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A Systemic Approach to School-Based Consultation: Combining Interventions That Belong to Different Theoretical Traditions

Ulf Axberg and Bill Petitt

In this chapter, we assume that the adoption of a systems perspective encourages—even requires—the possession of a plurality of theories and instruments because of the extremely complex nature of dynamic systems. To illustrate this idea, we describe how two separate intervention models, each derived from very different philosophical and theoretical traditions, have successfully been included within a single, systems-oriented framework. We describe a real-life, school-based intervention that combines a normative approach (Marte Meo), with a non-normative perspective (Coordination Meetings). The choice of models was made because of our understanding of the systems involved (individual, family,

U. Axberg (✉)
Department of Family Therapy and Systemic Practice, Faculty of Social Studies, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: ulf.axberg@vid.no

B. Petitt
Logos AB, Lerdala, Sweden
e-mail: bill.petitt@telia.com

organization) and the goal of the intervention. This implies that the actual choice of models selected for this intervention (or indeed any intervention) can be thought of as being arbitrary. This thinking fits with the primary goal with this chapter, which is not to promote a specific intervention, but rather to illustrate the idea that a systems perspective can encompass any idea that helps increase our understanding and effectiveness.

Introduction

Sonny, an eight-year-old boy is described by his classroom teacher as hard to understand, and she and other staff members are beginning to experience his behaviour as tiresome, as are his peers at school. According to the teacher, he often explodes in anger, "Like a bolt from the blue". Furthermore, he isn't keeping up with the lessons and is also having more and more difficulties in contact with peers. They are starting to avoid him and exclude him from play, and she recently found out that they no longer invite him to their birthday parties. At times, he seeks contact with her, comes with various questions or shows things he has brought from home, but sadly enough often at inappropriate times—when she cannot respond properly to what he is showing or asking. The teacher has tried to talk to Sonny's mother about his problems and has recommended her to seek help from Child Psychiatry or the Social Services, but she finds it difficult to reach her. Sonny's mother says that the school is overly critical of him and that they exaggerate the problems. She thinks that Sonny must just be given time to mature. The father and mother are separated and he lives elsewhere, and the teacher has not been able to speak to him about Sonny's school situation.

The creation of the intervention that was finally named "*Marte Meo and Coordination Meetings (MAC)*" was a response to the realization that—over a period of time—certain children and their families repeatedly appeared as "cases" in different settings (such as the education system, Psychiatric Services, Social Services, and other related agencies). Closer examination of these cases seemed to reveal a common pattern. Quite often, the first occasion when the family was brought to official attention was soon after the child had started school, when the teachers

noted that the child seemed to be experiencing difficulties in adaption in the classroom. There is a certain logic to this, as teachers daily meet children of the same age in groups and are thus in very special position to identify children whose behaviour deviates from generally accepted social parameters. The teachers did what they could to help in the school, of course, but if this failed to work, then often there followed a discussion in which the staff typically examined hypotheses about what the "cause" of the child's difficulties might be. Such hypotheses were usually focussed on factors that were external to the school—the family, possible psychiatric diagnoses and so on.

The next step in the pattern was that the school usually tried to involve the parents. If the desired results were still not forthcoming—if the parents wouldn't or couldn't help—then the school would suggest seeking expert help for the child, referring to their hypotheses to motivate this suggestion. Some parents declined to seek help as they did not feel that they had a problem at home, pointing out that their child only had problems at school and therefore they should be dealt with there. Other parents accepted the offered referral. However, in both cases, the result was often that the child's behaviour in school did not change—which could then lead to more suggestions for new referrals with still more services and experts. From the moment that the school first took contact with them, it also emerged as part of the pattern that it was easy for parents to feel that they were being criticized, particularly if they experienced the child's behaviour as being unproblematic in the home. If this happened, then they would tend to become defensive and critical of teachers and the pre-school/school. When this happened, there was a risk of a self-reinforcing, problem-affirming system of communicative behaviour developing around the child, in which both parts (family and school) felt blamed by the other. In turn, this generated the risk of an "epistemic breakdown", in which mutual distrust replaces mutual trust (Talia et al., 2021; Thayer, 1972). When this happens, it will often effectively hinder the establishment of a cooperative relationship—of building a working alliance to help the child. If such a relational context becomes established, this may also put an additional and even heavy burden on

the child, as he is the nexus point between the home and school and it is he who will have to balance the conflicting relationships and the different sets of expectations they represent (Aponte, 1976). This may place the child in a particularly vulnerable and difficult position.

The Development of MAC

In response to this analysis, Ingegerd Wirtberg,[1] attached to the Department of Psychology at Lund University, took the initiative to establish a research project aimed at the first step in the pattern described above: how to intervene at the very first stage—when the teachers say that they have spotted a child who has difficulties in adapting to the culture of the classroom. The first stage of the project involved a research team and a group of professionals who would help develop and apply the intervention. It was located in the county of Skövde, an area in which Ingegerd already had a professional network established over many years of teaching and supervising there. It was this project that resulted in the school-based intervention that later came to be named *Marte Meo and Coordination Meetings (MAC)* (Axberg et al., 2006). Besides the controlled study that was conducted in the development phase, a larger randomized controlled trial (RCT) has subsequently been carried out with promising results (Balldin et al., 2019).

As part of the development of MAC, two models reflecting two different theoretical traditions were incorporated into the intervention. The first, Marte Meo (MM) was developed by Maria Aarts (2008) and may be considered normative and pedagogic, and the specified goal is to help parents (or other significant others) to identify ways in which they can support the development of the child for whom they are important. Central to the model is an idea of what constitutes supportive behaviour, and the principal method is the use of video analysis to identify examples

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[1] Ingegerd Wirtberg died in February 2021. She was the driving force behind the development of MAC and the subsequent research projects. She is greatly missed by all who worked with her.

of such behaviour in the current interaction between significant adult and child and to see how they can be applied in different contexts.

It was decided from the start that it would be the school that initiated involvement in the project, and a referral would be accepted when it had the defined goal of supporting a specific child in his development so that his experience of school could become more positive. Since it was in the school that the behaviour of the child was first defined as being problematic, it was concluded that an intervention to support both the child and the teacher directly in the classroom where they worked together was the obvious starting point—reflecting the idea that it is often logical to try and solve problems in the context in which they emerge. To achieve a specific goal often requires specific resources and methods and it was felt that a normative, practical and pedagogic model such as MM would be an appropriate type of intervention to use in the school setting.

On the other hand, Coordination Meetings (CMs) reflect second-order cybernetic thinking, inspired by collaborative approaches such as *reflective processes* (Andersen, 1995), *language-systems* (Anderson, 1997) and *open dialogues* (Seikkula et al., 2003). CMs were created to provide a forum for significant adults (parents and teachers mostly) where they would be able to share their experience of the child. The coordinators' role was conceived of as a facilitator, who was to be responsible for establishing and maintaining a culture of epistemic trust, in which parallel and even conflicting narratives concerning the child could be shared and supported simultaneously. There is some resemblance here to the ideas about the "fifth province", a model created by McCarthy and Byrne (2008), in which a symbolic and safe place is created, where people can meet and engage in dialogical conversations.

The Systems Perspective

From the beginning, the team felt that adopting a systems perspective would be practical, as it easily accommodates different approaches. A systems perspective could allow the two separate interventions—MM and CMs—to be conceived of as two elements in a single, systemic intervention (MAC) (Axberg et al., 2021). Likewise, it would also help

researchers and clinicians to maintain a high-level perspective from which they could think about both the internal workings of the two major social systems involved (school and family, but even others where relevant) as well as their relationships with each other.

Von Bertalanffy—the initial proponent of what he called a systems perspective or systems pedagogic—envisaged his approach as a meta-perspective that could help to relate specialized areas of research and knowledge in a coherent manner, thereby facilitating communication between experts (and laymen) (1972). As a philosopher of biology, he began the journey towards a systems perspective early in his career, and his first book after the acceptance of his doctoral thesis was entitled in English: *Modern Theories of Development: An Introduction to Theoretical Biology* (Oxford University Press; New York: Harper, 1933).

Parallel to Van Bertalanffy, Norbert Wiener (1948) developed a series of concepts that he called *cybernetics*. He was also fascinated by the organizational principles found in both living and mechanical systems, particularly in relation to the aspect of control. For example, how does a cell maintain a recognizable form and carry out those operations that are necessary for the maintenance of its own existence?

Wiener's cybernetics and Van Bertalanffy's general systems perspective are complementary: for example, a naturally occurring system (a flower, a cat) must be explored on its own terms if we wish to understand both how it is constructed and how it maintains its organization. On the other hand, an artificial system (a computer, a space probe) is consciously constructed using already understood principles and ideas that are chosen to enable them to fulfil the purpose their creators have in mind. To be able to understand how any complex system organizes and regulates itself, and use that understanding to support its functions (medicine and psychotherapy, for example, in the case of people; engineering in the case of mechanical systems), may involve many theories and techniques.

In a discussion of how he thinks that systemic psychotherapy has developed over the last few decades, Luigi Onnis (2016) talks about what he calls "the optics of complexity"—in which conceptualization in the field is influenced by our growing understanding of the nature of complex, dynamic systems. Also the chapters by de Flon and Sheenhan,

and van Roosmalen in this volume give an illustration of this. Onnis further argues that such a perspective not only strengthens the challenge to the reductionism of classical physics as being the only valid scientific way of understanding or explaining the world, but does the same to any attempt to construct a holistic, "all-encompassing" perspective or theory. Onnis points out that the keyword in the paradigm of complexity is *plurality*. Every description of reality is limited and partial, even the systemic one. In practical terms, for example, the variety of human suffering requires a variety of approaches. This is something that Varela (1979) noted: the choice of different perspectives illuminates different aspects of whatever phenomenon is being studied: what is important is to be aware of the reason for the original choice, and how it influences the information generated.

A Brief Description of Marte Meo and Coordination Meetings

At the heart of MAC is a presupposition that when a child's behaviour is described by someone as being problematic (or positive, for that matter), then this description cannot be entirely understood as a simple representation some quality that is located within the individual child. Rather, any valuation of behaviour is produced in a network of interactions and relationships that exists between individuals in a specific context. Thinking in this way suggests that any possible intervention might benefit from trying to understand this network of relationships and encourage all parts of the network to collaborate with each other. The intervention described here is designed to both support the child and to strengthen the possibility of collaboration, and it consists of three separate parts or functions: Coordination Meetings (CMs), Marte Meo (MM) support in the pre-school/school—and, if the parents ask for it, Marte Meo support in the family (Wirtberg et al., 2013), as illustrated in Fig. 9.1. The core of this "collaboration model" is what has come to be known as *the working question*: "What is the need for developmental support for this child?" It is around this question that the entire intervention is focused.
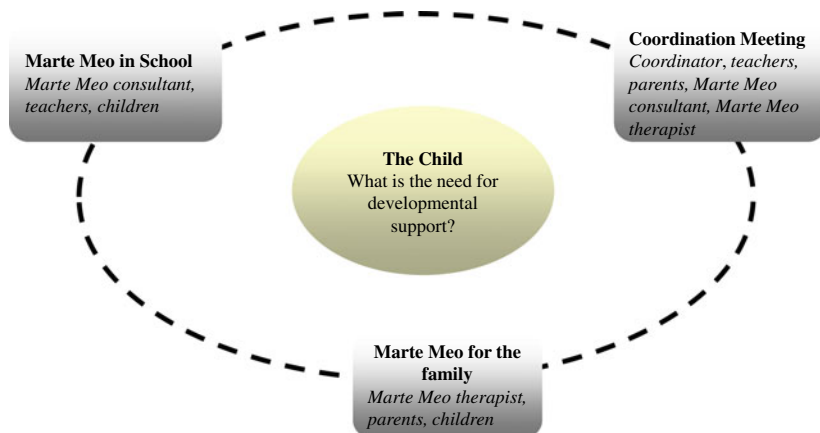
Fig. 9.1 An overview of the MAC model (*Source* Wirtberg et al. 2013, p. 18)

From the beginning, the team decided that the MAC workplace could be created where and when needed—there was no particular need to create a new department with their own offices. Instead, as qualified practitioners with the necessary skills were already in place in the county, albeit in different workplaces, it was decided together with the administrative and political leadership that when a referral was received a group with the necessary skills should quickly be assembled and a workspace allocated.

In Practice

The first coordination meeting takes place on a November evening in Sonny's school. The meeting includes both parents, the teacher who initiated the meeting and two of her colleagues, the Marte Meo guidance counsellor and the coordinator. The atmosphere is tense when the coordinator welcomes everyone and explains the purpose of the meeting. The father says he is in a hurry and the mother looks resigned. The teachers are also tense and everyone seems to be a little relieved when the coordinator takes clear control of the meeting. Everyone gets the opportunity to introduce themselves and after clarifying the purpose of the meeting, the coordinator describes how

he intends to structure it. The reflective way of working is revealed when the coordinator starts to talk to the various participants in different group-ings. Whoever is in the speaking position receives undivided attention and many follow-up questions. The coordinator is carefully trying to "tune in" and develop a supportive relationship with each person. The path to developing a relationship with trust is different for everyone, sometimes it is by talking football, sometimes by going straight to the "problem". When the teachers are asked what they are worried about, they talk about their efforts to help Sonny at school but how their attempts have had little effect. They are worried that the boy will "fall behind" in school and that he will continue "disrupting" the lessons. Their stories differ somewhat from each other and the coordi-nator tries to access their personal stories. The coordinator then turns to the parents and asks if there are things they recognize or don't recognize and if they want to comment on the teachers' stories. After this question, the conver-sation continues with the parents talking about their experiences, thoughts and feelings about Sonny and their relationship with him. The father shows more interest when he receives questions about himself, his work and his boy. The mother and the teachers look a little wary and suspicious when the father talks about his and the boy's common interests. The mother is tight-lipped and a little reserved when she is interviewed. She says that she thinks that the boy is doing well at home and that she thinks that they make too great demands on him at school and that he is also blamed for things that others have done. Finally, the coordinator gives the word to the Marte Meo guide and asks her to describe how she might be able to help. She explains concretely how she works and how by filming they will look at what Sonny needs for development support. The coordinator listens with interest to all meeting participants, asks follow-up questions, keeps order in the "listening" and "speaking positions" and then allows the various parties to reflect on each other's stories. The conversation climate changes slightly for the better as the meeting progresses, possibly the consequence of everyone being listened to with respect and interest, but perhaps also because the "conciliatory", curious and exploratory attitude adopted by the coordinator towards everyone is conta-gious. Experience has shown that often coordination meetings are initially marked by suspicion and latent conflicts, and this means that the coordi-nator must pay attention to actively working on a positive and conciliatory

emotional attitude. The communication tools for this are humour, affirmation by using positive restatements, continually repeating back what someone has said to show that they have been heard, using every opportunity to make eye contact and having a warm tonality as often as possible. But above all by being genuinely interested in everybody's personal story.

In contrast to the Marte Meo intervention, the CMs in themselves have neither mandate nor function to achieve any specific change. Their primary purpose is to facilitate the communication between the school and the family by affirming the integrity of both. A second purpose is to ensure that the meetings always remain focused on their commission, or the purpose for which they have been created: what kinds of developmental support for the child seem to be required, and how can these ideas be applied in practice. Thus, the CMs tend to move between two domains: one that is more normative, in which monologic contributions from participants dominate, and during which work issues, goals and the Marte Meo effort are discussed. In the second domain, a more dialogic conversation is to be found, and here more individual and personal experiences and stories emerge. These are supported to exist side by side—and in this way, the possibility of new stories or "mutual creations" is made possible. Being a more personal, sharing conversation, this domain also tends to be less normative.

At the beginning of the development of the intervention, it was rather naively thought that the contents of the second domain were simply selected stories *that were about the child*. However, over time we became more aware that they were not just stories (both told and untold) about the child, but that they were also about the teller—the teachers and parents. The role of the coordinator is central to facilitate this shift of focus—from "the child" to "the child and me and us". This is helped by the fact that the coordinator comes from an "outside" position. Not being directly involved in either, she has no investment in either the school or the home and the work being carried out there, which helps her to remain neutral in relation to both systems, allowing her to be equally curious about and affirming of all participant's narratives concerning themselves and others. This position is also reminiscent of Boszormenyi-Nagy's idea of *multidirectional partiality* defined

as being equally affirmative of all participants in the therapy process (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986).

The coordinator has no other agenda than that of facilitating dialogical conversations. This she will do within the context of the meeting by listening, affirming and protecting the different narratives presented by both the school and the parents even when they are contradictory and conflicting. This is a challenging task, especially when the participants in the meeting are in conflict, but as systemic practitioners the coordinators are trained in how to be continually affirmative whilst remaining neutral by steadfastly remaining interested and curious in order to explore each and every speaker's intention and meaning. In this work, it was found that the use of reflective positions was very fruitful as it gives space for both inner and outer dialogues.

Being aware that the power relationship between school and family is reciprocal but not necessarily equal is important in this context, and becomes more important when conflicts are present. It makes it all the more important for the coordinator to strive to work in a way that is experienced as beneficial for all parts of the system. For example, early on in the developmental process we became deeply aware of the difference between *inviting* or *calling* people to a coordination meeting. If you seriously want people to come to a meeting and to be as "open" as possible, the participants need to feel right from the start that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are genuinely important—that as prospective participants, they are important. Thinking in this way helps us to understand that invited participants should legitimately be able to influence when and where the meeting is to be held. A consequence of this approach is that it may be difficult to get the first meeting arranged, as there are often many different requests regarding time and place that must be accommodated and reconciled. However, over time, it became increasingly clear that this initial preparatory work—which could involve many telephone contacts and a lot of time—was of great importance for all that followed. It is well worth the effort to be thorough and respectful at this stage, even if it takes patience on the part of the coordinator to make an arrangement that works for everyone.

Another factor to be reckoned with is that some parents may have had their own difficulties in school or experienced that they were disadvantaged there by their former teachers—which might have an influence on their perception of the relationship with their child's present teacher, for example, by possibly feeling that they are inferior to or of lower social status than the teacher. At the same time, perhaps the teacher may feel themselves in a vulnerable and exposed position, liable to criticism and being questioned professionally by other staff in the school and by the school leaders, as well as by other children's parents. To establish epistemic trust, a safe context is necessary, so that the participants dare to expose themselves to the possible risks that personal statements might make them vulnerable to.

Another element that can help to make a meeting a safe place is to use of *contextual markers*: for example, clear information as to why the meeting has been called and who has called it, its structure, what its general purpose is, who is the leader, what are its specific goals, how the meeting will be run (rules) and what roles the participants have (Petitt, 2016). Another skill that helps is to be sensitive to what Øvreeide (1998) refers to as "identity markers", i.e. signals that are meant to inform others of how the individual perceives herself (and wishes to be perceived by others)—clues that reveal her social and individual identity. In the introductory "social phase" of the meeting, the coordinator will try and identify such markers and talk to the different participants about topics that contribute to their identity of competence or "adult identity". It can be about the relationship with the child, about school, but also if needed, about other areas of interest such as sports, work, cultural activity or (particularly in this area of Sweden) hunting.

The MM consultant has filmed a number of interactions between the teacher and Sonny. Some show structured contexts, such as when the teacher is giving instructions to the class, as well as unstructured situations, such as play. She analyses these short videoclips and then reviews them together with the teacher. In the previous review, the teacher observed that sometimes it seems as if Sonny might be signalling some kind of distress, but that the signals themselves are rather weak, and can easily be missed: for example, he drops his pen on the desk, or bends forward and leans his forehead on the desk. These signals have previously gone unnoticed by her since she has the

whole class to attend to. Then, he bursts out in anger, but the teacher now concludes that it does not come "like a bolt from the blue", but happens after the distress signals that were neither seen nor responded to by anyone.

Together with the consultant she discusses how she can position herself differently in the classroom so that she can more easily see and so be able to respond to Sonny's signals. In the following review, the teacher and consultant see how, when the teacher has finished giving an instruction to the class, she notices Sonny dropping his pen on the desk. She goes over to him and bends down giving the opportunity to make eye contact and asks Sonny if he finds the task hard. He nods and mumbles that he can't solve it. She suggests that they can try together, and patiently she guides Sonny through the steps needed, and he succeeds in solving the task. Sonny and the teacher then look at each other with a radiant glow of happiness. The consultant suggests that they should show this videoclip in the next coordination meeting.

When they did so, Sonny's mother burst into tears. When asked about the meaning of her tears she said that she thought that Sonny and the teacher could not work together and that they didn't like each other, but here she can see how much they enjoy working together and how they really seem to like one another. Sonny's father had been silent up to this point, but then says that he also finds it difficult to read Sonny's signals at times and wonders if it is still possible for a Marte Meo therapist to come home and film him and Sonny, an offer that had been made to him earlier, but which he had declined.

Marte Meo makes extensive use of video feedback. The intervention begins with significant adult (e.g. a teacher or parent) identifying and defining the nature of a problem they have in relation to a child. This is done together with a Marte Meo consultant in the school or Marte Meo therapists in the home. Then they are asked to specify what they would like to achieve in that relationship. In the next step, a brief (5–10 minutes) interaction between the adult and child in the classroom/home is filmed by the MM consultant/therapist. The MM consultant/therapist then analyses and edits the film using the development-supporting principles that constitute the core theoretical concept in MM (from the perspective of the adult): (1) identifying the child's focus of attention; (2) confirmation of sharing focus; (3) waiting for the child's reaction—beginning of turn-taking; (4) naming experience; (5) taking

responsibility for the development of turn-taking; (6) ongoing naming, structure and leadership; (7) triangulation; and (8) starting and ending signals.

In the next step, the edited film is reviewed together with the adult. This will normally result in the assigned of a specific homework for the adult which is to be tested in interaction with the child. The purpose is to identify the child's specific needs of developmental support and explore which responses from the adult seem to promote positive development. After that a new film of a brief interaction is recorded, analysed, and reviewed and together the MM consultant/therapist and adult explore if and how the task suggested in the homework has been of any benefit. If needed a new homework is assigned, new films are then made.

In Fig. 9.2, the MAC intervention is described step by step.

Final Reflexions

As noted earlier, Marte Meo is both normative and pedagogic in nature, and we have chosen to combine that method with a reflective working method that is grounded in a social constructionist theory and which is non-normative by definition. We have found that the two models work well in a complementary manner, as long as one is faithful to each model when using it or when discussing it—and do not confuse the two sets of concepts. This is again an example contextual markers: "Now we are applying Marte Meo, so we think and act from that theory and practice" or "Now we are applying CMs".

In considering and creating the structure for the coordination meetings, the coordinator obviously uses some normative ideas: for example, both theory and experience suggest that where possible it is generally beneficial if both parents are present (whilst always being sensitive to factors which make it inappropriate for them to be in the same room at the same time). Another is transparency: if relationships are to enjoy epistemic trust and mutual respect, again experience suggests that it is important that the leader of the meeting incorporate such principles into her own behaviour. A third—as we noted above—concerns the contextual markers that are used to structure and guide the meetings—and so
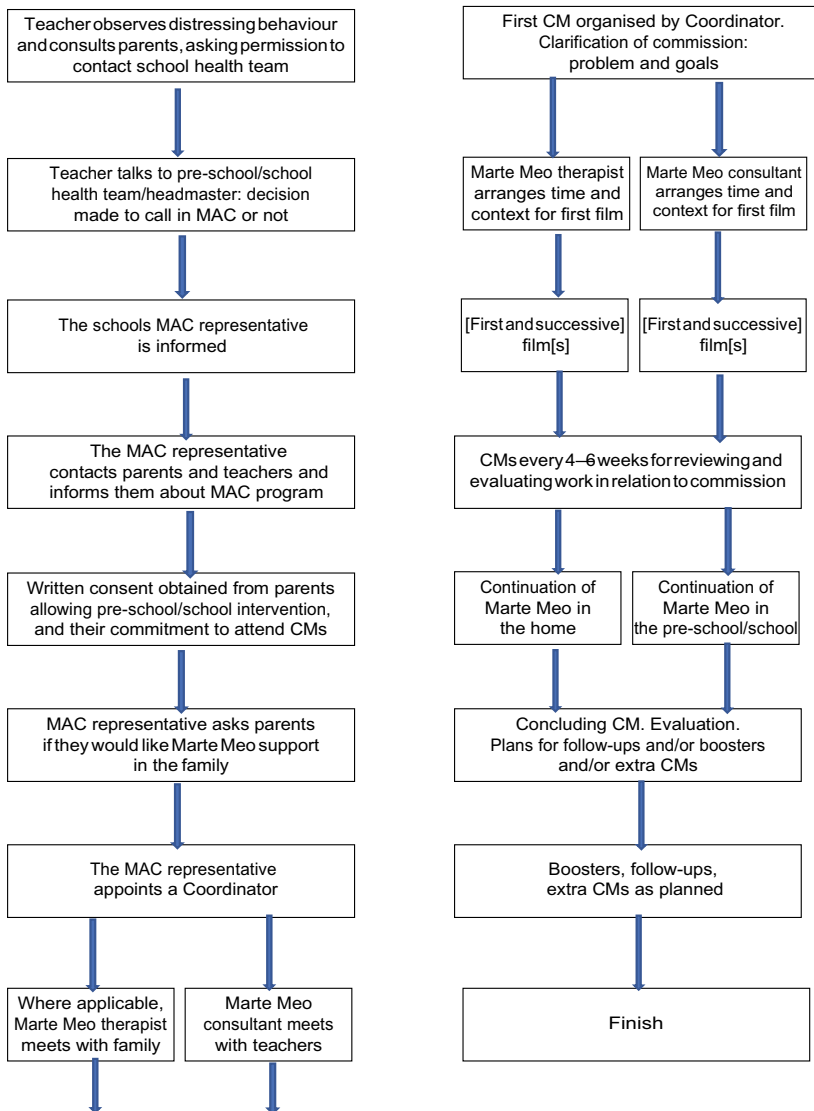
Fig. 9.2 Flowchart describing the MAC intervention (*Source* Wirtberg et al. 2013, p. 120)

on. However, once the meeting is under way, the coordinator switches to mainly working with a non-normative methodology based on collaborative and reflective principles. The coordinator is curious and exploratory, leading the process so that different opinions, thoughts and claims are allowed to coexist without demands for consensus, and where everyone has the right to speak and be listened to. Here, too, it is important to be "faithful to the model"; for example, the coordinator's credibility would immediately be destroyed if certain statements or opinions were given interpretive priority in the meeting. The only thing that participants need to agree to is the commission—the reason for the existence of the meetings. Since this is positively worded ("We are here to see how we can help the child develop in a positive way") and does not focus on the child as being a problem, it is normally easy to agree on that issue.

The division of models into the categories "normative" and "non-normative" is, of course, yet another construction of categories (see chapter by Axberg and Petitt in this volume) and it can be said of both of the models used in this intervention (and of all models in general), that they contain the possibility of both aspects. As was noted earlier, understanding is generated by the perspective chosen to look from. In practice, the open and reflective method is tightly controlled so that everyone gets their space to speak or listen and reflect on what they have heard. The clear management of the process provides the security and predictability that participants need to dare to speak freely, and to want to open up and to really listen to others. The Marte Meo model with its normative and relatively simple set of criteria designed to support children's development invites open reflection on the nature and meaning of interaction for both teachers and parents.

We cannot of course "know", but those who participated in the interventions became convinced that the combination of a more normative "hands on" intervention with a more non-normative intervention was beneficial. It is noteworthy that both studies mentioned here not only showed promising results in terms of effectiveness, but possibly the most interesting result was that there were few dropouts. In reviews of intervention studies concerning children displaying disruptive behaviour, the dropout rate is commonly as high as over 45% (Chacko et al., 2016; Lai et al., 1997). In the first controlled study, all teachers and all parents

remained in the intervention and the follow-up study. In the second study, the RCT, all remained in the intervention, and only about 10% dropped out of the follow-up for various reasons. A further suggestion concerning the importance of the CMs is to be found in a qualitative study that explored parent's and teacher's experiences of them. Here, it was found that CMs seem to promote a non-blaming climate, giving room for different voices and opinions in a manner that strengthened the link between home and school (Tarnow Håkansson & Hansson, 2015).

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