

ANNA MARIA PASSASEO  
*Editor*

CURRENT ISSUES  
IN MORAL MATTERS

A Call for Education



MESSINA  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

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*Editor*

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IN MORAL MATTERS**

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# NEW ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS IN THE SCHOOL PROCESS ANALYSIS AND USEFUL SUGGESTIONS

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. The case of the teacher hit by pellets fired from an air gun. – 2.1. Description of the situation. – 2.2. Declared and implemented actions. – 3. Analysis of the situation. – 3.1. Offensive behavior by students. – 3.2. In-depth examination of offensive and abusive behaviors. – 4. Options for intervention. – 4.1. Grasping the limits of common strategies. – 4.2. Understand and respect the defensive function of problem behaviors. – 4.3. Addressing the belief of being worthless and intrinsically flawed.

## *1. Introduction*

In their work, it is common for teachers to encounter complexities that, besides being annoying, risk undermining the classroom group climate and sabotaging pedagogical-didactic activities. A growing challenge in this regard is certain behaviors of students who, in the presence of their peers, provoke, offend, and even mistreat educators.<sup>1</sup>

The content of this paper is primarily aimed at teachers who, as previously indicated, may encounter difficulties related to the behavior of students who provoke and mistreat them in the presence of their peers. With this in mind, to make the discussion as concrete as possible, we will describe a recent case in which a teacher was subjected to insults and mistreatment. Subsequently, valuable explanations will be offered to understand the unacceptable conduct and to devise appropriate interventions to address it.

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<sup>1</sup> A. G. ALVES et. al., *Dimensions of Student Violence Against the Teacher*, in «Revista Ciência and Saúde Coletiva», XXVIII, 3, 2022, pp. 1027–1038.

## *2. The case of the teacher hit by pellets fired from an air gun*

Among the significant incidents where an educator is mistreated and offended, we can recall the event that occurred last year in a first-year class of a secondary school in Rovigo. As is known, a student shoots some rubber pellets at the science teacher using an air gun during the lesson. Meanwhile, some classmates laugh, and another records the incident with a cell phone to promptly share it on social media.

### *2.1. Description of the situation*

In the video available on YouTube,<sup>2</sup> the teacher is seen sitting behind her desk with her legs crossed. As she tries to teach, she alternates her gaze between the computer screen and the students in front of her, some of whom are engaged in conversations, contributing to a constant background chatter.

While lifting the textbook and addressing the students, the teacher says, “See the figure on page ten, this one here!”. She then turns her face back to the display, holding the mouse in her right hand, and for about ten seconds, she does and says nothing. Meanwhile, a small rubber pellet shot from an air gun hits her on the forehead. Instinctively, the teacher touches the impacted area with her left hand and exclaims: “Oh no! I won't forgive this! It really hurts!”

Then, she stands up, leaves her desk, and, while continuing to hold her forehead, asks: “Who threw the pellet right at my head?”

As the background murmur continues, some students smirk while others, one after the other, ask:

- Student 1: “What?”
- Student 2: “What happened, Prof.?”
- Student 3: “What happened, Prof.?”

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<sup>2</sup> The referenced footage can be found on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APGKkalmzhw>

- Student 4: “What happened, Prof.?”
- Student 5: “What happened?”

The teacher then returns to her seat and begins writing a note in the register. She resumes, “Who threw this thing at me? It really hurt! Who was it? (raising her voice). Who among you threw it? It hit right here!”.

While some students try to respond, saying, “If it came from over there... Prof...!”, another student shoots her again, and a third student remarks, “Prof., again?!”. Many students burst into laughter. Annoyed, the teacher asks: “Who finds it amusing to throw pellets at me?”.

This unpleasant and regrettable situation encompasses elements and behavioral patterns worth identifying and analyzing.

## *2.2. Declared and implemented actions*

According to Ansa,<sup>3</sup> the students who played a role in the incident mentioned in the previous paragraph should have been suspended.<sup>4</sup> Particularly, the student who fired the shot and the one who recorded the scene with a cell phone should have been punished with a five-day suspension. The student who brought the gun, allowed his peer to use it, and then hid it should have been removed from school for two days. The school principal, presumably to downplay the incident, noted that the events took place in a first-year class and involved students who had recently come from middle school and who, moreover, do not come from disadvantaged families. She added that these are normal kids who planned and participated in the teacher's mistreatment somewhat as if it were a "game" without realizing the seriousness inherent in the act

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<sup>3</sup> See, in this regard [https://www.ansa.it/veneto/notizie/2022/10/26/prof-colpita-con-pistola-ad-aria-compressa-alunni-sospesi\\_21ae4a51-20f0-4bf4-8bb2-2e62fec61b81.html](https://www.ansa.it/veneto/notizie/2022/10/26/prof-colpita-con-pistola-ad-aria-compressa-alunni-sospesi_21ae4a51-20f0-4bf4-8bb2-2e62fec61b81.html)

<sup>4</sup> In fact, following an appeal by a parent, the measure that decreed the suspension was not executed, and the students were not removed from the school. For more details, see in this regard, <https://www.tecnicaldellascuola.it/prof-colpita-con-pistola-ad-aria-compressa-genitore-fa-ricorso-e-fa-annullare-la-sospensione-per-gli-studenti-responsabili>.



of ridiculing a public official.<sup>5</sup> The principal also announced that she had deemed it appropriate to inform the police chief about the incident.

The affected teacher, who initially did not submit medical reports or file formal complaints after realizing that the school management had not issued the disciplinary measures she hoped for, resorted to legal action and filed a complaint against those responsible for the reprehensible deeds.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the interventions announced and carried out regarding the students can be summarized as follows: inquiries to ascertain the facts, namely to identify the perpetrators of the deplorable behaviors and to determine their specific responsibilities; note in the register; reprimand; suspension and expulsion from school; notification to the police chief of the incident; legal complaint by the offended teacher.

By notifying or implementing measures of the indicated type, the hope is that the students will reconsider their actions and not repeat similar behaviors in the future. Indeed, although the mentioned interventions may be appropriate, suitable, and sometimes even obligatory, they present significant limitations that will be discussed in detail in the paragraph dedicated to the search for intervention options.

In any case, it is important to emphasize from the outset that the listed strategies: a) tend to focus on observable behaviors; b) are based on a fundamentally moralistic logic; c) appeal to repentance and voluntary self-control, hoping that this will be enough to bring about change.<sup>7</sup>

### *3. Analysis of the Situation*

Reflecting on the reported situation, fundamental aspects emerge that merit analysis and deeper exploration. The goal of the forthcoming proposals is not to criticize or

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. G. MARI, *Competenza educativa e servizi alla persona*, Roma, Edizioni Studium, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> See, in this regard the link <https://www.fanpage.it/attualita/prof-colpita-con-fucile-ad-aria-compressa-promossi-i-due-studenti-valditara-diseducativo/#:~:text=L%27insegnante%2C%20che%20durante%20una,a%20gennaio%20a%20prezentare%20denuncia.>

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. G. AMENTA, *Gestire il disagio a scuola*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2020.

demonize anyone. “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.” The purpose is to explore the specific dynamics involved and devise intervention options that could be used to manage similar cases.

### 3.1. *Offensive Behavior by Students*

In the described situation, some students demean, ridicule, and mistreat the teacher, while some of them record the incident on a cellphone to promptly post it on social media. Many of them laugh, participate, or get actively involved. Though less evident in the video, others do little or nothing, perhaps because they do not approve of their classmates' offensive actions or would like to dissociate themselves or defend their teacher.

Given this context, it is essential first to consider that the age group of the involved students is the adolescent phase,<sup>8</sup> a period during which the sense of anonymity in some of them can grow excessively, becoming spasmodic and unbearable.<sup>9</sup> The emotions of the involved students vary, at least in some of them, from superficial amusement to indifference. Of course, it is unclear whether they feel any guilt for their actions, i.e., for mocking, hurting, and mistreating a teacher. Furthermore, the school principal highlights the judgment of immaturity, coupled with a perception of normality. She states that these students have recently arrived from lower secondary school and are not from disadvantaged or troubled families.

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. LANCINI, *L'età tradita: Oltre i luoghi comuni sugli adolescenti*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2021; P. PIERRE, *Adolescenti da brivido: problemi, devianze e incubi dei giovani d'oggi*, Roma, Armando, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. D. BIONDO, *Gruppo evolutivo e branco: Strumenti e tecniche per la prevenzione e la cura*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2020; D. CHEN et al., *A Developmental Perspective on Peer Rejection, Deviant Peer Affiliation, and Conduct Problems Among Youth*, in «Child Psychiatry and Human Development», LVI, 6, 2015, pp. 823-838.

### 3.2. *In-Depth Examination of Offensive and Abusive Behaviors*

To understand offensive and abusive actions like those mentioned, it is crucial to recognize that they are carried out in the presence of others, specifically in front of classmates.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, considering some studies on the collective management of reputation,<sup>11</sup> it is not difficult to see that the group does not dictate reprehensible behavior, neither in the case at hand nor in similar ones. It is naive to assume that students - as is often imagined - "get carried away by their peers," as if they were caught in a torrential river; thus, the situation would determine their improper actions. On the contrary, the group acts as an audience. It constitutes the necessary and qualified public to whom the provocative and humiliating conduct is presented as an act of heroism.

To understand this, consider that in situations of conflict between young people and authority and significant failures, especially in the educational field, the need for reputation can become crucial, frantic, and pressing.<sup>12</sup> More precisely, when adolescents or young people believe they are worth very little or are inherently flawed, the need to compensate for a sense of inadequacy by constructing some form of reputation becomes acute. Especially when they believe they lack the qualities and resources necessary for a positive reputation, it is almost automatic to aim at building a negative one, which ensures the same result: satisfying the need to feel like someone, namely essential and worthy of respect and dignity. The paradox, of course, is creating an acceptable reputation through unacceptable actions, trusting peers will consider them heroic.

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. G. AMENTA, *Gestire il disagio a scuola*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> N. EMLER, S. REICHER, *Adolescence and Delinquency: The Collective Management of Reputation*, Cambridge, Blackwell Publishing, 1995; A. CARROLL et al., *Delinquency and Reputational Orientations of Adolescent At-Risk and Not-At-Risk Males and Females*, in «Educational Psychology», XXVIII, 7, 2008, pp. 777-793.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. F. MONTUSCHI, A. PALMONARI, *Nuovi adolescenti. Dalla conoscenza all'incontro*, Roma, Edizioni Dehoniane, 2006.

The deplorable and aberrant behaviors considered are merely a means to attest to oneself and others their worth.<sup>13</sup> A way to demonstrate possession of those qualities deemed necessary to be admired, accepted, considered,<sup>14</sup> or to integrate into reference groups, to avoid the risk of being ostracized and excluded, rejected and marginalized.<sup>15</sup>

It is essential to understand that the more disproportionate and deep-rooted the belief of being profoundly and intrinsically flawed, the more painful and urgent the need to be accepted. The more spectacular must be the feat to redeem oneself and finally feel qualified to be welcomed, admired, and considered worthy of respect and esteem.

Finally, considering the function of the indicated deplorable actions, it becomes understandable that intensifying sanctions risks producing paradoxical outcomes and increasing the severity of punishments risks making the trophy to be won through deplorable or deviant actions more attractive and appealing. Consequently, the danger is that the value of the trophy increases instead of decreases. Its conquest will require even more courage, strength, and audacity. Therefore, the provocative act may be perceived as even more valid to attest and document the possession of those widely coveted properties to feel less flawed.<sup>16</sup>

In this perspective, ultimately, can be found usable explanations for the trivial, mild, and incomprehensible motivations declared by the protagonists when asked why they committed specific offensive, deviant, and deplorable actions: "for fun," "to see what it feels like," "to entertain ourselves." In reality, it is worth reiterating once again that these behaviors are carried out to free oneself from emptiness and uselessness, to compensate for the despair linked to the fear of being alone, excluded, and ostracized. These behaviors performed to gain prestige and credit are considered a *sine qua non* condition for being accepted and welcomed into reference groups.

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<sup>13</sup> N. EMLER, S. REICHER, *Adolescence and Delinquency*, cit.; L. LÓPEZ ROMERO, E. ROMERO, *Reputation Management of Adolescents in Relation to Antisocial Behavior*, in «The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development», LCXXII, 4, 2011, pp. 440-446.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. F. MONTUSCHI, A. PALMONARI, *Nuovi adolescenti*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> A.A. SHILLING, C.M. BROWN, *Goal-Driven Resource Redistribution: An Adaptive Response to Social Exclusion*, in «Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences», X, 3, 2016, pp. 149-167.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. F. MONTUSCHI, A. PALMONARI, *Nuovi adolescenti*, cit.

#### *4. Options for Intervention*

As variously observed in the preceding pages, about the situation under examination, the actions undertaken or announced include: a) questions aimed at establishing the facts, identifying the authors of the deplorable behaviors, and determining their specific responsibilities; b) reprimand of the involved students; c) suspension or removal from the school of the perpetrators of the improper behaviors; d) notification to the police chief of the events for further investigations or possible actions; e) filing of a complaint by the offended teacher, to pursue any legal responsibilities.

##### *4.1. Grasping the Limits of Common Strategies*

By notifying or adopting measures of the type indicated, the hope is that the students reflect on their improper behaviors, repent for having carried them out, and avoid repeating them in the future. It is essential to recognize that the interventions mentioned, although appropriate and necessary in many cases, have significant limitations that significantly reduce their effectiveness. As already observed, they tend to focus on evident behaviors, are based on an essentially moralistic logic, and appeal to repentance and voluntary self-control to promote change.<sup>17</sup>

To understand the indicated limits, it can be helpful to imagine, for a moment, exporting and applying the logic underlying the measures listed in the medical field and verifying the consequences that might arise from it. In particular, when accompanying a child with a fever of 40 degrees Celsius to the doctor, a reasonable parent usually expects the professional to make a good diagnosis and after prescribing some appropriate therapy. Rarely would the parent above be satisfied if the expert limited themselves to indicating medications to reduce the temperature or eliminate the fever without understanding what it signals. At a minimum, such a parent would

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<sup>17</sup> Cfr. G. AMENTA, *Gestire il disagio a scuola*, cit.

express surprise if, appealing to voluntary self-control, the doctor admonished the child and invited him to get over the fever. However, when reasoning about problem behaviors and unacceptable behaviors, it is sometimes considered reasonable to invite students to modify or eliminate them, ignoring what they signal. It even assumes that symptoms and underlying problems are the same thing and, consequently, by modifying or eliminating the first, one deludes oneself into solving the issues at the root. Worse still, there is a tendency to demand changes that the students cannot realize, if only because what from an external perspective are problem behaviors, in reality, also constitute fundamental defensive strategies to protect themselves.

#### *4.2. Understand and Respect the Defensive Function of Problem Behaviors*

From what has been observed in the concluding part of the previous paragraph, it follows that the variously considered behaviors - legitimately judged reprehensible and even deviant - can be modified and easily eliminated when they are no longer needed or when others are constructed that can replace and substitute them. Otherwise, it is like trying to take away a lifebuoy from someone who is using it to avoid sinking: it is unlikely that they will give it up. In other words, it is improbable that an individual will abandon a defense, if not temporarily before having devised another.

For instance, the boy who has decided not to study in rebellion against his parents who imposed a school he dislikes can be helped to assert himself, that is, to directly and assertively declare his school preferences and ask his parents to respect them. For example, he could tell his parents that the school they chose for him is distasteful and that, despite trying and retrying, he cannot come to like it and commit to studying. He might add that he would appreciate help changing schools to prevent rejection. If all this is not possible, the boy could be helped to acknowledge the situation, that is, to consider the school experience resulting from his parents' imposition as a kind of parenthesis, as a segment of a path that, once overcome, will allow him to continue on

his journey towards realizing his dreams and his self-project of the life. He can also understand that liking the school he dislikes and studying are different things; that is, deciding not to study as a form of rebellion represents only a way to cause further harm to himself and to adjust accordingly.

#### 4.3. Addressing the Belief of Being Worthless and Intrinsicly Flawed

When the focus is on the overt behaviors of students, it becomes difficult to grasp what underlies them. Offensive and abusive behaviors often indicate the presence of a need for reputation, which stems from an excessively painful self-concept that amplifies feelings of inadequacy, fragility, and vulnerability.<sup>18</sup>

As highlighted by many, one of the preferred defensive strategies to compensate for this feeling of inadequacy is: to try to appear better or superior to others;<sup>19</sup> to adopt the guise of being strong and tough; to celebrate integrity; to deny any form of tenderness, considering it inappropriate or a sign of weakness.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that the more individuals perceive themselves as fragile, vulnerable, inferior, and inadequate, the more likely they are to construct a facade of superiority, strength, toughness, and courage. The poorer the self-concept, consequently, the more abnormal and exaggerated the defensive strategies devised and adopted to gain a reputation will be.<sup>21</sup>

Given this, in managing complex situations of the kind mentioned, it is crucial to intervene in the negative beliefs the learners have about themselves to change them. This is, of course, a goal that requires long-term educational paths, considering that

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<sup>18</sup> Z. KRIZAN, O. JOHAR, *Narcissistic Rage Revisited*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», LVIII, 5, 2015, pp. 784-801.

<sup>19</sup> A. ADLER, *Inferiorità e compenso psichico. Un contributo alla medicina clinica*, Milano, Mimesis, 2003; H.L. ANSBACHER, *The Development of Adler's Concept of Social Interest: A Critical Study*, in «Journal of Individual Psychology», XXXIV, 2, 1978, pp. 118-152.

<sup>20</sup> W. GAYLIN, *Hatred: The Psychological Descent into Violence*, New York, Public Affairs, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> R.F. BAUMEISTER et. al., *Self-Esteem, Narcissism, and Aggression. Does Violence Result from Low Self-Esteem or from Threatened Egotism?*, in «Current Directions in Psychological Science», IX, 1, 2000, pp. 26-29.

any quick strategies may be helpful in dispelling anxiety but risk being illusory and producing redundant boomerang effects.

It is necessary to encourage the belief of being valuable regardless of conduct, results, or products that the learner can achieve. If we adopt the language of Transactional Analysis, it is essential to prioritize, from the early stages of the learner's development, the use of "unconditional strokes" or those aimed at being in addition to those aimed at doing. The word stroke, according to Berne,<sup>22</sup> primarily indicates various forms of intimate physical contact. Some caress the child, kiss them and give them a pat or a pinch. By extension, the word stroke can familiarly indicate any act that implies the recognition of the presence of another person.

As is well known, the mentioned reflections starting from the classical studies of Spitz<sup>23</sup> on maternal deprivation, which documented how, in environments poor in stimuli, orphaned children often died due to the atrophy of the Central Nervous System. On the contrary, those who were touched and even treated roughly and violently had a higher chance of survival. The referenced research demonstrates that attention and stimulation are fundamental for living.<sup>24</sup> They confirm that the so-called "negative strokes" are far preferable to their lack or their total deprivation.<sup>25</sup>

For convenience, examples of unconditional positive recognition are provided, that is, directed towards being marked by increasingly heavy weight that educators can adapt and recycle in educational relationships:

- "Hello!";
- "I am glad to see you!";
- "How nice that you are here today!";

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<sup>22</sup> E. BERNE, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello, The Psychology of Human Destiny*, New York, Grove Press, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> R.A. SPITZ, *The First Year of Life: A Psychoanalytic Study of Normal and Deviant Development of Object Relations*, New York, International Universities Press, Inc., 1965.

<sup>24</sup> J. BOWLBY, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1979.

<sup>25</sup> S. WOOLLAMS, M. BROWN, *Transactional Analysis. A Modern and Comprehensive Text of TA Theory and Practice*, Dexter, Huron Valley Institute, 1978.



- "I like working with you!";
- "You are unique";
- "I love you".

Coherently and appropriately integrated by non-verbal behavior (facial expressions, gestures, physical contact), such messages can be used to communicate to the learners that they are essential as a person, that is, insofar as they exist, and that they are far from "transparent," insignificant or useless.

Indeed, it is necessary for significant people, teachers, and parents, to demonstrate their belief in the learners by showing them dedication and commitment, performing their role and their work to the best of their ability. These are, in fact, attitudes capable of meta-communicating to the learner that they are important and worthy of value. In this sense, the educator needs to learn to cheer for the learners, following them in their growth and process of change.

Moreover, the frantic search for reputation, which indicates a lack of self-esteem, underlies the need to reconcile with oneself first and foremost. Those who laboriously try to fill their lack of self-esteem, hoping to gain recognition and acceptance from others, need to reconcile with themselves, permit themselves to be themselves and accept themselves. Hoping to be admired and recognized by others, in reality, is vain and illusory. It risks inducing dependence on others and their judgment, which, as seen in the case described at the beginning of this work, can result in offensive, abusive, destructive, and deviant behavior. Indeed, it is possible to free oneself from such dependence by allowing oneself to be oneself and by acknowledging, monitoring, and downscaling, in particular, certain parental dispositions and severe internal criticisms, which sometimes even become merciless.

Thirdly, to reduce the allure of deviant behaviors, it is essential to encourage learners to experience expressive forms of themselves that are authentic, free, and creative rather than demonstrative. Expressive and free behavior refers to the person's authenticity and genuineness. Adapted action, whether of a rebellious or conformist type, has others as its reference. In the first case, the horizon of reference for the

conduct, which values the person and brings the action back to its objective meaning, is acting to be. In the second, it is acting to obtain something. By promoting expressive and free action, educators can help learners rediscover their positive qualities and dust off their resources. This can become a powerful antidote against the ingrained sense of defectiveness that can result in the realization of striking, destructive, and deviant behaviors.<sup>26</sup>

What is proposed requires time, patience, and dedication. However, it can allow learners to emerge from certain abysses, that is, to develop healthy self-esteem and to overcome the frantic search for reputation by resorting to destructive behavior for themselves and others.

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<sup>26</sup> F. MONTUSCHI, *Fare ed essere, il prezzo della gratuità in educazione*, Assisi, Cittadella, 1997.