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The Preschool Teacher as an Object of Attachment

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Abstract

Citizenship education in the early years concerns socialisation through close relationships. Children develop attachment patterns in their early experiences with primary caregivers, who communicate emotions (positive or negative) and messages about the world (nice or scary). Attachment patterns become an important personal characteristic, influencing expectations and reactions in relations later in life. Preschool children spend much time with preschool teachers, who may become their object of attachment. We examine the attachment patterns of pre-school teachers (using The Adult Attachment Style Scale) and possible connections with their perceptions of children's characteristics and attachment-expressing behaviour. These perceptions and the consequent reactions towards the child may contribute to the child's interpretations of social situations. Some of these connections are confirmed.

Introduction

In the project of Partnership among Faculties, Schools and Nursery Schools (Pergar Kuščer and Prosen, 2005) we tried to bring the importance of sensitivity of preschool teachers for needs of children into the focus of our common interests in discussions and in research. The nursery schools play a significant role in the process of socialisation: encouraging children to incorporate certain social values and to develop social skills as acceptable ways of fulfilling one's needs. The preschool teacher plays a crucial role in this process - a role of a model for children's behaviour. Evidence suggests that when the child-mother attachment relationship is insecure, a secure attachment relationship with a preschool teacher may partially compensate for the insecure relationship (Michell-Copeland, Denham, DeMulder, 1997).

As the primary socialisation takes place in the environment of first close relationships that a child has, it is important to stress the quality of these early relationships which can be seen through the quality of attachment. The attachment is a child's tendency to be close to an important person – usually to the mother. The child is born with a disposition to develop attachment, which is consequently (re)shaped in the child's interaction with its environment (Bowlby and Ainsworth, 1965).

The main influencing factors shaping the attachment pattern include:

- The characteristics of caregivers, such as their sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and availability in the relationship with a child,
- The child's characteristics - his/her temperament, personal characteristics,
- The environmental characteristics such as its security and predictability,

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- Lastly there is attunement as an 'emotional language', including the synchronicity and interactivity among the child and a caregiver - the recognition and responding to the nonverbal signs of a child.

There is a pattern of children's need, the excitement deriving from it and preferably the fulfillment of this need from the part of a caregiver - if the pattern is to end in the child's sense of security. If the child's experience is that his/her needs are met most of the time, the child develops the sense of security and benevolence in the caregiver and in the environment in general. If that is not the case, the child may draw a conclusion about his/her caregiver and broader environment as insecure and may develop some other patterns in dealing with this sense of disappointment. Such secondary patterns may be the more powerful expression of one's needs or the withdrawal and trying to meet as many needs as possible by the child himself/herself.

The criteria by which the attachment figure of a child may be recognised, are:

- Seeking contact and protection from that person in case of danger or stress,
- Using that person as a safe ground to which a child reenters while exploring the environment,
- Emotional and physiological distress in case of separation from that person.

The attachment theory derives mainly from the psychoanalytical (the importance of early experiences with a caregiver) and etological (the importance of attachment for the survival of a child and as such its genetic predispositions) theory, stressing the active role of a child in the development of the attachment pattern. Some authors and their contributions to the attachment theory will be presented shortly in the next paragraphs.

Bowlby (Hrdy, 1999) proposed that the daily experiences with a primary caretaker influence the emergence of internal representations: working models. There are four types of working models, combining the confidence in others and in oneself:

- Confidence in others and in oneself,
- Lack of confidence in others but confidence in oneself,
- Confidence in others but lack of confidence in oneself, and
- Lack of confidence in others and oneself.

These working models shape the individual's experience with the social environment - by the way the person interprets and behaves towards others and consequently by the way these others respond towards him/her.

The mental representations, such as the attachment pattern, cannot be measured directly, only indirectly through the patterns of behaviour. Ainsworth (Bowlby and Ainsworth, 1965) described three attachment styles in children that were recognised through the 'strange situation' procedure, in which the caregiver leaves a child for a few minutes alone in the room with a strange person. Children's reactions at the point of the caregiver's leaving and reentering the room are observed. Upon these observations different attachment patterns are recognised:

- *Secure attachment* (exploring freely in new situations, mother is an important safe reference point, the child is concerned by the mother's departure and as she comes back he/she seeks her attention and physical contact with her but not for very long),
- *Anxious / avoiding attachment* (when mother is present the child doesn't pay much attention to her, is not very concerned when she leaves the room and is avoiding mother after she reenters the room), and
- *Anxious / rejecting attachment* (the child is not exploring the environment much even when the mother is still present, is very concerned when she leaves the room and rejecting mother after she reenters the room).

Afterwards the pattern of *insecure attachment* was added as a mixture of the previous two types (the child is the most concerned when the mother leaves the room and very chaotic after she reenters the room; desorientation/desorganisation).

Papalia and Olds (2003) described safely attached children as those that have developed positive expectations in the social situations based on early positive experiences. Insecurely attached children are more closed and/or dependant while disorganised ones more frequently develop behavioural problems.

The pattern of attachment deriving from childhood is also present in adults. Attachment styles in adults described by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) are secure, preoccupied, rejecting and insecure attachment.

The relationship representations, established in childhood – gathered in a certain attachment style – can influence the interpretations of and the reactions of adults on the needs of children and partners they have nowadays. The child doesn't only attach to the primary figures but to some other persons as well - e.g. teachers in nursery school and in school. That is why the attachment patterns that preschool teachers have (shaping their responsiveness towards children) are important and are explored in the present study.

Objective

Attachment security with a preschool teacher is related to the pro-social behaviour of a child, developed through the model teaching of social competence.

In our study we tried to reveal the possible connections between the attachment patterns of the pre-school teachers themselves and their perceptions of children's personality traits and attachment-expressing behaviour. We focused on the attachment characteristics of preschool teachers because we supposed that their attachment characteristics might influence their perception of the children.

Method

Participants

The participants of our study were pre-school teachers in nursery school. There were 67 preschool teachers involved in our study who evaluated 402 children aged one to seven.

201 of these children had been chosen by teachers as the most socially secure children in their groups and 201 children were those who, by the teachers' opinion, need more help to be included in the group of peers. Every teacher in the study chose the three most socially secure and three less socially secure children in their group.

Materials

Preschool teachers' attachment styles were measured by using *The Adult Attachment-Style Scale* (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991) that is based on descriptions of four attachment styles in adulthood:

- Secure attachment,
- Insecure attachment,
- Preoccupied attachment and
- Rejecting attachment.

The Child Behaviour to Pre-school Teacher Scale (Cugmas, 2003) was used to measure the attachment patterns in children. This scale includes two subscales:

- One for behaviours that imply the anxious attachment style,
- One for behaviours that imply the secure attachment pattern in a child towards his/her teacher.

The third scale used was *the Child Descriptions Scale* we constructed on the base of the Big five theory of Personality (Caprara et al, 1997). The scale of adjectives was shortened and adapted for the use of the study and includes:

- Activity
- Kindness and cooperativeness
- Diligence
- Emotional stability
- Imagination and curiosity

Procedure

Each of the preschool teachers first answered *The Adult Attachment-Style Scale*. Afterwards we asked them to think about the three most socially secure children in the group and three children who need more teacher's help to be included in the group of peers. For them, they reported on their characteristics and behaviour using the *Child Descriptions Scale* and *The Child Behaviour to Pre-school Teacher Scale*.

Results and discussion

The questions we tried to answer were:

1. Which is prevalent attachment style in preschool teachers (secure, preoccupied, rejecting or insecure)?

2. Is there any connection between preschool teachers' attachment style and the perceptions of attachment style (anxious, secure) and personality traits in children (activity, kindness and cooperativeness, diligence, emotional stability, imagination and curiosity)?

Attachment style in preschool teachers

Table 1: Prevalence of different attachment styles

Attachment style	Frequency	Percent
secure	44	65,7
insecure	11	16,4
preoccupied	3	4,5
rejecting	9	13,4
Total	67	100

The majority of preschool teachers reported to have a *secure attachment* style. That means they perceive themselves as emotionally close with others, relying on them, having little worries regarding being abandoned or not being accepted.

However, about one third of preschool teachers chose one of the insecure attachment styles as their prevalent one. There were representatives of an insecure, a rejecting and a preoccupied attachment style. *Insecurely attached* individuals have a wish to be close but also have difficulties trusting and relying on others. They have worries regarding being hurt in case of too close relationships. *Rejecting attachment* style means a person is feeling well without close emotional relationships and stresses the feeling of independency. In *preoccupied attachment* style a person is hoping for a total closeness but usually discovering that the others do not have the same wish. A person with a preoccupied attachment style may feel lost without close relationships and worries to be less appreciated by the others.

Through preschool teachers' attachment styles we got some insight into their perceptions of relationships, which are a part of their personality. This part of their personality most probably reflects in their behaviour towards children, their perceptions of children's behaviour and consequently influences the child's understanding of how to relate to each other. This understanding depends on the child's temperament and other characteristics as well.

Teachers' perception of attachment style and personality traits in children

We tried to research the connections of different attachment styles in preschool teachers with their perceptions of children in this part of the study.

Every teacher in the study (all together 67) chose the three most socially secure and three less socially secure children in their group (all together 402). Socially less secure

children were those who, by the teacher's opinion, need more help to be included in the group of peers.

Table 2. Teachers' perception of attachment styles in children

	Attachment style			
	anxious attachment		secure attachment	
	accepted children	less accepted children	accepted children	less accepted children
Mean	11.9	15.3	35.9	30.2
SD	4.7	5.3	6.8	7.6
t-test	-6.88		7.99	
Significance	0.00		0.00	

Significant ($p < 0.00$) differences in teachers' perceptions have been found between accepted and less accepted children among their peers in behaviours that express anxious or secure attachment styles - accepted children had more expressions of a secure attachment and less of anxious attachment.

Preschool teachers observed secure or anxious attachment in children through their reactions in certain situations: what is a child's reaction towards the teacher as he/she comes to the nursery school in the morning, whether he/she can openly express their feelings, how willing he/she is to accept help, whether he/she can be easily comforted etc.

Table 3. Teachers' perception of personality traits in children

	Personality traits									
	activity		kindness and cooperativeness		diligence		emotional stability		imagination and curiosity	
	accepted	less accept	accepted	less accept	accepted	less accept	accepted	less accept	accepted	less accept
M	8.3	13.5	12.6	19.9	6.9	11.7	8.2	12.2	7.9	13.0
SD	3.1	4.9	3.8	5.6	2.5	3.3	2.7	3.5	2.7	5.3
t	-12.77		-15.42		-16.44		-12.66		-12.21	
Sig.	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	

M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; t = t-test; Sig. = Significance

Activity is connected to the enthusiasm and the extrovert orientation of a child. Such children are more capable of shaping their own role in relationships.

Kindness and cooperativeness describes the ability to understand and support the needs of others, which enables the effective cooperation.

Diligence reflects one's reliability and the ability to end the task.

Emotional stability can be seen as emotional control, especially in conflict situations.

Imagination and curiosity reflects the intellectual ability of a person, the openness to different experiences and cultures.

All the teachers' perceptions of personality traits in children differed significantly ($p < 0.00$) regarding the acceptance of a child among peers. Accepted children were described by their teachers as more active (courageous, sociable, spontaneous), more kind and cooperative (benevolent, trusting, forgiving), more diligent (reliable, loving, attentive), more emotionally stable (calm, relaxed, resilient) and more imaginative and curious (creative, resourceful).

In the table below (Table 4) the results based on the analysis of variance (ANOVA) are presented. Only the statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are shown.

Table 4. Preschool teachers' attachment style and the significant differences in the perception of children.

Perceived child's characteristics	Teachers' attachment styles	Mean	SD	Sig
anxious	Secure	12.9	5.0	0.00
	Insecure	14.9	5.3	
	Secure	12.9	5.0	0.00
	Preoccupied	16.6	5.3	
	Secure	12.9	5.0	0.04
activity	Rejecting	14.5	6.1	
	Preoccupied	9.4	4.2	0.04
kindness and cooperativeness	Rejecting	12.1	4.7	
	Insecure	17.3	5.9	0.03
	Preoccupied	13.8	4.5	
emotional stability	Preoccupied	13.8	4.5	0.05
	Rejecting	17.0	6.2	
	Insecure	10.9	3.4	0.02
	Preoccupied	8.7	3.0	
imagination and curiosity	preoccupied	8.7	3.0	0.04
	rejecting	10.8	3.9	
	secure	10.5	5.1	0.03
	preoccupied	7.9	3.0	
	insecure	10.6	4.6	0.04
	preoccupied	7.9	3.0	
	rejecting	10.7	4.9	0.041
	Preoccupied	7.9	3.0	

Securely attached preschool teachers reported less anxious behaviour in children than teachers who are insecure, rejecting or preoccupied regarding their close relationships. That can be interpreted either as their sensibility for such behaviour as they might recognise it in themselves, or they might exaggerate regarding these behaviours.

Preoccupied teachers perceived children as more energetic (active, talkative etc.) than their colleagues with a rejecting attachment style. Preoccupied teachers also perceived children as kinder, more cooperative and more emotionally stable than their rejecting and insecure colleagues. Preoccupied teachers also reported the children to be more imaginative and curious in comparison with teachers with a rejecting, insecure or secure attachment style.

It is interesting that the preschool teachers with a preoccupied attachment style perceive the children more positively regarding the majority of their personality traits (diligence being an exception). Maybe this can be interpreted as their greater focus on the positive characteristics in people in order to establish more close relationships and thus controlling their fear of rejection.

Conclusion

The paper stressed that many preschool children spend a lot of time with their preschool teachers, who may become their object of attachment. Children develop the attachment pattern in the early experiences with their primary caregivers and as such it becomes an important personal characteristic, influencing one's expectations and reactions in all close relations later in life. The child has an active role from the beginning, because she or he not only incorporates what is offered by the caregiver, but from the very beginning tries to be wanted and learns how to be wanted. How a child resolves these challenges involves both the child's competencies (his or her sociability will differ in degree as a part of inherited temperament) and the responses of others towards the child. It seems that the attachment style of the preschool teachers has some influence on their perception and most probably also their behaviour towards children.

We detected some significant differences regarding the results of the attachment-style in the preschool teachers and their perceptions of children's attachment behaviour and personality traits. The preschool teachers with a non-secure attachment style perceived more anxious attachment behaviour in children. Perhaps that is due to the similarities of the perceptions among themselves and the children - whether through projections or insights remains to be answered in the further research. We also found that the preschool teachers with a preoccupied attachment style perceive children as more positive regarding their personality traits: their activity, kindness and cooperativeness, emotional stability and imagination and curiosity. Whether that is due to the teacher's own preoccupation with relationships and fear of being rejected or due to some other reason also remains to be further explored.

In the early relationships the child gains her/his understanding and attitude towards the world in general and especially towards other people, thus representing the roots of citizenship. As the preschool teacher is an important and compensating attachment object for the children (especially the insecurely attached ones) their attachment patterns should be stressed in the pre-school teachers' training - thus the pre-school teachers could become more aware of their attachment expressing behaviour and its impact. This is important when we discuss understanding rules and how children become responsible citizens and eager learners.

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