

Breaking Neoliberal Rules: Meeting the Other

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Abstract

Training tame workers, nurturing empty children and adolescents who need skills that are expendable *hic et nunc*. Schools are becoming large discount stores (McLaren, 2015) and young people, like ghosts in the corridors, are increasingly struggling with a latent disorientation, a pervasive sense of loneliness and resignation. Sartre's statement "L'enfer c'est les autres" (1944) seems to have been adopted as the leitmotif of the neoliberal system. The symptomatic landscape of fragility is dramatic, but there is a lack of greater concern for the stories of these young people, which are less and less listened to. In this sense, an exploratory study with a qualitative-quantitative methodology was carried out, during the school year 2022/2023 in some high schools in the provinces of Padua and Treviso (Italy). Among the core elements attributed to adolescent fragility, increasing relational difficulties (Barone, 2018), become the focus of our research. Starting from a critical emancipatory perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023), the data collected return many suffering Italian students (35% of the 'fragile' adolescents' state that they have never communicated their state of malaise to their classmates), but someone who retains a democratic soul: 33% of the participants state that they have often experienced support and solidarity from their classmates. A widespread sense of isolation and loss of self-identity raises the educational challenge of rediscovering the value of the other, of relationships, and of promoting a school that is a guardian of democratic values (Giroux, 2018), including an emotional development (Mortari, 2017). The choice is ours alone.

Keywords: Classmate Relations, Critical Pedagogy, Adolescents' Fragility, Loneliness, Relationships, Democratic Society

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Introduction

Talking about adolescence should lead us to talk about life, vital energy and future, but nowadays we only read and listen about death and destruction.

According to Peter McLaren, the spread of neoliberal ideology contributes to transform schools as large discount stores (2015), where both child, youths and adults try to collect competences and skills (Baldacci, 2019) to answer the law of the heart: be your own best businessman.

Even if recent scientific literature reports that adolescents are increasingly affected by various psychological disorders, i.e. depression, anxiety, eating disorders, violent and aggressive behaviours, different kind of addictions, etc. (Meherali, 2021; Pedrini, 2022; WHO, 2024), much less effort has been spent on studying how these discomforts are related to school life experiences and the influence they have on peer relationships. Trying to fill this lack, a study focused on the wellbeing in the classroom was carried out to find out the perceived level of disease and fragility experienced by these young people. Many researchers and professionals are deepening and studying this phenomenon, and some of them define it as an “existential disease” (Barone, 2009; Bruzzone, 2022), a hidden illness disguised as apparent wellness.

Starting from the previous studies and evidence, we try to understand how students feel in this atmosphere of competitiveness and solitude (Turkle, 2011), interpreting the mentioned symptoms of malaise as a way to communicate disease in this toxic contemporary “palliative and pain-free society”, as Han asserted (2021).

Research Design

Research Paradigm

The epistemological lens through which we would view the reality of the Italian school is a critical one, according to the critical emancipatory approach of Denzin and Lincoln (2023). In this sense, our research project would not only know the lived experience of Italian adolescent students but would also become a tool through which they could become aware of their condition by expressing their feelings and frustrations. Giving a voice to those who don't have one is one of the tasks of the emancipatory approach (Giroux, 2005, p. 205), and this is what we have done. To be able to speak, to have a voice, could mean for these young boys and girls that for the first time they could see in writing what they were feeling, which until that moment had only been an internal, often unacknowledged feeling. The concretisation of something that was previously vague or denied could lead them to reflect on their fragility, to recognise it, and perhaps to do something to change their perspective on themselves and others (Mayo, 2007, p. 23).

Aims

Considering the increasing number of adolescents diseases, our research group of the University of Padua, proposed and conducted an observational study focused on wellbeing in the classroom, involving some high schools (lyceums, technical and vocational schools) of two provinces of the West North of Italy- Padua and Treviso. Data were collected from September 2022 to October 2023 during the school year.

The principal objective was to ascertain the impact of the link between malaise and peer relationships, given the established correlation between the two factors in the existing literature. The main question was: How have relationships with peers been affected by the experience of illness.

Population

We enrol 157 students, from five different secondary schools. As this was a pilot study, we elected to employ a non-randomised sampling methodology choosing a convenience sample. Contact was made with several schools in the region via email. Of the aforementioned schools, a number of teachers expressed interest in participating in the research project. The most significant challenges encountered in the recruitment process pertained to technical and scientific institutions, coupled with the challenge of conveying to managers and teachers the critical urgency of this matter. A total of 157 boys and girls, aged between 14 and 20, participated in the study, with data collected from eight classes. The mean age of respondents was 17.2 years, with a greater proportion of females (57.3%) than males (40.1%) participating in the study. Furthermore, 2.5% of respondents indicated that they did not wish to provide a gender designation. The majority of respondents are Italian, with a minority of different nationality. The family composition is characterised by a significant proportion of adolescents residing with only one of their biological parents, due to circumstances such as divorce, separation or loss of the other parent.

Materials and Methods

In order to address the research question, an ad-hoc questionnaire was developed based on a review of existing validated questionnaires. This process yielded the formulation of a brief, semi-structured questionnaire comprising five questions. Two were closed questions and three were open-ended. The initial section was devoted to a biographical analysis, encompassing the respondents' names, surnames, provenance, family composition, and age. The subsequent section centred on the perception of personal wellbeing. The objective was to ascertain the level of wellness or illness perceived by the students. Furthermore, the aim was to gain insight into the potential impact of distress on the quality of student relationships with their peers. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms.

Approximately one to two weeks prior to the in-person administration of the questionnaire, the research team instructed teachers to collect completed forms (for both informed consent and for data processing). As the majority of students were minors, only those who had obtained the requisite parental consent were permitted to participate in the study.

The duration of our intervention for each class was one hour. During the initial stages, we presented the research findings, elucidated the content of the questionnaire, and collected the requisite signed forms. The remaining time was dedicated to the completion of the online questionnaires, shared to their smartphones through a link. The teachers were present throughout the duration of the research, together with the researcher. The remaining time allowed for further discussion with the pupils regarding the issues raised in the questionnaire.

The choice of questionnaire was influenced by the reluctance of educational institutions and teachers to invest their valuable time in the programme. Conversely, the teachers themselves played an indispensable role in establishing the prerequisites for the implementation of the

survey. In order to safeguard the voice of the adolescents, a number of open questions were incorporated, which were subsequently subjected to qualitative analysis.

Ethical Issues

Research involving minors on sensitive topics demands special consideration, particularly given the average age of the population is 17.2 years and a significant proportion of this age group constitutes minors. This prompted us to undertake a detailed ethical analysis of our research project.

The aforementioned forms were employed for the purposes of obtaining informed consent to the research and for data processing. The aforementioned forms were provided to the families of the minors and the 18 participants a week or two in advance of the session, allowing sufficient time for them to read and digest the information presented.

Results and Discussion

Given that the proposed questionnaire included both closed questions on a Likert scale and open questions, our analysis will be divided into two distinct parts: a quantitative data analysis and a qualitative analysis.

The quantitative data was analysed using Excel worksheets, while the qualitative data was analysed using the paper-and-pencil technique. The initial section of the inquiry sought to identify the nature of the malaise, the degree of internal cohesion within one's social group, and the quality of interpersonal relationships with one's peers in relation to one's state of malaise. The second part of the study permitted a freer and less guided clarification and expression of the subjects' states and emotions.

Quantitative Data

The initial observation was the considerable proportion of participants who reported experiencing some form of discomfort: 64.3%. This finding corroborates prior research on adolescent malaise in the context of contemporary consumerist society (Turkle, 2011; McLaren, 2015; Giroux, 2018; 2021; Pedrini, 2022).

The initial question of the questionnaire presented a list of various types of experienced discomfort, from which respondents could select the four most impactful. The four most frequently indicated were psychological and mental discomfort, episodes of violence, and specific learning disorders (SLD). Regarding gender differences, no discernible pattern emerges in responses, and psychological distress emerges as the most significant factor for both sexes.

Conversely, with regard to the perceived levels of internal cohesion, a notable discrepancy emerges between boys and girls. The previous literature about school belonging also corroborates the observation that girls tend to perceive lower levels of internal cohesion (Schnepf et al., 2023). Moreover, there appears to be an inverse correlation between cohesion and the impact of discomfort on relationships. As one variable increases, the other decreases. This finding lends support to our initial hypothesis concerning the pivotal role and 'therapeutic' function that an authentic relationship can assume, even in the context of one's own vulnerability and fatigue.

A key finding was the impact of SLD, which was identified as the most prevalent form of malaise, with an average score of 6.7. In contrast, the female population appears to be more significantly affected by mental disorders and exposure to violence, with an average of 6.7 points and a distance of more than 1 point on the scale measuring the perception of the level of internal cohesion.

Furthermore, an investigation was conducted into the most prevalent forms of malaise and the level of impact that the male students perceived in the cohesion of the class. Additionally, the diverse reactions exhibited by classmates when confronted with their own experiences of discomfort were examined. The options presented were as follows: solidarity, assistance if possible, indifference, teasing and offence.

Of particular concern is the high percentage of participants who reported experiencing indifference from their peers in response to their situation. Furthermore, a considerable proportion of respondents indicated that they had never disclosed their circumstances to their classmates. The partial explanation for this behaviour can also be found at the level of qualitative analysis, which may include a need for confidentiality, a desire to be invisible, and a reluctance to mix personal and school life.

Fortunately, only 3% of respondents stated that they had experienced insults and teasing. In addition to these, a significant percentage of respondents reported having experienced and continuing to experience supportive and positive relationships. Of these respondents, the majority were female.

Qualitative Data

While the qualitative analysis allowed us to consolidate the findings of the quantitative analysis, it also enabled us to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon under observation. This revealed that young people have a strong desire to be listened to and understood when they are experiencing emotional distress or malaise.

At first glance, it appears that there is a reluctance to share one's discomfort with classmates, with family, partners or best friends being the preferred choice. The decision to confide in a select few individuals, who are not part of the school environment, appears to be a common practice.

“I try to live with it and keep most things inside by talking about it *only with people close to me like my mum, dad, sister or a few friends* with whom I am very close.” (45M)

“My mates or people in general do not notice if I am sadder than usual or if I have something because *I tend not to show it to other people*, if I want to talk about it I talk to my *boyfriend*.” (16F)

“Only a close friend of mine knows.” (106F)

This desire to maintain a clear and distinct boundary between one's personal and academic lives is a recurring theme. This separation is, in fact, an illusion and is highly counterproductive, even with regard to the development of knowledge and skills. In order to

facilitate student empowerment, it is essential that classrooms become “democratic public spheres, sites of possibilities” (McLaren, 2015).

Some respondents denounce a certain degree of indifference and selfishness on the part of their peers, while others express a sense of sadness and loneliness.

“A *little bit sorry* because I was hoping for a more united class and instead *everyone thinks of themselves.*” (65F)

“*Bad* because I don't really feel that I have someone who cares about me, I *don't feel understood. I feel so lonely*, so much; although I always have people around.” (75F)

“I don't want my companions to know about my personal life, I *don't want to be vulnerable.*” (122F)

A minority point to their peers as being responsible for an increase in their state of anxiety.

“*Bad*, it's already difficult to cope with what's going on outside school and when I go into the classroom I sometimes *feel even worse* because of dirty looks and obvious signs of disdain.” (121F)

“Even some of them give me *extra anxiety.*” (60F)

“I *get twice as agitated* when they get agitated with me.” (49F)

A considerable number of respondents indicated that their experience of class life was characterised by a sense of normality and passivity, but fortunately, a significant proportion of respondents indicate positive experiences of relationships with their peers, including feelings of relational well-being and enjoyment.

“I feel wanted, it gives me the feeling that *I count for something in the class.*” (157F)

“I am *happy* because *I feel important to someone* and I know I can count on some of them.” (68F)

“The one time I opened up *I received a lot of support* because a lot of kids are having a hard time because of school.” (111M)

Conclusions

A widespread sense of isolation (Turkle, 2011) and loss of self-identity (Barone, 2018; Han, 2021) raises the educational challenge of rediscovering the value of the other, of relationships, of sharing personal and emotional states (Nussbaum, 2006; Mortari, 2017) with peers and of promoting a school that is a guardian of democratic values (McLaren, 2015; Giroux, 2018). A glimmer of hope emerges from this generation, which has endured significant challenges and fatigue: “I would like to trust some of my companions more” (153M).

As Heidegger suggests centuries ago Care is an essential mode of being, a part of the ontological dimension of the human being (1927). For this reason we could say that caring is

the essence of the human condition and that the promotion of loneliness is nothing more than a capitalist tactic to destroy the freedom and vitality of human beings. Since schools are one of the places where humanity should be cultivated, it is up to us to decide whether we should start watering, ploughing and fertilising the soil again or leave it to the mercy of pesticides.

We believe that the pedagogical/educational response to the current malaise of our young people is to be found in the recovery of an ancient and truly human practice ... of entering into authentic relationships, recognizing the face of the Other (Ricoeur, 1998). Nothing new or innovative.... Simply exercising our humanity, our vocation as men and women, as responsible and aware citizens, with rights and duties.

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