

Peer orientation in kindergarten

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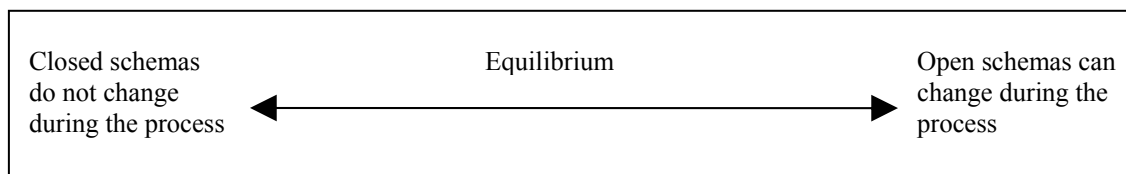
Abstract: As Piaget defines it, assimilation and accommodation make up adaptation, which refers to the child's ability to adapt to his or her environment. The child changes in the processes with the environment. But the child can change the environment too. The children are possible agents of change in the situations they interact with their environment. So when we say that the child is changing, it must mean both ways: The child can change or the child can be an agent of change. The purpose of the study was to find out how the child, this possible agent of change, orientates among peers in kindergarten. Gender and age define much of children's orientation, but because there are many boys and girls and many children of the same age, the children's innate characteristics also acquire importance. Children's tendency to see situations as agentic seems to be a central factor in children's orientation among peers.

Peer orientation in kindergarten

When we look at children orientating among peers, we must approach children as active participants in and creators of their relationships and social situations. The theoretical frame for this research is fairly simple. It includes the ideas of equilibration, adaptation and agency. It has some resemblance to Piagetian structuralism but differs from it in at least one important way. When Piaget studies how children change in interaction with the environment, in this research children's schemas can also change the environment.

The theory of knowing, as first articulated by Piaget (e.g. Piaget 1970), is essentially biological in nature; that is, an organism encounters new experiences and events and seeks to assimilate these into existing cognitive structures or to adjust the structures to accommodate the new information. The cognitive structures, or schemas, are formed and re-formed based on experiences, beliefs, values, socio-cultural histories, and prior perceptions. Children reformulate their schemas to make sense of dissonant information and experience. Growth and development are prompted by discrepancy or 'disequilibrium' between what is believed to be true and what is now revealing itself in experience. Accommodation happens when current experiences can not be assimilated in the existing schema. When children encounter something new, they must either assimilate it into an existing scheme or create a new scheme to deal with it. In assimilation, children's schemas can be described as closed. During assimilation the schemas themselves are not changing. Whereas in accommodation children's schemas are open; they may change along the interactive process. Equilibrium can be described as a balance between accommodation and assimilation and it is illustrated in figure 1.

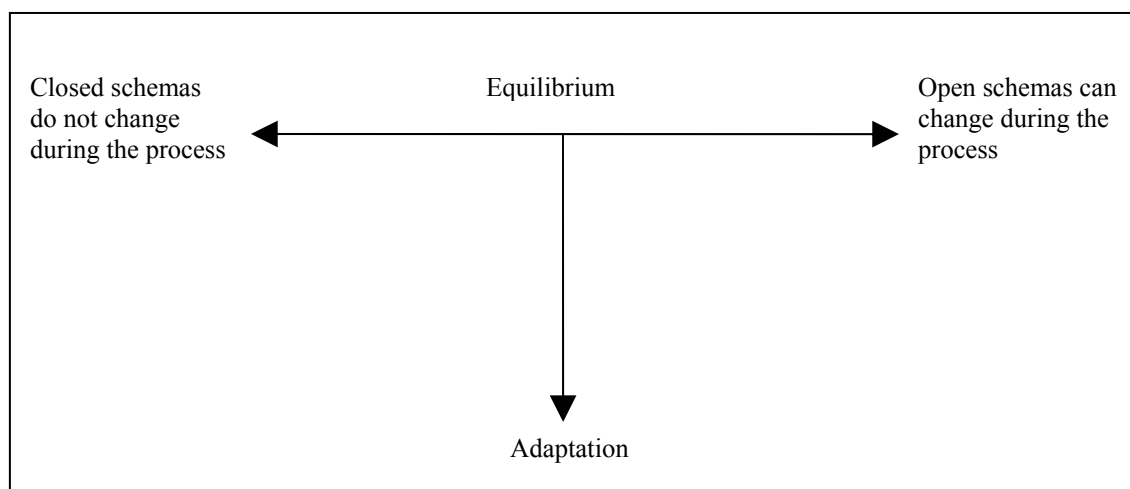
Figure 1 Equilibrium is a balance between open and closed schemas



In closed schemas children's views do not change because of the events. Closed schemas fit in the same structure before and after the process. Open schemas include orientation towards the environment. The open schema has the possibility of the schema to change. When the schema is open towards an element in the environment, the phenomenon can change the schema.

Taken together, assimilation and accommodation make up adaptation, which refers to the child's ability to better adapt to his or her environment in the course of development. The child changes in the processes with the environment. Through adaptation child develops to be even more adaptive than before. Piaget looks at the child developing (changing) through stages. On some occasions children's schemas are inadequate. If the schemas are open the children may adjust his/her schemas or create a new one. If the schema is closed, the child uses his/her current schema and the discrepancy continues until the child is ready to adapt more adequately to the environment. The child compensates his/her inadequate schemas and adapts better through changing and self-organizing his/her schemas. The adaptive process is presented in the figure 2.

Figure 2 The interaction between children and environment is seen through children's adaptation



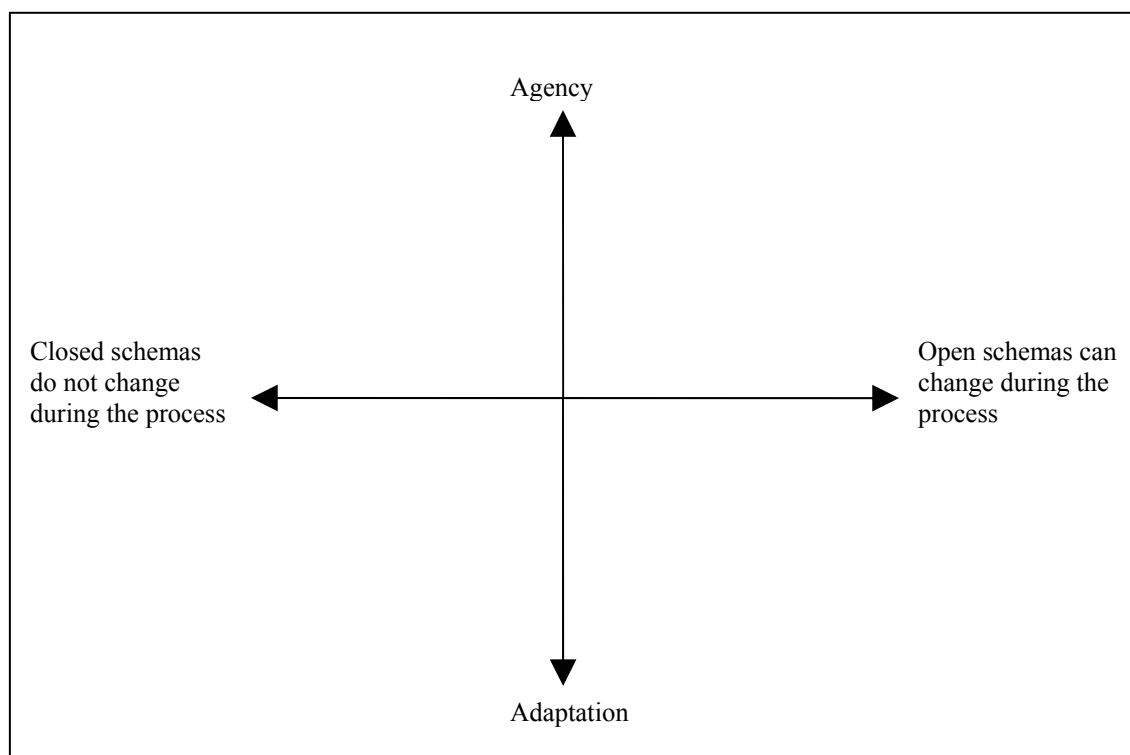
Piaget also sees the social development through adaptation. Children's social activities are studied in the light of child development. It is the child that changes. Through interaction child learns better ways to adapt to the environment. When the interactive process is studied, only the child's changing is taken in to account. The research and theory concentrates on children's logical, social and moral development. Vygotsky emphasizes more the social aspects of the interaction. In his idea of proximal development the child develops within the socially constituted settings, but even Vygotsky concentrates on the child's development. Vygotsky also looks at the child that is changing.

But as Cooney & Selman (1980) point out, children's Piagetian developmental patterns reflect also their social interactions. Children's views are an integral part of the development of the social situations. In order to complement the relationship of children's cognition and interaction, we must also look at the children's cognition changing the environment. It is not only the children and their cognition that is changing (see Alanen 1988). Children can change the environment too. James & Prout point out that childhood and children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their

own right, and not just with respect to their social constructions by adults. This means that children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. (James & Prout 1997, 4-5.)

As Solberg points out, children are involved in and contribute to the organization of everyday life in modern urban families. The content of childhood emerges through the interaction of parents and children. Although in many ways children's position is a weak one, they do not passively adapt themselves to what their elders say and do. Children are in a position to influence the outcome of the negotiating process in directions which they perceive to be favourable to them. (Solberg 1997, 126-127.) When we say that the child is changing, it should mean both ways: The child can change or the child can be an agent of change (Reunamo 2003 a, Reunamo 2003 b). The children's schemas can also be agents of change. We need to complement Figure 2 to include the child not only as adapting but also as an agent of change.

Figure 3 The children's views as potential agents of change

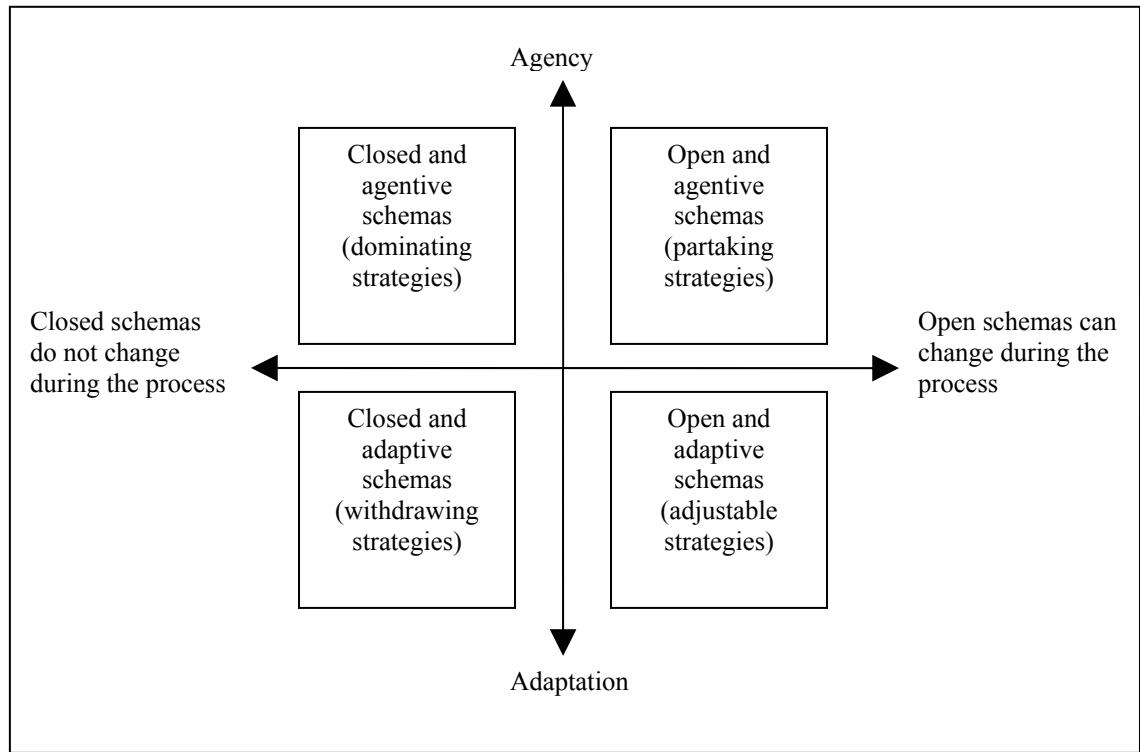


Schema is seen as a cognitive structure or a pattern of mental action. When Piaget discusses schemas it is often in conjunction with the re-organization of intellectual stages. Here they are more in reference to concrete images of concrete situations. Piaget is interested in the process by which the schemas develop through adaptation. In this research the perspective is partly turned upside down. The centre of this research is to find out how children's schemas change the environment. In this research the schemas are often termed as strategies, but it must be noted that they are referred to as mental images, not as concrete actions. The mental strategies have an effect on the action strategies but they are not the same thing.

These mental images, schemas, or strategies, can have four combinations in the two continuums described in Figure 3. First the strategies can be adaptive and open, which means that children's schemas do not change the conditions of their situation or environment, but the environment may change the children's view of the situation.

Second the schemas can be agentive and open, which means that both the children's schemas and the environment may change. Third the children's schemas can be closed and agentive, which means that the children's view of things changes the environment, but the environment does not change the children's schemas. Fourth the children's schemas can be closed and adaptive, which means that children's mental images do not change the environment, and neither do their strategies change. This makes up the theoretical framework of this research, which resembles both the Piagetian ideas of adaptation and the Hegelian tradition in which the process transcends both of the interacting phenomenon, which Engels describes in the following: "The great basic idea that the world is not to be viewed as a complex of fully fashioned objects, no less than the images of them inside our heads (our concepts), are undergoing incessant changes" (see Vygotsky, *"Mind in society"*, 1978). The theoretical framework can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Theoretical orientation of the research



The addition of agentive schemas adds a new phenomenon to the equilibrium process. Both closed and open schemas may or may not change the environment. Piaget did not consider the possibility of schemas changing the environment.

We get close to Froebelian way of seeing children. Froebel emphasized not adaptation but children's evolving understanding of their own potentialities and limitations. Children grow up to deliberately and rationally foster the evolutionary process itself (see. Curtis & Boulton 1958, 352-391).

Conducting research

Research problems were: 1) How do children orientate among peers in kindergarten? 2) How do the children's schemas about their situational approach relate to children's orientation among peers?

For the research 73 children, aged 3-7 years, from four randomly selected kindergartens in Helsinki, were interviewed. The children were asked fifteen different questions. The answers were grouped in to three categories: 1) if the child reports a change in the condition of the given situation or not, 2) if the child takes the environmental condition in account or not, or 3) the answer was unclear or indecisive. Children's actions were observed in a normal kindergarten environment. The systematic sampling was used and the children were observed in two-minute intervals each a total of 1678 times. The observation took place always between 8 am and 12 pm. The third way of getting information was teachers' and parents' evaluations of children's actions: did the children change themselves in the changing situation or did they change their situations. The evaluation was done with a questionnaire in which the child's relation to the changing situation was evaluated from one to six on the Likert scale.

Results

Other children are important in kindergarten, as children orientate towards children more than adults (see also Reunamo 2000). Girls tend to orientate towards girls and boys tend to orientate towards boys. Children who are of the same age seek each other's company. Gender and age define much of children's orientation, but because there are many boys and girls and many children of the same age, the children's innate characteristics also acquire importance.

Children's tendency to see situations as agentic seems to be a central factor in children's orientation among peers. The results highlight the importance of children's views in different situations. Children with accommodative social schemas are easier to

relate to. Equilibrium thus describes not only children's way to adapt to the environment, but the way the environment adopts to children's schemas. Open schemas seem to attract even more varied and subtle interaction. We must question the Piaget's very idea of equilibration. It is not possible to consider children's equilibration without the differences in children's orientation. The children's difference in the balance between assimilation and accommodation seems to result in different development, as the accommodating children seem to encounter more open environment than their assimilating peers.

Accommodating perception leads to accommodative encounters. Equilibration happens not only in children's minds but in their relationship with the environment. Children with different schemas seek different situations. Accommodation can be seen as a distinct way of seeing, of orientating, and of changing the world. Even if assimilative and accommodative children encounter similar situations (as in the interview), they see them differently and the course of events change their experiences even further.

An adapting child seems to give more attention than to receive it. The same applies for an observant, not partaking child. Those children that are dominant, forcing their actions through at home, also get proportionally less attention from their peers. Adaptive behavior does not make children popular but neither does forceful action. But an influential child, who easily adjusts to the forthcoming changes, gets most attention among peers. The influential child is different from the forceful children. Forceful action indicates action without much interaction or the taking others in to account. Whereas an influential child has a real impact on others and the impact seems to rely on some other factor than using force. Proportionally the child receiving the most attention is also socially active and adjusts easily in forthcoming changes.

Children that, according to parents' evaluations, prefer more familiar and secure actions get more attention than they give compared to other children. There seems to be different types of peer relations, as some children orientate towards partaking children and others towards children who seek out for familiar and secure situations.

Children that adjust to breaking rules stick together as do children who feel uncertain when somebody takes their toy. These two groups represent two types of social climates or cultures in peer relationships. Children, who see or regard situations differently, orientate differently among peers in kindergarten. They may interact with different kinds of children and the quality of the interaction is thus different. Children, who act differently, see things differently and also encounter different interaction. This affects their further development and shapes their future orientation in social environment. If we study this orientation we may explore the linkage between children's personality and development. Children that adjust to rule breaking come across a distinct social environment that is unique to them alone. These children's orientation in their future interests and their patterns of action develop during this interaction.

The children's views are not important only because we need to understand how children's view things or how they develop, but to understand how the subjectivity of the self takes shape. At the heart of studying human subjectivity – in the genesis of personal motivation and goals – it is not only to see how children develop, but to see how the interaction between children and their environment develops. At the core of seeing children as the subjects of their development, there is the connection between children's views and their personal orientation. As the space here is too limited for describing the results in any detail, I invite the reader to see the extended version of this article, which can be found at <http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/article/peers.pdf>

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