**Attachment Theory and Schools**

> Attachment is the strong, affectionate tie we have with special people in our lives that leads us to experience pleasure and joy when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness in times of stress.  By the second half of the first year, infants have become attached to familiar people who have responded to their needs (Berk 2013: 428).

Within the UK, attachment theory has had significance for the policies and practice that relate to social work and child care: in particular, for the safeguarding of children, the provision of foster care, and the planning of a permanent home for those who are unable to live with their family of origin (see for example, NICE 2015; Schofield and Beek 2006).  That is, children who have suffered abuse and neglect are less likely to have benefitted from sustained secure attachments.  Although resilience may mediate against any inevitable consequences, these children are more likely to be insecure and anxious: in consequence, continuity, an understanding environment, and one or more relationships that provide a secure base become essential for future growth and development.

Whilst a secure and trusting relationship has been seen as imperative in the child's home, it's relevance in the school environment has also become the subject of attention.  A 'Good Practice Guide for Schools' is provided by Clements (2013) and an accessible introduction to attachment theory and the needs of looked after children in school has been produced by Timpson (2016) (free from Timpson shops and from  books@timpson.com).  In 2014, as a means of helping schools to meet the needs of looked after and previously looked after children, the government extended the Pupil Premium.  Schools can apply to the Virtual School Head for a grant of up to £1,900 per child.  The use of the money is decided by the school and it is intended to further the achievement of that particular pupil's personal education plan (DofE 2014). Thomas (2015) and Webber (2017) provide case studies of the ways in which these budgets might be used.  In most instances, the budgets are likely to be used for one-to-one support.  However, there may be occasions when training the whole school on attachment and the needs of adopted and looked-after children would be appropriate.

In a number of schools, third sector organizations have trained staff members on the ways in which schools can become 'attachment aware'.  Whilst recommendations are not being made, a list of organizations providing these services is available below.  In addition, Bath Spa University, in conjunction with Bath and Northeast Somerset Council and the National College for Teaching and Leadership et al., has developed training materials on attachment and the implications for learning and behaviour (see  https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/).  Based on similar theoretical foundations, the Nurture Groups Network offers consultancy and support for schools aiming to improve the learning

environment for children who may have experienced a traumatic start in life (https://nurturegroups.org).  In short, training is available in all four nations of the United Kingdom.  Furthermore, as a result of funding from the Alex Timpson Trust, the impact of attachment awareness in schools is being evaluated by the Rees Centre, Oxford University.

The overarching aim of introducing attachment theory to the school environment, is to encourage a greater appreciation of the emotional needs of children and young people, which are understood in terms of relationship.  The aim is for school staff members, and the school itself, to become a secure base, in order that the potential for children's learning and development is maximized.   Although this may be particularly important for children who are, or have been, looked after by the local authority, it has been recognized that many children who remain at home may also have experienced trauma, and may not enjoy secure attachments within their family. In consequence, attachment theory has been seen as relevant for schools in general (see Bombèr and Hughes 2013; Geddes 2006; and Marshall 2014).  It has been argued that the implementation of attachment theory in school can improve the wellbeing of pupils and therefore their academic performance (see Bergin and Bergin 2009), and by helping school staff understand and respond to disruptive behaviour as evidence of emotional insecurity, the rate of exclusions can be reduced. Furthermore, attachment disorder is acknowledged in the Department for Education's advice on mental health and behaviour in school (DfE 2015).

By drawing on published research and literature, Bergin and Bergin (2009) conclude that there are two main ways in which the principles of attachment theory can be applied in schools.  Firstly, to the teacher-pupil relationship and secondly, to the functioning of the school as a whole.  At risk of oversimplification, what follows is a summary drawn from the research:

*Teacher-student relationship*

A secure teacher-student relationship is characterized by trust and being attuned. The student would feel safe and able to seek help whilst the teacher would be able to console the student when required.  Teachers should be educated in child development and have time to cultivate supportive relationships, but they also need to be authentic in their dealings, have high expectations of pupils, be well prepared for class, and facilitate pupil autonomy (in terms of being sensitive to the child's agenda and allowing some choice).  If a child's biography has led to an insecure style of attachment, teachers may find them 'hard to reach' and face challenges in building a trusting relationship.  Nevertheless, efforts to build such a relationship can succeed.

*A whole-school approach*

Positive results may be gained when school leaders encourage a warm socioemotional climate and a culture of respect.  In order to stimulate a sense of security, continuity of people and place is important, and benefit may be gained when essential transitions (across years and schools) are facilitated.  Small schools that are embedded within their communities are more likely to encourage pupil bonding, and inclusive extra-curricular activities are beneficial.  A description of an attachment informed, whole-school approach, to improving the social and emotional wellbeing of pupils in Australia is provided by Patton et al. (2000).

Whilst Bergin and Bergin (2009) claim that the attachment of a pupil to parents and teachers influences school success, they also acknowledge that caring for children in school is a worthy goal in its own right (Noddings 1992).  However, it is recognized that educational environments are complex, and all school staff members in the UK are challenged by the current regime of economic austerity.   Furthermore, many schools are already implementing practices based on attachment theory.  Nevertheless, for those not in this category, the application of the principles attachment theory in school may be worthy of exploration, as they may lead to beneficial outcomes for all concerned.

**Training providers**

Adoption Matters: www.adoptionmatters.org.uk

After Adoption: www.afteradoption.org.uk

Braveheart Education: www.bravehearteducation.co.uk

Hope Attachment Training and Therapeutic Services: www.hopeattach.co.uk

KCA Training: www.kcatraining

PAC-UK: www.pac-uk.org

Touchbase: www.touchbase.org.uk

What about Me? Training Ltd: www.wamwhataboutme.co.uk


**Acknowledgement**

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