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EPILOGUE:

SOME SPECULATIONS ABOUT ATTACHMENT IN THE SCHOOLS

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In this special issue, the effects of attachment relationships on learning and instruction processes in early childhood have been emphasized. It has become clear that the quality of the infant–parent attachment relationship has far-reaching consequences for learning and instruction in several domains. Attachment has not only been shown to influence the preschoolers' social development but also their cognitive abilities and their adaptation to new and/or strange circumstances. Secure children have a headstart over insecure children when they enter school and they acquire basic, emergent literary skills at an earlier stage. At school they might very well be the pupils who are easy-to-teach and their headstart might become the starting point for the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986) whereby the initial differences between pupils increase instead of decrease through the process of schooling. It is for this reason that educationalists should be aware of the high impact of early attachment development on learning and instruction at home and in the schools.

But there is another reason to highlight the contribution of attachment theory to educational science. Attachment is a life-span phenomenon (Ainsworth, 1989), not only crucial during the early preschool years and within the family system. Attachment has to be seen as a vital condition for human functioning at every stage in life and within any social context (school, work, social network). Although hard empirical data to support this contention are not abundant there are too many clinical findings to neglect the likelihood that secure attachment relationships are the foundation for a balanced social and cognitive development during childhood and adolescence (Bowlby, 1985). In the school setting, attachment might be taken into account at four levels.

First, the attachment needs of pupils might be met optimally only within a school system in which continuity of relationships is guaranteed. The same teacher and pupils should remain together for an extended period of time to enhance the opportunities for the development of secure relationships. Highschools in which teachers and groups of pupils change every two hours or so, might provide too few chances for adolescents to build meaningful relationships among themselves and with their teacher.

Secondly, teachers might learn from the sensitive responsiveness with which parents

instruct their children in the family context (Ninio & Bruner, 1978). If teachers are aware of different types of attachment relationships (avoidant, secure and ambivalent attachments) they might be better able to deal with their pupils' subtly and indirectly expressed attachment needs and to meet these needs as part and parcel of the instruction process. In general, knowledge of attachment theory could help teachers in being sensitively responsive to the attachment needs of children in stressful situations, such as being a novel pupil in a class or having to cope with death of a family member or divorce of parents. In all these cases, a child's attachment behavioral system will be activated and, depending on the specific quality of its mental representation of attachment, it will make different demands on its social environment, including school teachers. Meeting these demands will enhance adaptation and school performance. Studies on parent-child interactions in difficult task settings have shown how much more efficient learning and instruction takes place if the relationship is a secure base to explore new and potentially threatening phenomena. The same might very well be true for teacher-pupil interactions. Pianta (1992) has documented empirical evidence on the existence of attachment relationships between teachers and pupils, comparable to those between parents and children.

Thirdly, Bowlby (1989) proposed that beyond childhood, attachment needs might not only be fulfilled within relationships between two people, but also in the wider context of the group or social system. The "corporate identity" of an effective school might stimulate the pupils' identification with "their" school. In the U.S.A. much more attention has been paid to the schools' identity (e.g., through school-based sporting teams) than in Europe. If the schools were integrated more in the pupils' lives and allowed for identification and attachment processes, they might serve as a secure base to explore uncharted intellectual and cultural territories.

Fourthly, attachment theory is playing an increasingly important role in the treatment of learning disabilities (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991). With troubled and learning disabled children the educational therapist has at least three roles: teacher, educational attachment figure and consultant to teachers in schools. In educational therapy, the focus is on the significance of attachment for the development and persistence of learning disabilities (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991). Many pupils are referred to educational therapy or even to special schools, who experienced separations that have proved traumatic (e.g., illness, hospitalization, divorce, or death of attachment figures) and clinical evidence suggests that these pupils often have a history of unresolved grief within the family which affects the pupils' learning abilities. Bowlby (1985) suggested that schoolphobia—which of course affects the child's learning potential—might originate from dysfunctional attachment relationships within the family. To ignore these roots in the treatment of learning disabilities might perpetuate the basic problems beneath the symptomatology.

In conclusion, we offered some speculative considerations as to the role of attachment in the schools. In the foregoing papers the place of attachment in learning and instruction during early childhood has been emphasized. In this epilogue we have tried to indicate some applications of attachment theory to the schools. Important areas of interest were: attachment relationships with peers, attachment between teacher and pupil, attachment to the school, and educational therapy of learning disabilities. Because empirical data

are still scarce, we were only able to formulate some hypotheses and directions for further studies on the complex issue of attachment in the schools.

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