The child's affective relationships in the family and the classroom: a comparison of graphic representations

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Family and school are the first fundamental settings in which children's affective, emotional, social and cognitive growth takes place. Two separate images of the child are formed in these two groups, the "filial" image and the "scholastic" image, which are inevitably merged with the personality of the child. This study aims to compare and evaluate the affective relationships experienced by children in the family and in the class, as observed through their drawings. The study involved 105 elementary school students (60 males, 45 females) from Piedmont, Italy, of whom 65 were in the first cycle (first and second grades) and 40 in the second cycle (fourth and fifth grades), and analyzed a total of 210 drawings. We found that there are graphic differences depending on the subjects' gender and age group. Comparison between the findings that emerged from the Family Drawing and those from the Class Drawing pointed to common aspects and specific features of the depicted settings.

Keywords: Family drawing, class drawing, elementary school, children's drawings.

Las relaciones afectivas del niño en la familia y en la clase: representaciones gráficas comparadas. La familia y la escuela representan los primeros contextos fundamentales del crecimiento afectivo, emotivo, social y cognitivo del niño. En estos dos núcleos se forman, por separado, dos imágenes del niño, la "filial" y la "escolar", que se van fundiendo inevitablemente en la personalidad del niño. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo evaluar y comparar las relaciones afectivas manifestadas por los niños en la familia y en la propia clase, constatadas a través de sus dibujos. Han sido objeto de estudio 105 alumnos (60 niños, 45 niñas) de escuelas primarias piamontesas, de los cuales 65 cursan el primer ciclo (primero y segundo) y 40 el segundo ciclo (cuarto y quinto), por un total de 210 trabajos analizados. Se han observado diferencias gráficas según el sexo y la edad de los sujetos. De la comparación de los resultados obtenidos a través del Dibujo de la Familia y los obtenidos a través del Dibujo de la Clase, se desprenden aspectos comunes y específicos de los contextos que se han dibujado.

Palabras clave: Dibujo de la familia, dibujo de la clase, escuela primaria, dibujo infantil.

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The family is the first fundamental setting for the child's affective, emotional, social and cognitive growth. When parents are able to fulfill their duties "well enough" (Winnicott, 1965), they are a resource for the child from a number of standpoints. They satisfy the child's physical and emotional needs by offering material and affective support, transmitting social and moral rules, acting as role models, and proposing knowledge about the world and lifestyles that are necessary for his or her independent life in the future (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

Psychological literature long focused on family members in a precise sequence that assumed a decreasing order of importance, from mother to father to siblings. However, the majority of mothers and children live in a family setting in which there are other family members who modulate the relationship within the dyad in different ways, and thus cannot be relegated to a secondary role as onlookers. In particular, the dynamic perspective, by stressing the value of the father's presence in structuring the child's personality, conceptualizes the "co-starring role" that the paternal figure plays in promoting the child's psychological growth (Quaglia, 2001).

In certain cases, the presence of siblings modifies the family structure in numerical terms and, above all, from the dynamic-relational standpoint. The "relational network" which is set up inside the family is thus extended, and the dynamics change: Having a plurality of interlocutors encourages the process of decentralization, the development of social skills can be fine-tuned, and it is possible to use more material, cognitive and emotional resources, thus increasing the likelihood that successful solutions will be found. Accordingly, siblings put the ability to cope with alliances and rivalries to the test, making it necessary to develop new relational approaches.

Family relationships have an uncontested importance, not just because they are a source of security and satisfy affective and material needs, but chiefly because they lay a solid foundation on which future relationships can be built: Through affective, communicative, cognitive and social exchange with each family member, children internalize relational models that will represent themselves in the contexts that they will encounter later on in life (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). A number of studies have confirmed that the relational patterns found between the child and the first caregivers are extended to the relationships established with other figures to which the child will turn to receive protection and comfort. In this sense, the parent-*child* relationship reoccurs in the interactions that the child-*student* establishes with the teacher (Howes & Hamilton, 1992) and with classmates (Erickson, Sroufe & Egeland, 1985).

School, then, is the first stage where the social and relational approaches acquired in the early affective contacts are rehearsed. Upon starting school, the process of partial separation from the parents is consolidated: For the first time, children are put in a position where they must compare their own with others' experience, and can learn to go beyond egocentric and subjective viewpoints (Programmi, 1985). Drawing on their

prior experience, children learn to dialog in a new way with adults and peers having different roles and functions (the teacher *in lieu* of parents, classmates *in lieu* of siblings). At school, others' expectations and social rules multiply and become more complicated: Children know they must adapt to the new context, "reconstructing" a new image of themselves as students (Carugati & Selleri, 1996). This triggers a partial "dismantling" of the ways that the child has hitherto used and heard in order to talk to people, to tell them about things, to ask, to explain, and to deal with others, gradually making room for those that are "institutionally appropriate". At home and at school, two images of the child are developed separately: the "filial" image and the "school" image, which inevitably merge together in the personality of the child (Liverta, Sempio & Marchetti, 1995).

In this scenario, a fundamental role falls to the teacher, who serves as a "hinge between the experience and the family culture of the individual and the experience and culture of a larger segment of society" (Bombi & Scittarelli, 1998, p.53): Taking up where the parental relationship leaves off, the educator assumes the role of the third caregiver who is expected to recognize the child's feelings, process them and present them in a form which is more bearable for the child. A positive relationship with the teacher, marked by affection, closeness, and exchange of communication, becomes a factor that protects against those developmental risks associated with problematic family situations as well as with negative school experiences either in terms of academic failure (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992) or in terms of misconduct and peer relationships (Hughes, Cavell & Jackson, 1999).

Given the important role that school and family play in the child's development through a continual exchange and construction of "images" of the child as "son" or "daughter" and as "student", this study aims to compare and evaluate the affective relationships experienced by children in the family and in the class. These dynamics are observed in drawing, an activity that is natural and enjoyable for the child, and a way of communicating the structure of the inner representational world and its affective implications.

In particular, identifying significant associations between graphic indexes of family experience and the ability to adapt to the school setting will enhance the value of using drawing (specifically, the Class Drawing) as a means of communication and of opening up the dialog between teacher and student.

METHOD

Participants

The study involved 105 students, including 60 males (57.1%) and 45 females (42.9%), with a mean age of 7.96 years (*SD*=1.441). All of the children attended primary

school in Piedmont, Italy. Sixty-five children (61.9%) were in the first cycle (i.e., first and second grades) and 40 (38.1%) were in the second cycle (i.e., fourth and fifth grades): so, the participants were equally distributed between the age groups, a younger group of 6 to 7 year olds, and an older group of 9 to 10 year olds. Since each student produced two graphic representations, 210 drawings were analyzed in total.

Instruments

Being a part of the projective methods that are traditionally used in dynamic models, the use of the graphic method follows the idea that drawing can reveal affective dynamics in childhood. Like a narrative, a drawing is a "construction", shaped on the one hand by life-cycle events, and on the other hand by internal working models that cannot be assimilated literally with real events. The drawing is thus a "communication" of the inner representational world and its affective implications (Tambelli, Zavattini & Mossi, 1995): In their graphic representations, children do not reproduce reality faithfully, nor do they depart from reality on purpose. Rather, they cut out a corner of the world all for themselves, where they can dictate the rules of the game and twist and bend reality in order to recreate a relationship of trust with different self-images (Quaglia & Saglione, 1990).

In this sense, the two instruments used, namely Family Drawing (FD) and the Class Drawing (CD), represent a personal conception of relatively stable, though by no means fixed, affective dynamics that occur in the family and school settings respectively.

The Family Drawing (FD)

The Family drawing, devised by Corman in 1967 for children and adolescents, aims to investigate the relationships that the individuals have established with other members of the family group, as well as the problems they have with the group as a whole and/or certain individuals. This study follows the interpretation of the FD as provided by Tambelli, Zavattini and Mossi (1995), who define it as "a *representation of a representation*, or in other words the product of a construction, not in terms of a pure creation of unconscious fantasies that are indifferent to the experience of real relationships, nor of a mere distortion of them, but as an expression of more fluid mechanism of cycles of projection and introjection in which representations of internal relationships of an imaginary nature are constantly projected onto the outside world, and perceptions of real figure in the outside world blend with internal images" (Tambelli, Zavattini & Mossi, 1995, p. 12-13).

The FD and CD were created by the entire class during morning school hours, on different occasions and in alternating order, without time constraints. For each drawing, each child was given a standard A4 sheet of paper, pencil, eraser and crayons. For the FD, the children were told to "Draw a family", rather than to "Draw a family, a family you've invented" as in the traditional Corman method, since the intention was to

maintain the same function of facilitating the projection of imaginary aspects, but without suggesting explicitly inventive aspects (Tambelli, Zavattini & Mossi, 1995).

After finishing their drawings, all children were interviewed individually to obtain information about their preferences and identification with the people represented in the drawing (for each person represented, they were asked to indicate name, gender, age, role in the family, what they do and where they are, and who is the most or least liked, happy or important. In addition, the children were asked: "Suppose you are part of this family: who would you like to be?" For each child, we observed the attitude assumed when receiving instructions and while drawing (e.g., refusal, excessive speed, anxiety, etc.). Finally, the teachers assisted in filling out an identification form indicating the composition of each child's family group in order to compare the drawn family with his or her actual family.

Given that the data collected through the drawing can never represent everything that the child could or would like to communicate consciously or unconsciously, but only those things that were focused on through the selected parameters, a set of indexes was used to identify the subject's principal positive or negative tendencies. Specifically, the investigators proceeded to compare the real family with the family in the drawing (analyzing omissions and additions), to determine the role of identifications and, in accordance with Corman's concept of "valorization/devalorization" (1967), to rank the significance assigned to the characters depicted on three nominal scales (i.e., priority, size and importance).

The Class Drawing (CD)

The Class Drawing, a semi-projective graphic method developed Quaglia and Saglione in 1990, was used to investigate children's perception of their "well-being" at school with regards to the various aspects of classroom life (i.e., the relationship with the teacher, the relationship with classmates, experience with learning and with themselves as students. After a preliminary discussion with the entire class in which the children were brought to understand that the "class" is an entity consisting of four main aspects (i.e., one's self, classmates, teacher, classroom), the children were told: "Draw your class, draw it however you like". Here again, the children were interviewed individually after finishing their drawings in order to determine what each child had represented and the reasons for any omissions.

Following Quaglia and Saglione's (1990) methodology, the drawings were interpreted at content level. Specifically, after comparing the contents of the drawing with the real elements of the classroom (i.e., layout of desks, the position of each student, number of classmates and teachers, etc.), we followed with an analysis of how each element of the class was depicted and whether it was omitted, the amount of care taken in representing it, its dimensions, order of appearance, and its closeness/distance. According to Quaglia and Saglione (1990), the forms of devaluation (e.g., moving away,

reducing size, erasing, adding last, suppressing) are to be interpreted, much like silence in oral communication, as defense mechanisms and attempts at reassurance when faced with distressing and problematic situations to which children are unable to adapt. Conversely, the elements of the class that are represented accurately and valorized (e.g., subjects are physically present, depicted with care, close, proportionately dimensioned, and drawn first) are interpreted as showing positive affective investment, and children exhibit a relationship of trust in them.

Procedure

We analyzed the data using the PASW 18 statistical analysis software.

RESULTS

Family Drawing

The majority of the children produced the required drawings calmly and happily, in a *drawing time* that was neither too long nor too short (97.1%). The *pressure* and *type of stroke* used were for the most part appropriate (82.9% and 87.6%); lines that were too light or too heavy, discontinuous and uncertain or repeated were chiefly typical of males (x^2=6.085; df=1; p<0.05) and younger children (x^2=5.815; df=1; p<0.05).

A generally positive emotional tone (in 99% and 96.4% of cases respectively) was also found in the responses to the question "*Where are the people?*" and in the description of the *activities* they engaged in, and especially in the responses of the younger children (x^2=6.757; df=1; p<0.05).

Frequency distributions of the indexes analyzed for the FD are summarized in table 1.

Concerning the *actual composition* of the families, in most cases the students belonged to triadic families (36.2%) consisting of mother, father and child or tetradic families (49.5%) made up of parents and two children. When comparing the remaining 14.3% of cases, the family consisted of three or more children. This means that, in 63.8% of cases, students had at least one brother or sister.

Comparing the actual numerical composition with the one depicted in the drawing, it was found that 68.5% of the students drew all their family without making changes. In the remaining 31.5% of cases, the changes consisted in *omitting* rather than *adding* people (see table 1, *Omission*). In particular, the omissions concern parental figures (i.e., mother: 11.4%; father: 10.5%) and, even more frequently, the child himself (21.9%). The older students are likely not to draw themselves more often (x^2=16.620; df=2; p<0.001). More often than their counterparts in the first cycle, the older students had the tendency to assign characteristics –name, gender, age, profession– to the parental

figures that partially differed from those of the real family members (father: x^2=22.238; df=2; p<0.001; mother: x^2=24.166; df=2; p<0.001).

The added figures, which like the omitted figures are here interpreted as different "identifications" of the subject, rather than as indicating unexpressed drives, are chiefly representative of children with whom there is a fraternal bond (11.4%), other unrelated children, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.

Table 1. Percentage frequency distribution for each FD index

FD INDEXES and FIGURES (reference %)	Father (100%)	Mother (100%)	Self (100%)	Sibling1 (63.8%)	Sibling2 (9.5%)	Other cohabitant (5.7%)	Added figure (21.9%)
Omission	10.5	11.4	21.9°	1.9	-	-	-
Total distortion of reality	18.1	16.2	15.2	3.8	1.9	1	16.2
Partial distortion of reality	11.4°	12.4°	6.7	14.3	2.9	-	4.8
Complete match with reality	60	60	56.2	41.9	4.8	4.8	1.9
Identification of desire	23.8*	24.8*°	25.7	11.4	2.9	1.9	9.5°
Order (drawn first)	30.5	24.8	24.8°	7.6	1	1.9	5.7
Size	47.6	24.8	2.9	1	-	4.8	2.9
Importance	21.9	23.8*	18.1*	8.6*	2.9	-	4.8
Closeness	41	46.7	-	30.5	3.8	-	1.9
Together	84.8	83.8	76.2	57.1	9.5	5.7	21
Happiest	26.7°	33.3*	39°	29.5	1.9	1	10.5
Less happy	16.2°	7.6	2.9	4.8	1	1	4.8
More important	41.9°	30.5*°	29.5°	17.1	1.9	1	1.9
Less important	1.0	6.7	6.7	7.6	1.9	1	4.8
More liked	34.3	21	16.2	22.9	3.8	1	8.6
Less liked	11.4°	4.8	6.7	8.6	3.8	-	1.9

* With significant differences by gender; ° with significant differences by age.

The children's choices as regards *identification of desire* are almost equally divided between themselves (25.7%), the maternal figure (24.8%) and the paternal figure (23.8%). It should be noted that the child's response to the interview question: "Who would you like to be?" refers to a desire or tendency at the conscious level: children choose the person who best expresses their "confessable" aspirations. In this case, then, the question is not so much one of accepting one's gender, age or role in the family as of identifying with the figures who represent the power, value and models that children would like to make their own (Abraham, 1976). Conforming this, it is chiefly the younger children who identify with the maternal figure (x^2=6.977; df=1; p<0.01), and who also see the mother as the most important person (x^2=6.672; df=1; p<0.05), underscoring her role as the primary relational partner.

In the responses, there are also important differences associated with gender identity: girls prefer to identify with the mother (x^2=22.684; df=1; p<0.001), and boys with the father (x^2=14.717; df=1; p<0.001). This highlights the sense of sexual belonging and the function it assumes in the organization of the Self.

Considering *depicted closeness* as an indicator of the dynamics of the affections, we evaluated "where" children draw themselves with respect to the other family members. The majority of the subjects (78.7%) placed themselves near at least one parent (see Table 1, *Closeness*), emphasizing the bond of mutual understanding and liking that connects children with their parental figures. In addition, parents and children are usually depicted as belonging to a single graphic grouping. The other figures – siblings, added persons and other cohabitants in particular– occupy a common, shared space to a gradually decreasing extent (see table 1, *Together*).

As for the *order* in which the figures are drawn, the father is often represented first, followed by the mother and the children (see Table 1, *Order*). However, the paternal figure is also the one that is most frequently drawn last, indicating an ambivalent attitude towards him. Here again, moreover, the younger children exhibit a strong egocentric sense, starting their drawings by representing themselves ($x^2=9.765$; $df=3$; $p<0.05$). This attitude is also found in the younger children's tendency to identify themselves as the happiest ($x^2=5.549$; $df=1$; $p<0.05$) and most important person ($x^2=5.098$; $df=1$; $p<0.05$).

Assuming that there is a link between the emotional resonance of a family member and the size of that member's depiction, the father is also the most highly valorized figure in terms of height (47.6%), followed by the mother (24.8%) (see table 1, *Size*).

Based on the number of attributes, on the other hand, the mother is the figure who receives most attention, though not to an overwhelming degree (see figure 1, *Importance*), followed by the figure of the father (21.9%) and that representing the child (18.1%). In general, girls devote more attention and care to details (Maternal figure: $x^2=13.130$; $df=1$; $p<0.001$. Figure of self: $x^2=3.723$; $df=1$; $p<0.05$. Figure of siblings: $x^2=8.025$; $df=1$; $p<0.01$).

Class Drawing

The main findings that emerged from the analysis of the Class Drawings are summarized in table 2.

Concerning the physical presence of the individuals making up the class (i.e., the child, classmates and teacher), the figures who are most frequently represented are those of classmates (65%) (see table 2, *Presence*). However, classmates are not always drawn with particular care, especially by the males ($x^2=7.574$; $df=2$; $p<0.05$). Another figure that is generally present as a person is the teacher (62.5%) who, even if omitted, is nevertheless "remembered" through an element (blackboard or desk) associated with his or her educational role (35.6%). The teacher often appears among the most highly valorized figures in the drawing (43.8%), particularly in girls' representations ($x^2=6.242$; $df=1$; $p<0.05$).

By contrast, the figure that is least present is that of the child himself (48.6%). Once again, the representation of Self, when present, is drawn with greater care by females (x^2=6.522; df=2; p<0.05) and. as in the FD, is more highly valorized by the younger children (x^2=14.514; df=1, p<0.001). With age, in fact, the attention towards the self is replaced with a greater care in drawing the classroom as a physical space (x^2=8.555; df=3; p<0.05) and in drawing the teacher (x^2=5.006; df=1; p<0.05).

Table 2. Percentage frequency distribution for each CD index

	CD INDEXES and FIGURES	Self	Classmates	Teacher		Classroom
Presence	Absent	36.2	3.9	1.9	Out	1.9
	Element	15.2	31.1	35.6	Closed	42.9
	As a person	48.6	65	62.5	Open	55.2
Detailed importance	Element not carefully drawn	12.4	28.6	20	Sparse furnishing	56.2
	Element carefully drawn	2.9	2.9	13.3	Decorative furnishings only	7.6
	Person not carefully drawn	17.1	33.3	24.8	Educational furnishings only	16.2
	Person carefully drawn	30.5	31.4	40	Furnishings of all kinds	15.2
Total importance	Presence carefully drawn	33.4*	34.3*	41		43.8*°
	Presence not carefully drawn	29.5	61.9	23.8		54.3
Order	First	16.2°	20	14.3		53.3°
	Other	41.9	54.3	45.7		23.8
	Last	4.8	10.5°	4.8		21.9
Value	Among the most highly valorized elements of the drawing	25.7°	24.8	43.8*°		53.3*
	Among the most devalorized elements of the drawing	51.4	53.3	41		27.6

* With significant differences by gender; ° With significant differences by age.

Concerning the internal correspondences between the total scores obtained in the different dimensions of the CD, there are significant correlations between the representation of subjects: between Self and Classmates (Pearson's r=.529; p<0.01), between Self and Teacher (Pearson's r=.473; p<0.01), and between Classmates and Teacher (Pearson's r=.499; p<0.01).

Associations between FD and CD

Table 3 summarizes the significant relationships found between the indexes considered for the FD and the CD. As one may notice, there are important links between the two graphic representations, particularly between:

- Ways of representing the paternal figure and valorizing the Self-student: a greater importance assigned to the father (manifested in terms of the care taken in drawing him and the attribution of characteristics that express happiness and liking for the figure, typical of younger children) corresponds to a higher regard for the Self in the school setting (likewise typical of six to seven year olds). This emphasizes the value of

the paternal figure as one that indicates the future to the child, opening up the road to conquests in the world outside of the family.

- The omission of the Self-child and the devaluation of the Self-student: how children represent themselves in the FD is repeated in the CD.

- The characteristics of the graphic representation of the parental figures and those of the classmates: forms of affective disinvestment from the paternal and maternal figure and in part from siblings (e.g., omission, poor match between the depicted figures and reality) correspond to forms of devaluation of peers in the CD, confirming the role of primary relationships as the basis for all future bonds.

- Value assigned to the maternal figure and the figure of the educator: chiefly, students who identify with the maternal figure and consider the mother to be the happiest and most important person graphically valorize the teacher (consequently, this is especially true of girls).

Table 3. Chi-square test thresholds in the associations between FD Indexes and CD Elements as most highly valorized (+) or most devalorized (-)

FD Indexes	CD Elements		
	Self	Classmates	Teacher
Parents_Omission		- 0.05	
Father_Closeness			+ 0.05
Father_DistortionReality		- 0.01	
Father_Importance	+ 0.05	+ 0.05	
Father_LessHappy	- 0.05		
Father_MoreLiked	+ 0.01		
Mother_Identification			+ 0.01
Mother_Omission		- 0.05	
Mother_DistortionReality		- 0.01	
Mother_Importance			
Mother_Happiest			+ 0.05
Mother_MostImportant			+ 0.01
Self_Omission	- 0.01		
Self_Happiest	+ 0.05	+ 0.05	
Siblings_Omission		- 0.05	

CONCLUSIONS

We found that age and gender are variables that influence children's internal representations in two settings of undoubted importance, the family and the school (Morval, 1973). In particular, our study found significant differences between the two age groups considered (i.e., younger children from 6 to 7 years old, and older children from 9 to 10 years old), confirming the intermediate age of 8 years as a turning point. In the graphic representations considered, there is a clear transition from a period of egocentrism and dependence, rendered by a high valorization of the Self in drawings by children in the first elementary school cycle, to a form of devaluation of the Self in the representations of students in the second cycle. Rather than a devaluation, however, this

must be seen as an attempt on the part of the older students to differentiate themselves from the family setting, and to adapt and identify interests in the non-family world (i.e., the world of school and contemporaries). Graphically, this attempt translates into illustrations that are less anchored to reality in the FD, and, in the CD, a higher valorization of the educational environment and figures (e.g., taking particular care in drawing classroom furnishings and the teacher). While the importance that children assign to themselves continues to decrease, the educational figures –the parents in the family and the teachers at school– remain constant points of affective reference.

The significant associations found between the FD and CD (i.e., the link between how parental figures are represented in the FD and classmates in the CD, between the maternal image and the teacher, between the figure of the father and of the child himself in the school setting) confirm the importance of relational exchanges with family figures, which contribute to the baggage of knowledge and experience that the child will bring to each new situation, including the school situation. At the same time, however, each setting imposes its own specific features; in the school environment, for example, the role of the educator is a resource for establishing positive relationships with peers.

These findings thus contribute to demonstrating the concurrent validity of the Class Drawing, which is confirmed as a useful means of interpreting and understanding for teachers who, in view of their direct knowledge of the student, can employ this graphic method to dialogue with the child and reconstruct –and maybe improve– the child's affective reality.

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