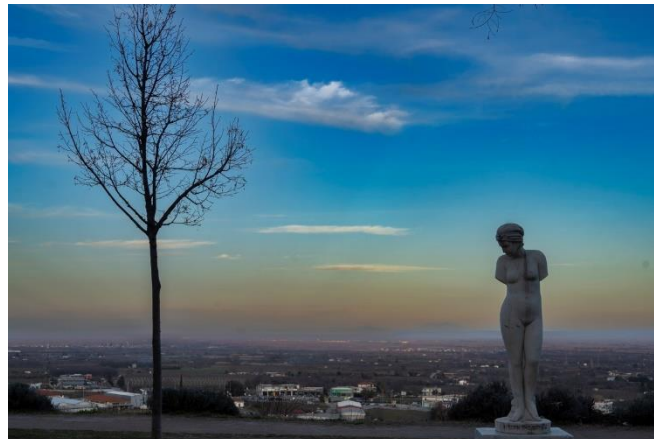# A collaborative series of discussions in the 2nd grade of high school about love, relationships and sexuality: Systemic perspectives and issues of psychosexual development in the public school

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Abstract

From a systemic perspective, psychologists in schools can work in two mutually complementary directions: Broadening the perspective for identifying, understanding and intervening in what is considered dysfunctional, and shaping the environment and processes of emotional expression, communication, connection and care. Such an environment promotes the comprehensive development of students and community life. The collaboration between psychologists and teachers seems particularly helpful in these directions. This article presents a series of experiential meetings with students in the 2nd grade of a public high school, based on these theoretical starting points. The theme of these meetings, coordinated by the school physicist and the school psychologist, was love, relationships, and sexuality.

Key-words: *psychologist, school, system theory, collaboration, team, sex education*

Introduction

In this article, a series of meetings in the form of an experiential workshop with students in the 2nd grade of a public high school in the suburbs of Athens is presented. I worked

as a psychologist from December 2020 until June 2021, for five hours per week[45] in this high school. We coordinated these meetings, thematically oriented towards issues of relationships - love - sexuality, with the class physicist, Evangelos (Angelos) Batris. The choice to present this particular project/intervention in the journal was made, because working in group, experiential activities with the students, in joint coordination with a schoolteacher, seems to correspond to the systemic way of thinking and intervening in community contexts. Also, this is a thematic content that on the one hand seems to be particularly relevant to teenagers and on the other hand has been declared as being included in the plans of the Ministry of Education for the new school year, but lacks in actual planning. This is because Sex Education workshops are included, as a subsection, in the so-called "skills workshops" (a new school subject)[46], but critical questions such as *what will be the reasoning, in what direction, in what ways, and having received what kind of training* will the teachers develop the Sex Education workshop, have not been clarified. In fact, a public debate was initiated concerning the approval by the Institute of Educational Policy of a program entitled "Prenatal Education", which was eventually withdrawn after strong protests for its unscientific and unfounded content.

Over time, all the members of school life (teachers, students, parents/guardians) have expressed the request for psychologists to offer their services in Greek public schools. The need to organize the promotion of mental health in school is reflected in the conclusions of previous research[47]. In an attempt to satisfy this constant need and request, an extended (compared to previous years) number of psychologists were hired in primary and secondary education throughout the country, in the school year 2020-2021, under three programs of the Ministry of Education: a) staffing of special schools, KESY[48] and EDEAY[49], b) "a new beginning for Vocational Schools", c) "Support of Primary and Secondary General Education schools by Psychologists and Social Workers" addressing the consequences of COVID-19. Our placements in schools took place (in the order of the three projects) from September to December 2020. The third program brought for first-time psychologists to public middle schools and high schools on a large scale[50]. I worked in this program.

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[45]At the same time, I was serving in four more secondary schools in the area. The context and subject matter of the work of psychologists in public schools will be presented below.

[46]http://iep.edu.gr/el/psifiako-apothetirio/skill-labs

[47]Indicatively see: Bruzos (1999), Panhellenic Federation of Associations of Special Educational Staff of Special Education (2019), Todas et al. (2018), Chatzichristou et al.(2004, 2006, 2009)

[48]Secondary units of psychosocial support and educational needs assessment

[49] Units consisting of a psychologist and a social worker supporting groups of five schools under the supervising of KESY

[50]It is noted that in the introduction emphasis is placed on the placement of psychologists and especially in secondary education, as this concerns the work presented in this article. Also, for the same reason, the working framework is recorded as it functioned for the project

Initially, it is worth considering the terms and the formal context in which we were called to work. Only a basic reference can be made in this article; however, it is necessary for both scientific institutions and the collective institutions of the Special Teaching Staff (in which psychologists are included) and for the educational movement to gain a deeper understanding in order to criticize, process and suggest changes. This framework is presented in the job description recorded in Government Gazette B 4716 - 26.10.2020 of the Ministry of Education[51]. There are parameters that promote our work as well as others –structural ones- that significantly limit the potential of interventions.

The extensiveness of the job description, on the one hand, highlights the multitude of psychosocial support needs of all members of the school community, and on the other hand, creates a fertile ground for the development of diverse and multidimensional interventions. Specifically, we are called to work on:

   i.   Individual support for students, parents/guardians, teachers.
   ii. Family support.
   iii. Group support and/or informative activities.
   iv. Cooperation, raising awareness and providing orientation to the Teachers' Association.
   v.   Promoting collaboration and inclusion in every school.
   vi. Networking and cooperation with specialized and local agencies and services.

For this program, the starting point was the goal of empowering the school community to create a safe environment that can deal with the effects of the pandemic crisis. Of course, however, the basis of any intervention still is the general psychosocial support of the students and the promotion of psycho-emotional health in the school community in general.

With these as a given, we can work in both individual sessions and broad-based group activities with all members of each school - thus developing an environment of collaboration, mutual support, conversation and active listening. This way, the conditions can be built for promoting emotional communication among all members of the school community and for the formation of an increasingly secure framework of relationships and comprehensive development of the students.

The reality of the working conditions, however, prevents the achievement of goals that are so broad.

First of all, each psychologist works in five or four schools, in which the 25 working hours per week are divided. Thus, the student population that he or she has to work with consists of several hundreds of children/adolescents - and the total population includes teachers and parents/guardians too. It is clear from the beginning that in-depth acquaintance and cooperation with so many people are an unrealistic goal. Therefore, the possible interventions are less than those described in the job description - and (more importantly) less than the ones that are necessary.

"Support of Primary and Secondary General Education schools by Psychologists and Social Workers" to deal with the consequences of COVID-19.

[51] https://www.esos.gr/sites/default/files/articles-legacy/psyhologoi_koinonikoi_leitoyrgoi_.pdf

Then, as is the case with many fellow educators, psychologists are called upon to work in schools as substitutes. This means: a) late placement in schools (for the school year 2020-2021 our placements for this program were made in December 2020)[52], b) it is uncertain or (more commonly) unlikely to continue working in the same schools every year. Therefore, the time frame is narrow for the realization of all the necessary goals, and in addition, the constant alternation of people disrupts the development of deeper, stable bonds and communication.

To make matters worse the 2020-2021 school year was marked by continuous distance learning. Students, parents/guardians and teachers have experienced its adverse effects. Especially with our placement in schools that were already closed (in December 2020) it became even more difficult to deeply connect with the school community.

The list of difficulties (which aims at setting a goal to overcome them) concludes with the absence of scientific supervision that is generally required for our profession. Above all, however, we must keep in mind a fundamental flaw: that these programs by the Ministry of Education do not require the employment of psychologists (and/or social workers) by all the schools in the country.

Presentation of basic concepts and theoretical issues.
How does Systemic Thinking permeate school functions?

At the beginning of General Systems Theory, von Bertalanffy explained that the system is a complex of interacting elements and that, when approaching it, we deal holistically with the relationships and the interconnection between its parts (von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Every school is a constantly evolving community with multiple correlations, interactions, levels; it is a system of constantly interacting and connecting parts: students, teachers, teachers' associations, administration, other staff, parents/guardians, subgroups within the system, their relationships. At the same time, the school is part of a wider social system (of the local community, of the educational system, of the state as a whole, etc.), whose institutions influence it (Polemi-Todoulou, 2010, Georgas, Bezevegkis & Giotsa, 2006, Georgas in Gari, 1996). In other words, we see that the school system is at the same time shaped by both the dynamics of individuals and groups and by general socio-political and cultural parameters.

As we delve deeper into such a holistic approach, understanding and intervention, we realize that education is a field of overlapping co-constructions. Students are the dynamic subsystem that is intellectually shaped and will in turn shape social movement. Teachers are "conductors" of knowledge and companions who can "challenge" students to find new ways of knowledge and social life. Knowledge itself encompasses the social condition and dynamics that resembles a multidimensional grid in which students are shaped (Nicolescu & Petrescu, 2017).

Understanding education and functioning in it through such a systemic point of view gives us the chance to go beyond identifying and considering dysfunctions in a

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[52]For the current school year, the corresponding placements were made in mid-January 2022.

linear way of detecting cause and effect. Such linear perceptions have, in the past, led to individual interventions, that are regulatory "corrective" and ineffective. Ineffective, as all phenomena of life advance and develop dynamically, in a modern world characterized by complexity and constant change. In this world, it seems more effective and beneficial to expand the framework of study, interpretation and action, so as to include and communicate with individuals, groups, ideas, scientific theories, etc. (Kataki, 2009).

According to Gary (1996), in education, such a framework means: to explore and understand which components and which dynamics contribute to functionality and dysfunction, to propose interventions aiming at strengthening the functional aspects and to be able to compose the various perspectives that each part of the system brings (eg teacher, psychologist, student etc.). Such a framework can be used both for the identification and intervention in dysfunctional circumstances, and more generally for the development of positive interactions between members of the school community (Giotsa, 2014).

In this systemic light, we see humans, families and all social groups as "*biopsychosocial systems. That is, the psychosocial and biological structures and processes of living systems are separate but interconnected*" (Kataki, 2009, p. 19). At the same time, the modern findings of neurosciences highlight the continuous ability of the brain to be shaped and transformed based on human experience. Particular emphasis is placed on the value of the emotional climate in which interpersonal interactions take place, as this affects the neuroplasticity of the brain. More specifically, relating and interacting with others contribute to the formation of neural pathways and synapses (Siegel, 2007, 1999).

But what are those neuroplasticity-promoting processes? What interactions are helpful? The answer lies in emotion and contact: developing an emotionally rich, connection-based, caring, and empowering climate. The existence of stimuli that motivate curiosity, experiential learning, repetition and cooperation are also important factors (Flores, 2010).

From theoretical foundations to classroom teamwork -
The importance of cooperation between a psychologist and a teacher

With these starting points, throughout my collaboration with the five school communities, I considered teamwork that can be achieved in classes necessary and helpful. In groups, one can become part of dynamic dialectical processes and experience emotional processing and conciliation that promote connection, reconstruction and synthesis, contributing to the advancement of human systems at higher levels of organization (Kataki, 2009). The neuroscientific data mentioned above reinforce this reasoning.

The fact that the group can contain disagreement, protestation and mutual provocation, without this signaling a risk of rejection, contributes to the formation of a sense of security (Polemi-Todoulou, 2010). It is important to reflect that differentiation and/or conflict do not mean disapproval of the person or dissolution of the relationship.

Additionally, the concept of working groups in schools is based on the assumption that as psychologists we do not operate in terms of an objective, absolute, universal truth, but in terms of perspective and (co-) constructions. Based on this premise, we can stay connected to the perspectives and (co-) constructions, which are in effect the reality of others, and thus jointly create meanings, instead of seeking "the one true meaning". Therefore, communication and emotional participation are terms and tools of effectiveness (Kataki, 2009; Kataki & Androutsopoulou, 2003).

These points are made not only to support the rationale of working with groups of students but also because they lead to collaborative work between adult professionals at school. The collaboration of two group coordinators enriches the process with different perspectives and also brings forth a dynamic model of how we can bridge our own truths with the truths of others (Kataki, 2009). That is why we chose the joint coordination of the group by a teacher and a psychologist. Of course, it should be noted here that the deep ties that the fellow teacher had developed throughout the school year with the students were a valuable foundation for this experiential process.

Another main aspect we wanted to work with, was to give students the opportunity to express all their thoughts, feelings, questions and concerns aloud - even in areas that may be considered contradictory or provocative. We considered it fruitful to form a secure framework so that adolescents can talk about what concerns them and take advantage of the diverse mosaic of perspectives, views and emotions that concerns the issues of romantic relations and sexuality. After all, according to Androutsopoulou (2003), the unfolding of rich narratives about oneself and the experienced emotions ("I am both this and that - I feel both this and that") composes a lively internal dialogue with many alternative voices. Thus, the most protective and functional voice for every circumstance can emerge and be chosen, and a positive and realistic perception of the self can be maintained. But when the narration is limited, a correspondingly limited and restrictive self-image, with no alternatives is created.

The function of the group/class was based on creating an atmosphere of emotional security, intimacy and openness, on unprejudiced expression and communication, on positive ways of communicating, on fully respecting others (even if some behavior had to be disapproved of), on highlighting the empowering aspects, at the limits that establish security and respect (Polemi-Todoulou, 2010).

Romantic relationship issues and sexuality: discussion, polyphony, honesty, trust

Many teenagers around the world are waiting for Netflix to air the fourth season of "Sex Education", a pretty popular series. It is a tender and kindly told story about teenagers' concerns about relationships, sexuality, identity and gender expression. The adult female protagonist - a sex therapist - incites the assembly of the high school community that her son also attends, to base Sex Education on the triptych of "T": Talk - Truth - Trust. Despite the fictional element, these are three axes prove to be useful, insofar as we perceive, on the one hand, school as a place that promotes the comprehensive development of children through safety and caring, and on the other

hand sex education as an issue and right to health, self-knowledge, self-determination, coexistence and violence prevention.

The formation of educational plans for Sex Education in school goes back to two main lines of thought, that arise through conflicting value systems: on the one hand the programs of "abstinence" and on the other the logic of "multidimensional sex education" and the recognition of psychosexual development as an undivided and integral part of children's and adolescents' overall development (Gerouki, 2011). We chose to address the adolescent group (noting that we did not conduct a comprehensive sex education program) under the second perspective, believing that young people are capable of making decisions, that providing them with the relevant information helps them make the most appropriate and considerate decisions for themselves, and that all students should feel included in the procedure.

Thus, we tried to focus on the cultivation of emotional and social skills, as well as on the development of dialogue, which are necessary conditions for making responsible and protective decisions (Gerouki, 2011). At the same time, we had five criteria for coordinating such workshops in mind: personal awareness, belief that psychosexual education contributes to the full development of young people, immediacy/honesty/humor/tolerance of others' views and values, personal values and ethos, respect for the family "voices" that children carry (Kreatsas, 2003). We kept as a guide what has previously been described in research results: that students pay special attention to the ability of adults to form a safe framework for open dialogue in the classroom. Characteristically, it has been shown (Blake, 2002) that they favor credibility, discretion, openness, self-confidence, respect, the ability to listen and predispose to the discussion, as well as the provision of objective information.

For adults working with teens, the question always arises: how can we listen to their worries and pressures, and how can we support them? Let us explore, therefore, some of the parameters involved in the synthesis of the representations of love and sexuality that adolescents/youths have. Modern students are a very well-informed generation, but at the same time, they are looking for adult answers with the quality characteristics mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Markovic (2012) observes that, at the cultural level, a dipole is developed on sexuality: on the one hand, a commercialized and impressionistic representation is proposed, with a predominant physicality and appearance, in which sex is defined exclusively in terms of penetration – a representation which may contain the terms of power, abuse and exploitation. On the other hand, sex becomes taboo and not talked about (in families, in education, in healthcare and social welfare). Based on these observations, she points out that the entire spectrum between this dipole is missing. Thus, she proposes to develop discussions about sex with greater openness and by sharing concerns, thoughts and questions - and in fact in as many contexts of discussion as possible. Such a treatment of adolescent worries and feelings about intimacy and sexuality leads to minimizing the impacts of both silence/oppressions, and of the "sexualized" representation described on the other side of the dipole.

What are these impacts though? The culture of power and violence around sex has already been mentioned. In addition, clinical experience reveals that a dominant narrative about sex becomes regulatory and makes young people feel uncomfortable, guilty and ashamed, if they do not comply with this regulatory norm. Then, the fear of how others might see and criticize them puts tremendous pressure on them. When all

this is mixed with sexist representations (e.g. male sexuality for adolescents is not criticized) and with possible pressure from peers and/or the dominant culture, confusion arises (Markovic, 2012).

Presentation of the project

As mentioned in the introduction, the project presented was carried out in May and June 2021. High school students in Greece had returned to on-site learning two weeks before Easter and continued until the first ten days of June. The rationale that led us to the choice of group-experiential processing, cooperation and engagement with issues of love, relationships, sexuality in adolescence has already been described. Our goal was to collectively shape the space to address questions, concerns, certainties and doubts, and to cultivate a culture of emotional communication between team/class members - at a life period characterized by ongoing processes of identity and role shaping. While at the same time, adolescent students reunited in school after many months of distance and deprivation of their communication-relational "normality".

Markovic (2012) emphasizes the importance of not discussing sexuality as an independent issue, cut off from the rest of human experience and relationships. Following this, we sought to begin by discussing the thoughts, feelings, representations, and expectations of adolescents about love and relationships, and we consistently reflected on the questions "Do I feel ok? Do I listen to the other person?".

I had "met" the group/class a few months previously (in February 2021) via WebEx. Then, a self -presentation exercise was used in which the students made an acrostic with their name and wrote down their characteristics that they consider to be "strong" using the name letters. This exercise seeks to focus on the recognition of personal capabilities and their utilization (Polemi-Todoulou, 2010). A special moment was when, after the expression of a student's inability to present herself, one of her classmates had the initiative to present her, according to the instruction.

In the first meeting in the school and in collaboration with Evangelos (Angelos) Batris, I invited the children to re -introduce themselves, since we now had the opportunity to see each other (as not all the cameras during the online "meeting" had been on). This time, the introduction exercise was done in pairs: each student introduced his/her neighbor with some characteristics that he/she appreciates/admires/loves. This task of the first subsystem of the classroom - the pair sharing a desk - was selected in order to prepare for the discussion with the entire group. This first "conversation" followed by the "conversation" in plenary gives space for all possible "voices" of students to be expressed and heard. At the same time, sharing the positives promotes the creation of a good emotional basis (Giotsa, 2014). The team even suggested to prolong the exercise by talking about everyone in this way - which could not be done due to time constraints.

Then, the class recorded their thoughts on what they wanted and expected from our meetings. Their questions are summarized as follows: does it make sense at this age to have relationships? Can these relationships last and how? How do we overcome obstacles and difficult moments in relationships? In this context, the diversity of relationship experiences that everyone has is revealed. As Polemi-Todoulou (2010) points out, it is important, concerning this issue, to avoid personal experiences

functioning as a criterion for group separation, but to utilize the deeper unifying points (e.g. even if some do not have any romantic experiences, they can be connected on reflecting about how they have dealt with a friendly dysfunctional relationship), so that an enriched dialogue of alternatives can be developed.

Discussing sexual attraction and love, we presented theoretical neuroscientific material in a popular online form[53]. It turned out to be the part of the process that mobilized the students the least.

During the hours we talked about sexuality, the students' interest was rekindled. It should be noted, of course, that participation remained at different speeds, which may reflect both class dynamics in general and possible inhibitions regarding the issue. The role of the fellow teacher was catalytic, as he contributed to exculpating, emerging and utilizing students' discourse, with his emotional participation, self-disclosure, humor and the trustful relationship he had formed with the class. We both sought to promote the unification of verbal and non-verbal messages by expressing our own emotions (Giotsa, 2014). In this way, we can contribute to both the students' understanding of all levels of communication and to the cultivation of their emotional response.

Let us return to the students' discussion concerning sex. What do we keep from this discourse? The dominant position was that of the self-determination of the body and that of mutuality. It was agreed upon by both girls and boys that they have the right - when they choose - to enjoy their sexuality, on terms of equality and mutual care. A relational representation emerged, in which sexuality is perceived in terms of mutual satisfaction. Also, all the teenagers were aware and strict about personal boundaries and consent. Even when the question of whether the way someone dresses could provoke sexual aggression, this was done mainly with an emphasis on self-protection and not as a justification for aggression. The feeling that it was permissible to express this question as well - and then to raise objections and disagreements - is valued as a positive point of the process. When a controversial view is addressed and discussed, it is enriched with new, alternative versions (according to the narrative perspective we saw in the theory) and thus its dysfunctional background may be reduced.

At the end of the meetings, we asked the group to write down in notes what they wanted to convey to us from their experience. An interesting point is that they automatically asked several clarifying questions, in a way as if they wanted to be "on topic". A second one is that they stayed in the classroom during recess, to write. What they wrote is very enlightening. First of all, just because students develop wonderful and diverse thoughts under an "open subject". Moreover - and most importantly – their notes reveal maturity and deep emotional involvement. By categorizing thematically what the students wrote, the following axes are formed:

- Awareness and having questions answered, concerning the topic itself.
- Emphasis on the issue of respect for the partner, consent, personal boundaries.
- Personal "openings" and sharing of views.

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[53]Characteristics:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sY4rhvB9LE
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=169N81xAffQ

- Personal emotional process, in touch with emotions.
- Understanding aspects of self and others through the ability to converse and listen to others express themselves.
- Active participation of most members of the class, which contributed to a special bonding of the group.
- Acquisition of intimacy between classmates, as well as with adults (teacher and psychologist).
- Satisfaction with the humor used in all the meetings.

In concluding the presentation of this short series of meetings, it is worth mentioning three points: a) other 2nd grade classes persistently asked to participate in the project too (however, practical schedule aspects did not allow it), b) Students from another class skipped class wanting to participate in the discussions and c) The students of the class we worked with asked - and succeeded - to have more time added. Through these events, we can understand both their need and desire to work on their psycho-emotional concerns together with adults they can trust, and the satisfaction they experience in processes that invite them to express themselves, to communicate, to connect.

Discussion

At this point, let us look at some key conclusions drawn from the experience of this mini workshop. First of all, it seems that the school environment is a fertile ground for a Systemic perspective; such a perspective offers a holistic and caring approach, serving a dual and concurrent purpose:
- Tackling individual dysfunctions effectively: by broadening the framework of understanding and action, we identify critical mechanisms and interactions that lead to dysfunction (Kataki, 2009).
- Promotion and empowering of health-creating aspects and potentials, which contributes to the increase of the daily satisfaction in school and therefore to the more effective educational/pedagogical work.

Moreover, neuroscientific theory and research have emphasized the primacy of emotion and the dual nature, cognitive and emotional at the same time, of human experience. Mind and emotion are complementary. Contact with our emotion provides us with relief and contributes to our communication and connection with others (Bafiti, 2011). The educational process can be aided and promoted by taking under consideration this dual nature of human experience.

Since we perceive school as a place of care and of empowering the multidimensional development of children/teenagers, it is crucial to create an atmosphere of emotional interactions in which students (and adults) can experience emotions, relate, express themselves and listen to others, differentiate and create new meanings. Thus, appropriate training, containing and support for teachers is required for them to recognize and express their emotional needs, in cultivating a collaborative basis and emotional communication (Polemi- Todoulou, 2010). The collaboration of school psychologists with teachers contributes to their empowerment, in order for them to

holistically support the students. At the same time, the teachers' perspective, knowledge and experience are enriched and often determine the school psychologist's point of view and the possibilities of interventions.

Sex Education in school provides students with valuable knowledge and contributes to improving students' sexual health (Somers &Gleason, Blake, in Gerouki, 2011). On what terms, though? Openness rather than avoidance of discussion, permissiveness of the particular way in which adolescents perceive, explore and experience sexuality instead of imposing adult norms, confidence in the criterion and self-action of adolescents instead of repression, are major aspects in order to organize such Sex Education classes that can cover their needs, and also contain them.

For the adult professionals who work with children in school, keeping in mind that what we do is not any objective, absolute truth that applies uniformly in each case is both an important starting point and a conclusion of any intervention made (Kataki, 2009). Being open, in constant contact with others and in personal reflection can help us be more effective in exercising our role. Collaboration and interdisciplinary dialogue promote our work.

In conclusion, this article is published during the second semester of a school year. Despite the increased needs brought up due to the disorganization of the two years of the pandemic and despite the positive experience of last year and the previous two school years, the perpetual request for psychologists (and social workers) to offer their services in every public school in the country is not satisfied in sufficient and stable terms this year either. From the systemic point of view described throughout the article, it seems that the super-system of state institutions chooses not to invest in the establishment of psychosocial support structures in public education. Under the same perspective, however, we understand that within the multiple groups in which individuals participate - and therefore in the school as well - necessary reconstructions both personal and collective take place (Kataki, 2009). Thus, informing and activating our scientific associations and unions is essential, in order to achieve change and promote this social and pedagogical major request.

A personal note in the epilogue: I need to express my deepest gratitude to Angelos Batris for being such a precious colleague and for creating the chance for this workshop to happen. To the class of 2022 that participated in this workshop, best wishes for this hard senior year and the biggest thank you for the cooperation.

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