COUNTERTRANSFERENCE AMONG TEACHERS: EXPRESSIONS, INFLUENCES, AND COPING

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Abstract: In teachers' work, due to the complexity of the interaction between them and their students and the management of the classroom, they often feel strong emotions in them that may affect their behavior in a classroom, causing them feelings of stress and distress. Teaching is work that may involve a whole range of strong emotions from joy to anger (Liljestrom et al., 2007). Given the complexity of teacher-student relationships, teachers need to constantly engage in and maintain emotional work (Sutton, 2007). The amount of emotional work and energy they have to invest in their daily interactions with students and the classroom, in not-so-simple working conditions, (Day et al., 2007) leads to high levels of mental exhaustion and burnout among teachers (Hakanen et al., 2006).

Key words: cointertrasnfer, specialist, trachers, expression therapy

Public education teachers in Israel and around the world suffer from significant mental burnout and some choose to leave the profession due to difficulty coping with the strong emotions they experience as part of their job. In Israel, this phenomenon is particularly significant due to the large workload imposed on teachers (for example,

relatively long working hours and crowded classrooms) (Sorek, Tal and Paz, 2004). In order to reduce the rates of mental burnout of teachers and reduce their negative effects on teachers, students, and the interaction between them,it is important to help teachers cope with their work. The present article offers a way to do this through the prism of countertransference - a process that occurs in teaching similar to psychotherapy.

Countertransference includes the conscious and unconscious emotional responses of the therapist (or teacher) arising from his or her inner world and self as a person (Goldstein, 2007). Although countertransference has been studied extensively in psychotherapy, there are only a few articles that address the way in which this phenomenon is relevant and is also reflected among teachers. The present article presents the sources, triggers, expressions, and possible outcomes of countertransference responses among teachers and offers recommendations to teachers on how to properly manage their countertransference responses to reduce their negative effects on their work. Despite the existence of a number of articles that have addressed the relevance of countertransference to teachers, the present paper presents the issue in a morecoherent and complete way and the resulting applied recommendation.

The parallels between psychotherapy and teaching the need to deal with patients (or students) expressing opposition to collaboration, learning, and change in order to achieve their goals have already been identified by Freud (Freud, 1937).

In examining the phenomenon of countertransference in psychotherapy, it is customary to examine a number of its aspects: origins, triggers, manifestations, consequences, and the ways in which the therapist conducts it. Some sources refer to the

unresolved conflicts or personal experiences that arise in the therapist during the countertransference (Hayes & Gelso, 2001).

In the case of teachers, these could be relationships they had with their parents or they currently have with their children. For example, when the teacher fails to bring order to the classroom or to achieve his or her goals in class, he or she may experience early feelings of failure and lack of control, which will intensify his or her mental responses in the same situation. At the same time, certain students' reactions and behavioral problems may evoke in teachers feelings of anger, distress, and helplessness experienced in similar interactions with their own children.

The other component examined is the factors or triggers that elicit countertransference responses.

These factors may be:

Characteristics of a particular student (such as abilities, interests, body structure), which remind the teacher of himself or herself, one of his or her children or someone they know personally, making it difficult to separate his or her attitude toward that student from his or her previous experiences.

People with similar characteristics: certain characteristics of a student may raise personal issues with which the teacher is dealing. For example, overweight children may provoke disgust in the teacher who feels overweight and remind him or her of how he or she has been treated over the years because of their weight. Another example is children with very high intelligence, who may evoke in the teacher feelings of inferiority or childhood memories of living in the shadow of a genius big brother who received different

treatment from parents and society. Countertransference may also arise as a result of social and emotional behaviors visible among children and among them and the teacher, disciplinary issues, or difficulties in transferring classroom materials (Weiss, 2002). Other factors that may provoke or exacerbate countertransference reactions are workload or lack of support from colleagues or the school's higher management. When the teacher feels that he or she has insufficient resources (e.g., social support, resilience, coping skills, difficult work conditions) to do his or her job well, his or her emotional responses to student behaviors (e.g., helplessness) will be stronger (see review, Chang, 2009).

Expressions of countertransference may be internal, in thoughts or feelings experienced by the therapist. Or it can be external, expressed through a wide range of verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Perlov, 2009). Internal countertransference reactions may include frustration, anxiety, or guilt. Frustration is the negative emotion most often mentioned by teachers when they feel they are failing to influence students' behavior. They feel then that they do not meet the goals they have set for themselves as teachers. Frustration can also arise in re-dealing with behavioral problems of certain students. The teacher will sense that he or she is failing to discipline a classroom, that he or she is helpless in front of students (Sutton, 2007). These frustrations are often accompanied by feelings of guilt that teachers feel that they are not able to make a significant contribution to their students' success. They might also feel self-blame for the anger they feel or vent on students, perceiving their behavior as contrary to 'optimal teacher' behavior (Hargreaves & Tuckers, 1991).

Another emotional response of a countertransference that some teachers experience following exposure to problematic behaviors and even student violence is anxiety. This feeling stems from a lack of control over students' behavior and the fear that they will hurt

them or one another (Bullough et al., 2006). In terms of behavioral expressions, countertransference may be expressed in various ways. For example, a teacher may evaluate in a negative way or react aggressively towards a student who evokes strong emotions in him or her. Alternatively, the teacher might ignore the student's problematic behaviors or conflict between students out of difficulty in dealing with the strong emotions that arise in him or her. Countertransference responses may also be reflected in the teacher's decisions concerning how to deliver the materials, penalties, or awards based on student behavior, or concerning classroom discussions and classroom conduct in general.

Countertransference responses will also affect the teacher's interactions with each student and the degree of attention he or she gives them. On the one hand, when the teacher is emotionally exhausted, he or she may feel indifferent to students and be mentally unavailable to them and their needs (Chang, 2009). On the other hand, following emotional reactions to certain students, the teacher may treat certain students differently; that is, give them more individual attention or

ignore their actions and perceive them negatively. These teacher behaviors can impair classroom functioning and students' behavior (Field, 1989).

The last aspect in which it is customary to examine the phenomenon of countertransference in psychotherapy relates to the way the therapist manages it. Because no one is even completely exempt from negative emotions or reactions from their deeper selves, it is important for the therapist to properly manage their countertransference responses to mitigate their negative effects (Goldstein, 2007). According to research in the field, the most significant element in the proper management of countertransference is the therapist's self-awareness. Therapists must observe and appreciate their feelings, memories,

and behaviors during their work and examine the extent to which they emerge from their personal lives (Hayes, 2002; Jackson, 2001).

This recommendation is relevant and significant for teachers who are often unaware of their countertransference responses (Weiss, 2002). When a teacher does not pay attention to the causes of emotions that arise during his or her work, this can have significant negative consequences for the way he or she manages the classroom. Teachers may respond to students' behaviors in an aggressive manner that may be effective in the short term but often harms students and in the long run. Teachers may also become emotionally detached from the suffering of their students or become overly involved in their difficulties out of empathy with what they are experiencing. According to this, it seems that what can help teachers cope with the significant mental burnout they experience at work is awareness and acceptance of their emotions (see review, Chuah & Jakubowicz, 1999). They should not suppress and repress their emotions (see Liljestrom et al., 2007). Educators need to identify, recognize, and use the emotions that arise during their work and especially when interacting with certain students, groups of students, classrooms, parents, peers, and school managers. Similar to psychotherapy, when a teacher acts to suppress and conceal his or her emotions rather than trying to use them to improve his or her work and to understand students and the classroom process, he or she will only injure students (see review (Chuah & Jakubowicz, 1999). It is important that teachers understand the sources and causes of strong countertransference responses in order to process unresolved personal issues and find more effective ways to deal with these factors and thus reduce their negative impact (Raider-Roth, 2005; Slater, McCarthy Veach, & Li, 2013). Such a personal process could help the teacher make decisions and act in the classroom according to what is appropriate and right for that student or classroom (see Weiss, 2002).

The study by Slater (Slater et al., 2013) examined the phenomenon of countertransference through interviews with outstanding expert lecturers at a major university in the United States. They found that situations in which the lecturer interpreted a student's behaviors as disengagement from the relationship with them and the learning environment or when a conflict arose between the lecturer and the student, they had significant countertransference reactions. In addition, when lecturers felt empathy with a student because of the similarity between what he or she went through and his own personal experiences, they evoked countertransference reactions that included emotions such as fear, anger, or compassion. Countertransference responses could be expressed in negative feelings or thoughts towards the student or towards themselves (self-criticism) and in overt behavior towards the student.

The lecturers in this study reported that they enlisted the help of other people to get support for dealing with countertransference responses and sought various strategies to prevent or manage the countertransference responses in interacting with students. In some cases, teachers avoided certain content or students to protect themselves from these reactions. According to these findings, there is a relationship between the degree of the teacher's awareness of their countertransference responses and the degree to which they were able to manage them effectively. Researchers recommended that lecturers talk to each other about their experiences in class and receive feedback from others on how they deal with countertransference responses (Slater et al., 2013). This study constitutes an important step in examining the impact of countertransference in teaching, but it is conducted through interviews in which lecturers recapture previously experienced cases that correspond to the phenomenon of countertransference. Therefore, it does not necessarily reflect the existence of this phenomenon among teachers in general. In addition, this study is done about

university lecturers and does not necessarily reflect the cross-curricular responses of teachers in schools.

In light of the significant impact that countertransference responses can have on teachers' work, it is important to teach teachers mental skills that will help them be aware of countertransference responses, where they originate, and how they are expressed and managed properly (Weiss, 2002). It is important that teachers find the time and place to pay attention to what they are experiencing personally, talk to colleagues about strong feelings that arise during their work, and about reactions they had to students or classroom events that they felt were excessive or inappropriate. Teachers work many hours at a very large workload so they have no time to pay

attention to what is going on inside them and process strong emotions. Despite this, it is important to find the framework to do such processes to reduce teachers' mental burnout, increase their professional efficiency, and reduce teachers' departure from work.

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