Relational needs in educational contexts

Nevenka Miljkovic

Abstract

In this article the author shows how she uses a model of Relational Needs in the educational context. It can be observed how a model can change when used in some other field of application than the original one. The author presents her adaptation of the model, gives examples of working with it, discusses the fact that educators themselves have relational needs, and finally explores the ethical implications of working with this approach in an educational setting.

Introduction

In this article, relational needs are discussed as an important component in the educational process. First described by Richard Erskine, building on the work of Heinz Kohut (1971), relational needs are preeminently explored as needs perceived by the clients, in their process of shaping their relationships to significant others. In this article I discuss first relational needs as they emerge on the students' side I demonstrate the role and the potential choice of responses to these emerging students' relational needs in an educational context.

Then I observe what kind of relational needs do educators have? Is it professionally OK to have relational needs as educator, trainer, teacher? Is it ethical?
My answer is: this is unavoidable, normal and useful.

When Berne described his theory of motivation – the bio-psychological hungers (1963) - he linked motivation squarely to relationship. The stroke as the smallest unit of recognition implies interpersonal contact. The significance of relationships is supported by ideas from social learning and complexity theory as well as recent developments in neuroscience, which emphasis the vital role of relationships for the development of the brain and personality.

In educational contexts, relationships have (most of the time) been considered crucially important - not only by participants but also by the theory of education. Children voice it freely and extensively "I am not going to learn French, I hate our teacher". Studies have shown that relationships are highly motivational for an adult to enroll in a course, to continue taking a course, and to drop out of a course.

Though the fact that the relationship is crucial in the learning process is regularly mentioned in the literature, in my experience, its implications are rarely examined and analyzed. The interesting question is what is a good "healthy" relationship, a

relationship in which people learn and develop at their best? Transactional Analysis in the educational context needs theories and models that describe the challenge of a good, rich, supporting, stimulating and safe relationship. These theories and models should either support the practitioner her or himself within the educational process (self management) or provide guidance in the choice of interventions in the work with students. Both goals will be discussed later in the article.

One very useful model for the educational field is the model of Relational Needs (Erskine 2002), which can be used in planning a course, analyzing and understanding the actual process of training and also for the supervision of teachers and trainers.

In this article I want to show the potential of this model in the work of a trainer and supervisor. I first discuss the model, its premises and implications, then describe my modification of the model, taking a relational perspective on the educational context. I give examples of working when students' relational needs become figural and also describe and discuss the largely overlooked fact that teachers and trainers also have relational needs. I illustrate how these can be addressed in a beneficial way. Finally, the article explores the ethical implications of this approach.

2. Relational Needs

Relational needs are the component parts of a universal human desire for relationship. They are present throughout the entire life cycle from early infancy through to old age, each day of our lives. If they are 'present-centred' (in the sense described by Summers and Tudor 2000) and age appropriate, they help create the kind of relationship we need. Each relational need may become figural or conscious as a longing or desire while the others remain out of conscious awareness or as background. Relational needs can be satisfied in contact with another, through her or his reciprocal response.

Erskine draws on Kohut (1971) and Stern (1985) to identify eight important relational needs: for security, to feel validated, affirmed, and significant, for acceptance by a stable, dependable, and protective other person, for confirmation of personal experience, for self-definition, for having an impact on others, to have another initiate, to express love. "The relational needs described in this article have emerged from a study of transference and a qualitative investigation of the crucial factors in significant relationships conducted at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy in New York City. Although there may be an infinite number of relational needs the eight described in this article represent those needs that, in my experience, clients most frequently describe as they talk about significant relationships." (Erskine 2002, p 5).

Neuroscience emphasises the crucial importance of the relationship for the development of the brain: the "social brain" (Insel and Fernald 2004) on one hand and the activation of the "reward system" on the other. The human "reward system", located on the axis between VTA and nucleus accumbens, enables us to be motivated and to develop the energy to reach our goals. It seems that nothing

activates the "reward system" as much as relationship and the possibility of a relationship - when we develop the wish to be seen by the other, to be appreciated, to get strokes and above all the when there is a possibility of love (Bauer, Prinzip and Menschlichkeit, 2007). On the other hand, the impossibility of relationship usually brings about the collapse of the 'reward system" and of any motivation.

I see relational needs as a description of a vehicle that helps us to establish and shape relationships in the way we need them. They help us to regulate distance and closeness, to define ourselves as separate and stay connected with others. In this way they should be welcomed as important signs for the person her or himself as much as for the partners in the relationship.

3. Relational Needs in educational context

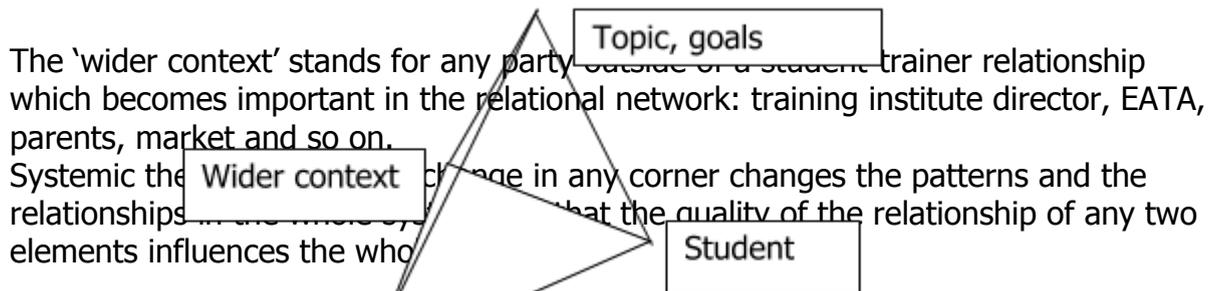## 3.1. Specifics of educational context The Relational Net

The educational context is always complex. Each educational course has a more or less explicit, formulated goal. The goals have mostly to do with successful development of the students: after the course, students should have attained defined competences, know defined facts, have developed their personality in a defined manner. The teachers are professionals whose task is to facilitate the fulfilment of these defined educational goals.

The (quality of) relationship is rarely an explicit goal of an educational process, but nevertheless it is the medium by which the goals can be accomplished, or, alternatively, which makes the goals hard or impossible to reach.

There is an important relational web that is created in the educational process. It is woven by the interaction of several significant parties besides the learner and the teacher/trainer: there are those who pay for the education, those who organize the courses, maybe those who evaluate the process and in the background of all of them, parents, families, politics, and so on. Even if we in pedagogy tend to consider the relationship between the trainer and the learners as the most important one, the effect of any other relationship can become dominant and influence the learning process strongly.

An example: Some years ago I was offered the job of training 100 policewomen in customer relations. During the first negotiation with the members of the leadership team who were planning this training I already had a bad feeling because of the discounting way the leaders were talking about the policewomen and their work. I wanted this job and tried to bring the contract onto the OK/OK/OK level. After that, the leadership started talking more respectfully about my future trainees and I agreed to do the programmes. However, in the long run, the whole training was quite a disaster. It was understandable: if the policewomen had learned something important in the training and had acknowledged it, then their leadership would have been right to say that they had a lot to learn because their work was so poor. So they tried and managed to learn nothing in the training which proved to the leadership that they were wrong to discount them. In this case, the relationship

between the trainees and me as trainer was Ok but less significant then the discounting relationship between the leadership and the trainees.

I use English's (1975) three cornered contract to visualize this relational network. It becomes three dimensional as I add the topic/goals over the top, because each party's view of them is of great importance.

Topic, goals

Wider context

Student

Trainer

The 'wider context' stands for any party outside of a student-trainer relationship which becomes important in the relational network: training institute director, EATA, parents, market and so on.

Systemic theory says change in any corner changes the patterns and the relationships in the whole system, that the quality of the relationship of any two elements influences the whole.

In the process of teaching/learning, all parties develop relationships to each other and all experience relational needs and react to them and react to the relational needs of others. This is often an unconscious process, at the level of what Berne called *the psychological contract* (or *ulterior* level communication). Usually even if the process becomes conscious, it will not be discussed openly.

The relational needs of students and trainers, and the repercussions of the process, will be discussed later. Here I want briefly to mention the forming influence of "the wider context": Trainers sometimes offer the same course to similar target group but in different institutes or organisations. They often experience that courses given in one institute have some important similarities. As a simple example: I have had a customer for whom every single training was kind of complicated and another customer where trainings were successful, emotionally moving and rewarding. Here it can be useful to look at relationships and relational needs between the "wider context" and the trainer, or the "wider context" and the students.

3.2. Modification of the Relational Needs Model for the educational context

For practical work in the field of adult education I have modified Erskine's and Trautmann's model of Relational needs and developed a schema, which I use as a diagnostic tool for consideration of the group process and specific personal relational issues of both the trainees and the trainers.
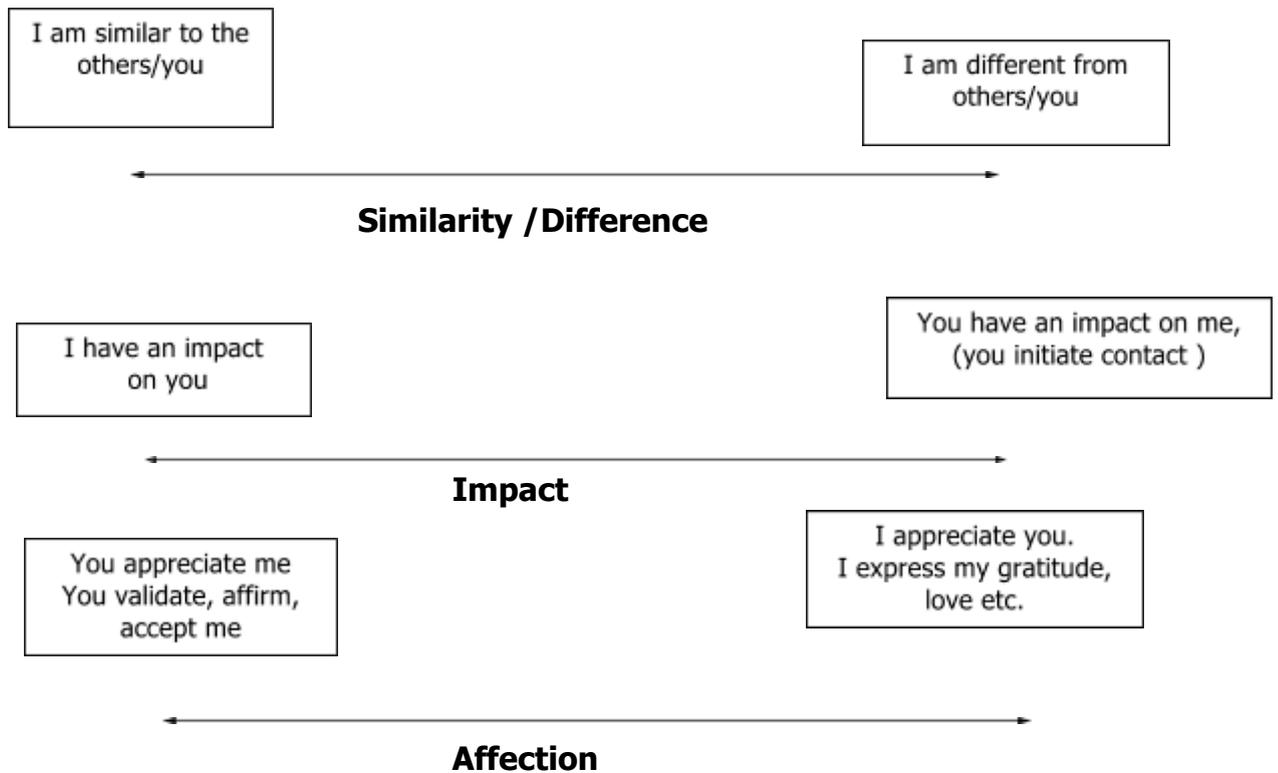
I have tried to reduce the complexity of the descriptions and to find the key point of each need.

In my opinion there are three specific axes, which refer to three different aspects in relationships:

Similarity /Difference

Impact

Affection

I am similar to the others/you		I am different from others/you

Similarity /Difference

I have an impact on you		You have an impact on me, (you initiate contact)

Impact

You appreciate me You validate, affirm, accept me		I appreciate you. I express my gratitude, love etc.

Affection

Besides these three specific aspects, which have two different directions, there is one general need: to feel secure in the relationship. This need is connected with all other relational needs. We usually do not feel secure if any of the other important needs has not been satisfied.

3.3. Relational Needs of students

In the learning process students experience themselves as a part of many relationships: as a group member towards the other group members, to the trainer, to some specific friends in the group, to the institute representatives, and so on. Relational needs can and do arise in many directions, and often at the same time. We will discuss some of them.

3.3.1. Observation of different Relational Needs

The need for security

In the educational context the need for security is very important because the possibility of being ashamed and getting hurt through the shame is very present. To avoid the danger of being ashamed students can develop various defensive learning attitudes, (Nagel 2009) which enforce their script and make learning difficult. Learning means always changing, and change processes are accompanied by the feeling of insecurity. On the other hand in the educational context, students (and

sometimes trainers) often get assessed and compared; these processes are stressful and again are accompanied by the feeling of insecurity. The feeling of insecurity (the expectation of getting hurt) is very unpleasant and further, very harmful for the learning process.

All this means that in the educational context the need for security arises often. It can be directed to any person in the system of a trainer, group and the wider context.

The position of the student can be:

a) I (need to) feel secure in my relationship to the **trainer**:
$ am I confident that she is competent in her subject?
$ do I feel that she is offering the 3 Ps towards individuals and the group efficiently and
$ do I experience that she is well settled in the wider environment (school, institute....) ?

b) I (need to) feel secure in relation to the **group**: I can count on respectful behaviour from the group members. The group is working on the group activity.

c) I (need to) feel secure in the **wider context**, in this school, university, institute........

The axis: similarity/difference
To be different from others
Learning and teaching is based on being different. If we were the same, what could we learn from each other? Most people have the need that their being different is seen and appreciated.
The student might think and feel: I have my individuality. I have my special strengths and weaknesses. I also have different needs to the others. I have also got different goals than the others. And this is good and I can be open about this.
To be the same as the others
The student might think and feel when this need is satisfied:
It feels good to have the same views, values, use the same methods, and have the same goals, same experiences as the others. I can feel relaxed, secure and calm. I feel connected by feeling the same.

The axis: impact

The need to "have an impact on the other" arises in every relationship and is important in every constellation of two or more persons. It shows that there are two in the relationship and that both are important.
The educational context has a long history of students having less impact in the

process.
The student might feel and think: I want to express myself; my needs and wishes, my thoughts and feelings and they should be seriously taken into account.
In addition, we all have the need for the other to reach out to us, to have an impact on us, which can be enriching and invigorating.

The Axis: affection

Our motivation is connected to our wish to be affirmed, appreciated, accepted, loved. At the same time most of the people have the urge to love, appreciate and to express it.
The students might feel and think: I am liked and accepted. I belong in the group and people seek out my friendship.

3.3.2. What do students do to get their relational needs met?

In order to get satisfaction for their needs students/trainees undertake different activities during their training process: either they ask for what they need directly or symbolically or they enact it in games.
For example: a student has a need to have an impact on the trainer or on the group process. She can talk about it and explain it. Or she can propose some new activity, or she can demand something from the trainer or the group, or she can start a discussion about who is deciding what in the training. Or she can give some feedback that is supportive or aggressive.

All these behaviours can be seen as attempts to change the relationship in the way student needs it in this moment.

3.3.3. Trainer Responses

Trainers tend to respond automatically to the needs of the students. This model offers guidance for doing it systematically and consciously.

The first step is to use it as a diagnostic tool for reflection on the process in the group or between individuals. One very helpful question is: "What needs are students trying to satisfy through this behaviour?" No matter how dysfunctional some behaviour is, it can be very useful to view it as an attempt to meet some important need. Though there can be different kind of needs which can emerge in the educational context, relational needs are so important that they should always be taken into consideration.

Example:
A new student has joined the group. He says almost nothing even after some time.
As a trainer I start reflecting:

Security need: He doesn't say anything, is it because he
                                  doesn't feel secure? Maybe he thinks that I am not good
                                  enough? Or the group is quite rude? Or the wider context
                                  is scary

Or Similarity/difference axis: I think, that he is not saying much because the
                                  group is quite homogenous in some sense and he feels
                                  different and doesn't see his "being different" accepted.

Or Impact axis: Perhaps he is afraid of making an impact -
                                  or even perhaps he knows that his silence will have a big
                                  impact eventually.

Or Affection axis: I wonder if he hopes that his silence will attract
                                  sympathy from me or the group.

This way I can reflect on all the possibilities and decide a possible diagnosis of the
process.

The second step is to decide how to intervene:
In the educational context we can use all kinds of interventions which are used in
the counselling context and in addition we can use different teaching and learning
methods as powerful interventions. The choice of method is a genuine intervention
in the educational context. Methods (should) optimize the learning process and have
a strong relation-shaping impact. I consider this relation-shaping impact of the
method as the most significant repercussion for the choice of the method. Does the
trainer do a piece of teaching him or herself, or does he/she invite the student to do
some teaching, does she/he organize the students to work in groups, do they work
in stable groups or in changing groups, how big are the groups? And so on. All
these decisions will create a different relational situation in the training and will
highly influence the learning.

In the example above, the trainer can assume that the student needs:
1. More security in the group so he/she decides to create an activity for working in
pairs or small groups
2. More security in relation to the trainer: so a method will be chosen whereby the
trainer can demonstrate some important competence
3. Reassurance that students can be really different and this is OK; here the teacher
may suggest a work experience where being different is necessary and helpful.

In this way the trainer can assess the relational need and choose teaching and
learning methods that can be helpful for students to organize themselves in the way
they need it at that moment.

3.4. Relational Needs of trainers

3.4.1. Do trainers and teachers also have relational needs?

Pedagogic literature and teacher education programmes both have the same focus: the student. Usually nothing is said about the teacher and about what he needs to be able to work and live in this profession. On the contrary: in many papers it is simply demanded: "In a caring relationship, teachers must focus their efforts on valuing and appreciating students' needs and learning what their interests and desires are. Teachers should, as far as possible, suspend their own beliefs, feelings and values and listen attentively and generously to their students" Thayer-Bacon (DATE p.169)

But teachers - just like humans! - are relational beings and they have relational needs too.

In Germany more than 50% of the school teachers fall sick during their professional life, so severely, that they have to be pensioned. There are many factors which contribute to this sad state of affairs, but I believe strongly that one is a systematic denial of the fact that teachers also have needs during their work in the educational context and the consequences which arise from it.

I do not know of anybody in the educational field who does not want sincerely to have an impact on the students and the class. Otherwise, how and why would a teacher teach? In the long run I also cannot imagine anybody who does not care about getting affirmation and affection from his students.
And where is the teacher who does not want to be remembered as different by his students?
Each and every relational need emerges in the educational context, on the trainer's side as well as the student's.

Just as students can do many things to get their needs satisfied, the teacher/trainer is also doing the same. Whatever content she wants to teach, she can use various methods to suit her specific need. (My experience is that new trainers tend to decide about teaching methods mostly according to the topic/content and do not consider themselves (with their relational needs) or the learners as individuals, or as a group. As they become more experienced, they vary their teaching methods according to the needs of all participants of the learning system. "All participants" means themselves too.)

For example:

I feel the need to be appreciated and validated:	I can ask the group for the feedback about their progress and what helped them to make it
I feel the need to be initiated and reached out to by others	I let the trainees discuss in small groups and present in plenum: What are the next steps to be done?

3.4.2. Ethical implications and the management of needs

One question arises immediately:

What are the ethical implications of trying to satisfy trainers' needs during the training? Trainers are not paid to get their needs met (through the trainees). Are we allowed as teachers to take care that our needs are met, or should the pedagogical encounter take just students' needs seriously, and the teacher can wait till the evening or till the holidays or pension or sickness?

In my opinion, we are actually obliged, as professionals in the educational context, to take our needs very seriously and to welcome them.

There are many reasons:

- Students recognise trainers' relational needs within minutes, on a conscious or unconscious level. Often they react in a very friendly way, taking it as an invitation for symbiosis in which they protect the trainer. Or they take it as the beginning of a psychological game. In both cases they react and they are more busy dealing with the trainer then learning the desired things.

- Besides this, the trainer is an important model: if she is not aware of her needs or if she is behaving inauthentically, the mirror neurons of the students learn the lesson "how to discount one's own needs" Model learning!

- And, how is the trainer going to support the students in their needs, if he discounts his own?

- And, is the trainer not in danger of using his own script solutions, if he discounts his needs? Can he be responsive, validating, loving and respectful to his trainees if he is not to himself?

In short, systematic sacrifice of trainers' needs to the needs of the trainees can be seriously harmful, for both students and trainers.

3.4.3. Management of needs

This of course does not mean that all the needs should be fulfilled in the educational context.

Students and teachers have very different roles. The term "Role" I use in the way described by Schmid (1990). According to Schmid's model a working professional acts in three different worlds: private, professional and organisational. The role of the person in these different worlds is a coherent system of attitudes, feelings, and behaviours. In his or her role a person has role-specific goals, values, visions, modus operandi, and ethics. We can assume that a person also has different needs in different roles.

In her work with students, the teacher acts in her professional role. In this role she is working on fulfilling her complex contract. The needs she experiences in her role should help her to fulfil the contract. As long she acts in her professional role her

relational needs will be age and context appropriate and present centred.

The teacher has to be able to differentiate "here and now" relational needs from the script bound encrusted ways of relating, in his students and in himself. Script bound encrusted ways of relating can be treated as any other personal issue which emerges in the educational process.

If a student shows such behaviour, the trainer will decide how to meet it, if he observes himself having "encrusted" relational needs, most probably the best option would be to look at it in supervision or in personal therapy.

It is an important task for the trainer to establish a learning environment in which the major relational needs of all participants in the learning system (trainer and trainees) can be met as they appear.

In my opinion the trainer/teacher has a complex responsibility:

- $ The trainer has to be aware of relational needs, of the participants and of his own, in all their diversity;

- $ The trainer has a special commitment to the goal and the contract and can value which and whose relational needs should be met first, second or not at all.

- $ The trainer can be an important model of how communication about one's own relational needs can be managed: open, clear and respecting of self and others.

4. Relational needs, relational styles and script

In my work with trainers I differentiate three grades of experiencing relational needs. The first is when they are connected to the context and their role in it; they come and go, in the "here and now". Since needs emerge in the "here and now" they can be useful for a diagnosis of the process.

The second level describes relational styles: the habit or the tendency to organize most of a person's relationships in such a way that one or two prominent needs get met (for example to have an impact on others, or to be significant, or to give affection), but they are still flexible and open for others to emerge.

The third grade level is a script way, where a person has very limited options: constant relational needs and limited methods of satisfying them.

A student or a trainer can experience any relational need in any of these three grades and the TA practitioner has many different options of responding to them.

5. Conclusion

This description of the many different aspects of the relational needs model such as diagnosis, methodical response, educator's relational needs, the levels of relational

needs, does not answer the important question: which needs of the students should the educator seek to meet and when should he look for other ways of relating? Society, the organizers of the education, teachers and trainers (often) see education as a space where alongside learning and development, healing experiences should also take place. And indeed, even if teachers complain that they are not therapists, which is true, good education, with all the time, relationships and constellations, offers a lot of opportunities for healing: "to get what we didn't get on previous occasions or more of what we already have" (Barrow www.crackingbehaviour.com). Many students have had negative or shame-based experiences of schooling and for them, simply to have a different experience of learning can be transformational. The educator can have a powerful role in facilitating such experiences of positive learning cycles (Newton, 2006) which help students to update their script through revising "their theory in light of new evidence" (ibid p193), In this way, if we take Cornell's (1988) definition of script "life script is ongoing process of self-defining and sometimes self-limiting psychological construction of reality", educators can and do influence this "psychological construction of reality".

The educator dances on different floors. Sometimes she mainly facilitates the learning of the subject (facts, skills…) and there she will usually meet present-oriented relational needs. Sometimes she mainly supports the personal development of the trainees or tries to offer a healing experience, where she will perhaps seek to meet their relational needs. Sometimes she challenges the student and offers something else - perhaps to explore the meaning of the ways the needs have been manifested.

In addition to this, she has the same requirement to attend to her own needs – for contact, for impact for satisfaction. The trainer who accepts and works with those not only provides a healthy model for her students but is usually a more integrated and congruent educator.

In this dance the model of Relational Needs supports the practitioner her or himself within the educational process (self management) and provides guidance in self care and in the choice of interventions in the work with students.

Barrow, G. Distinctive Features of the Cycle of Development Model (CoD)
http://www.crackingbehaviour.com/articles.asp

Bauer, Prinzip and Menschlichkeit, 2007

Cornell, W.F. (1988) Life script theory: A critical review from a developmental perspective. Transactional Analysis Journal Vol. 18(4), 270 - 282

Erskine, R. (2002) Relational Needs, EATA Newsletter No. 73: 5-9

Insel,T. & Fernald R. (2004) How the brain processes the social information: Searching for the social brain, Annual Revue of Neuro-science 27: 697.

Kohut, H. (1971) The Analysis of the Self, New York: International Universities Press.

Nagel,N. Beziehung als Schlüssel zum Lernen, Zeitschrift für Transaktionsanalyse 2/2009, Junfermann Verlag, Paderborn, p. 128 – 141

Newton, T. (2006) Script, Psychological Life Plans and the Learning cycle, Transactional Analysis Journal Vol. 36, 186-195

Schmid,B. (1990) Persoenlichkeits-Coaching – Beratung fuer die Person in ihrer Organisations-, Berufs- und Privatwelt, Hersteiner 1, Wien, p.12-15.

Summers, G., Tudor K. (2000) Cocreative Transactional Analysis, Transactional Analysis Journal Vol. 30, 23 – 40.

Stern, D.N. (1985) *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, USA: Basic Books.

Thayer-Bacon, B.J. 2004 'Personal and Social Relations in Education' in *No education without relation* edited by Charles Bingham and Alexander M. Sidorkin, New York: Peter Lang