Pedagogical Sheet

Assessing the "autistic object's" place

Section of the module / R

Contact : Jean Loup Lenoir.

ifrass
Campus Louis Lareng

1/ **Context**

The envisaged context can be a primary or secondary school.

2/ **Goals**

The purpose of this fact sheet is twofold: firstly, **allowing the assessment of the function and place of the so-called "autistic" object in the accompaniment of a child with Special Educational Needs** and, on the other hand, **limiting the effects of invasiness of the learner's psyche by this object**.

The challenge here will be to consider this particular modality of object relation (which is both to allow, and even to support, but also to limit) in order to **allow the pupil to re-enter the dynamic of learning and group life class**.

3/ **Conduct**

We are in an ordinary class where a child has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). He sometimes becomes remote on his side and takes a particular object (what seems to have a calming effect on him but connotes at the same time a dropping out of any form of intersubjective relationship), and thus confronts professionals to a paradox and therefore a difficulty to think of a position that would be relevant and would keep close to the basic needs of the child.

The practical issue of this sheet will consist in allowing the child to limit the place that this autistic object takes in his daily life or in a learning situation, in particular by limiting what is for him / her a cause of emotional disarray.

Understanding the function of the autistic object in a learning context is complex. If the function of the "cuddly toy" (which is a transitional object) is to enable the child to experience the separation from his / her attachment figures in a progressive way, it should be noted that the autistic object does not have the same function. It is an object to which the child, during a pedagogical activity or on a time of exchange between the teacher and the group of learners, can suddenly get "connected". The child, because of the hypersensoriality specific to

ASD, becomes inward-looking while playing with an object of limited interest, and in a dynamic of stereotyped repetition of the same motor and sensory experience (for example turning a ball between his / her thumb and his / her index, or spinning the wheels of a small car on his / her cheek), to cope with what he / she feels like a risk of emotional disorganization.

Faced with this child resorting to an autistic object, the teacher can:

- **Avoid focusing support on prohibitions regarding the autistic object** (this object allowing him / her to structure his / her relationship to the social environment and emotional experiences) **but work (in co-construction with the child) on a limitation of its use**.
  This job must be done in a way adapted to the singularity of each situation.
  This limitation can be played out in particular **at the spatial and temporal levels**: that is, by defining the times when the child can request this object and, secondly, by defining the spaces where the child can request this object. Thus, sound or space-related cues may enable the child to separate more easily from this object by playing the role of rituals, initiating the beginning of an activity and meaning for the child the moment to lay down his / her object. It is important to repeat the same steps each time, in the same order, at the same place, well identified by the child.
  In addition, one can imagine an evolutionary approach concerning the place of the object going from nearer to further and visible to hidden. At first, when the child discovers a new classroom or activity, he / she can first place his / her object on the table near him / her, clearly visible. Little by little, the distance can be gradually increased (for example by putting it with him / her high up on top of a piece of furniture, the object remaining well in sight).
  When the child will be able to do so, he / she may store his / her object in an immutable place (first close to him / her, in his / her pocket for example, then further, for example in his / her locker). These principles are to be elaborated with the child, and must be re-evaluated for each child, according to the singularity of the events he / she is living.

- Setting up an educational framework enabling the child to **express his / her emotions**. This work of expressing and telling emotions and feelings will enable the child to organize his / her emotions, to structure them, to put meaning on the events he / she is living and to learn from others by imitating them. To do this, the teacher can use a set of **teaching tools**:
  - ✓ He / she can rely on targeted texts allowing exchanges and a work of telling and naming the characters' emotions and feelings.
  - ✓ He / she can also use **visual supports showing the range of emotional situations**, thus enabling the child to give meaning to his / her experienced feelings and to position him- / herself as a subject involved in his / her own emotional life. These visual supports can take the form of photos or pictograms, the choice of these images will be elaborated, as far as possible with the child or his / her parents, according to his / her capacities and his / her specificities (using for example his / her limited interests and what he / she already knows). Thus, using pictures of familiar objects from the child's home environment can promote his / her spatial awareness in the classroom.

- Setting up a pedagogical framework enabling the child to identify social conventions and codes. The lack of knowledge related to these codes can indeed put the child in a delicate and anxiety-provoking situation, so working on these social benchmarks will help avoiding situations that cause anxiety and emotion-management difficulties. To do this, the teacher can use a set of **teaching tools**:
  - ✓ Using supports (texts, photographs, film's extracts) based upon which social codes and social conventions can be made clearer and explained. This explanation will enable the child to cope

with otherwise incomprehensible social situations, and thus to structure and anticipate his / her social interactions.
- ✓ Using group reflections on potentially actual social situations can be very rich for the child with ASD in order to imagine the possible behaviours and reactions in a given context and to be gradually able to identify a little better the other's emotion and what can be expected as an answer.

4/ **Evaluation**

- Check the child's well-being in the group and in learning situations. Does he / she manage to participate in class time and other activities? Is he / she not too introverted? Does he / she feel good in the exchange with the children's group or with some of them in particular? Is he / she somehow communicating with the adults around him / her? Is the number of outbursts or "crises" setting back or under control?

- Provide spaces for talking with the group of children, the teachers, the accompanying persons and possibly the family to collect what the child feels, what he / she can say about the place one tries to make for him / her within school. Does he / she feel comfortable with the place one tries to make for him / her?

5/ **Limits**

In Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) situations, these objects may indeed seem to take up all space, invading the child's mind space, and monopolizing his / her attention to such an extent that it makes it hermetic to any exchange and any learning relationship. But it must also be considered that these objects have, at the same time, a function of locating, self-regulating and structuring the bodily and emotional experiences experienced by the child.

6/ **Prospects**

Taking into account this particular modality of object relation enables the pupil to re-enter the learning dynamic and the life of the class group, which opens up new possibilities from the educational and pedagogical point of view, and the access to new skills and abilities for the accompanied child: openness to otherness, individuation and socialization work, social skills. This accompanying dimension can thus be complemented by considering the particular modalities of affective and emotional expression of children with Special Educational Needs.