

Observing and supporting: an action research for preventing maladjustment in pre-schoolers

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A three years action-research project aimed at empowering the pre-school teachers' and caregivers' observational skills, mastering two observational tools, the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) and the Pre-Schooler Socio-Affective Profile (PSA). As the teachers themselves increasingly denounce that "difficult" children are more and more frequent within the educational contexts, improving their own ability to cope with them becomes a professional priority. This study presents some observational data of children considered as having behavioural problems inside pre-school and the methodology adopted during the training process.

The shared observations and the ability to better observe children, with the help of the two tools, allowed teachers and caregivers to plan individualized educational interventions, supporting the children's well being within the pre-school context. A case study, focused on a subject with a disorganized pattern of attachment, confirmed the importance of integrating the teachers' representations of the child with the outcomes of observational data collected with these two reliable observational tools.

In our current social organization, the preschoolers' teachers are the adults, besides parents, who can be considered as privileged witnesses of the quality of children's development. In the educational practice, it looks urgent to plan specific trainings aimed to improve these teachers' ability to handle and use specific observational tools. The teachers themselves increasingly denounce that children presenting developmental or adaptation difficulties are more frequent within pre-school contexts, reporting at the same time their own difficulties to cope with children's behavioural problems. From our point of view, one main goal of training would be to enable the pre-school teachers to discriminate those untoward aspects or maladjusted forms of children's daily behaviour, of which it could be adequately taken care within the educational context, from more severe forms of disease.

In the first case, to plan specific and individualized interventions becomes a professional priority for the working group of teachers. In this sense they need to be supported and empowered to use reliable observational tools. On the other hand, more important socio-affective troubles, which can be considered indicators of possible developmental risk, need to be duly reported to local psychological

and social work services. In our experience, this kind of watershed is often hardly recognized by teachers.

This study presents some results of an action-research project aimed at collecting observational data of children inside pre-schools, in order to discuss them with their teachers, to improve their observational skills.

Hypotheses and Aims of the Action-Research

A three-years training and research project involved 30 preschool teachers of children from 2 ½ to 6 years old and 15 professional caregivers of toddlers (less than 2 ½) in the municipality of Trento, using an observational tool based on attachment theory, the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT; Bretherton, Ridgeway and Cassidy, 1990).

We hypothesized that the internal working models of attachment relationships that children had interiorized within the relationship with each parent could influence the quality of their staying inside the educational context and, specifically, the quality of their daily interactions with teachers and peers. Even if the present status of attachment theories has precisely stated that the attachment system does not represent the wholeness of the parent-child relationship (Main, 1999), knowing attachment representations of children, in order to better deal with them, seems to be an important starting point of the supporting educational work requested to teachers, in case of troubled relation-

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ships or forms of maladjustment. Trying to modify some insecure aspects of the children's representational state of themselves as related to others, as a prior aim of the educational intervention of teachers, was one goal of the present project, developing the suggestions of John Bowlby (1973; 1988). For some children, the observational results obtained applying the ASCT, were integrated with teacher's evaluation of the social and emotional ways of adaptation to the educational context, using a standardized instrument, the Preschool Socio-Affective Profile (PSA; Dumas, La Frenière, Capuano, & Durning, 1997).

Our first aim was to empower and refine the teachers' observational skills, with specific reference to some key aspects of preschool socio-affective experience. Moreover, to improve their capacity to construct more individualized educational interventions, working also as *facilitators* in the relationship with parents. Finally, in a longer term perspective, we aimed at building up a group of specifically trained professional caregivers and teachers, who could better master the application of adequate observational tools. This group was supposed to be able to play a key role in supporting the educational work of other teachers and caregivers on the territory, in terms of recognition of maladjusted behaviours, planning individualized interventions and establishing, when needed, a collaboration network with local psychologists and social workers.

METHOD

Sample

31 children, aged from 3 to 6 years (mean age = 4.6; M=21, F=10) were observed inside their pre-school context. They were considered by their teachers as showing some difficulties in daily institutional routines. The teachers' motivation to observe each of them was analyzed, following a common outline, that included teachers' as well as parents' representations of each child. The teacher's image of the child referred to the quality of his perceived relationships with peers, with his teachers/caregivers and within the family context. In order to have an integrated evaluation of the child's behaviours inside his different ecological niches, also the parents' viewpoints were taken into account, as they were collected during the daily meetings or when specific talks were scheduled.

Procedures

The first year of training focused on two main aspects. After the participants were introduced to the theoretical ba-

sis of attachment theory, the ASCT, already applied by the researchers in other preschool settings, was presented. The collected data were discussed and matched with the teachers'/caregivers' representations of children, as they were summarized in their motivation for in-depth observation of children. During the second year, a second observational tool was introduced, the PSA, suited to younger children, from 2,5 years of age. In this phase the participants started to experiment by themselves the use of these two observational tools within their own pre-school contexts, regularly supported and supervised during the training sessions. In the third year a working group, called "research laboratory", was formed. During laboratory meetings each participant presented, in turn, her own representation of a specific child's socio-emotional situation, adding the coded observations made in her own educational context. Starting from these materials, an accurate analysis, a definition of, and an individualized intervention plan were carried out within the laboratory group.

Instruments

The Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT), initially developed by Bretherton and colleagues (1990) with regard to doll-play completion for pre-school children (3-7 years), has undergone a variety of specific modifications and procedures in the strive to evaluate the structure of the attachment internal working models during middle childhood. The shared purpose of many studies (Oppenheim, Emde, & Wamboldt, 1996; Oppenheim, Emde, & Warren, 1997; Verschueren & Marcoen, 1999) has been to focus the assessment on the narrative skills and the development of empathic competences that enable children to complete incomplete plots.

In the present study we adopted the original battery of five stories, proposed by Bretherton, Ridgeway and Cassidy (1990), which introduces themes related to attachment (the spilled juice, the hurt knee, the monster in the bedroom, the departure from and the reunion with parents), preceded by a warm-up story with happy/neutral content. Detailed verbal and behavioural transcriptions were made of the videotaped story completions. These transcriptions also included notes on the emotions of the subjects (postures, tone of the voice, facial expression and quality of the manipulation of the dolls and the props). Verbatim records were also made of the tester's prompts. Each child was observed using the ASCT inside pre-school setting. Before the test was administered, a brief period for familiarization with the observer was established, with a non-specific narrative task, during which the children were free to draw, narrate and discuss a warm-up story. The observational sessions were videotaped by a teacher well known by the child, who served as an emotional point of reference while

the researcher presented him the battery of stories. Each video was observed within the training group, on the basis of a five areas observational scheme, derived from standardized coding procedures. These simplified observational schemes were created ad hoc, together with teachers/caregivers, as part of their training.

Each battery of narratives produced by each child was also separately analyzed by researchers using three different coding systems:

1) The criteria for defining the specific attachment configurations proposed by the Düsseldorf Manual (Gloger-Tippelt, König, Kapitza, Mippers, & Retzlaff 1999), which include the original indications of Inge Bretherton, integrated with some more recent suggestions made by Carol George. This coding process took place in 5 stages, which consisted in a *top-down* and *bottom-up* analysis of the narratives and the observational sessions. Each narrative was first coded on the basis of its predominant contents; then an attachment score from 1 to 4 was assigned to each story (1=very insecure, 2=insecure, 3=secure, 4=very secure). In the third stage the qualitative characteristics of the observational setting and of the child's particular contingent emotional situation were considered, as elements which can interfere with the narrative production. A global score for attachment was then given, considering the arithmetical mean of the scores of the five stories. Finally the whole narrative production was labelled on the basis of four attachment models. The secure classification (B) refers to short and clear narratives, where adults are represented as competent and protective and the child positively collaborates with the examiner. Avoidant narratives (A) are characterized by deactivation of the emotional themes, refusals of contents and prolonged silences. The children classified as ambivalent (C) show difficulties ending the story, use childish verbal expressions and tones of the voice and the characters of their tales typically act role-reversing patterns. This coding system includes also the evaluation of Disorganized (D) children (Main & Solomon, 1986; 1990), even if this category is not enough distinguished from the other two forms of severe insecurity. The D category includes chaotic and confused transcripts, with disruptive and aggressive contents and systematically the stories end in a distressing or horrifying way.

2) The second coding system was created by the Mac Arthur Narrative Group (Robinson, Mantz-Simmons, & MacFie, 1996). Here a wide range of emotional, moral and social aspects of development are considered, besides the nature of the representations of the relationships with father and mother. Moreover, specific criteria were given to focus on the child's behaviour while telling the story, the type of interaction with the examiner, his/her involvement in the task and the formal coherence of his/her linguistic production.

3) The third system was a Q-sort questionnaire, created by Bader and Pierrehumbert (1998), to be completed by the researcher on the basis of repeated observations of the videotaped sessions. The items are grouped into 9 scales, which include the predominant characteristics of the child's narrative style as well as his/her global state of mind toward the attachment issues. These scales measure: symbolic competence, feelings of protection, positive affects, representations of parental pressure, quality of the narration, lack of symbolic distance, separation anxiety, verbal irresolution and the feeling of inadequacy with respect to the narrative task.

The Pre-Schooler Socio-Affective Profile (PSA) assesses characteristic patterns of affective expression, social competence, and adjustment difficulties of pre-school children in interaction with peers and adults. It is an 80 item rating scale, self-administrated by each caregiver, on the basis of a 6-point Likert scale. We used the French version (Dumas, La Frenière, Capuano, & Durning, 1997), standardized for 979 Quebec children (La Frenière, Dubeau; Capuano, & Janosz, 1990) and for 800 French children. The PSA consists of four global scales (social competence, internalizing behaviour, externalizing behaviour, general adaptation) and eight dimensions identified as central to the quality of the child's adaptation to the preschool or day-care environment. Each scale is defined by a positive and a negative pole: *emotional expression* (Joyful-Depressive, Secure-Anxious, Tolerant-Angry); *peer relations* (Integrated-Isolated, Calm-Aggressive, Prosocial-Egocentric); *teacher-child relations* (Cooperative-Opposite, Autonomous-Dependent).

In our action-research, we used this instrument for some cases only, as a control measure of the data obtained with the ASCT. A wide data collection using the PSA with children attending day care services in the Municipality of Trento is actually in progress, but the results are not yet available.

The PSA is a questionnaire, to be filled by each caregiver, after having carefully observed the child for at least two months, with reference to behaviours and attitudes described in the 80 item. A general profile of the child results.

We present here the ASCT data for the entire sample, giving also a qualitative example of the crossing of the ASCT with the PSA.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The distribution of the attachment styles among the 31 observed children, using the Düsseldorf criteria, shows that one third of them was classified as "disorganized" (D). Moreover, as far as the main three types of attachment are

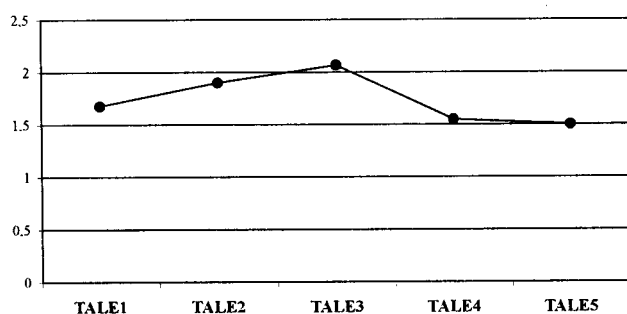


Figure 1. Trend of the Mean scores of Security (Düsseldorf coding system)

concerned, the other two third of the sample appear to be homogeneously distributed among them: 7 subjects are classified as secure (B), 7 as ambivalent (C), and 6 as avoidant (A). The narratives of the 11 D children are strongly characterized by negative events, highly destructive contents, atypical responses and linguistic confusion. The impossibility of making use of a structured strategy, in order to cope with the distress caused by the task and by the elicited attachment themes, led these children to loose the thread of the narrative process and often to enact aggression. These narrative characteristics can be matched with the indices of attachment disorganization highlighted by recent contributions (van IJzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999; Solomon, 2002; Gloger-Tippelt & König, 2002; Pierrehumbert, Nicole, Miljkovitch, & Ansermet, 2002). Furthermore, we can observe (Figure 1) that mean scores of security decrease especially in the last two stories, dealing with the severely distressing themes connected to separation/reunion with parents.

The Mac Arthur coding system permits a qualitative analysis of the narratives based on the *contents* of the tales, that is the relationships among the characters. Those children, who were labelled as behaviourally disturbed by their pre-school teachers, consistently enact negative relational themes like aggression, jealousy and punishment. Often they seem also to perceive themselves as guilty and socially isolated. Considering the *emotional expressions* produced during the narrative task, as to the Mac Arthur system, the prevailing tone is a negative one (Table 1). High levels of worry and distress related to the parental figures are relevant, as well as anger and anxiety. The literature on attachment suggested that forms of high concern referred to parents (as illness, injury, accidents, etc.) are typically connected with the ambivalent classification (C), while confusion, anxiety and panic characterize children classified as Disorganized (D).

The Mac Arthur coding system enables moreover in-depth analyses of the formal aspects of the tales, like the skills in mastering the crux of the narrative, in producing

Table 1
Prevalent emotions and contents (Mean scores) (MacArthur Coding System)

EMOTIONS		CONTENTS	
Joy	1.11	Affection/Appreciation	.52
Concern	1.67	Reparation/Guilt	.20
Sadness	.51	Personal/Injury	.38
Anger	.95	Punishment/Discipline	.54
Anxiety	.99	Exclusion	.65
Distress	1.35		

fluent speech and the ability to be concise, formulating an adequate conclusion to the narrative sequence. We can consider *the coherence of narration* as a synthetic indicator of the state of mind toward attachment with parental figures, even if with some necessary remarks. Coherence is a fundamental category in classifying the adults' state of mind toward attachment, as it happens in the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1998). Considering that cognitive and linguistic organization is continuously developing during childhood, we must take this index with some caution referring to children's transcripts, as it has been recently underlined by Jonathan Green (Green, Goldwyn, Stanley, & Peters, 2001). The range for the scores of the coherence of mind is from 0 to 9 and the point 5 can be considered as a discriminant threshold. Low scores (from 0 to 5) indicate an inadequate understanding of the core of the tale, connected with incoherent shifts, while high scores (from 6 to 9) demonstrate the ability to manage the conflict of the story, offering a likely resolution. In our sample, the mean scores present a spread distribution, from 3 to 8, which can be attributed to the age differences of the observed children (from 4 to 6 years). In another study, we have pointed out that, as expected, the mean scores of coherence decrease as the level of the children's inner emotional difficulties increases (Ongari, Tomasi, & Zoccatelli, 2002). On the contrary, the more they feel secure, the more they are able to constructively cope with the distress evoked by the battery of stories, remaining able to collaborate with the examiner and to invest themselves in the narrative performance.

Finally, using the Q-sort procedure, created by Pierrehumbert, Karmaniola, Sieye, Meister, Miljkovitch, & Halfon, (1996), it is possible to arrange evaluations deriving from the videotaped sessions into a forced distribution of items, which takes the form of a gaussian curve. The scores (from 1 to 7) of each subject are distributed on 9 scales evaluating the children's *performances* (symbolic competence, narrative structure, lack of symbolic distance, hesitations during the narrative task), as well as the *con-*

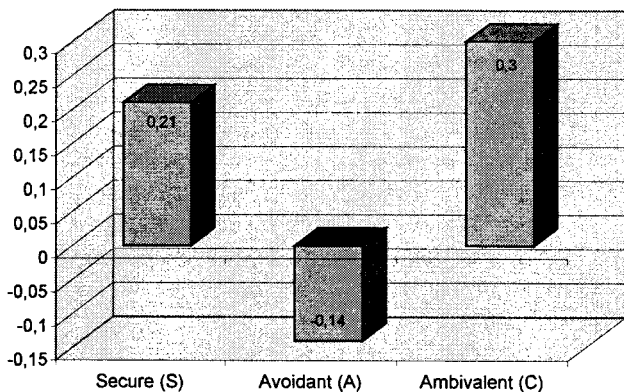


Figure 2. Correlations between the Mean Scores and the Prototypes (S, A and C) (CCH Q-sort procedure)

tents and the *emotional tone* (a feeling of being protected by parents, positive affects, separation's anxiety and parental pressure). In our sample, the mean scores are homogeneously distributed, with a range from point 3,5 to point 4,5.

The Q-sort procedure provides a comparison of the scores with the attachment Prototypes in a three-way classification: Secure (S), Avoidant (A) and Preoccupied (C). The Prototypes, as they have been empirically defined Pierrhumbert et al. (1996), synthesized the general patterns of functioning of the three main categories of attachment. In order to analyze the possible correlations between the behaviours of our children with the characteristics of the Prototypes, we adopted a canonical analysis. Here each subject can be considered as a variable and the created variable puts the subjects in a maximal correlation. The subjects can be placed within an ideal triangle, whose vertexes are the Prototypes (S, A, C) and where the canonical variables are constituted by the three orthogonal axes: Security (S) as opposed to Insecurity, which is divided into the two modalities, Avoidant (A) and Ambivalent (C). The Disorganized (D) classification has been not yet considered in this kind of analysis. Figure 2 shows the correlation between the mean scores of the sample and the Prototypes. The examined children positively correlated with the Ambivalent (C) Prototype. This result confirmed the evaluation of the attachment obtained with the Düsseldorf system.

A case study

After having discussed the general characteristics of the narratives of our sample, we will produce here a case study, which can better illustrate the methodology used

during the action-research training with teachers and caregivers, with the different steps that have characterized it.

Dan is a 5 years and 2 months old boy, attending pre-school in a little mountain village. From the teachers' viewpoint, even if Dan looks interested in participating to shared activities with peers, he looks unable to find "the right way" to interact with them. The daily relationship with the teachers constitutes a very big deal too, as it is very difficult to him to cope with rules. Dan often behaves provokingly and his range of emotional expressions is highly restricted and forced into a sort of stereotyped laugh, in whatever circumstance. Although he looks cognitively competent and wishing to play, his performances appear ultimately poor and incomplete: he often soils and destroys his own products.

The parents' viewpoint, particularly his mother's one, has been collected during the daily exchange while accompanying and picking him up from pre-school. She is partially aware of the emotional difficulties of her son, that induce to her feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. So, she compels teachers asking for help. At the same time she perceives her husband as more assertive and less anxious. She depicts Dan having a troubled relationship with his toddler brother. At home Dan is considered as not yet autonomous, lazy, and always trying to run away from the actual context into an imaginary and virtual world, moreover full of monsters and fearful.

The ASCT procedure applied to Dan leads to a Disorganized (D) classification of attachment. His transcript looks confused and severely incoherent, where narrative sequences are recurrently repeated, without reaching a likely resolution. Prevalent contents of aggression, destruction, pain and accidents match with his hyperactive movements and with his non-motivated bursts of laughter, as behavioural attitude while narrating. As his anxiety increases, in accordance with the stimulus offered by the tales, his language (in particular, the tone and the rhythm of his speech) tends to become more and more childish.

Two teachers subsequently completed separately two PSA questionnaires, to analyze Dan's social and emotional situation while dealing with the educational context of pre-school. The PSA profile, which is the synthesis of the coding made by 2 different observers (87% inter-coder agreement), shows a very high level of irritability, with a difficulty to tolerate and to manage frustrating experiences. Taking moreover into account his oppositeness toward the teachers and his difficulty to develop pro-social behaviours with peers, even if they really constitute a source of interest to him, Dan can be considered at risk from a psycho-social perspective (Figure3).

All the observational data, gathered by one teacher, were shared in the monthly meetings, to allow each participant to contribute to structure an adequate educational

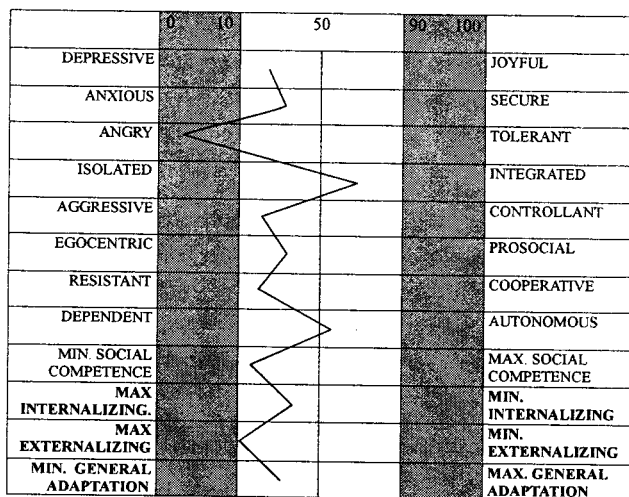


Figure 3. Dan's Pre-school Socio-Affective Profile

project. Observing Dan with the help of these two reliable tools highlighted some "new" elements related to the educational intervention planned for him, while more evident habits and well known aspects of his behaviour (as his great anxiety related to a lack of self-control and the inadequacy of his emotional responses) were confirmed. Discussing these old and new findings in the lab's sessions led to better focus on Dan's needs and resources. His cognitive competences were recognized, as his good attention and his reflective skills, together with his curiosity towards the external world, that put him in relation with others and constitute a deep drive to be active. At the same time, three fundamental Dan's needs were shown: firstly, his strong request for an individualized relationship with a supportive adult, with whom share his emotions; secondly, his need to increase his own self-esteem, to be sustained and gratified in his daily acquisitions, and finally, the search for a new adequate way of joining his peer group. Therefore the basic educational working aims were defined. Primarily, the importance to provide the possibility of an individualized relationship with a reference teacher, who could take care of Dan's emotional verbalization and expression, while giving him a containment. Secondly, to offer an indirect support to his family, by giving back to his mother and father a more positive image of their child. This project took place in two phases. Initially, a teacher, who took part to all the observation sessions and to the planning phases, organized individual or small group playing activities, in which Dan felt to be the protagonist, free to express himself. At a second stage the child and his reference teacher went out of the classroom to have 'privileged' opportunities, where they would create and narrate stories together. At the same time, scheduled conversations with his mother were provided. The progresses and the positive behaviours Dan was pro-

gressively acquiring in his daily pre-school activities and relations were reported. A constant change in this child's relationship with his reference adult, as well as with the other teachers and his peers, was observed. Dan finally appeared to be more calm and more motivated in the experiences proposed to him, less irritable and more cooperative with his peers. Also in the teachers' meetings with his mother he was beginning to be talked about in more positive terms.

The teachers, through this action research project, had the opportunity to systematize their daily observations, by focussing on the knowledge at their disposal and by organizing these elements in a more child-focused project. Moreover, in the lab group, each participant found the space where it was possible to express and share difficulties, doubts and emotions, and felt that there was a support for her educational work. The lab was characterized as a constant exchange between teachers and trainers, who could reformulate observational tools on the basis of the concrete educational institutions involved, in a together building up of meanings.

CONCLUSION

We can consider the observational procedures, even the technical and standardized ones, as dynamic processes, where sharing common aims permits the co-construction of a common knowledge, in which the different representations of children can be compared and become more responding to their real developmental needs. The shared observations by researchers and teachers, that make account of images and feelings of parents too, looked at aspects not duly considered before: what is new, what's surprising, what wasn't seen, going beyond stereotyping of mutual representations. A co-construction took place, not only a cognitive product, integrating different knowledge or evaluations, but also a space of emotional exchange of experiences. In fact each teacher had the opportunity to propose her point of view .

We became more and more aware that the knowledge on children development and on their educational needs requires an active and permanent collaboration among the adults who, at different levels, are involved in the attention to their growing up. The partiality of each specific knowing (emotional by parents, educational by professional caregivers/teachers and scientific by researchers) appears to be more and more lacking and unable to give reason about the complexity and richness of developmental processes, in relation to specific life contexts.

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