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**School Failure in Latency-Age Children: Between Cause and Consequence
A Psychodynamic Psychological Reading in Light of Psychic Functioning and
Knowledge Investment**

Saadia Djeloud^{1*}, Abla Zioui²

¹ University of Algiers 2 Abu Qasim Saadallah, Clinical and Experimental
Psychology Laboratory, Faculty of Social Sciences (Algeria),
saadia.djeloud@univ-alger2.dz

² University of Algiers 2 Abu Qasim Saadallah, Clinical and Experimental
Psychology Laboratory, Faculty of Social Sciences (Algeria),
ziouiabla@yahoo.com

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***Corresponding author**

Abstract:

This research paper addresses the phenomenon of school failure among primary school children (aged 6-12) from a psychodynamic perspective, based on a central question: is failure a cause or a consequence? The study seeks to highlight that, in many cases, failure does not reflect a real cognitive deficiency, but rather is a psychological symptom that masks psychological disorders and an inability to apply knowledge during the latency period. The research relied on a theoretical-analytical approach, reviewing psychodynamic literature related to psychological and cognitive functioning and analyzing the psychological factors leading to academic failure. The study concludes that it is necessary to reconsider the issue of school failure without reducing it to a cognitive issue.

Keywords: School failure; latency period; psychological employment; knowledge investment.

Introduction:

School failure has always been a topic of interest to researchers and specialists in psychology and education alike, especially when it comes to primary school (ages 6-12), which is a critical stage in personality development and adaptive skills. However, children who fail are often judged from a purely normative perspective that reduces their failure to cognitive deficiency or weakness in one aspect of intelligence, without paying sufficient attention to the deep psychological dimension that, in many cases, is the main driver of this failure.

Clinical studies indicate that a large proportion of children who fail at school do not suffer from any significant impairment in their cognitive abilities¹, as psychological assessments reveal normal or average intelligence levels. This leads us to assume that what hinders their academic achievement goes beyond the cognitive aspect. From a psychodynamic perspective, unconscious psychological factors, relational factors, and factors specific to the child's personal history are intertwined, making failure a symptom that leads us to understand the child's psychological functioning more deeply than standardized test scores can express.

The central hypothesis of this article is that school failure during the latency period is most often the result and symptom of psychological disorders, and that a psychodynamic approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of this complex human phenomenon. In recent years, this topic has received increasing attention in Algeria, particularly with studies confirming that academic difficulties are often an indicator of internal psychological distress that goes beyond the educational institution.²

This paper addresses the aforementioned issue in three main areas: First, it clarifies the concept of school failure within the framework of the psychodynamic approach. Second, it provides a theoretical overview of the latency period as the temporal setting for the manifestations and problems of children's cognitive investment. Third, it presents an interpretive psychological reading of the situation of failure in light of the concepts of psychological employment and knowledge investment disorder.

THE FIRST TOPIC: THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL FAILURE IN LIGHT OF THE PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

This topic breaks down the stereotypical image of school failure, as it addresses in its first section the shift and transition in the understanding of school failure from a purely social and cognitive framework to a deep psychological

dimension, highlighting failure as a meaningful symptom in the child's psychological economy, which is detailed in two complementary sections.

First requirement: The limitations of traditional approaches and the need for an interpretive shift to the psychological dimension

This requirement addresses the limitations of monolithic interpretations of school failure and highlights the need to integrate the psychological dimension into the assessment of the child who is failing at school. This is done through two sections that combine a critical analysis of prevailing approaches and theoretical contributions to the analytical perspective in this field.

First Section: School Failure: The Interpretive Shift to the Psychological Dimension

Among the many perspectives that have gained widespread popularity in the study and interpretation of school failure historically, we find sociological explanations that attribute it to class and social differences, while cognitive interest has focused on absent or deficient cognitive abilities. However, clinical reality and the results of studies conducted in this context contradict these explanations. For example, statistics reveal that many children from disadvantaged social backgrounds excel, while children from well-off families regress despite their recognized natural intelligence³.

The psychoanalytic approach to understanding failure began with the work of Freud, who noted in his book “Repression, Symptoms, and Anxiety” that academic failure arises in most cases from functional repression, whereby the ego abandons a function because that function has acquired sexual meaning for the subject.⁴

This perspective has allowed for a deeper understanding of academic failure, as it becomes a symptom that carries meaning in the individual's psychological economy, rather than merely a direct functional deficiency or shortcoming⁵

In this context, researchers such as Gibello (Gibello, 2009) have distinguished between an actual disorder in cognitive abilities and what they call “pathological cognitive dysregulation,” which manifests itself in inconsistent performance across multiple cognitive domains while maintaining a mostly normal IQ⁶. A child who is good at math but unable to read, or vice versa, is not necessarily intellectually disabled, but rather a child with a particular psychological disposition who expresses his or her suffering through the medium of the educational process.

Second section: School failure as a psychological symptom

Giving failure the status of a symptom means that we should ask ourselves what this failure tells us, rather than reducing it to an explanation. Bernard Gibello (2009)⁷ argues that intelligence disorders should be considered symptoms that have meaning in the psychological economy of the examinee⁸. This theoretical shift is fundamental: instead of looking for the absence of abilities, we look for the presence of a psychological obstacle that prevents the use of existing abilities.

Demogeot (2009) reinforces this position when she observes in her clinical context that the prevailing tendency today is to reduce school failure in children to cognitive or intelligence aspects, while neglecting the complex psychological mechanisms involved in learning processes⁹

The academic failure described in many studies is not the result of a lack of intelligence, but may express the impossibility of escaping the grip of separation anxiety, or a close connection to issues of separation and individuality¹⁰.

Similarly, in the Algerian context, the work of Remmas and Cherif (2018) has shown that academic difficulties are often an indicator of psychological distress in adolescents linked to multiple factors affecting the educational institution, the family, and peer groups¹¹

Although their research concerns adolescence, its theoretical foundations find clear extension in the study of academic failure among children in the latency period.

THE SECOND TOPIC: THE LATENCY PERIOD AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD WHO FAILS

Following the psychodynamic interpretation of failure in the first topic, this topic seeks to deepen our understanding of the nature of the stage addressed by our study. The first section addresses the characteristics of the latency period and its role in the dynamics of learning, while the second section presents a reading of the psychological functioning of the failing child and the disruption of knowledge investment.

First requirement: Characteristics of the latency period and learning dynamics

This requirement focuses on the critical developmental stage that represents a pivotal space for knowledge investment or failure, in two branches that present its psychodynamic characteristics and actual effects on the learning process.

First section: Characteristics of the latency period (psychodynamic perspective):

The latency period (6-12 years) is one of the most interesting stages at the intersection of psychological and cognitive development. At the libidinal level, it is a period of relative calm following the resolution of the Oedipus complex and the intensification of repression, allowing the child to invest their psychological energy in intellectual and relational activities ¹². According to Laplanche and Pontalis (1967), one of the most notable features of this stage is the shift in the subject's investments towards parental identifications and the development of sublimation, which provides the child with the pleasure of observation and symbolization¹³.

However, this apparent calm and ease is not the norm for all children's psychological development, as the supposed tranquility of the latency period is often disrupted by symptoms such as psychomotor instability, memory impairment, and attention deficit (Demogeot, 2009, p. 23). Arbisio-Lesourd (2007) therefore called for a more accurate and complex view of children in the latency period, because this stage, which characterizes children in primary school, is not immune to psychological disorders and symptoms.¹⁴

On the cognitive level, Piaget (1972) documents a qualitative transition from the preoperational stage to the concrete operational stage, where logical thinking is characterized by its liberation from the constraints of direct sensory perception¹⁵. Meyer (2015) shows that Piaget's stage extends from two years to 11-12 years of age, including the preparation and organization of concrete operations up to the age of 7-8, followed by the completion stage ¹⁶. The author also notes that a child may master one aspect of arithmetic but fail at another, confirming that development is not necessarily linear¹⁷.

Second section: Investing in knowledge and learning dynamics during the dormant period:

The concept of “knowledge investment” is one of the key concepts in understanding school failure. Learning is not a neutral process that takes place in isolation from the child's inner life, but is, in essence, a psychological movement that requires a desire for knowledge, the ability to think, and the possibility of investing in the subject of knowledge. Demogeot (2009) points out that focusing

on the latency period seems fruitful because it opens up the possibility of exploring the roots of thinking and the actual ability to learn.¹⁸

In this context, Golse (2001) puts forward the idea that the desire for knowledge and learning stems from a drive to mastery, which aims to master and control a subject, and from which sexual curiosity is born first, followed by intellectual curiosity thanks to sublimation¹⁹. Consequently, any disturbance in this psychological dynamic has a direct impact on the child's ability to invest cognitively in school subjects. Winnicott et al. (1975) describe that the ability to learn is based on the child's gradual psychological independence through “the ability to be alone in the presence of another,” and that the transitional space between the inside and the outside is the cradle in which creativity and thinking grow²⁰.

Here, the importance of the pleasure of thinking described by Chiantaretto (1992) as the internal driver of learning becomes apparent, as children invest in the knowledge of identification with adults during the latency period, and the pleasure of learning becomes a motivation for acquisition²¹. Conversely, when this vital psychological movement falters or is disrupted, the desire for knowledge fades or turns into resistance and rejection, which in educational reality translates into failure and academic failure.

second requirement: Psychological employment of the failing child and knowledge investment disorders

This requirement addresses, through specialized clinical analysis, the mechanisms by which psychological disorders become obstacles to knowledge investment, divided into three sections, beginning with a focus on the ability to think in itself, then looking at the impact of certain unconscious and relational psychological phenomena in disrupting and hindering knowledge investment.

First section: Psychological functioning and impaired thinking ability

Psychological functioning is a concept that describes how a child organizes their inner life in relation to external reality. A child suffering from psychological functioning disorder cannot necessarily make full use of his or her latent cognitive abilities, because these abilities are constrained by emotional and psychological limitations that prevent them from being activated.

Bion's theory²² on thought containers and the maternal “alpha” function is one of the cornerstones of the psychodynamic understanding of the foundations of thinking. a child who does not receive sufficient containment and interpretation

of his psychological products from his environment will gradually be unable to assimilate this thinking apparatus and make it part of his internal structure²³ (Demogeot, 2009, pp. 18-19). One of the painful paradoxes in this regard is that some children experience what Boimare (2000) calls “fear of learning,” meaning that immersion in subjects of knowledge arouses fears of facing internal chaos²⁴

At the cognitive level, cognitive functioning refers to the way in which a child processes information and constructs concepts. Coq and Gérardin (2021) have shown that a child's psychological development is based on two main poles: emotion and cognition, which are intertwined from the beginning of life in a relational system that supports the construction of thought and relationships with others²⁵.

Therefore, any imbalance in one of these two poles does not remain confined to its own sphere, but inevitably affects the other pole.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the image of the failing child is what Gibello (2009) described as “pathological cognitive dysregulation”; a condition in which the child has mastery of certain areas of knowledge but not others, despite having normal or near-normal intelligence. This confirms that failure in these cases does not reflect a lack of ability, but rather a disturbance in the psychological containers of this ability and in the dynamics of its employment.

Second section: The false cognitive self and school failure:

One of the most procedural concepts in approaching the concept we adopt for school failure is the concept of the "false cognitive self " developed by Haguenaer (2016) based on Winnicott's term, which refers to a distorted relationship with knowledge based on the unconscious use of misunderstood concepts in the context of adapting to the demands of the environment²⁶ . Some children are able to “perform” knowledge rather than truly acquire it, responding with what is expected of them rather than what they actually understand, thereby developing a false learning that is revealed in subsequent evaluative situations through collapse and failure.

This group of children often suffers from what Demogeot (2009) describes as an inability to meet the expectations of teachers and parents, and from silent suffering that accumulates under the mask of superficial performance²⁷ . Here, failing school becomes an expression not of inability, but a sign of the collapse of the false self when superficial knowledge is no longer sufficient to cope with increasing academic demands.

It is worth noting that Meyer (2015), in his study of Vygotsky's theory, emphasizes that teachers and the social environment play a pivotal role in pushing children into the zone of proximal development, and that deprivation of this support hinders the development and utilization of intelligence.²⁸

This partly explains why some children fail in unsupportive environmental conditions, despite having sufficient abilities.

Third section: The impact of the primary relationship on knowledge investment:

The analytical approach generally holds that the roots of learning ability are deeply connected to the primary relational experience between the child and primary caregivers. Golse (1985) asserts that the construction of “idea containers” in children is closely linked to the mother's ability to contain their emotions and thoughts and return them in a form that can be represented and reflected upon²⁹. When this containment function is disrupted early in life, the child finds himself facing a profound structural problem related to the basic ability to think and learn.

Based on this, the concept of attachment becomes directly relevant to academic failure, as Demogeot (2009) demonstrated in her comparative study that children with an anxious attachment style are less engaged in cognitive and academic tasks than their secure peers³⁰.

Emotional security, as a “secure base”³¹, forms the foundation from which children explore the cognitive realm.

The internalizing dimension cannot be overlooked in this analysis, as Remmas and Cherif (2018) that failure to identify with parental ideals leads to a diversion of libidinal investment away from the subject of study toward alternative subjects, which explains the phenomenon of “unconscious rejection of parental identifications” that the child translates into a reluctance to learn (Remmas & Cherif, 2018, p. 533). Although this dynamic is clearly evident in adolescence, its seeds are often sown during the latency period itself, when the child feels a painful disconnect between what is expected of them academically and what is valued by their social and family environment.

In the context of cognitive employment specifically, clinical studies have shown that in-depth psychological assessments of some failing children using standardized tests such as the WISC contradict initial diagnostic expectations. As the results reveal that these children possess cognitive abilities that contradict the indicator of school failure, and that the psychological-emotional aspect is the main

obstacle. This is in line with the central thesis that failure is often a symptom rather than a permanent characteristic of the child.

Conclusion:

This psychodynamic reading of school failure during the latency period reveals that the phenomenon is more complex and significant than quantitative and normative indicators suggest. Failure is often not evidence of a lack of cognitive abilities, but rather an indicator of the child's complex psychological dynamics and functioning, which are often obscured by a simplistic interpretation that reduces the child's abilities to normative indicators. The most common pattern in clinical practice is that of a child of normal or average intelligence who fails academically, not because of a deficiency in cognitive abilities, but because, as Freud suggests, the function has acquired an unconscious meaning that prevents its use.

This approach requires a shift in the way psychologists assess and intervene, moving beyond simply measuring intelligence or performance skills to a comprehensive understanding of the child's psychological functioning in the context of their relational history and family dynamics. This psychodynamic approach also necessitates restoring the strategic importance of the latency period in early intervention and using projective assessment tools in parallel with intelligence and cognitive ability tests to arrive at a more comprehensive reading.

The most difficult diagnostic equation in clinical practice remains the distinction between a genuine disorder in cognitive functioning and a disorder in the use of cognitive functioning, because both sometimes lead to the same result—as in some cases of school failure—while each requires a different intervention. Simply addressing this question with sufficient scientific rigor to conduct research in this area is fair to every child who has experienced or will experience school failure.

¹ (Demogeot, 2009, p. 12)

² Remmas, R., & Cherif, H. (2018). Désinvestissement scolaire et troubles relationnels avec les parents: Le cas d'adolescents algériens. *مجلة العلوم النفسية والتربوية*, 4(1), 532.

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⁴ Freud, S. (2011). Inhibition, symptôme et angoisse (éd. 7e éd., Vol. 7). (P. U. France, Éd.) Presses Universitaires de France, p 6.

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⁶ Chikh, K. (2016). Échec scolaire électif: vers un modèle de pensée de cette déficience intellectuelle dysharmonique. Éditions universitaires européennes, pp. 30-31

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