



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHOOL.  
EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAYS AND  
ANALYSIS OF EXPECTATIONS AND TYPES OF WORK**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the perception and knowledge that teachers have of the educational psychologist in order to gain a better understanding of the types of collaboration that can be established between mental health professionals and education professionals.

The study involved 189 schools in Piemonte and 139 psychologists. Two questionnaires based on those which are most commonly used in similar investigations in Italy were employed. The first questionnaire was addressed to teachers, while the second was addressed to psychologists.

Statistical analysis was performed using the PASW 18.0 software package. The factorial structure of the questionnaire was investigated using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), following factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization. Cronbach's alpha was used as an estimate of reliability.

Analysis of results indicates that the activities of specialists in education and in mental health do not satisfy psychologists' expectations concerning how their skills can be applied in the school; for teachers, on the other hand, the sense of mistrust and fear about the psychologists' work affects the latter's quality and makes it less effective.

**Keywords:** Psychological intervention, School Psychology, Teacher-Psychology interaction

**INTRODUCTION**

Schools are complex organizations, and while the reform of educational programs and the increase in local autonomy have given school districts greater freedom of action, they have also brought greater responsibility for achieving educational goals. As a number of scholars have pointed out, these sweeping changes have destabilized the equilibrium of school organizations and the relationships between the people who work in them (Belvisi, 2000; Ceccon 1999; Martinelli, 1996). Teachers would appear to be particularly hard hit by this process of transformation, expressing their discomfort with a sense of precariousness about their role and their commitment.



## NIVELES DE ANSIEDAD ANTE LOS EXÁMENES EN UNA MUESTRA DE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS

The commitment required of teachers, in fact, entails a considerable degree of personal involvement, as it hinges on the relationship with the other-child. On the one hand, the teacher's function is one of responsibility, laden with abstract but socially important demands (transmitting values, rules of conduct, knowledge, etc.); on the other hand, the teacher interacts with an organized setting that inevitably breeds misunderstandings, antagonism and rivalry. In the place of his or her organizational experience, the teacher seems to exhibit the anxiety of those who exercise authority, and the anxiety of the powerless. The teacher's perceived image as sufficiently good or fundamentally bad is a true constraint (Domenici, 1998).

We must thus ask ourselves how and to what extent educational psychologists should be introduced in Italian schools. This new role cannot simply be juxtaposed with existing ones, but must be tied in with them in order to form a new organizational scheme (Borgogni, 2001). Continuing to exclude the psychologist from school is becoming increasingly difficult, and there are no precise reasons for doing so. Nevertheless, schools tolerate the presence of the psychologist only on a temporary basis or as a guest, but not as a figure who is part of the educational setting. An irrational process seems to dominate faculty members' thinking about psychologists, who are seen more as a threat than as a resource.

Though there are long-standing contacts between psychology and schools, and the first forms of collaboration date to the late nineteenth century, the educational psychologist is not contemplated by Italian legislation. At what levels, then, does the resistance to this figure operate? What fears and what type of anxiety trigger the change in the relationships between roles when a psychologist is brought into a school? These are the premises underlying a survey conducted in order to determine how much "knowledge" teachers have of the figure of the educational psychologist, and thus gain a better grasp of "the most complex and subterranean doings (...) that animate and agitate individuals" (Quaglino 1996, 21).

The study also investigated the current status of relationships between educational psychologists and schools, an investigation which was regarded as a necessary preliminary to assessing teachers' attitude and openness towards the school psychologist.

The objectives can thus be summarized as follows:

To determine the school's expectations concerning psychology.

To determine how the school regards psychological intervention in connection with the relational, didactic and organizational dimensions in which teachers are involved.

To determine what psychologists currently do in schools.

To determine the basic elements that could improve the relationship according to psychologists and according to schools.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The survey involved 189 schools in Piemonte. Most of these schools are located in the cities of Torino (29.89%), Cuneo (20.11%) and Alessandria (14.37%). They include comprehensive schools (38%), upper secondary schools (24%), lower secondary schools (20%) and primary schools (19%). The survey contacted 139 psychologists, including 116 women (83%) and 23 men (17%). Their average age was 36.8 years. 56.52% received their degrees in Torino, 33.33% from the Università di Padova, and 10.15% from other universities. 56% of the psychologists hold graduate degrees in systems/relational psychology, 13% in psychodynamics, 7% in transactional psychology, and 5% in cognitive/behavioral psychology.



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

**Instruments**

The survey made use of two questionnaires based on those which are most commonly used in similar investigations in Italy (Andreana Dentici, 2002; Glauco Ceccarelli, 2003; Gaillard, 2003). The first questionnaire was addressed to teachers, while the second was addressed to psychologists who work or who have worked under contract in schools during the last three years.

Before administering the questionnaire, its reliability was assessed by conducting a pilot study of a random sample consisting of 24 schools and 31 psychologists. The following types of analysis were performed:

Item analysis, which made it possible to identify non-significant items.

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, which confirmed the good fit between the data and the proposed model.

Subsequently, responses for the entire sample were scored using item response theory (Thissen, 2003) with the Multilog 7.3 program.

The final version of the questionnaire (Table 1) consists of 8 sections and 45 items for the psychologists' version, and 12 sections and 75 items for the school version: psychologists and educators were asked to rate their agreement on a seven-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = moderately agree, 7 = strongly agree.

The items were preceded by initial questions to establish the sample's sociodemographic characteristics.

Questionnaire sections were as follows:

SCHOOL QUESTIONNAIRE	PSYCHOLOGISTS' QUESTIONNAIRE
A. Data regarding the school	A. Identification data
B. Data regarding the respondent	B. Activities performed at school in the last three years
C. Start and duration of employment	C. Types of work
D. Representation of psychology in the school	D. Expectations
E. Representation of professional psychologists in the school	E. Evaluation
F. The psychologist at school	F. Type of contract and compensation
G. Problems of the school	G. Professional satisfaction
H. Psychologists' activities at the school and percentage of time	H. Difficulties encountered
I. Which of the psychologist's skills cause the school to be satisfied/dissatisfied?	
L. What are the activities that involve teachers and psychologists?	
M. How useful can the psychologist be in	



**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHOOL.  
EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAYS AND  
ANALYSIS OF EXPECTATIONS AND TYPES OF WORK**

**Procedure**

The survey employed the two questionnaires described above, which were administered under the terms of an agreement between the Università di Torino School of Education Sciences, SIPEF (the Italian Association of Educational and Training Psychology) and the regional educational research institute IRRE Piemonte. The latter forwarded the questionnaire to the schools involved. The questionnaire was anonymous and was to be filled out by individuals. Completed questionnaires were collected after six weeks.

**Statistical analyses**

Statistical processing was performed with the SPSS PASW 18.0 software package, using means and standard deviations for each section of the questionnaire.

The factorial structure of the questionnaire was investigated using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), following factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization. Cronbach's alpha was used as an estimate of reliability.

Items in the sections of each questionnaire were compared using repeated measures t-tests, taking a p-value less than 0.05 as the criterion of significance. In addition, one-way analyses of variance were conducted to investigate the differences ascribed to sections A, B and C of the questionnaires, and significant differences were further investigated using Tukey post-hoc analyses ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Analysis of the data from the questionnaires indicates that psychologists work alone (45%) and in pairs (22%); 12% are part of a work group. A little less than half (44%) work in teams at school, maintaining contact with the group of teachers.

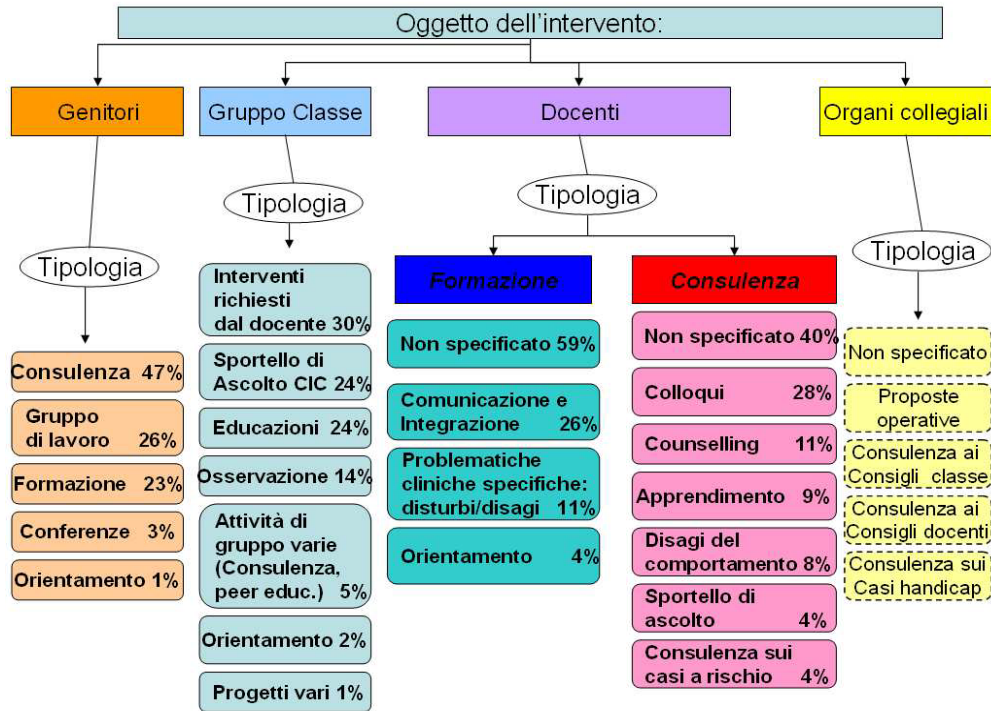
Psychologists are chiefly active in the areas of consulting (45%) and training (23%). Schools also ask for their assistance in the form of conferences (17%), and only sporadically request courses dealing with orientation, education and prevention.

As regards the object of intervention (Table 1), the psychologist's professional activity at school consists of advising parents (47%), working in the classroom (30%), and in training and advising faculty members.

Though the psychologist's work covers a wide range of areas, they are all at the confines of what strictly speaking are the school's main activities. In other words, the psychologist is called in as an expert to be consulted or to whom a problem is delegated, but is still not seen as having an educational role, fully involved in the pupils' schooling. What the psychologist does is considered functional and useful to the teachers, as its aim is to reassure and support, but it is never regarded as part of school life per se or the educational processes.



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN



Psychological intervention, in any case, is not easily rated. Clear quality indicators do not always emerge from research, and project indicators for specific situations and types of program are likewise difficult to formulate. The survey indicated that the criteria used to evaluate effectiveness (Table 2) are limited to simple oral feedback (68%) and the use of instruments such as questionnaires and tests (26%). Even though psychological research in recent years has addressed the efficacy of evaluation in psychotherapy, teaching, prevention and so forth, it has had almost no impact in the school setting. In addition, evaluation is performed by several people (83%), and the individuals involved are users of the school service (parents and teachers) or public entities such as municipalities and local health agencies (20%). An annual final report is submitted at the end of collaboration. What thus seems to be absent is the use of appropriate scientific instruments capable of determining whether or not psychological intervention is effective in the school setting. Evaluation of this kind would be useful in accrediting the psychologist's work with teachers, or would at least help describe a "job" that for many teachers is still obscure. In any case, an understanding of the results achieved by psychologists' efforts can only go so far in counteracting resistance on the part of teachers. Having to share ones' vital space – the classroom, in this case – with others cannot fail to generate deep-seated anxieties.

From the standpoint of educational psychologists, we find that their expectations fall into three types: personal, professional and economic. Personal expectations arise from the opportunity to see how one measures up with other professionals as a means of both personal (30%) and professional enrichment (20%).

Professional expectations chiefly center on having a job (26%), while economic expectations do not go beyond being able to command the fees contemplated by the professional associations (44%).





**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHOOL.  
 EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAYS AND  
 ANALYSIS OF EXPECTATIONS AND TYPES OF WORK**

**I criteri utilizzati per valutare l'efficacia dell'intervento**

Feedback verbale e comportamentale degli utenti	68%
Questionari e test	26%
Metodologie proprie della ricerca – azione	3%
Test iniziale sulle aspettative e finale sulla soddisfazione	2%

**Nella valutazione sono intervenute altre persone?**

Si	83
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**Se si, chi è intervenuto?**

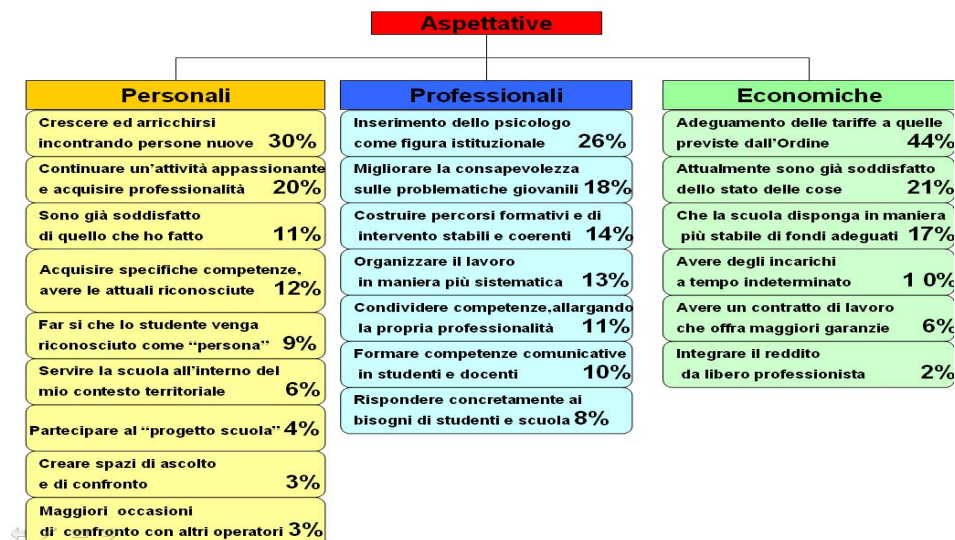
Gli utenti del servizio (i genitori, i docenti)	35%
Gli enti pubblici (ASL, Comune)	20%
Il referente per il progetto e l'istituto committente	16%
Operatori specializzati (pedagogisti, sociologi, assistenti sociali)	13%
Il dirigente scolastico	10%
Collaboratori	2%
I supervisori	1%

**Sono stati presentati dei rapporti alla scuola?**

Si	99
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**Se si, con quale cadenza sono stati presentati i rapporti?**

Annuale	58%
Altra cadenza	19%
A fine progetto	23%





DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

Quanto è soddisfatto/a del suo rapporto con la scuola?

		<b>Molto</b>	63%
<b>Abbastanza</b>	21%	Il rapporto collaborativo che si è instaurato	42%
		L'essere maturato a livello "personale"	27%
		Il rapporto umano con gli utenti	26%
		La disponibilità mostratami	5%
Insufficiente numero di ore messe a disposizione scarse opportunità di accesso nella scuola e risorse a disposizione	37%	<b>Moltissimo</b>	15%
I docenti non hanno aspettative realistiche rispetto alla psicologia scolastica	27%	Le gratificazioni personali e professionali	12%
		Investire nella scuola significa investire nel futuro	7%
La precarietà dei servizi e un'attività svolta in maniera non continuativa	10%	Il grande interesse e l'ampio coinvolgimenti dei ragazzi, dei docenti e delle famiglie	19%
		L'aver instaurato dei buoni rapporti con i ragazzi, l'averci lavorato insieme e l'essermi sentito / a accolto / a	19%
È stato abbastanza stimolante affrontare le tematiche legate al disagio adolescenziale	10%	L'aver svolto un lavoro pionieristico	19%
Il CIC viene percepito come una realtà estranea	5%	L'aver raggiunto obiettivi professionali	12%
La difficoltà incontrate nel lavorare con alcune classi	5%	La possibilità avuta di agire concretamente sulla prevenzione del disagio	12%
Una bassa motivazione da parte degli utenti	5%		

For the school questionnaire, principal component analysis of the teacher's views of psychologists' work made it possible to extract three factors which after oblimin rotation explain 60.28% of total variance.

The first extracted component (26.72% of total variance), labeled "usefulness", expresses a positive view of psychology as a science that helps people in difficulty. Teachers thus believe that the psychologist's role is effective and provides essential support in an educational and organizational context as complex as that of the school. As can be seen from Table 1, factor saturation is quite high (0.88 and 0.86), and reliability is satisfactory (0.80).

The second extracted component (19.20% of total variance), labeled "uselessness", expresses teachers' opinions about psychologists' profession action at school: "action" which is seen as harmful, as it does not "deliver on its promises" and "tends to interfere with schoolwork". The items saturating the factor appear to reinforce the negative image of the psychologist: resistance to change, mistrust and fear are the expressions reflecting teachers' negative feelings about psychologists' work. Reliability, however, is low (0.50).

The third extracted component (14.36% of total variance), labeled "desire for change in the role", once again calls attention to the mistrust that teachers have in the psychologist's work. Teachers thus say that psychologists should have more professional training (0.71), should share their work with teachers to a greater extent (0.69), and that there should be more opportunities for teachers holding a degree in psychology (0.69). Though teachers feel that psychologists do useful and essential work at school, they express a sense of mistrust and, at times, fear. In addition, a large number of teachers feel that psychological intervention should not be offered by psychologists, but by teachers with a background in psychology. The reason cited is that they want "to know what's going on, and not be left out of the loop".



**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHOOL.  
 EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAYS AND  
 ANALYSIS OF EXPECTATIONS AND TYPES OF WORK**

Item	Factor	Component [1]			Reliability coefficients	
		I	II	III	Rit[2]	$\alpha$
1. Psychology helps people.	<u>Usefulness</u>	<b>0.88</b>	0.09	-0.18	0.67	<b>0.80</b>
2. Psychology can be useful at school.	(of the psychologist at school)	<b>0.86</b>	0.13	-0.23	0.67	
3. Psychology promises much but does little.	<u>Uselessness</u> (of the psychologist at school)	-0.39	.082	<b>0.64</b>	0.35	<b>0.50</b>
4. Psychology does more harm than good at school.		-0.08	-0.07	<b>0.79</b>	0.37	
5. Psychology interferes with schoolwork.		-0.12	-0.16	<b>0.67</b>	0.30	
6. Psychologists should get a specific graduate degree before working at school.	<u>Desire for change in the role</u> (of the psychologist at school)	0.14	<b>0.71</b>	0.26	0.30	<b>0.46</b>
7. Psychologists should work in contact with teachers.		0.29	<b>0.69</b>	-0.04	0.29	
8. Teachers with a degree in psychology should deal with problems at school.		-0.21	<b>0.69</b>	-0.16	0.23	
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<b>1.846</b>	<b>1.64</b>	<b>1.498</b>		
	<i>% Variance explained</i>	<b>26.72</b>	<b>19.20</b>	<b>14.36</b>		

[1] Results of principal component analysis after factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization. Correlation between factors: I vs II 7,015E-02, I vs III -,157; II vs III 1,565E-02

[2] Corrected item/total scale correlation coefficient; Cronbach's alpha

As regards the problems that teachers report encountering every day, four factors that explain 61.6% of total variance emerged from principal component analysis.

The first extracted component, difficulties in managing organizational changes, clearly expresses the teachers' pessimistic view of the school organization, disciplinary efforts, teachers' meetings, and the increasingly hectic pace of school life. School reform has also obliged teachers to acquire computer skills, a move that has fueled considerable resistance. The greatest difficulties are found in assessing students, in the use of new testing methods for learning processes. The call for psychological support arises chiefly from the awareness of these difficulties. Revealing oneself and thus feeling dependent on others inevitably generates ambivalence. The disdain that many teachers express towards psychologists can be seen as a true manic defense.

The second extracted component, handling difficult students (11.992% of total variance), calls attention to the difficulties that teachers have with student's behavior in class. The factor is saturated by items such as children with handicaps or psychic disorders, and the presence of foreign students or students who create problems for the others. It is thus handling the class and dealing with diversity that disorients the teacher. Once again, the school feels that it has to acknowledge a limit, to call in a psychologist, an action that regularly deludes expectations. At this point, it is clear that psychologists can work only if they put themselves "at the service" of the school; or in other words, if they are able to "convince" teachers that their work "depends" on them. We can accept depending on other people only if we think we can dominate them.





DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

The third factor regards similar problems, viz., the student's commitment, motivation and study. Here again, teachers see the psychologist's work as essential, and this generates insecurity about their role and weakness because of the impotence they feel.

The fourth extracted component, ability to handle relational difficulties (8.302% of total variance), expresses teachers' difficulties in dealing with their own and others' emotions. The items saturating the factor reinforce the picture of fragility in interpersonal relationships. These problems affect both the area of relationships with students and the area of relationships with colleagues, as well as dealings with parents. Teachers would like the psychologist to mediate in this tangle of relationships, but without "stealing the scene", and this is impossible.

Item	Factor	Components[1]				Rit[2]	α[3]
		I	II	III	IV		
1. School organization.	<u>Difficulties in managing organizational changes</u>	<b>0.79</b>	0.24	0.32	-0.52	0.42	<b>0.77</b>
2. Teaching aids.		<b>0.75</b>	0.20	0.09	0.08	0.71	
3. Connections between school and extramural life.		<b>0.71</b>	0.25	0.41	-0.42	0.61	
4. Methods for testing students' abilities and attainment		<b>0.66</b>	0.32	0.37	-0.36	0.47	
5. Effects of school autonomy		<b>0.56</b>	0.12	0.02	-0.32	0.53	
6. Presence of students who create problems for the others.	<u>Handling difficult students</u>	0.08	<b>0.83</b>	0.10	-0.39	0.67	<b>0.77</b>
7. Students with handicaps or psychic disorders.		0.40	<b>0.79</b>	0.07	-0.14	0.59	
8. Presence of one or more foreign students.		0.16	<b>0.76</b>	0.05	0.02	0.56	
9. Class discipline.		0.18	<b>0.71</b>	0.23	-0.39	0.49	
10. Motivation to learn and ability to study.	<u>Problems with student commitment, motivation and study</u>	0.07	0.14	<b>0.83</b>	-0.33	0.54	<b>0.69</b>
11. Students' poor educational attainment.		0.21	0.12	<b>0.80</b>	-0.02	0.55	
12. Difficulties in reaching the goals set for the school.		0.38	0.12	<b>0.72</b>	-0.26	0.44	
13. Difficulties in relationships between teachers.	<u>Ability to handle relational difficulties</u>	0.20	0.16	0.17	<b>-0.79</b>	0.59	<b>0.75</b>



**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHOOL.  
 EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAYS AND  
 ANALYSIS OF EXPECTATIONS AND TYPES OF WORK**

14. Student-teacher relationships.		0.44	0.39	0.32	-0.75	0.63
15. Teaching methods and programs.		0.32	0.18	0.43	-0.74	0.56
16. Dealings with parents.		0.35	0.33	-0.7	-0.58	0.42
	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	3.318	3.033	3.215	2.655	
	<i>% Variance explained</i>	32.257	11.992	9.211	8.302	

[1] Results of principal component analysis after factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization. Correlation between factors: I vs II 0,242, I vs III 0,18 ; I vs IV -0,276; II vs III 0,12; II vs IV -0,23; III vs IV -0,21

[2] Corrected item/total scale correlation coefficient

[3] Cronbach's alpha

Section M of the questionnaire, which deals with how useful the psychologist can be in addressing specific problems at school, is also significant.

The first extracted component (which explains 32.516% of total variance) sheds light on the contribution that the psychologist can make in updating and improving educational provision. There is a deeply felt need to train faculty members in areas of knowledge outside their own subjects, to be able to manage organizational changes, and to take effective action in the students' learning processes and study methods. This factor is closely correlated with the fifth extracted component, which highlights the teachers' desire to master innovative methods for education research and teaching experiments. Behind this need for training, there is thus a deeper and more vital need, that of enhancing one's own professional standing.

The second extracted component expresses the teachers' need to deal with such problematic conduct on the part of students as bullying and acts of violence, or with issues associated with sex education, health and disease prevention. These are alarming phenomena and delicate issues that the teacher must be prepared to handle should they arise. With the dread of not being able to deal appropriately with misconduct or keep the class under control, teachers are torn between the desire and the fear of abdicating their image in favor of others.

These issues are indirectly tied in with the third and fourth extracted components, which emphasize the teachers' fears in managing relational dynamics, with their colleagues, but above all with their students. This reinforces the image of the insecure and fearful teacher, with a low sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000), as has also been reported in numerous studies, and is now widely discussed in the pedagogical literature.



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

	Factor	I	II	III	IV	V	Rit[2]	α[3]
1. Training teachers in areas of knowledge outside their own subjects.	<u>Contributions to updating and improving educational provision</u>	<b>0.84</b>	0.73	0.24	-0.32	-0.33	0.75	<b>0.82</b>
2. Consultation in preparing and implementing school autonomy projects.		<b>0.81</b>	0.16	0.10	-0.24	-0.39	0.64	
3. Consultation in improving educational provision.		<b>0.74</b>	0.14	0.28	-0.28	-0.42	0.63	
4. Work with classes and in study methods and techniques.		<b>0.71</b>	0.04	0.27	-0.36	-0.09	0.50	
5. Training teachers in meta-learning.		<b>0.58</b>	0.05	0.49	-0.47	-0.33	0.59	
6. Discussions and lessons about sexual and affective issues.	<u>Miscellaneous education courses</u>	0.04	<b>0.92</b>	0.10	-0.22	-0.10	0.80	<b>0.85</b>
7. Work with students on bullying and violence.		0.04	<b>0.84</b>	0.16	-0.33	-0.17	0.72	
8. Discussions and lessons about health issues.		0.19	<b>0.81</b>	0.04	-0.02	-0.18	0.64	
9. Discussions with students regarding aspects of their behavior.		0.03	<b>0.75</b>	0.31	-0.32	-0.06	0.61	
10. Work with students who have learning problems.	<u>Work specifically addressing students</u>	0.18	0.06	<b>0.85</b>	-0.29	-0.01	0.64	<b>0.71</b>
11. Work with students who have particular handicaps or deficiencies		0.11	0.11	<b>0.75</b>	-0.02	-0.28	0.49	
12. Analyzing students' interests and aptitudes for orientation purposes.		0.30	0.27	<b>0.73</b>	-0.21	-0.08	0.47	

[1] Results of principal component analysis after factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization. Correlation between factors: I vs II 7,313E-02, I vs III ,213; I vs IV -,317; I vs V -,247; II vs III ,144; II vs IV -,219; II vs V-,159; III vs IV -,229; III vs V ,178; IV vs V ,178

[2] Corrected item/total scale correlation coefficient

[3] Cronbach's alpha

## CONCLUSIONS

As emerges from the discussion of results, educational psychologists work individually at school rather than as a consolidated research group, concentrating mostly on advising parents and teachers and on working with the class.

These are services which limit the scope of psychological action: no support is provided in learning processes, either for students or for the difficulties encountered by the teacher.



**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND SCHOOL.  
EVALUATION OF POTENTIAL EVOLUTIONARY PATHWAYS AND  
ANALYSIS OF EXPECTATIONS AND TYPES OF WORK**

In addition, the questionnaires administered to teachers indicate a clear sense of mistrust and fear in connection with the psychologists' work. Until these barriers are overcome, there can be no dialog between the two professional roles, thus making it unlikely that they can cooperate in putting their respective skills to use for the good of the school community.

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DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

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