

## **The advent of a dream in a group of children**

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### **Abstract**

This paper follows the perspective suggested by Francesco Corrao in his writings on groups (F. Corrao, 1998), taking up some of the elements present in clinical practice that help to describe the question of dreams in a small early-childhood analytical group. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first I treat the emergence of metaphor within the group; in the second, the advent of dream through a metaphorical bridge; in the third, the series of dreams with speech and mime as group memory.

**Key words:** childhood analytical group, dream, group memory

The clinical aspects are framed against a set of guidelines that this work will also bring out:

- 1) The group is viewed as a set "both of physical objects and of human objects" (F. Corrao, 1995b) whose analogical and metaphorical structure activates multifocal thought and polysemic language.
- 2) It is considered within the concept of the field, which enables us to examine the problem of extra-verbal communication in children, in a space that is in common, marked by emotive, affective, cognitive events (F. Corrao, 1986).
- 3) The analyst participates in the experience of the group but does not offer structured interpretations, fostering sharing and communication with verbal-corporeal transformational actions (A. Lombardozzi, 1996, 1999).
- 4) Language and dream take on the importance of a construct of shared objects that are basic to the evolution of the group. Fundamental to these objects is access to a metaphorical space-time that is conducive to the passage from the concrete to the abstract.

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## **Methaphor and group**

"Perhaps every science has to begin with metaphor and end with algebra; and perhaps, without metaphor there could be no algebra". (Max Black)

I worked with a group of eight small children, aged 3 to 5, at a nursery school for three years. In addition to evident fear of bodily contact, I found among them marked aggressiveness in relations and serious difficulty in communicating with the world: one girl (Sara) found it impossible to talk except through another girl who relayed her words to the group.

A group of very young children, with sensory experience linked to thought and language, and with its extremely rapid emotive passages, entails reference to the analogical logic suggested by Corrao, relating to learning how to "make believe", in which we discover new connections between things, our bodies, words, feelings and thoughts (L. Ruberti, 1990).

Bodily movements, gestures, games and drawings will provide the vehicle for communicating feelings and thoughts, the birth of metaphor.

At first the group was mired in a materially sticky slime (a mix of paste, modelling clay and objects) that tied bodies to the floor with no possibility of expressing emotive words or activating shared thoughts.

Eventually, it is drawing that makes it possible to "give a name" to these entangled, stuck-together images, filtering an emotive experience. And drawing is a fundamental phase in the apparatus for thinking and dreaming described by Bion: like a grid, the lines of the drawing filter something that cannot be said but that exists in the "emotive atmosphere" of analysis and moves towards dream images (D. Vallino, 1998).

By degrees and by leaps, communication evolves towards language through a complex sensorial network (A. Lombardozi, 1990).

One must pass through non-sense (A. Baruzzi, 1980) as a basic experience that makes possible the shared activation of thought (C. Neri, 1996).

One day, as is not uncommon in children's groups, a plastic snake breaks into the group, terrorizing all the children; it appears as fear-poison-word: a possible assonance from which we can begin to move. Assonance restores to objects the possibility of being used in the "in-common" of the group.

Andrea arrives with the plastic snake, which he has taken out of his pocket, to scare the girls. Sara and Federica cower behind me while he waves the snake and yells "He bites, he bites!" and throws it to the ground.

All the children scream and run to the sides of the room while the snake holds the center.

Clara: "Is it real? Does it move?"

Marco (from the other side of the room, but not moving): "No! its's plastic, stupid!"

Federica: "I'm going away. I'm scared".

I am struck by the animated reaction of the group; I say that the snake is scary there in the middle of the room even if it is plastic, because sometimes these things seem almost real.

Chiara: "If we keep still it won't bite".

Carlo: "A stick; a stick and I'll kill it". And, fearfully, he asks me "Is it plastic?". He goes on: "I'm not scared because I held a snake in my hands at the zoo".

Valerio: "Me too".

Federica (speaking for Sara): "Now Sara will draw it".

Marco (moving toward the snake): "I'm going to eat it".

Valerio: "Mongooses eat snakes".

Chiara: "Don't they get poisoned and die?"

All the children stamp their feet loudly while Sara draws the snake. The noise is loud when Marco goes into the middle of the room, takes the snake and "eats" it, hiding in his pocket.

Chiara (screaming): "No! No! The venom!"

Marco: "I won't die", and he pretends to spit the venom out.

Then he makes a mongoose out of modelling clay. Meanwhile, Sara has finished her drawing. Marco makes as if to give me the mongoose so that I can have it watch over the house, but Sara grabs it and tramples it underfoot. Marco, a furious expression on his face, seems about to explode with rage, as if he couldn't find the words; at last he manages to scream "You're a snake!" And that is the first metaphor.

When we lack the words, when we need to say something that can't be said in ordinary language, we turn to metaphor, to the power of its images. In the "interactive conception" of Black, the efficacy of metaphor consists in enabling us to see new aspects of reality and express them in a new way. A metaphor is "efficacious" in bringing people into cognitive and emotive relation: "Metaphorical thought represents a particular way of obtaining better understanding; it is not constructed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought" (Black, 1962-77).

From this standpoint, metaphor has a developmental, cognitive value for the formation of ideas and language (Duyckaerts, 1994).

Corrao, in suggesting the activation of analogical thought with the extensive use of metaphor within the group, raises the possibility of a change of attitude in our connections between things and thoughts, which is essential in practice. And analytical intervention fosters the space-time togetherness of something waiting to be narrated (Ruberti, 1996).

In the group of young children, who are engaged in the search for language, the efficacy of metaphor is a founding value, making sense of emotive reality in narration: the activation of the snake metaphor works in this way with its attributive-emotive transfer between snake and Sara.

Through the analogical extension, there arises the possibility of a new connection, new speech within the group: Sara's voice, which emerges from the silence, wrought with feeling, in answer to Marco:

"I'm scared".

It is a tiny, terrified voice, at once mild and angry. Hearing her emotional words, I am overcome with images of birth, spatial, stellar images, and I tell Sara she talks like a star – in Italian, "stella" (and Stella is also the name of the school's German shepherd, who is the heroine of one of the group's fairy stories).

Metaphor will work as a thought-bridge for the next few sessions until the advent of the snake dream.

### **The advent of the dream**

Borges says of dreams: "If a tiger were to enter this room now, we would feel fear; but if we feel fear in a dream, we are creating a tiger" (Borges, 1976).

The passage from the plastic snake to the snake dream is one that transforms the links between words, elements of affective conjunction between things and persons.

"You're a snake" creates a system of implications about the snake and the girl, Sara. Thrown into the middle of the room, the snake has evocative attributes: it slithers, it bites, it poisons you, it is ugly, scary, wicked.

The perceptibility of the snake-object within the field of the group stimulates thought. Sara-the-snake, the speechless one, maintains the group's unexpressed emotive aspects. When she does speak, she lends her voice to the fear that is felt ("I'm scared") and to unimagined feelings. As Bachtin has said, words do not arise alone but are formed in "dialogical interaction" (M. Bachtin, 1975). And every word tends towards a "future response-word", not yet pronounced, from someone else.

In the context of the group, the encounter with Sara's words orients a dream experience that creates a new snake that can be imagined and recounted.

Here is Andrea's dream:

"A snake comes into the house and everybody runs away for fright. The father cuts off the venomous head, and the venom oozes out like glue. Then the snake turns into a serpent, but not poisonous, and says: 'ssss-i! And it talks.'"

His dream evokes the transformation that made possible the birth of speech, the passage from venom-glue to words.

The advent of the dream in this group of young children is a kind of vital psychic representation (R. Tagliacozzo, 1993): once expressed, it brings a story of the group into the realm of possibility. Learning to dream dreams as you think thoughts (W.R. Bion, 1962, 1970) enables the children to tell their own story.

From the space-time of the dream they begin the tale of the emotive experiences converted into images. For a group of toddlers like this, and for the analyst who can think with them, this is an experience suspended between earth and sky.

A dream, the children say, "comes from the earth of a plant, it's lovely, it's bad, it's in your head, it's in your closed eyes, it's like the tongue in your mouth, it flies away, up

to the sky." Dreams are like the balloons in the sky in Chiara's drawings, which you can sometimes actually catch. So you can play catch with them: "I'll throw you a dream" is like "I'll tell you my dream".

The meaning that is forged in the integration of actions, words and images is the expression of what happens in the transformation of the group. It can be perceived, as in the frames of a film, through a series of dream-snakes and monsters that eventually change into human bodies, children's bodies.

### **A series of dreams**

"A dream of a riverbank is another riverbank" (Edmond Jabés)

The emergence within the group of a series of oneiric configurations is a developmental passage (Fosshage, 1997) that will foster the emergence of language in the group.

The telling of the series of dreams alternates between pauses and accelerations, demanding attentive, empathetic listening in order to understand the series as a game, played through the assonances that join one dream to the next.

This is the sequence of dreams generated by the snake dream:

a dwarf snake that spits glue on everyone and slithers;  
a "gluey" monster that conceals a snake in its belly and gets cut open;  
a monster that may have swallowed some snakes (but we're not sure), writhes around and has to vomit;  
a monster with a human face that talks and spits and crawls on all fours;  
a near-man who is afraid but then turns into a child and therefore knows the magic words.

The group, dreaming, in this sequence represents a vital transformation that suggests the future: the ability to think oneself, to express oneself, becoming children. But the children also become "dreamers", authors-narrators-audience to their own dreams (Augé, 1997). And the magic words are bound up with the children's corporeal mimesis while they imitate monsters. As mimes, they become the monster who turns into a child, and they take on its characteristics. Mime, in fact, reactivates the relation with "a constellation that is in formation and definition" (Neri, 1995).

By recounting oneiric images, the children can lend body and form to words. The telling of dreams "works like an enzyme that can accelerate communication and the work of the group, transporting the categories of discourse into a visual space" (Neri, 1995). In this space, the abstract and the concrete meet in new relationships from the children's viewpoint, and its narrative context fosters "the emergence, the unfolding and the development of a group mental activity that consists in the continuous interchange of thoughts, feelings, affects, fantasies, memories, dreams and bodily sensations" (Corrao, 1995a).

The series of dreams makes possible a group memory as the affective warp and woof from which one can branch off with new intersections of action and experience. In the background, for the group the dream remains as a psychic reality in relation to "shared perceptive reality". The dream reminds us that "Memory, Future, and Dream should be joined together to form a 'complex conjugated point' from which to start out to navigate in the flow of Time, following an incessant play of flux and reflux in the effort to locate a difficult, shifting equilibrium between going and coming back and going forth once more"(Corrao, 1993).

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