

## Research Article

## Autism and Transference: Case Study in a Brazilian Primary School

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**Abstract:** The main issue of this research was the occurrence of transference between an autistic child and his mediator in school. Transference is defined as a process by which the unconscious desires are re-established in certain objects, within a specific sort of relationship. In this case study, a negative transference took place in first place. After some weeks, with the understanding that the psychologist must support the negative transference and help the child to deal with frustrations and misunderstandings, a positive transference started to happen, and an affective bonding was constructed, as the child began to see the mediator as a parental figure, following his directions, ceasing aggression towards the mediator, or peers, as well as developing his learning abilities.

**Keywords:** child, autism, transference, Psychoanalysis, school, ASD.

### INTRODUCTION

Since Kanner's seminal paper on autism, published in 1943, attention has been drawn to the difficulties and possibilities of dealing with children who developed that disorder. The new edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, APA, 2013) specifies a list of symptoms for ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorders), such as social interaction and communication problems; difficulties in normal conversation; difficulties in sharing of interests or emotions; challenges in understanding or responding to social cues (eye contact and facial expressions); restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests or activities (hand-flapping and toe-walking, playing with toys in an uncommon way, speaking in a unique way, need for a predictable routine or structure, intense interests in activities that are uncommon for a similarly aged child, experiencing the sensory aspects of the world in an unusual or extreme way). Consequently, autism involves a break in interactional relationships and, fundamentally, a difficulty in social development, especially in early abilities to express joint attention (Dawson et al, 2004). Apparently, those symptoms hinder (and hide) the learning possibilities (or abilities), resulting in the idea that a child with autism is intellectually disabled, a vision that is questioned by many researchers, mainly the ones who directly deal with autistic children in school and clinical settings, using a Psychoanalytical framework (for example,

Tustin, 1972; Kupfer, 2000; Bastos & Kupfer, 2010; Silva & Fiamenghi-Jr, 2018). Klein (1932, 1961) described a clinical experience in Psychoanalysis with a boy, named 'Little Dick', who never showed affection, wasn't able to represent reality and didn't interact in playing activities. Tustin (1972) explains that autistic states systematically appear in children with a high level of intelligence and, depending on how therapy is conducted, some of them achieve a good prognosis, exemplifying with patients who completed a degree in Mathematics, Meteorology and Music. Tustin (1972, 1981) emphasizes that the therapeutic setting for autistic children must be routinely organized, in the same hour and weekday, in the same room, keeping the room furniture in the same place, and providing the same materials and toys for the child to use, including family puppets or dolls, plastic animals, cars, pencils, playdough, paper, and crayons. In fact, the importance of drawing in child's therapy is explained by Dolto (1984), assuring that while drawing, playing, or modelling, a child expresses his/her own images, symbolically connected to emotions that marked his/her personality.

Laplanche and Pontalis (2016) explain that in Psychoanalysis, transference is the process by which the unconscious desire is updated towards some objects and

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some kind of relations, as a repetition of childhood prototypes, and a basis for the process of analysis. Roudinesco and Plon (2011) state that those unconscious desires of the patient are repeated inside the analytical situation, directed to the psychoanalyst. As a result, the psychoanalyst assumes the form of parental figures, allowing the patient to revive latent psychological material. Lacan (1961) asserted that “we are not able to formulate otherwise the phenomena of transference than in this enigmatic form: why is it necessary for the subject to repeat perpetually this signification, in the positive sense of the term, which he signifies to us by his behavior” (p. 172). According to Freud (1916/1973), “transference... really becomes its most effectual tool, which aids in opening the locked compartments of the psychic life” (p. 2399). During the first contact between patient and psychoanalyst, a positive relation emerges, as the patient agrees to everything that is interpreted; this is called positive transference (Santos, 1994; Tafuri, 2000). However, there is also a transference of hostile feelings, called negative transference, that is not identified with hate (Lacan, 1961). Houzel (2004), working with autistic children, defines 4 stages of transference: transference onto the container; analysis of the infantile transference; transference neurosis, and the end of the process.

On the other hand, there is also counter-transference, unconscious emotional reactions from the psychoanalyst, and must be identified and understood (Zambelli, 2013). In fact, when dealing with autistic patients, the therapist must understand countertransference feelings of despair, as well as hope, that “might reflect both the child’s split-off and fragmented primitive unconscious phantasies regarding traumatic breakdown, as well as his or her hidden search for reparation” (Durban, 2014, p. 187).

This work aimed to discuss the role transference plays in the relationship with autistic children, in a school setting.

## METHOD

This qualitative ethnographic research was conducted in a government school, that caters for low income to lower-middle income pupils, in a São Paulo county country town. It was part of a larger investigation on autism and inclusion, being approved by the Ethics Committee (CAAE n. 0087.0.272.000-10).

During a period of 5 months, an 8-year-old boy, diagnosed with autism, was observed interacting with his mediator, as well as classmates and teachers. The observations were registered in a field diary and lasted 4 hours each.

A mediator, in Brazilian primary schools is normally an undergraduate student, who is hired to help children with special needs/disabilities to follow

mainstream schooling, during classroom hours. The mediator stays near the child, attending to all the needs, and intervening when there is a problem.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observations were transcribed from the field diary and analyzed. 30 observations were chosen to exemplify the evolution of the relationship of the autistic boy with his mediator and are described below, divided into months. First observations (1 to 18) showed a lot of aggression, towards the mediator, the classmates and the teacher. After a bond was created between the boy and the mediator, his behavior systematically improved, at the point of no aggression or agitation (observation 19 to 30). It took approximately 4 months of daily interaction and presence for the boy to accept the mediator and change his attitudes of aggression into trust and companionship.

### Month 1:

1. This day, the boy was very aggressive after losing a game of swap cards: he stayed behind a door, hitting it. The mediator followed him, and he pushed the door violently, but went back to his desk.
2. He was unsettled when the teacher was reading a story and left the library. He wanted to take a pair of scissors to the playing yard, but was not allowed to do so, and was very angry, throwing the scissors away. Then, while painting, he asked the mediator to do it for him; as the mediator denied, he started screaming, ordering the mediator to leave; at the same time, the boy was unsettled, pacing around the classroom. By the end of the day, he was rolling on the floor, refusing to follow orders.
3. The boy was sitting quietly, but, suddenly, walked to a classmate’s desk and punched him on the face. Questioned about that behavior, he said that the other boy was talking too much the day before. After that, he was very unsettled, walked around the classroom, throwing other classmates’ objects on the floor. The mediator restrained him, but the boy tried to hit the mediator and started swearing. The way the mediator restrained the boy was by holding him from behind, keeping the boy’s arms crossed in front of his chest, sitting down on the floor and talking very gently to him. During gym class, he was very aggressive, and spat in everyone around him, throwing objects on the floor. Then he said he was going to kill the mediator. He was calm during the break. However, as soon as he entered the classroom, he was aggressive, hitting the door, crawling under classmates’ desks. The teacher asked him to stop and the mediator approached, but the boy started screaming and calling the mediator ‘devil’. The

mediator took him for a walk in the library and he was calm again.

4. He was very calm, doing his Math's activities and when he finished, the mediator took him to the library to print cards. There was a group of pupils in the library and the boy started to be tense. A trainee Psychology student asked if she could stay in the classroom and the boy was very unsettled after she entered the classroom. He asked the mediator to do cuttings for him, but complained, shouting, very arrogantly: "*What sort of shit is that? It is crappy, do it again!*" The mediator said he was trying to help, for it was the boy's task to perform; he was very angry and pinched the mediator. Looking sideways to the mediator, he ran around the classroom, throwing books on the floor, crawling under his classmates' desks. The mediator restrained him and convinced him to go outside to the playground.
5. The class was doing a written test, but the boy refused to do it. The mediator took him to the library. When they returned to the classroom, a reading activity was being performed. He was very aggressive, tried to hit the mediator, break the computer mouse, laid under a desk, saying he was tired. At the gym class, he was very aggressive, kicked the mediator, tried to punch him, threw the bin at him, and the teacher took all the pupils back to the classroom. He was still unsettled and ordered the mediator to do cuttings for him. The mediator told him to do and he would help. The boy screamed: "*Shut up and do it now!*" The school staff mentioned that the boy had arrived in school very aggressive that day.

#### **Month 2:**

6. When the mediator arrived, the boy was doing a test and said he did not want the mediator near, because he wanted to do it all by himself. He was not able to complete the test and started to be unsettled. The mediator took a game of plastic darts, without looking at the boy, who approached, held the mediator's hand and asked him to play. There was a meeting in the teachers' room and he asked the mediator: "*Are you afraid of going there?*" The mediator said he wasn't and in fact that was the place he had his coffee. Then, the boy asked the mediator to go to the teachers' room, to discover what they were talking about. During the break, he played with some classmates, and was peaceful during the rest of the period.
7. He did not want to do a test, and also did not allow the mediator to sit beside him, pretending not to listen when people talked to him. The teacher said that he was already aggressive when arrived at school. The mediator tried to talk to him and he was very angry, pushed a chair against him. As he wasn't able to hit the mediator, the boy turned to the classmates, trying to hit them, throwing their objects on the floor. The mediator restrained him and took him to the playground. They walked by the garden and the boy was quiet. As soon as they returned to the classroom, he was aggressive again, throwing chairs and desks, and the mediator restrained him, took him to an empty room and the boy relaxed and slept.
8. When the mediator arrived, the boy ran and hid behind the locker door. He was very unsettled and the mediator left the room to drink water. The boy went back to his desk and the mediator stayed far, ignoring him, observing his behaviors. The boy was calm, sometimes wandered by the classroom, tapping the locker door, looking at the mediator as to call his attention. The mediator did not look at him and he stopped. After the break, the boy wanted to go to the secretary office, seeming afraid, or escaping the mediator.
9. The boy arrived very unsettled at school, and didn't allow the mediator to sit near him. He threw objects at the teacher, the mediator, the classmates, and was crawling under the desks. Then, the mediator took him to the library and he was peaceful, printing figures do paint. But, as soon as he returned to the classroom, he was very aggressive, and kicked another boy, who reacted, pushed him and he fell down. The mediator got a Lego toy and the boy played with it and was calm again.
10. The boy was a bit upset during Arts class (every week, there is a different teacher and he doesn't like it). The monitor took him to the library, to print cards and he was calm. Returning to the classroom, he wanted to play with another boy and the teacher called his attention. He was very angry and hit the teacher and the classmates. The mediator talked to him and he was calm again. However, the Art's teacher talked about his behavior and he was furious, hitting his classmates and running to the teacher to beat her. The mediator took him to another room, but he was very agitated and the mediator held him from behind, crossed his arms on his chest, sat down with him, and asked him to breathe deeply and slowly. After 10 minutes, he was very relaxed, and the mediator got a cushion and the boy laid down.
11. The boy arrived very aggressive, pacing up and down the classroom, and threw objects at the mediator (scissors, paper, pencil case). The mediator took him to another room, restrained him. It didn't take much time for him to calm down. He got the bin and threw the contents on the floor. The mediator asked him to collect

everything, otherwise they wouldn't leave the room. He obeyed and they left.

**Month 3:**

12. When the mediator arrived, the boy was sleeping in classroom. He woke up and started to copy the lesson the teacher wrote in the blackboard. He was a little agitated, but very briefly.
13. He was very calm during Arts class, played with his classmates, but was a little stressed because he lost. During break, he tried to hit a boy, pushed the teacher, but when class started, he was quiet and copied the lesson.
14. He and the mediator played with Lego almost all day. He was unsettled when class finished, saying he didn't want to go home.
15. When the mediator arrived, the boy was lying down in the Secretary Office. Staff said he had a fight as soon as he arrived at school. The mediator took him to the classroom, and once there, he slept almost all the time.
16. During Physical Education class, the boy hit another classmate, whose leg was hurt and bleeding a bit. The mediator asked why the boy did that and he said he was losing the game and was angry. He asked the mediator not to tell his father about it and spend most of the day quiet and withdrawn. When his father arrived, he started to call him 'devil' and didn't want to go home.
17. There was a book fair in town and the children visited the exhibition. The boy was calm, up to the point when music started and he was very upset, covering the ears and shaking his head. The mediator took him to a quiet place, talked to him very gently and the boy was peaceful afterwards.
18. He arrived very unsettled and would not sit at his desk. He kicked his classmates, sat on the teacher's chair and the mediator took him to another class. There he was calm and played checkers, but when his father arrived to collect him, he was very angry, didn't want to go with him, and threw his bag on the floor.

**Month 4**

19. He was copying his lessons when the mediator arrived. Then, he asked the mediator to stay close and teach him new words in English.
20. He talked a lot with the mediator, copied his lesson and asked to go to the library to print some cards. The mediator took him to the library and said that he would print a card if the boy finished the activity the teacher asked him to. He agreed

(which was very new), finished the activity and then the mediator printed the card.

21. When the mediator arrived, he suggested a painting activity, but just after the boy finished a Mathematics exercise and the boy agreed. He was upset, though, because the principal and the father decided to reduce his school hours (staying in school until after the break), and he didn't want to go away.
22. He was very sleepy and at the break, he went to the playground with the mediator, sat near him and talked until his father arrived to collect him.
23. He was calm, doing his activities. He wanted to go to the library, use the computer and, when he returned to class, he copied the lesson and finished it. During the break, he played with his classmates, and his father arrived to collect him.
24. When the mediator arrived, the boy was sleeping. During the break, he played with the classmates for a while, then sat down near the mediator and talked to him until returning to the classroom.

**Month 5:**

25. The boy wanted to paint some figures, but the mediator told him that he had to finish his Mathematics activity first. He completed all the four pages of exercises and then the mediator took him to the library to print the figures for him to paint. During the break, he was very happy, playing tag with his friends. After the break, his father collected him.
26. He was a little upset, because a substitute teacher was in class. But, when the mediator explained the situation, he was calm again.
27. When the mediator arrived, the boy was copying some activities and asked if they could go to the library. The mediator said they could go after he finished his lesson. He finished and they went to the library to work with a painting software. He liked it very much and learned very quickly how to use the software.
28. The boy was sleeping and when he woke up, he copied some of the activities. He had a cold and was complaining of a sore throat and feeling tired. Nevertheless, he went to the library with the rest of his classmates and worked with the software.
29. The boy had a week of tests, and every day, the mediator took him to the library and read the questions for him to answer. It was impossible for him to do the tests in the classroom, because the school is parallel to a motorway and there is a lot

of traffic noise, disturbing his attention (as well as the other pupils').

30. From this week on, the boy didn't show discomfort or uneasiness, and was very close to the mediator, who stayed in school for 3 more months. The boy was socializing, sitting every day near a different classmate, showing no signs of aggression.

When a child is diagnosed with autism, people tend to consider him/her as a problem, due to limitations in the abilities of socialization towards others (APA, 2013; Dawson et al, 2004). This situation could be observed in the school environment, where this research was conducted. In the beginning, there was a huge gap in communication between the boy with autism and the teachers, principal, staff and other children, due to the lack of understanding of the boy's needs, a common situation observed in schools, when a child with special needs is enrolled in mainstream education (Kupfer, 2000; Bastos & Kupfer, 2010; Silva & Fiamenghi-Jr, 2018).

Concerning the mediator, the boy at first interacted with him, giving the impression that he was accepted. According to Psychoanalysis, a positive transference happens in the beginning of the psychotherapeutic relation (Santos, 1994), when the patient feels that the therapist might be the idealization of all qualities and the only one able to understand and cure him/her.

After some days, however, the boy's attitudes changed radically towards the mediator, who was the focus of his aggression, physically and verbally abusing the mediator especially when facing any frustration. Psychoanalysis understands this phenomenon as resistance (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2016), and a negative transference was created, meaning the projection of all hostile feelings to the therapist (Freud, 1916/1973; Lacan, 1961; Roudinesco & Plon, 2011).

As aggression escalated, to the point of hurting the mediator, it was necessary to physically restrain the boy, holding him from behind, helping him to calm down, preventing further damages to himself and others. This was normally done in a quiet room, and the mediator sat down, talking slowly, in a quiet voice, as a child with autism needs a tranquil environment, where he/she does not feel threatened by external stimuli (Kupfer, 2000; Tafuri, 2000).

After this period marked by resistance and negative transference, the boy slowly started to create an affectionate bond with the mediator. The result was the end of physical aggression, with some verbal abuse appearing only in extreme stressful moments. The boy also began to ask the mediator's attention, requesting his help in classroom activities, or during the break.

This stage marks the beginning of a positive transference (Freud, 1916/1973; Roudinesco & Plon, 2011). At the end, the boy saw the mediator as someone who did not offer any danger to his integrity; on the contrary, someone he could trust and rely on (Tustin, 1972, 1981; Bastos & Kupfer, 2010).

## CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to discuss transference between a child with autism and the mediator who interacts with him/her in school.

Initially, the boy rejected the mediator, with a negative transference expressed by rage, hostile behaviors, physical and verbal abuse, lasting approximately two months. After that, the mediator was allowed more contact with the boy, who accepted his presence.

### Three Important Conclusions Can Be Drawn From This Study:

- Transference, as a relational phenomenon, is also present in school, being a very important ally when dealing with an autistic child.
- It is difficult to understand a child with autism, especially due to the lack of knowledge of the disorder by school staff, leading to a need for discussions to be implemented explaining how to understand, respect and share experiences with an autistic child.
- Finally, it is fundamental to recognize that a simple elimination (or modification) of unwanted behaviors is a poor comprehension of the complexities and wealth of human experience.

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