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## **AERA Paper 2016**

### **SIG: Social and Emotional Learning**

#### **Attachment Aware Schools**

##### Abstract

'Attachment Aware Schools' is a collaborative program of support which is promoting public understanding of the underlying causes of children's behavior, stimulating political debate about inclusive educational provision and is helping to transform professional practice within schools and community settings. The program hinges upon attachment theory and attachment-based strategies for supporting children's social and emotional development. This paper documents the positive impact of pilot programs within the UK on national policy and in developing sustainable improvements in systemic school-wide practices relating to children's behavior and well-being. It illustrates collaborative research evidence between practitioners and academics, generating civic participation and engagement, which has also informed policy directives within national and local government, and public and private sector organisations.

##### Objectives

- Develop a sustainable, replicable training program on the importance of attachment, attunement and trauma-informed practice, along with accompanying strategies and interventions that support children and young people, particularly more vulnerable groups
- Explore the effectiveness of attachment-based interventions which address the particular needs of children and young people, particularly more vulnerable groups, to enable them to develop their potential
- Improve the behavior and well-being of children and young people, particularly vulnerable groups, which can help to close the attainment gap, to improve attendance, to reduce exclusions
- Create an evidence-base of hard and soft indicators of improved outcomes by the Attachment Aware Schools model via a robust, mixed method research evaluation

##### Theoretical Framework

For emotional and psychological good health a child needs to have secure attachments with the main significant adult or adults, and experience environments that provide consistent

and warm relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment is fostered through attunement – where the emotional and physiological states of a child are the focus of attention by an adult (Trevarthen, 2011). Attunement promotes a sense of ‘felt’ security in the child enabling them to develop mental representations of the self which guide their thoughts, feelings and behavior and teaches coping strategies when distressed (Sroufe, 1995). Secure attachments support mental processes that enable the child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others and appropriate moral reasoning (Shore, 2001; Sroufe and Siegel, 2011).

There has been a dearth of attachment research in relation to education (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; Kennedy, 2008; Riley, 2009). However, since the pioneering work by Pianta (1992), research has linked attachment theory to teacher-child relationships, and related secure attachment to school readiness and school success (Commodari, 2013; Geddes, 2006). Attachment issues influence children’s relationships with peers, teachers and support staff with securely attached children more likely to attain higher academic grades, have greater emotional regulation, social competence, willingness to take on challenges and have lower levels of delinquency (Bergin and Bergin, 2009).

Smyth declared ‘what is required to keep young people in schools, switched on, tuned in and learning in meaningful ways, are ... trusting and respectful relationships’ (2007, p 227-8). Positive relationships with adults in schools enabled children to function effectively (Martin and Dowson, 2009). Teacher-student relationships become more influential for students as they get older, and are particularly important for children deemed academically at risk (Commodari, 2013; Roorda et al., 2011). Indeed, Riley considers that the application of attachment principles to the dyadic teacher-student relationship ‘offers teachers new ways to inform and improve their practice’ (2009: 626). He and Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) cite the evidence which shows how children will form ‘bonds’ with significant adults outside of the family, such as teachers, who can become ‘attachment figures’ to students. Close and supportive relationships with teachers have demonstrated the potential to mitigate the risk of negative outcomes for children who may otherwise have difficulty succeeding in school (Driscoll and Pianta, 2010).

The consideration of attachment theory for the relational dyad between teacher and student can be extended to the wider school community. Secure attachment to the school (referred to as school bonding), encompasses a ‘sense of belonging’ to the school and the community within it (Bergin and Bergin, 2009). Smith (2006) discusses how ‘attachment to school’ affects the degree of commitment to and engagement with schooling felt by students. Strong or Secure attachments reflect a sense of value and purpose in school whilst weak or insecure attachments to school reflect scepticism, indifference and/or hostility towards school.

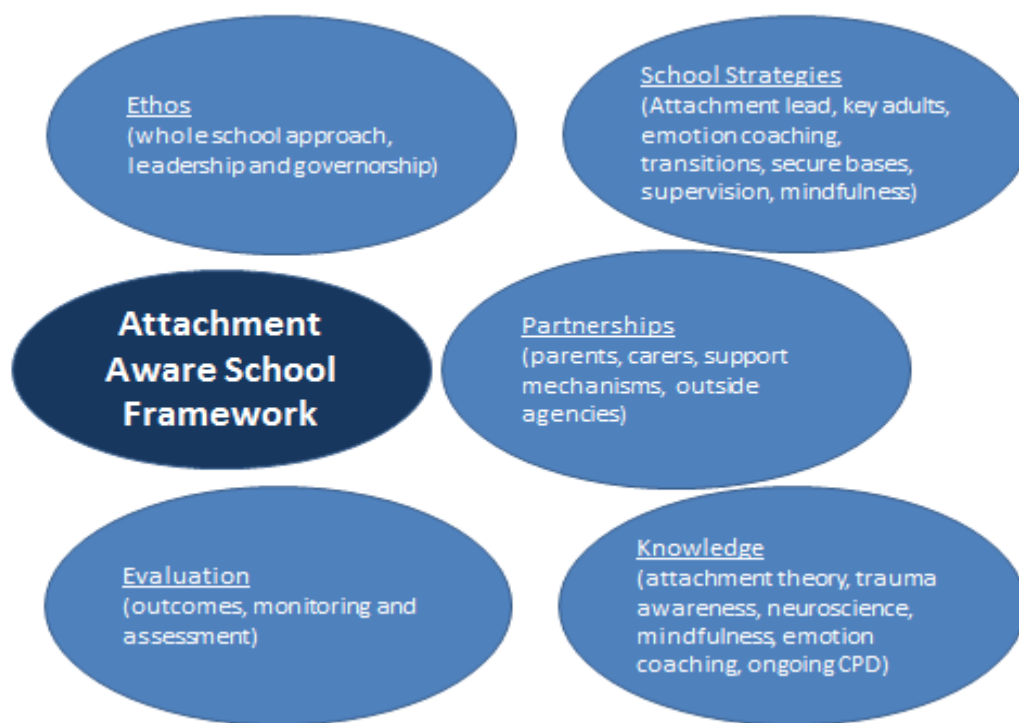
Currently in UK schools, relationships are predominantly addressed through non-statutory frameworks, curriculum support and interventions. However, schools have found it challenging to translate and adapt individual social and emotional learning programs into whole school approaches (Department for Education, 2010; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). The progress and integration has been hindered by curricular frameworks not having the full support of all staff (Roffey, 2010), insufficient training provided to implement the goals (Murray-Harvey, 2010) and, critically, curricular frameworks that do not address the central role of student-teacher relationships (Mc Laughlin and Clarke, 2010).

Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) also draw attention to the evidence which suggests how teachers may misinterpret insecurely attached children's behavior as uncooperative, aggressive, demanding, impulsive, withdrawn, reactive and/or unpredictable. These judgments of behavioral manifestations of underlying inner experiences and relationship history affect teachers' attitudes and responses to behavior. It is suggested that teachers need to understand the meaning behind such behavioral displays and the needs that are being expressed in such defensive behavior (Kennedy, 2008). This is a necessity given that it is estimated that at least one third of children have an insecure attachment with at least one caregiver, which in turn will affect their school performance and behavior (Bergin and Bergin, 2009).

Roffey (2010) identified that for successful implementation and integration of intervention programs, the symbiotic relationship between the two educational systems, one which concerns school culture and climate, and the other the social and emotional curriculum for students, must be recognised and addressed. Moreover, there is now a sound rationale for interventions that work with the brain, mind and body to support children's emotional and social learning (Cozolino, 2013; Immordino-Yang, 2011). Therefore, the Attachment Aware Schools model, and the holistic attachment-based strategies/interventions applied, are modelled on providing a nurturing environment, which offers appropriate attachment-like relationships with students.

The Attachment Aware Schools framework is outlined in the model below. It comprises key elements for enabling effective implementation such as a consideration of the school ethos, specific training, promoting particular strategies, developing collaborative partnerships with the wider community and building an evidence base. The framework draws upon our preliminary findings and the contributions of the participating schools, as well as relevant literature in the field regarding educational change (Fullan, 2006). It operates on principles of joined-up thinking and interagency collaboration firmly endorsing the concept of 'the team around the child' and community-wide collaboration (Chivers, and Trodd, 2011; Anning, 2006).

The Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) Framework



## Methodology

This ongoing research is drawn from 3 pilot studies carried out over a period of 3 years. Funding limitations precluded the adoption of RCTs but a mixed methods approach generated both quantitative (descriptive using SPSS (V21) and Excel, and inferential statistics using chi-square and t tests) and qualitative data (using NVivo, cloud generator and thematic analysis) as indices of effectiveness (Johnson and Christensen, 2012; Mertons, 2010). Participants were recruited from 40 schools in two disparate socio-economic areas within the UK and involved practitioner participants (teachers and school support staff) (n = 200 to date) and case study children ranging from 5 years to 16 years (n = 100 to date).

The model comprised a training phase and an action research phase:

### *Training Phase*

- Initial auditing assessment of existing provision
- Series of workshop training outlining the model and covering neuroscience, physiological processes, attachment theory, strategies and interventions. Strategies/interventions included whole school use of Emotion Coaching and more targeted interventions such as Nurture Group provision and Theraplay.

### *Action Research Phase*

- Over a period of one year, participants adopted AAS strategies and interventions into everyday practice adapting them to their own contexts
- Additional input was also given by the research team at network/ booster meetings to report progress, clarify application of the strategies/interventions, explore the complexities and challenges of adopting attachment-based strategies and to provide general support
- Tracking of case study children
- Exit auditing assessment and other data collection (exit questionnaires, case studies, tracking data)

### Methods/Data sources

The following research instruments were utilised at 2 time points (pre and post):

1. Attachment Aware Schools audit – used to assess provision in relation to attachment-based school approaches, strategies and interventions
2. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) - used to assess strengths and difficulties experienced by a child such as emotional symptoms, conduct problems, inattention, peer relationship problems and pro-social behavior (Goodman, 1997).
3. Tracking of case study children – used to assess a variety of behavior outcomes and school achievement including student attendance, exclusion, behavior incidents, reading achievement, writing achievement, and math achievement.
4. A post-intervention staff exit questionnaire - used to assess additional feedback from participants regarding impact on professional practice, adult self-regulation and behavioral impact, including challenges of implementation. The items compiled in the Exit Questionnaire were derived from claims made by the participants about the use of strategies and interventions during the group discussions (Johnson and Christensen, 2012).
5. Online record of incidents where strategies/interventions were utilized with commentary on outcome and effectiveness.

Ethical protocols were upheld in accordance with the authors' institutional research ethics regulations (BSU, 2011) and in accordance with British Psychological Society (2011) ethics guidance. They also meet the AERA Code of Ethics.

### Results

Preliminary findings include the following:

- Changes in behavioral and socialization practices via improved social and emotional competencies
- A positive impact on behavioral regulation (improved pro-social behavior) by the children/young people across the settings
- Reductions in disruptive behavioral incidents, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, inattention, peer relationship problems
- Increased academic attainment scores beyond expected levels (English, math and reading)
- Case studies demonstrating a reduction in hyperactivity, improved engagement/attention in learning and academic attitude, self-esteem, confidence and well-being
- Adults reporting greater sensitivity to children's needs, more consistent responses to children's behavior, improved personal and professional self-regulation in 'controlling' incidents, more positive relationships, an adaptation of teaching and learning strategies to suit child, and improved well-being

#### Wider impact of the study

Systemic change which operates at multiple levels within the ecosystem of school and wider society are clearly necessary and we are already beginning to influence national policy and professional practice with our preliminary findings. For example:

- Our AAS program has been officially endorsed by the government and the National Health Service via the Statutory guidance *Promoting the health and well-being of looked-after children Statutory guidance for local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and NHS England* (2015, DfE and NHS) and *Promoting the education of looked after children Statutory guidance for local authorities* (2014, DfE).
- The executive agency of the Department for Education (the National College for Teaching and Leadership) commissioned us to produce training materials on the implications of attachment for governors and school leadership
- The National Institute for Clinical Excellence accepted our research recommendations as part of their national Guidelines on Attachment for Education
- The Health Select Committee recommended that all teacher training should include a mandatory module on children's mental health (House of Commons, 2014:101)
- We have been working with a number of initial teacher education providers, e.g. the Universities Council on Teacher Education (UCET), the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT) and Teach First to develop a common approach. We also influenced the government's review of initial teacher training, that 'child and adolescent development should be included within a framework for ITT content' (DfE, 2015: 9)
- Dissemination and national conferences are being channelled via the website – [attachmentawareschools.com](http://attachmentawareschools.com) – and professional online publications, webinars and videoblogs

- Private sector organisations such as Kate Cairns Associates have adopted our evidence-based strategies as part of their portfolio

There is still relatively little empirical research on the effectiveness of attachment-based school strategies for meeting children's attachment needs, and the implications of whole school strategies (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2004; Bergin and Bergin, 2009; Kennedy, 2008; Riley, 2009). However, our research is helping to close this gap.

Word count: 2000 excluding references



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