it diagnostically.

As mentioned above, systemic thinking is rather multifaceted. Using Freud's structural model as a framework for school observation, evaluation and intervention might serve to simplify complex matters.

In his seminal work "The Ego and the Id" (1923, 1961), Freud proposed the structural model, which divides the "psychic device" into three parts: id, ego, and super ego. The id is the nucleus from which the ego and the super ego are formed. It is the unconscious part that includes the instincts and the libido. The ego "is the part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world...Moreover, the ego seems to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reins

unrestrictedly in the id. For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions"(p. 10).The ego has unconscious parts (the defenses) and conscious parts. The super ego, or ego ideal, as Freud called it, "has the most abundant links with phylogenetic acquisition of each individual – his archaic heritage. What has belonged to the lowest part of the mental life of each of us is changed , through the formation of the ideal, unto what is highest in the human mind by our scale of values....the role of father is carried on by teachers and others in authority` their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal..." (p. 18). The super ego has also conscious parts and unconscious parts.

### 1.1. The Super Ego of the School –Its Ideology, Values and Vision

Regarding the “personality” of a school, we may say that the school’s super-ego encompasses its ideology, vision, values, and cultural norms - what is right and what is wrong. As the school system is comprised of individuals and sub-groups (principals, teachers, students, parents, etc.) and is nurtured from within the community in which it is located, its conscious and unconscious ideologies and values are varied and are not always internally compatible.

Fundamental to an examination of the school personality is assessing whether or not it has a coherent super-ego. One can have the sense that a school vision is hanging on the wall in the principal's office but is absent in the corridors of the school.

The nature of the school's super-ego is reflected in the quality of school discourse: Do core values arise in staff discussions, and is there an awareness of gaps and conflicts (which always exist)? The super-ego is reflected as well in the tasks and structures of the school. For example, a school whose main value is educational excellence will need robust organizational structures around teaching subjects (active didactic teams). A school whose leading value is inclusion of challenged students will need an active therapeutic team.

Alongside schools where the concept of values is vague, we can observe schools with an **inflated super-ego**. This type of school has grandiose values but finds it difficult to accomplish basic tasks. Such situation, which can stem from crisis and a desire to impress various external actors, may produce friction within a team that feels overloaded with large projects at the same time that it feels that it cannot fulfill its basic tasks.

By contrast, a school may present with a **rigid super ego**; that is, with strict moral standards that leave little room for flexibility and expression of personal needs. Such a framework can arouse tacit and explicit opposition among staff and students, who feel that their needs are not being taken into account. Schools with rigid super egos fear change and may use a moral stand to forestall criticism that threatens its structure.

Alternatively, a school may have been founded on the basis of a certain ideology that was appropriate for the population it served, but with changes occurring in the school population, gaps may have developed between earlier values and those held by the new population. Too, there may be gaps in the values held among the school subgroups: teachers, for example, may wish to advance selectivity in acceptance of students, while the administration may strive to achieve broader inclusion with respect to students.

In their book "Managing by Values," S. Dolan, S. Garcia and B. Richley categorize values into three sets, namely: ethical and moral values (e.g., justice, equality and integrity), economic values (e.g., security, power, and excellence), and emotional values (e.g., satisfaction, pleasure and excitement). Their categorization is interesting because it parallels the three parts of the personality, meaning that values should contain these three elements. In their view, the more cohesive and harmonious the values held by the management and employees of an organization, the stronger and more efficient the organization will be. Borrowing their notion for our inquiry concerning the super-ego of the school, it seems that the strength of a school's super-ego depends on the degree of balance that exists between the three groups of values that it maintains.

In sum, a system whose value dimension is: 1) evident on a daily basis; 2) balanced (not inflated and not constricted) as well as compatible with the population which it serves and to which it belongs; and 3) sensitive and alert to internal value gaps, has an increased likelihood of functioning well and displaying resilience in the face of crises.

### **1.2. The Ego of the School – Its functioning in reality**

The ego is the part of the personality which operates in reality. It is responsible for mediating between the demands of the super-ego, id and external reality.

### **1.3. Primary tasks and organizational structures**

With respect to the ego of the school, we might say that this is the part that is supposed to implement the school ideology, vision and values. Hence, it includes the primary tasks that derive from the school vision as well as the organizational structures that are designed to fulfill it. For example, in Israel, schools that serve a religious population are headed by a rabbi. Schools that aspire to religious and cultural co-existence are jointly run by representatives of each of the different cultures. Anthroposophical schools are managed by administrative team members in rotation.

In schools that are in crisis or decline, we often see an absence of structures suited to their tasks or non-functioning structures (e.g., meetings that do not take place or participants' sense of time wasted), and a lack of precision with regard to the definition of structures and roles, generating tension among subsystems. An examination of existing structures and their functions provides information about overt and covert dynamics within the school.

### **1.4. Human and economic resources**

The challenges faced by private schools, which select their students and serve a strong socio-economic population, differ from those facing public schools.

### **1.5. School self-image**

Kohut (1971) and Winnicott (1960) pioneered work on the Self, emphasizing the subjective experience of the Self which develops in the encounter with the Other and the environment. Like the individual, the system is also able to function better and cope with pressures and crises, from within and from without, when its sense of self-esteem is consolidated, cohesive, and stable. Schools' self-image is also strongly influenced by its own history.

### **1.6. Flexibility, creativity and authenticity**

Winnicott (1960, 1970) points to flexibility, creativity and authenticity as signs of mental health crucial to self-development. The many tasks and pressures faced by today's schools call for flexibility and creativity in problem-solving and crisis management. And even more than that, they are required for development and growth.

### **1.7. The Defenses**

As Menzies (1960, 1970) has demonstrated, the system also operates defenses against anxieties. In schools, for example, we observe denial when a school that in the past ranked high in academic performance still aspires to academic excellence, despite drastic changes in demographics. Such a school continues along its path without adapting its primary tasks and organizational structures to reality. The inability to recognize change and adapt to it leads to mismatch between school offerings and student needs and can lay the groundwork for a crisis. When a system has trouble acknowledging that some of its difficulties derive from the manner in which it conducts itself, blaming instead external factors, such as parents, the Ministry of Education, or the municipality, we are witnessing projection in action. Within the school, one professional may project blame onto another. An example of projective identification would be when the teacher of a special education class that is being rejected by the administration and staff is absent from the teacher's room, taking the role and place of the rejected class at school. These are only handful of the many defenses that can operate in the school system.

### **1.8. The School's Id – History, drives and unconscious parts**

The id is the unconscious part of a personality that drives the behavior of the individual, the group, and the community. There is a large body of literature on the unconscious aspects of organizational life (see, e.g., W. Halton, 2004; M.F.R. Kets de Vries, 1991). Freud referred to the id as containing "all that is inherited", all that exists at the time of birth and is fixed within the constitution (1961, p. 18). In reference to the school's id, it is possible to refer to "everything that is inherited" not only as the instincts and inherited DNA, but also the "inherited" history of the school and its existing patterns, some of which is known and some of which is unknown and unconscious. Thus, for example, a school whose history is saturated with administrative dismissals may have developed patterns of suspicion and distrust. In his

own work, Freud placed the impulses in the id. Relatedly, sexuality and aggression are central issues for educational systems. The way these drives manifest themselves is depends upon the ability of the school's ego and super-ego to deal with them. For example, we are likely to find more behavioral problems in schools in which organizational structures are blurred, without clear boundaries (poor ego) and values (weak super ego). These features tend to convey contradictory messages.

As noted above, individual behavior can point to an unconscious systemic problem. For example, children with behavioral problems, who may have a history of parental absence, will become a critical issue in a system that has trouble with containment and which lacks clear boundaries. Vandalism in school can be an expression of protest and anger, when students sense that they are not seen by the system. Eating disorders can be a symptom of a system that aspires to perfection, and an environment that emphasizes external appearance.

W.A. Bion did ground-breaking work in psychoanalytically oriented group research. With respect to unconscious processes in groups, he "distinguished two main tendencies in the life of a group: the tendencies towards work on the primary task or *work-group mentality*, and a second, often unconscious, tendency to avoid work on the primary task, which he termed the *basic assumption mentality*. These opposing tendencies can be thought of as the wish to face and work with reality, and the wish to evade it when it is painful or causes psychological conflict within or between group members" (S. Barrett, et al., p. 316). Along these lines, we might observe a school administrative team that is unable to advance the issues for which it is convened and operates on the basis of basic assumptions. Examination of the dynamics can lead to jealousy, a sense of mistrust, and difficulty in carrying out tasks, with the group retreating more and more to an anti-mission defensive function. Such phenomena emerge in schools that are under existential threat of closure, in growing schools where the corresponding organizational structures have yet to be established, or in schools that have been traumatized.

Moreover, the school system often reflects the dynamics of the population it serves. For example, special educational schools serving a population of young children with severe disabilities might work at a compulsive pace (with attendant staff burn-out) in order to avoid feelings of pain and loss. This kind of behavior can also be a clue as to unconscious denial on the part of parents, resulting in a neglect of the emotional aspects of caring for these children. Thus, it ought to be borne in mind that on a group level, processes that take place within a school mirror conscious and unconscious processes of the community and the larger society.

## 2. Method

If personality theories can afford us a better understanding of the school system, psychological tests may contribute to the assessment and evaluation of an educational system. To investigate this hypothesis, I administered the "Draw a Person" test and asked study participants to write a story based on guiding questions. I used the answers to learn about different parts of the school "personality" (see Appendix). In the second part of the session, I asked participants to place the character they had drawn in front of them and think about what the character wanted to tell them and what they would like to tell the character.

The three objectives of the study were: (1) to obtain an image of the school personality, its super-ego (values, vision, ideology), ego (reality functioning and prominent defenses) and id (unconscious parts); building on D. Armstrong's (1997) notion of the figure as a representation of the "institution in the mind" (1997), (2) to help participants jointly examine the different perceptions of the school each of them held; and (3) to clarify the relationship between participants and the system, and specifically the implications of this relationship for participants' functioning, on the one hand, and for the functioning of the system, on the other.

I implemented this test in two settings, namely, with educational psychology interns in the framework of a course, and with educational psychologists working on various psychological service teams. The aim was to examine the effectiveness of the model in systemic evaluation and intervention.

The second part of the session, in which participants were asked to articulate what the character would want to tell them and what they would want to say to the character, was designed to clarify the dynamics of participants' relationship with the system. When the study participants were educational psychology (interns and teams), the other participants were asked to share their associations, facilitating an understanding of the unconscious processes involved. When the participants were school staff and administrators, I aimed to examine the effectiveness of the tool in expanding their understanding of the ways in which they perceive the system and how these perceptions affect their personal conduct and the functioning of the system as a whole.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

The use of the "Draw a Person" test was found to be effective in working with psychologists (interns and teams), principals and educational staff, to facilitate systemic evaluation and systemic intervention.

The psychologists were enthusiastic about this model, perceiving it as a way to organize observations and to capture a broader and more complete picture of the system. Their colleagues' responses to their productions, which revealed hitherto hidden aspects of the drawings, often elicited surprise on their part. The discussions that ensued helped the psychologists to formulate appropriate interventions.

The study trial with principals and staff moved easily from systemic assessment to systemic intervention, promoting collaboration and shared thinking about the school's vision, values and tasks. These processes were marked by a sense of surprise on the part of the staff, as they discovered different aspects of the figures they themselves had drawn, as well as those drawn by colleagues. The accompanying stories clarified further aspects of the systemic personality. Importantly, the active involvement of both the principal and the psychologist were found to be key elements in the success of the intervention. Schools in which the principal did not participate in the process did not have a successful outcome, and may even have ended up worse off than before the study, as initial hopes for change were not materialized.

It should be noted that the use of the “Draw a Person” test may prove overly revealing for presentation with principal and staff together. Thus, it is suggested that the practitioner first present the tool in the smaller framework of the administrative team.

While the effectiveness of the School Personality Model for evaluation and systemic intervention was affirmed in discussions, no follow-up was done in relation to these anecdotal findings. Further research, then, is needed to clarify this crucial point.

In a striking finding, the drawings that have been collected and analyzed thus far have yielded recurring motifs. Crowns or medal displays, for instance, were found in schools that are preoccupied with their sense of self-worth. Split figures, in which two different or contrasting parts stand out, were common in schools where there were problems amongst the staff relationships. Motifs of flooding (e.g., rain, hurricanes, and puddles) showed up in schools that are in crisis. Abundance of body, color, and power were prevalent in schools with a sense of ability. Multi-handed figures appeared in systems that were overloaded and marionette figures were drawn in schools where there is a sense of helplessness and being controlled from the outside. Heart images predominated in systems characterized by a sense of warmth and inclusion.

Further research is needed to determine to what extent the motifs that appear in the team drawings correlate with other measures of school functioning. It would also be interesting to examine if and how the motifs that arise in the drawings are correlated to the personalities of the actors and to the characteristics of the school populations. Finally, the recurrence of images that appear to reflect precisely the dynamics of school functioning is a fascinating finding that warrants further study. These promising lines of inquiry await future scholarly attention. |

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