Chapter #31

USING THE ATTACHMENT LENS AND THE DYADIC EXPANSION OF CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH TO INCREASE SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT

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ABSTRACT
When in danger, either we refer to menaces or just novel situations, the brain needs firstly to connect to another human brain in order to coregulate; only after, can that brain continue process/ learn, regulate behaviors and thus adjust to the environment. The purpose of this study was to explore the connection between the quality of the pupil-teacher relationship, assessed from the attachment perspective and different school adjustment aspects. A sample of 40 educators were invited to evaluate their attachment strategies and then assess at least 3 children from their current classes (primary school); results for a total of 121 pupils were collected. First of all, educators assessed the pupil's attachment needs using the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale; then, they were asked to assess social competencies using the Social Competence Scale and the Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning Scale, as facets of school adjustment. Results show that the strength of the pupil-teacher relationship is influenced by the particularities of the attachment strategies of both parties, and, in turn, this relationship, with its 3 dimensions (closeness, conflict and dependence) impacts adjustment. Results are discussed in the light of the Dyadic Expansion of Consciousness hypothesis – in a safe relationship, both the teacher and the pupil significantly expand the learning possibilities.

Keywords: attachment strategies, emotional coregulation, school adjustment, dyadic expansion of consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adjustment, as a condition for growth and development, is a process bidirectionally linked to learning; introducing the brain to the proper state for learning implies a couple of preconditions as well, amongst which, emotional regulation is critical.

Talking about attachment in the context of teaching, Cozolino (2017, p. 65) pinpoints: "The brain has been designed to develop when stimulated. In other words, the brain lives for the sole purpose of learning. This impulse is nurtured when rewarded by persons that are fully caring. If not properly rewarded or even punished for curiosity, the brain learns to hide, avoid risks and rely on what is familiar. Even if every child is capable to learn, some children have brains, minds and souls that have been shut down".

As such, it is our purpose to bring further evidence for the view that school adjustment is critical for the capacity of adjustment of the future adult as he or she should be educated to be a competent human being while "learning" that he or she deserves to be in close, caring relationships outside the family environment as well. We join the line or research that has already proved the importance of close teacher- student relationship, but bring to your attention a novel combination of lens for analyzing the critical role of these relationship: the attachment lens is enriched by the Dyadic Expansion of Consciousness hypothesis that posits that when safe together, the teacher and child significantly expand their capacities.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. School adjustment

Adjusting to school/ educational system has been differently measured and described in time. For the purpose of this study, we considered the perspective of Ladd (1990) and Perry & Weinstein (1998) that broaden the definition to encompass the degree to which a child becomes interested, engaged, comfortable and successful in his educational environment (Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009). As such, one needs to look to the reality of adjusting considering a variety of aspects, amongst which the age is critically linked to the strength of the protective systems of the child.

In the first years of educational exposure, the adjustment refers to the extent to which preschoolers develop positive versus negative perceptions in regard to education, are comfortable or not in the classrooms, get involved or not in the tasks and other activities (Buyse et al., 2009; Ladd, 1990). Therefore, Ladd's model places a great value on the relationship in-between the child's characteristics and the support he or she gets from the main sources of reassuring connection, while considering the sources of stress as well coming from all contexts: family, educational system, community.

We embrace a perspective of the school adjustment as a complex process, with multiple facets, reflecting first of all (as the most traditional models were showing) the adjustment to academic requests, but critically adding the adjustment to socio-emotional tasks and other behavioral challenges, that in turn lead to the development of specific competencies that will be used and improved throughout the entire educational path (Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, Legkauskas, & Kepalaitė, 2018; Perry & Weinstein, 1998).

2.2. The attachment lens and emotional regulation in the educational context

Initially introduced by John Bowlby, the concept of attachment refers to an inherited system that is meant to insure survival in the psychological sense of the term. Bowlby (1973) unpacks the activation process of this system and suggests that interactions with significant others, particularly in moments of danger, are internalized in two specific mental models: the self-image and the image of others (the attachment models), that in turn organize cognitions, affects and social behaviors throughout our entire lives. What is the underlying mechanism? When attachment figures (primary caregivers) are perceived as available and ready to attend to the needs of the individual, in response, the child (and later in life, the adult) develops a sense of being secure in his/ her close relationships when perceived absent or lacking reaction, the same attachment figures can induce a terrible sense of insecurity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This experience of security/ insecurity is integrated in the internal working models of the individual, the self-image and the image of the others: if cared for and needs met, one feels worthy of love and belonging and can trust others to come when in need; as already stated above, these models influence cognitions, experiences and the capacity for emotional regulation, the expression of the need for closeness and various other behaviors, all across the life span (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2004; Mikulincer, Shaver, Pereg, 2003).

As such, our view is that when entering the educational system children bring in their backpacks their attachment system as well. Collins and Sroufe (1999) are the authors of a transactional model whereby they underline that the early attachment experiences continue to affect children's functioning and all others relationships, while children also contribute to their own development and environments by responding and engaging with others relying on the previous patterns of adaptation and expectations. As such, various children might

experience safety for the very first time in the relationship with the educators as different background factors impeded their caregivers to offer them a safe upbringing environment. Adjusting to the school environment is a task of great novelty and challenge so the activation of the attachments system is a given from the very beginning. And yet researchers are not convinced that one should consider educators attachment figure as well. Verschueren (2015) believes that the teacher-pupil relationship cannot become an attachment in the true sense of the concept for all children due to the lack of exclusivity and sustainability, the differences in potential emotional investment teachers can make as compared to the parents. Unfortunately, this unanimous view translates into problems for all parties, children, caregivers and educators, especially when insecurity is the" key word". Insecurity can activate 2 different directions:

- anxiously seeking the proximity of an attachment figure and asking for comfort or
- persistent avoidance/ keeping away, both physically and mentally, as the sole solution to minimize the exposure to situations where one could feel helpless, extremely lonely or hurt.

So, what are the difference? Research shows that preschoolers who are securely attached to their mothers are more socially competent and thus adapt easier, they become leaders in peer groups, have more positive interactions with elders, are more empathetic, more popular, cooperate better, and are evaluated by educators as having a higher level of social skills (Mitchell-Copeland, Denham & DeMuler, 1997). How about the insecure ones? Children with an avoidant attachment have poorer vocabulary, limited creativity, demonstrate hostility toward the teacher and school tasks, and denied the need for help (Geddes, 2018). Sroufe (1983) in Pianta, Steinberg and Rollins (1995) argues that pupils with histories of anxious / avoided attachment make less contact with teachers, and teachers often react mostly with fury to these children. Children with an ambivalent or resistant attachment style are prone to absenteeism, tend to develop teacher addiction behaviors, have good verbal skills that can be used to dominate and manipulate the teacher's attention and experience a constant fear of losing the educator's attention (Geddes, 2018). In general, they are perceived by teachers as vulnerable and fragile (Sroufe,1983 in Pianta, Steinberg and Rollins, 1995). Spilt and Koomen (2009), combining a qualitative and quantitative study approach, delineate several interesting findings: when teachers evaluate relationships as not to close too their pupils, they evoke feelings of ineffectiveness and that they are discouraged to invest in the child or find themselves searching for new strategies to assert influence; as well, teachers expressed more anger and helplessness concerning children they assessed as more disruptive in their class as compared to a nondisruptive child. Expanding their research, Spilt and Koomen (2012) point that the effects of the lack of teacher responsiveness might be wider when it comes to girls using disruptive behaviors to protest against the conflictual connection, whilst boys are more receptive to proactive strategies – when these are used by the teacher to regulate their behavior they are less inclined to act negatively; underlying mechanisms might be different, but irrespective of gender, children need the teacher to be involved in the relationship.

Various other studies bring arguments to show the value of a close relationship in the school environment by pinpointing the effects of a conflictual relation for specific disciplines. McCormick and O'Connor (2014) show that higher levels of teacher–child conflict are related to lower levels of reading achievement in elementary school, over and above a wide host of child, family, and teacher control variables; when teacher–child closeness across elementary school improves, this is then related to gains in reading achievement. After testing, as well, whether effects differed by gender, McCormick

& OConnor (2014) found that girls who had conflictual relationships with teachers experienced lower average levels of math achievement than did boys with conflictual relationships with teachers.

Particular values in explaining these critical aspects we found as well in the work of Dewitte and DeHouwer (2011); although not applied to the educational field, the authors research is of great interest for our purpose as it underlies the mechanisms involved in the processing of information that are the fundament for the internal working models, especially the *model of others*. Dewitte and DeHouwer (2011) points that building on a sense of trust, secure individuals inhibit the negative traits they perceive in other, a crucial inhibitory process that can be regarded as a buffer mechanism, protecting secure individuals from negative signals entering their attachment schemas (as Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, were also proposing). At the end of the spectrum, insecure individuals were found to show difficulties with inhibiting negative cues they perceive from the others, which may explain their tendency to emphasize the attachment figure's bad intentions and negative traits." Such inhibitory deficits may foster a negative appraisal of the attachment figure, which makes it more likely that insecure individuals will act in a negative manner towards their significant others. This may turn the attachment figure to withdraw support over time, confirming one's negative other-view" (Dewitte & DeHouwer 2011, p.21). Applied in the educational system, children that perceive negative traits in teachers will act in manners that will further impede their proper emotional coregulation and thus strengthen their perception of an insecure relationship, whilst the teacher as well, if not secure, will be influenced to perceive the child as problematic, disruptive, hard to handle and lower his desire to support him/her.

2.3. The dyadic expansion of consciousness hypothesis

The Dyadic Expansion of Consciousness Hypothesis (Tronick at al, 1998) relying as well on the theory of attachment, expands it upon the analysis of the mother – infant interaction in the" Face-to face Still Face Experiment". The main postulate is that" … each individual is a self-organizing system that creates its own states of consciousness—states of brain organization—which can be expanded into more coherent and complex states in collaboration with another self-organizing system. When the collaboration of two brains is successful each fulfills the system principle of increasing their coherence and complexity (Tronick at al, 1998, p. 296)." In order to fully grasp the value of this hypothesis in the educational environment, it is of paramount importance to identify the two steps of the process Tronick is describing: first, we rely on the significant relationships in our lives, hence on the brain of the significant person we interact with to help us regulate the emotions we are experiencing; if, and only when this first step is achieved, we then can have access to a wider part of our existing resources (cognitive, emotional ones); as such, we expand our knowledge and capacity to take in what is being taught/ introduced/ analyzed by the other brain, while offering back the possibility that this other brain expands as well. We teach to get taught and we allow to be taught so that we teach back!

Tronick and the collaborators (1998) point that" the process of mutual regulation, at the level of social emotional exchanges and more critically at the level of states of consciousness, determines much of the emotional, social, and representational course of the infant. When the affective regulation of interactions goes well, development proceeds apace. Increasingly, complex tasks are approached, resolved and incorporated, not by the child alone, but by the child in collaboration with others. But because of their resolution, the child expands and becomes more coherent. When failure occurs, development gets derailed and the child's complexity is limited or even reduced (i.e., the child may regress).

The effect is in the child, but the failure is a joint failure. With continued failure and the structuring that goes on around that failure, affective disorders and pathology may result (p. 297)."

Using Cozolino's lens we argue that teacher-pupil relationships are key factors in strengthening internal working models of the child; adding the Dyadic Expansion of Consciousness Hypothesis (Tronick at al, 1998) we consider that the process is reflecting back on the teacher as well. Integrating these lenses, it is our goal to test the impact of the teacher-pupil similarity in terms of attachment characteristics upon the different facets of school adjustment as assessed by the teacher.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 121 educator-pupil pairs. The educators' sample comprised 40 experienced, female graduate-level educators with at least 3 or more years of teaching experience (20.5 mean of teaching experience): ten 1st grade teachers, ten 2nd grade teachers, eleven 3rd grade teachers, nine 4th grade teachers. The sample of children involves 121 pupils (mean age=9.52, SD=1.7), 30 in the first grade, 29 in the 2nd grade, 31 in 3rd, 31 in 4th, 51,2 % males and 48.7% females. The sample was recruited from schools in a mid-low-socio-economic status area in north-east Romania. Parental permission was obtained prior to initiating the collection of the data.

3.2. Measures

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Koomen, Verschueren, van Schooten, Jak, & Pianta, 2012) as one of the most used instrument to assess the strength of the attachment relationship of teachers and pupils includes 32 items divided over three scales: Conflict (11 items) (e.g. *Dealing with this child drains my energy*), Closeness (14 items) (e.g. *I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child*) , and Dependency (7 items) (e.g. *This child looks to me for help, appreciation and support*). Cronbach's α coefficients from .67 to .84 indicated respectable to very good reliability according to the standards for research. Next, teachers self-rated their attachment style using the Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) (Fraley, 2011). The test includes 9 items (e.g. *It helps to turn to people in times of need*) that can refer to different relationships and has a Cronbach's α coefficient .81.

Educators were asked to assess pupils' social competencies as well using the Social Competence Scale (Corrigan, 2002) and the Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning Scale (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009), as facets of school adjustment. Developed ever since 2003, the Social Competence Scale includes 25 items that refer to the prosocial behavior (8 items – e.g. helpful to others), emotional self- regulation (10 items – e.g. controls temper when disagreement) and the academic abilities of a child (7 items – e.g. can cope with failure). Cronbach's α coefficients from .92 to .94 indicate very good reliability according to the standards for research. The Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning Scale is compromised out of 32 items as well divided into different subscales, such as behavioral engagement (e.g. *In class, I work as hard as I can*), emotional engagement (e.g. *I enjoy learning new things in class*), emotional lack of involvement and re-engagement (e.g. *When in class I feel bad*). Cronbach's α coefficients are as well according to the standards for research from .80 to .94 indicated respectable to very good reliability.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Educator-Pupil Attachment-Like Relationships: A Person-Centered Approach

O'Connor et al. (2012) emphasized the significance of a person-centered approach to the comprehension of an educator-pupil relationship. Cluster analysis has been suggested as a useful method for classifying patterns or profiles in a sample. The silhouette measure of cohesion and separation for cluster quality is a measure of the overall goodness-of-fit of the clustering solution. It is based on the average distance between the objects and can vary between -1 and +1. A silhouette measure of less than 0.20 indicates a poor solution quality, one between 0.20 and 0.50 a fair solution, while values of more than 0.50 indicate a good solution. In our study, Two-Step cluster analysis yielded a two-group solution. The silhouette measure of cohesion and separation for cluster quality showed fair (0.4) overall goodness-of-fit, indicating that two groups are statistically the optimal number-of-clusters solution. The two-cluster solution distribution also corresponds to the theoretical typology regarding schoolchildren's secure and insecure attachment styles.

Table 1.
Cluster analysis for teacher-student attachment-like variables.

	TEACHER SELF -RATED ATTACHMENT STYLE				
	Secure teacher (N=59)		*Insecure teacher (N=62)*		
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t-test values*
STSR CLOSENESS	*55.98*	*9.12*	*52.56*	*9.8*	*1.98*
STSR CONFLICT	*19.50*	*11.09*	*22.01*	*10.61*	*-1.27**
STSR DEPENDENCY	*18.20*	*5.84*	*19.93*	*4.91*	*-1.6*

* $p<0.05$

The first group (n=59, 48.8%) was labeled secure educator – pupil attachment-like style. The group is characterized by higher levels of perceived closeness, lower levels of conflict and dependency. The second group (n=62, 51.2%) was labeled insecure educator – pupil attachment-like style. The group is characterized by lower levels of perceived closeness, higher levels of conflict and dependency. Conflict is the sole dimension with significant differences.

4.2. Differences between pupils having secure educator -pupil attachment-like style and those having insecure educator -pupil attachment-like style in school adjustment

T-tests analyses, conducted to assess whether pupils having secure attachment-like relationships with their educators and those having insecure attachment-like relationships with their educators differed with regard to their social competencies and learning engagement, as facets of school adjustment, were found to be significant for most of the subscales.

Table 2.
T-test for the differences between the secure and the insecure educator -pupil attachment-like style groups in school adjustment variables.

	TEACHER SELF -RATED ATTACHMENT STYLE				
	Secure teacher (N=59)		*Insecure teacher (N=62)*		
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t-test values*
PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR	*4.31*	*.63*	*3*	*.92*	*-9.06****
EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION	*4.22*	*.59*	*2.81*	*.95*	*-9.71****
ACADEMIC ABILITIES	*4.29*	*.79*	*2.68*	*1.08*	*-9.29****
SOCIAL COMPETENCE	*4,27*	*.60*	*2.84*	*.91*	*-10.12****
BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT	*3,38*	*.62*	*2.28*	*.85*	*-8.08****
EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT	*3.50*	*.65*	*2.48*	*.84*	*-7.48****
RE-ENGAGEMENT	*3.45*	*.43*	*2.42*	*.60*	*-10.75****

****p<0.000*

As shown in Table 2, children with secure attachment-like relationships with their educators showed a higher tendency towards prosocial behaviors, can easier self-regulate, have overall better academic abilities, tend to get involved behaviorally and emotionally, and can as well re-engage after a context where he or she is prone to disengage.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Limitations are not to be ignored especially if one considers generalizing the results; the rather small sample, the fact that there are only female teachers, the fact that educators are the only ones to assess the child and this can create biases, are amongst the aspects that need to be properly controlled in a future study expanding the current one. Nevertheless, the combination of the two-explanatory lens, attachment and Dyadic Expansion of Consciousness remains the element of novelty that we believe will encourage researches in other education system to test the relationship as well. Multiple assessments of the attachment styles of both children and educators could bring value; repeated measures, across a full cycle would of course bring many other analysis possibilities, considering as well potential events that could interfere in all significant relationship of a child and thus impact his/ her internal models (as they are still forming), but as well in the lives of the teachers (their models are for sure more stable, but major events such as illness, loss of partners, lack of job security have been proven to shaken internal representations of safe relationship for adults as well).

6. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Worldwide, educational policies continuously reevaluate the immediate measure that can be implemented in order to ensure proper adjustment to the school environment thus children can be properly educated, early school dropout ca be prevented, and high academic achievement can be facilitated. The current research, with its limitation which we admit, shows once more that when attuned and safe together, the educator and the pupil enter a synergy that creates the platform of development for both.

The interaction between the teacher, the pupil and the learning task is a continuous dynamic loop where the task should be built on the teacher's awareness and understanding of the pupil, while the pupil deeply trusts that he/she can seek reliable support when challenged by the task. Teacher and pupil relate one to the other in a way that should fosters curiosity; there is little space for learning, exploring and keeping curious if one is not helped to regulate the emotions. When in uncertainty, even if we refer to the plain not knowing how to solve a second-grade problem, the brain cannot avoid emotions as they are vigilant messengers of unmet needs.

Unregulated emotions put the child in a reactive position which in turn becomes the concern of the teacher; it is now his or her turn to experience emotions and have essential needs in danger. Paradoxically, the challenges of 'not knowing' are at the heart of all learning (Geddes 2006), while being in the very safe time the triggers of insecurity. As a stronger and wiser, self- regulated adult, the educator helps the child with the regulation and allows himself to be challenged by the brain that he or she is still shaping.

Unregulated adults have as well difficulties in shaping others brains in an efficient manner, so the attention should be oriented as well to the wellbeing of the educators, pointing that the pupils are not responsible for the coregulation of the teacher (another adult should be involved in that), but when safe together, both pupil and teacher can infinitely expand the amazing world of learning and adjusting.

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