Invited Commentary

Sensitivity in Teachers' Interaction Processes is Central to the Improvement of Teacher–Child Relationships

Commentary on: Formations of Attachment Relationships towards Teachers Lead to Conclusions for Public Child Care

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The topic of sensitivity and close relationships has attracted Klaus and Karin Grossmann a great deal throughout their entire professional careers trying to discover the mechanisms for how this might occur and be maintained over the life span in various developmental contexts. As one of the important contexts, Beckh and Becker-Stoll's (2016) paper characterize positive teacher-child relationships through high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict. Against the background of international work in this area, Beckh and Becker-Stoll refer to two central outcomes from NUBBEK, the large scale German National Study of Child Care in Early Childhood, revealing that boys and migrant children are least likely to form close relationships with their teachers. Once teacher-child relationships are positively established, interestingly however, these children benefit the most in developmental domains which are considered typically

weak for boys (i.e., social emotional skills) and for migrant children (i.e., language skills). These results are very timely and go far beyond current research which revealed successful child outcomes through close teacher-child relationships only in general, and not as straightforward and meaningful.

Moreover, Beckh and Becker-Stoll raise two connected questions on (1) how close teacher-child relationships emerge, and consequently (2) how supervisions for professionals should be designed to ensure these relationships. Past approaches of some researchers underlined the contextual influences to which teacher-child relationships are exposed, and claimed that a thorough understanding of context should take classroom quality and group dynamics into account (e.g., Van Schaik, Leseman, & Huijbregts, 2014). Other researchers, however, focused on child expectations toward relationship qualities and discussed how children provoke specific interaction styles in the teachers, based on their home attachment histories (e.g., Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Mitchell-Copeland, Denham, & DeMulder, 1997). Yet other researchers took the teachers' side

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and suggested that the self-reflective capacity of a teacher might be the best preparation for positive relationships with children, regardless of the children's care histories and the present care conditions (e.g., Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

Whatever side we might take, Beckh and Becker-Stoll are absolutely right in stressing the sensitivity in teacher-child interaction processes as the central vehicle by which teachers' relationships to the children emerges and can be improved. Because the context is so important for group care arrangements, it became the state-of-the-art approach to mirror teacher's behaviours against the background of the classrooms. Besides taping emotional und instructional support in the classroom (La Paro, Hamre, & Pianta, 2012), group-related sensitivity vs. dyadic-related sensitivity (the classical dyadic concept by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) became an issue in the debate on emerging teacher-child relationships (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006). This leads to the question of how to determine these different types of sensitivity. Clearly, dyadic interactions are the foundation in teacher's classroom activities too. However, the durations of these interactions might not only be shorter and often interrupted, they might even be functionally different than when observed in one-on-one situations with an individual child. That is, group-related sensitivity does not operate only on a lower level than dyadic-related sensitivity. Qualitative differences from dyadic-related sensitivity may appear in the sense that teachers may initiate group processes and group interactions. They may support children in engaging in group activities, playing together, and interacting with the peers using verbal expressions like *doing something together, help each other,* or synonyms (see Van Schaik et al., 2014). The group-related sensitivity surely must go hand in hand with addressing a child's individual needs by the teachers' dyadic-related sensitivity. From this perspective, children clearly experience the quality of a relationship in a group context through both, dyadic-related sensitivity, and more often through group-related sensitivity. That is, what can be learned through direct interactions can be expanded outside of the immediate teacher-child dyad via observational social learning about teachers' behaviours towards the peers (see Ereky et al., in print; Waters & Cummings, 2000).

Consequently, the different determinations of teachers' sensitivity might be one reason why associations between sensitivity and attachments in group contexts are difficult to establish. Further research needs to more carefully address these types of sensitivity as it also must carefully deal with measurement problems in capturing attachment for which applications of the Strange Situation, the Attachment-Q-Set (both based on observations), and the STRS question-naire can make significant differences in attachment outcomes (e.g., Pinquart, Feussner, & Ahnert, 2013).

Merit is warranted to Beckh and Becker-Stoll to have shown that children with negative attachment experiences at home benefit from high (group-related) sensitivity of teachers, no longer being at risk for developing no or even conflictual relationships with the teachers. Teachers, however, might have difficulty forming relationships with migrant children as they might lack a common cultural background, which in turn makes it difficult to establish a shared understanding during interactions. Consequently, Beckh and Becker-Stoll call for professional supervisions to be taken on a regular basis by the teachers in centre-based classrooms.

Unfortunately, modified family-based video-feedback interventions were only successful for home-based childcare. This is in line with our understanding of different types of sensitivity, of which only those in small groups resembles dyadic-related experiences in the family. Consequently, family-based video-feedback interventions that are successful for parents might therefore be an adequate intervention for teachers in home-based care arrangements. Specific interventions are needed which are tailored to the challenges of teachers' sensitivity in group care, however. Beckh and Becker-Stoll therefore plead to focus on teachers' Inner Working Models and suggested interventions that are able to reorganise these mental representations by which, in turn, teachers' sensitivity to the children will be reshaped. Pursuing this goal would not only stimulate the current efforts for better quality in German child care centres, it would also work against the rising burn-out patterns among the teachers.

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Bio Sketch

Lieselotte Ahnert, Professor of Developmental Psychology at University of Vienna, received her PhD from Humboldt-University Berlin (1982) and University at Jena (2000). Her research is concerned with early interaction patterns, and mother-child and father-child attachments throughout the preschool years, social-emotional development in different contexts, i.e. in families and out-of-home care, behavioral adaptation, and stress reactivity.