

Observations at the nursery: practicing how to attribute meaning to everyday actions

Paola Balducci, Maria Marasà

Translated by Daniela Molino

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how the psychoanalytically oriented observation method in the tradition of the Tavistock Clinic applied as main tool in the training of educators in the institutional setting of a nursery is a valuable tool for the prevention of possible serious psychopathological situations. The observer acts as a sounding board for the budding links (with children and parents) and participates to everyday life in a joint affective and emotional field that – when reported and shared in the supervision group – can be the engine driving changes in actual dysfunctional situations. The excerpts of observations reported in the paper show the degree of sharpness that the educator's gaze can reach, the emotions and defenses that emerge and can be elaborated in this training model, the relevance of changes, the possibility to restart a developmental process favored by group discussion.

Keywords: psychoanalytical observation, services to children, group supervision, caring relationships

In this paper we present some reflections on the use of observation in our experience as teachers in a psychoanalytically oriented training course for the staff of nurseries and day centers for toddlers in the city of Rome.

We started providing teaching and training in 2002 with the aim of developing and increasing psycho-pedagogic knowledge in the services for children, privileging a methodology based on learning from experience by means of group discussions of observation protocols prepared by the educators on some specific situations.

We modeled our courses on our training as psychotherapists (at AIPPI) whose main feature is the use of infant observation.

The theoretical and methodological roots of the the AIPPI postgraduate school are strictly related to the observation courses taught by teachers from the Tavistock Clinic (1) led by Gianna Polacco that started in Italy in 1976.

These courses, organized in many Italian cities at universities or associations, in addition to teaching observation methods included also the basic concepts of psychoanalytical thinking (M. Klein, W.R. Bion, D. Meltzer, M. Harris) and the application of this method to various work environments. These teachings, updated on the basis of new clinical experiences, have played a crucial role in the promotion of prevention activities and in understanding the interactive dynamics of various

institutional groups, outlining areas of research in constant change, assets for the whole Association, in a constant interchange between tradition and change.

In preparing our training courses for educators at nurseries and day care centers we, first of all, started by recognizing that educators thanks to their role can have privileged and detailed access to the processes that allow the emotional, social and cognitive development of children within the family and at the centers. Educators are professionals engaged in accompanying families and children through an important stage of life and can create occasions for facing the different ways of viewing education and childhood, offering to children and their parents alternative models of relating that can respond effectively also to developmental blocks.

Educators are “experts/specialists in separation processes” and can promote discontinuity in continuity as they pay special attention to the transition of children – at the right time and in the proper way – from the family environment to wider and more complex relations.

If thinking in children can be born and evolve in relation to what the reference adults can provide from their own thinking function – when the little ones are still unable to do it fully – it is easy to see how the “maintenance” of this function through constant training can play a crucial role in the early prevention of psychic distress.

Some of the most celebrated Italian and international psychologists and child psychoanalysts showed that play, language and therefore thinking are strictly related and their basic components are found in the emotional quality of the earliest relations that children establish with their reference adults highlighting the situations where the growth process can proceed slowly or stop but can also re-start within relationships.

The complexity of the educators’ tasks oriented us to a form of training that, first of all, helps them to develop their capacity for observation in an increasingly rich and global way since we are convinced that this can support the many different and sudden decisions, loaded with mutual emotions and fantasies, that they need to make every day. In our experience, in fact, observation is a privileged method for training an attentive gaze and a lively mind, a critical way of thinking capable of oscillating between the figure and the background, between objectivity and subjectivity. Knowing the reality in which we are immersed helps us to see its intrinsic features, to test its qualities and let ourselves be touched by it until we can no longer say who is responsible for what is observed.

In psychoanalytically oriented observation we find those passive and active aspects that Borgogno calls “containing identification” to describe the receptivity but also at the same time the decoding of the communications and of the fragments of self that the other sends to us (Borgogno, 1978). Starting from these assumptions we structured our training model – lasting one year with monthly meetings – that includes group discussions based on the analysis of observation protocols that concern situations from daily work in the nursery.

Follows an excerpt of an observation made by an educator in a situation where educators, children and their parents were present. It provides detailed observation

and suggests theoretical concepts that can be evoked in group discussion. “Maria was playing in a corner with the box of treasures together with Laura, she was very interested in its square metal lid: she licked it, bit it, looked at it and beat on it. Maria was looking around with great interest and gurgled happily. (Maria is 7 months old and Laura 10 and while they explore the toys their parents exchange opinions on the different stages of skill acquisition of their children: sitting upright, exploring objects, concentration in play). Of the objects contained in the box Laura is interested in the wooden spoon with a hole at the center and in the metal spoon: she puts them in her mouth, licks them and looks at them. She is curious of Maria, she looks at her, then looks around, looks at her mother and then looks at the other child again”.

We see here how a tool for psychoanalytically oriented exploration, seldom used before in the training of educators, provides them with the opportunity to see in depth the meaning of the child’s behavior, the dynamics of the interaction between peers and to reflect on the intervention modes of the relations between adults and between children. Observers relating to what they observe become active interlocutors that play the role of sounding board for a developing image in a sort of evocative process where we see the enactment of an emotional field rich in echoes and suggestions as well as a purposeful drive that will be realized in a “third” space from the relation with the other in the here and now, that of group discussion and supervision.

One of our objectives was to create a training course that allows educators to understand before doing with the aid of systematic observation, disassembling events and being able to remain in contact with the primitive infantile emotions and anxieties that are so powerfully evoked by work with children and their families. Martha Harris warned that if the observer does not get near enough to the observed situation (mother-child relationship but also educator-child relationship) to feel authentically all its emotional impact many details will be lost and the quality of learning will be reduced. In order for this learning not to induce to action, for mental anxiety not to be acted but contained in reflection, we need to find a detached enough position to create a mental space for observing what is taking place” (Harris, 1986).

The following situation presented by an educator gives us an idea of how the training group starting from observation can analyze the various levels of projections between adults and with children – with significant effects on preventing the recourse to hurried and automatic psychopathologic categorizations: Leonardo (11 months) arrives with his mother, once on the floor he crawls fast across the room attracting the attention of Ginevra’s mother who asks how old he is. The two mothers compare the characteristics of their children that despite being the same age are physically very different and can do different things. Ginevra’s mother explains that since her daughter is not very tall she exploited her low barycenter to start walking quite early and she can do it quite well, falling and getting up again without problems. Leonardo’s mother listens to her and says that instead her child is “heavy” and a little “rough”. The educator standing near them turns their attention to the boy’s smiling face and comments that he seems to really want to go towards the others and stresses

his communicative ability that is made of clumsy but never aggressive gestures. Leonardo's mother acknowledges her unease because she is always afraid of hurting the sensitivity of other parents due to her son's behavior and says that she is afraid that he could hurt another child. She had already mentioned her fear in previous meetings but she adds that she noticed an improvement in her child since he started coming to this school and this is why she did not stop coming although initially she was quite worried.

What we requested to educators in our training was not only to observe what happened but also to analyze the effect that the aspects observed produced in the observer. In the discussion group of this observation, we saw that some educators seemed to identify with the mother's anxiety on the developmental skills acquired by her son as compared to those seen in his peers. An anxiety that if not acknowledged by the educator risks to create emotional problems at various levels in the educator's relationship with the child, between the adults and between the mother and her son. In this excerpt we see that the move of the educator's gaze to what the child has shown in terms of competence and his wish to go towards the others has the function of supporting the mother's capacity for reverie (Bion, 1972) – at that point uncertain – allowing her to turn the fixed, clumsy and heavy image of the boy into a more dynamic and purposeful projection.

If properly seen, the emotional factor is an indispensable tool to use for understanding and creating a more receptive, mindful and nonjudgmental attitude (Miller, 1992). The practice of observation provides to everyone the chance to try out a specific methodology that, as G. Polacco and B. Copley suggest, could be very synthetically defined as what Keats called the 'negative capacity', i.e. the ability to sustain doubt and live with uncertainty (Polacco, 1986).

This is a training model that is not based exclusively on theoretical contents but on the personal experience of seeing a child grow and develop, an essential characteristic of an inductive rather than deductive approach to learning. In the following excerpt of observation made at the moment of entering the school we can see how difficult it is for the educator to suspend action in favor of a solution that has been thought, keeping in mind the different relational levels enacted when the parent leaves the child. The door is opened and Harriet enters with her father. She is clinging to his neck. The educator invites the father to come in and while he walks in the child clings to him even tighter. The educator notices that the girl does not look around and that her face is literally lying on her daddy's shoulder. He tries to pull her off and the educator gets up extending her arms to the child and saying: "come and play with us". Harriet's answer is to delve deeper in her father's shoulder. He pats her on the back and passes her to the educator. Immediately the child starts crying while the educator tells her "Stop, Harriet, and say goodbye to daddy, see you later". Harriet cries louder, looks at her dad leaving and struggles in the educator's arms while she moves to the table where the other adults are, sits down and tries to soothe the child.

The training group, reflecting on this observation noticed that the rough moment of separation from the father together with the educator's immediate adhesion his mode produced an increase in the child's separation anxiety. In our work with the educators we strove to let the repressed and denied anxious experiences in the adults emerge in an observed situation where the main actors tried to rapidly shelve the pain of separating, in order to avoid the simplification of the complexity of the dynamics at play, and an easy adhesion at the idea that the parent was the only one responsible for the failure of his taking leave.

In the example above our main objectives are clear: give a name and meaning to the experiences of loss that involve children and adults at the nursery, parents and educators. We reflected on what feelings the child has in passing from one well known reference figure like a parent to a 'reference system' made up of various adults and peers.

To give continuity and meaning to the experience of the persons we care for implies a great responsibility and individual and collective engagement. An unavoidable task for a caring relationship in an institution that receives babies and toddlers is to give a meaning, look for it, find it, contribute to defining it and build it. It means that we have to explain, give a meaning to what we are doing: why did we decide to do that activity, why at that very moment, in that space, with that group of children, with what objectives and so on.

We cannot avoid reflecting on what are the meanings for each one of us of our gestures, relations and the choices that we make every day with our colleagues, with the children and their parents.

So, what are the features of a good acceptance, the experience of a pleasurable meal, washing hands, the ritual before taking a nap? What is the meaning of these activities and what relation is there between routine and learning, care of the physiological and affective needs and of cognitive needs? Who is responsible for what goes wrong?

Training to observation can therefore maintain a focused attention on what is not working as we would like, on fatigue, failed projects, gestures repeated because they are taken for granted. In repetition in fact lurks the risk of doing things without understanding their meaning.

Follows an excerpt from a meeting of the educators that highlights how hard it is to find a solution to this kind of questions and the stress induced by the experience of supporting doubt and suspending judgment. A question that arose often in our meetings is how and if educators need to intervene during the children's free play because we noticed that when we did not intervene there was a progressive decline in interest for that game and an increase in inadequate actions, such as not using the right materials and showing great confusion... In our previous meeting we noticed that it is difficult to understand the quality of the context of play, to see the clues in the general climate of the relations that suggest if it is necessary to intervene or not. We reached the conclusion that there is no single recipe that is always applicable but that being with the children requires of us a continuous elaboration of the schemes

that we possess leveraging on the children's needs and on our exchanges with our colleagues.

It is clear then that work on our impressions favors the discussion among colleagues and allows each one of us to move out of our subjectivity negotiating the meanings of what we observed with the help of group discussion. This process of attribution of meaning to everyday events through careful observation cannot leave out the relationship that each educator establishes at various levels with the children, the colleagues, the parents, and the institutions.

During the supervision of observations, we often see that the work of an educator is defined mainly as a the point of interchange of various interactions. This requires a position that is at the same time mindful of individual relationships and of the whole system of communication within the nursery and between the nursery and the outside world. This is a profession that is performed within a group of colleagues and the group can be seen as a tool that should not be neglected and requires an adequate structure and a proper articulation. As Claudio Neri states, "group work in fact allows us to give value to the comparison of different points of view in order to gain a knowledge that a single person cannot easily reach and acquire. An individual in fact can find it hard to see the multiplicity and complexity of an event and at the same time keep all these aspects their mind" (Neri, 1995).

This problem emerges clearly in the supervision of a group of educators that asked the group leader to clarify an important episode that risked to jeopardize the collaboration and trust between the nursery and a family. The group reported the request for explanations of a father who feared that his son had been abused by an educator (an impeccable professional) to whom the boy was deeply attached until that moment. The father reported that one day back at home from the nursery the toddler had associated the word "pain" to the name of the educator. The parents asked him a series of questions to see if they could confirm their hypothesis of abuse and he was convinced of the truthfulness of these 'guided associations' so with great anger he requested clarifications from the school.

In the group meeting the educators' persecutory experience emerged clearly along with the regret for the lack of trust that penetrated the relationship with this family. One of the aims of supervision was to put together the observed data with the experiences of the group and the experiences of the families.

Only after expressing the unwieldy persecutory anxiety circulating in the group, the educators were able to understand what had happened. First of all the term used by the boy at home, "pain", had been linked to the long absence of the teacher who had been sick for two weeks: the boy had in fact suffered for the absence of his reference adult and used this word to communicate to his father that his favorite teacher was absent and that he suffered for this absence. She was the one in "pain" but he too had suffered because she was not at school. With the help of supervision, the group was able to connect the event to the suspicions that the father had already expressed during the adjustment period at the beginning of the school year when he alone was

attending his son. In the discussion we succeeded in giving a new meaning to the father's fear for his son's safety in all the situations where the boy was outside his control which suggested the idea that he might have had some previous experience of anxiety related at the early separation from his child.

The awareness of these aspects allowed the group to perform a function of reverie in the relation with the parent that reestablished the trust between the nursery and the family. In a meeting with the educators the father was able to express his anxiety for the separation from his son that was present even before the parents decided to bring him to the nursery and dated back to the father's experiences of abuse as a child.

This example explains very well how a child represents a common object of attention and care but also of expectations and evaluations that imply a complex articulation of the relations between adults.

The group and its members perform this function of restitution and integration of the different aspects of the same reality: if each point of view is represented by a member of the group, each member at the same time can take advantage of the points of view of the others. The training course the educators attended focused on the group and allowed on one side to understand and appreciate the methodological aspects and on the other to focus on the complexity of the relational dynamics connected to sharing the growth and education of a child by different reference adults.

This training course showed that in a nursery there are many opportunities for finding procedures that facilitate the relations between educators and families. The former in fact are willing to change their behaviors, attitudes, experiences and ways of relating in favor of a greater awareness of the dynamics and of reducing conflicts and competition. Group observation – as this example shows – is a tool that allows the group a more sophisticated understanding of the behavior of children and parents, showing greater benevolence towards the educational limitations of families. We saw in the educators a greater capacity for identifying with the “uncomplying” part of the parents and finding different strategies to overcome relational difficulties.

To promote these objectives, we had to discuss with the educators on the identity of the service considering the experience of adults no less central than that of the children. This kind of training confirms that the experience of growth does not only concern the children but is, or could be, at least potentially, also an experience of growth for the adults. The capacity to establish relations with the parents without necessarily passing through their child seems to reflect a more complex view of the nursery that tends to accept the adult not only as a parent but also as the bearer of more articulate needs. This training model can be defined a true research laboratory on relational and educational skills, seen not as a place where an expert passes skills or capacities to a non-expert, from someone who has more knowledge to someone who receives it, from an educator to a confused parent, but rather as a model based on the recognition of the skills and resources of each participant in the educational task that find them in themselves and transfer them to the others. Through elaboration and systematic confrontation, we valued, interpreted and organized the range of relations

existing between adult minds and developing minds that can stimulate the creative function of their encounter.

The knowledge of the observed object becomes then a myth written by a group of persons (the child, the mother, the observer, the supervision group) as described by Donald Meltzer with reference to the aesthetic conflict (Meltzer, 1988). A myth that traces a path starting from an emotional experience that recognizes the complex and the contradictory to reach a mental experience of construction of identity: again, of the child, the mother, the observer.

We believe that this is the only path that can create a way to recover our roots, a sense of belonging and the engagement in concrete actions of transformation of our social, cultural, environmental reality.

Notes

1. The teaching program of the Tavistock Clinic originated under John Bowlby in 1948 with Esther Bick as its organization head and includes a course open to all professionals working in fields where observation is an essential tool. As for the aim of the seminars, we know from the words of Martha Harris that “it is that of making perception sharper and increasing the use of imagination so that there can derive a richer understanding of the interactions between the personalities described by the reporters on the basis of the clues of motivation that arise from unconscious factors. Education to sensitivity and to a greater awareness is a gradual process inevitably accompanied by anxiety. ‘Not noticing’ is one of the outcomes of the defenses enacted in order not to feel pain in oneself and in others. The seminars of infant observation provide the students with an especially valuable approach to the study of development that is not based on books but on the personal experience of seeing a child grow from birth to two years of age. Students are expected to visit the family for an hour every week following the baby and its mother from birth to two years. It is important to abstain from doing or saying anything, remaining on the background in an attitude of friendly attention in order to allow the mother and the other members of the family to go on with their usual activities with the least interference possible. Observations are recorded in detail after each visit and are presented for discussion to a small seminar group... As the possibility of intervening in the growth of this relationship is excluded, the student can observe how a mother-baby couple manages as best as it can the crises and the difficulties, discover how these experiences can be used in a developmental sense or not according to the situations, and realize how fallible hasty judgments on these situations are. Each participant to these seminars has the chance to notice sooner or later the difficulties that we all encounter in our fight against (mainly childish) mental attitudes that try to attribute guilt to someone, usually the mother, when things don’t go well, to deny ourselves the

attitude of the “one who knows more” and not to make uselessly all-knowing diagnoses and predictions that risk to cloud later observations” (Harris, 1980).

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Paola Balducci: psicologa, psicoterapeuta (Aippi).

E-mail: p.balducci.f@gmail.com

Maria Marasà: psicologa, psicoterapeuta (Aippi).

E-mail: m.mariellina@tin.it