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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Attachment Aware Schools: Working with Families to Enhance Parental Engagement and Home-School Relationships

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### Abstract:

#### Background:

Application of attachment theory in school contexts lacks empirical evidence. The Attachment Aware Schools pilot project was commissioned by two Local Authorities in England to improve the educational outcomes of Looked After Children, and to build an evidence base. Informed by attachment research, the Attachment Aware Schools program provides a coherent and integrated theoretical framework, discourse, and practice for all practitioners working with children and young people.

#### Objective:

The primary focus was to provide whole school and targeted attachment-based strategies to support children's well-being, behavior, and academic attainment. This paper; however, documents a secondary objective, which was to facilitate collaborative partnerships with families.

#### Method:

As part of the mixed methods approach to the Attachment Aware Schools project, a series of case studies were collected and thematically coded. The case studies were generated by practitioners using an outcomes-based framework.

#### Results:

Although the case study sample size is small (N=10), the case studies presented here illustrate how the Attachment Aware Schools program can promote increased home-school engagement and shared practice between home and school. Outcomes include improved home-school relationships, reductions in behavioral incidents, and improved family dynamics.

#### Conclusion:

Attachment Aware Schools can be a vehicle for facilitating supportive home-school collaborative partnerships with positive outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

**Keywords:** Attachment aware schools, Attachment theory, Emotion coaching, Home-school relationships, Parental engagement, Behavior.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research addresses a key governmental policy goal in England, which is to raise the academic attainment for

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disadvantaged students and to reduce achievement gaps [1]. This article reports on some of the case study findings from the Attachment Aware Schools Project (AAS) [2]. The AAS project was commissioned by the two Local Authority Virtual Schools to improve the educational outcomes and well-being of Looked After Children, and other vulnerable children in need or at risk. In England all Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide a Virtual School Head to promote the educational achievement of the Looked After Children. Virtual Schools are not to be confused with online education programs. Virtual Schools work with the children's services department of the Local Authority and with all schools in the area on initiatives to promote the education of children in care.

In terms of educational outcomes, Looked After Children are one of the lowest performing groups internationally [3]. In England, the National Institute of Excellence has reiterated that extensive, cross-cultural research demonstrates how attachment is an important influence on school students' academic success and well-being at school. Increasingly, major national organisations, such as the UK Department for Education (DfE), and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), are calling for this research to inform practice and for education professionals to be trained: in understanding attachment and attachment difficulties; how relationships and attachments inform behaviors; the effects on learning and behavior; and how school staff can support children and young people with attachment difficulties [4].

Attachment theory is derived from the work of Bowlby [5]. At its core, it refers to the instinctive need for humans to feel protected and safe, which, in turn, allows them to explore their world more confidently. Secure attachments develop from nurturing relationships and support mental processes that enable a child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others, and appropriate moral reasoning [6]. Securely attached children are more likely to attain higher academic grades, have greater emotional regulation, social competence, willingness to take on challenges, and have lower levels of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and delinquency [7]. Conversely, attachment issues and trauma adversely affect children's relationships, not just with caregivers, but with peers, teachers, and support staff [8, 9].

A recent literature review noted that teachers and school staff were identified by Looked After Children as the main determinants of educational progress [3]. The literature has further strongly identified how positive and supportive relationships can play a part in buffering children from the impact of adverse experiences [10]. Research on attachment needs and trauma has identified sustainable whole school practice and targeted interventions as supportive for children with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties [4, 11, 12].

### 1.1. Project Aims and Program

The AAS project was premised on the belief that "an attachment-informed approach for all professionals working with children, including those within the universal services, offers the best prospect for effective early intervention for children, whatever their age or family situation" [12: p. 8]. It provided a coherent and integrated theoretical framework, discourse, and practice for all practitioners who work with children and young people.

The AAS project's objectives were threefold: 'to improve learning outcomes and well-being for all children while supporting the needs of children with unmet attachment needs, including those who have experienced trauma and neglect; provide schools with attachment-based strategies to support children's well-being, behavior, and academic attainment; and implement whole school approaches with targeted interventions to meet a spectrum of need, working with agencies and caregivers where appropriate. The focus is on the importance of attachment, attunement, and trauma-informed practice to address children's individual needs. AAS aim to promote nurturing relationships that support the socio-emotional development and the learning and behavior of all children. It draws on reviews of relevant literature and the findings from a preliminary pilot study [11], literature in the educational field regarding whole school cultural change [13, 14], and practice contributions from experienced practitioners.

The AAS project was presented as a whole school program to support all children's emotional and social development, as well as offering targeted support for more vulnerable learners. The principles of joined-up thinking and inter-agency collaboration firmly endorsed the concept of "the team around the child" and community-wide collaboration [15, 16]. Indeed, as advocated by Grayson, the program advocated holistic interventions that favored parental participation to narrow the student attainment gap [17]. By facilitating the development of empathetic environments, AAS aim to support children in developing their potential through improving their socio-emotional well-being and behavior. Where this is achieved, evidence suggested that academic achievement improves and the attainment gap decreases [7, 18].

The AAS pilot project involved a training phase and an action research phase. Practitioner training, often with

online support, helped to equip staff with theoretical understanding along with practical, effective tools and techniques to use in settings. To develop a shared understanding and insight into attachment theory [19] and the recent neuroscientific evidence that appears to support research in attachment and learning [20 - 23], all members of the school were trained. Staff also undertook specific training in Emotion Coaching [24], a practice to help support children's self-regulation of emotions. They were also made aware of the potential impact of trauma on the developing brain, behavior, and learning [25 - 28]. By utilising strategies such as Emotion Coaching, the AAS project created a nurturing infrastructure that bound whole school strategies into specialised, relational-focussed approaches. The training subsequently provided opportunities for staff to develop closer relationships with families, either informally or formally *via* interagency working, and by sharing the work being done in school and particularly the strategies being utilised by the school.

Over a period of one year, participants embraced an action research approach to implement AAS strategies and interventions into everyday practice and to adapt them to their own contexts. Staff tracked impact using case studies of children who were deemed to be "at risk", such as in relation to their educational progress or at risk of exclusion. Schools were given individualized support to help record and report progress, clarify application of the strategies/interventions, explore the complexities and challenges of adopting attachment-based strategies, and general support for the action research process.

The findings from the AAS main mixed method pilot study are reported elsewhere and reveal promising results [29]. In terms of the impact regarding academic attainment, there was a statistically significant improvement in reading, English, and math achievement and a significant decrease in the number of students not meeting expected achievement, thus helping to close the attainment gap. In terms of the impact on the children regarding behavior, there was a significant decrease in exclusions (inside and outside of classroom). Child strengths and difficulties assessments revealed a statistically significant reduction in symptoms. Overall, 97% of professionals largely agreed that the AAS training impacted positively on their professional practice, 96% largely agreed that training impacted positively on adult self-regulation, and 99% largely agreed that training impacted positively on child behavior [29].

## **1.2. Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) Model**

A recent review of literature and research on how best to improve outcomes for children and families was undertaken by The Centre on the Developing Child [30]. They constructed a Translational Science Model (TSM), which acknowledges the contributory role that small-scale pilot intervention studies can play in improving outcomes for families and children, and for transforming lives and practice. Successful TSM projects operate as learning communities utilizing a cyclical process of learning and adaptation; are united by a common vision to support children's well-being and progress; engage in shared learning to accelerate innovation; and promote the adoption of promising strategies and considered pathways for larger scale impact [30]. The AAS model evidences many of these qualities, as it was designed to offer structured core components, but is flexible enough to accommodate the diverse needs of individual schools and settings to increase accessibility and applicability. Furthermore, along with specific intervention strategies, the AAS project includes common program materials to guide successful implementation processes. It also provided impact evaluation measures for development, adaptation, scalability, and cross-site synthesis. As suggested by the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, this helps to support and identify "what works (or doesn't) for whom, in what contexts, and why" [30: p. 4].

To meet the full range of children's needs, the AAS framework utilizes a "pyramid of support" [11]. At the top of the pyramid are the small number of high-need children who will require supplementary, specialist help, such as referrals to mental health services or specialist interventions. In the middle are those children who require some additional support within the school environment, such as 1:1 tutoring or nurture group provision. The base of the triangle represents the entire school (and wider community), who are supported through the provision of whole school training on relational models and relational actions, such as Emotion Coaching. Emotion Coaching resonates strongly with attachment-based strategies and has been correlated to secure attachment [31].

## **1.3. Intervention Strategies and Emotion Coaching**

The AAS intervention strategies included whole school use of Emotion Coaching and more targeted, specialist interventions, such as Nurture Group provision and Theraplay® [18, 32]. Emotion Coaching is an evidence-based strategy that helps children to become more aware of their emotions and to manage their own feelings, particularly during instances of heightened emotions that can lead to misbehavior [24]. It instils the tools that will aid children's

ability to self-regulate their emotions and behavior [33]. Emotion Coaching is based on the principle that nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships provide optimal contexts for the promotion of resilience in children. Children's emotions are noticed and validated within a supportive relationship with clear limits set, where appropriate, followed by joint problem-solving with the child to develop more effective behavioral strategies [34]. Recent research in England suggested that an Emotion Coaching approach can reduce behavioral incidents in school and foster positive relationships between teacher and student [35].

Randomised control trials have shown that children who are Emotion Coached have fewer behavioral problems, achieve more academically in school, are more emotionally stable, and have more friends [24, 36]. Studies demonstrate its effectiveness in supporting children with conduct behavioral difficulties [37] and those exposed to violent environments, including inter-parental violence, maltreatment, and community violence [38, 39]. Emotion Coaching has also been used effectively to improve the psychological functioning of children who have experienced complex trauma [40] and identified as a protective factor for children at risk [41].

Attachment research has shown how 'emotion-focused talk' by the adult can teach children to use appropriate strategies to cope with stress [42, 43]. Empathic and dialogic interaction enables children to feel appreciated; to explore their feelings and relationships; to reflect with others and to confront their anger, fear and anxiety, rather than projecting them through challenging behavior [44]. The narrative provided by Emotion Coaching creates a communicative context for a child's emotional experiences to be explicitly and meaningfully processed within a relational dyad, and resonates with Siegel's work on interpersonal neurobiology [20]. It can operate as a stabilizing factor to enable children to focus their energies on learning and so help them moderate the challenges of school.

#### 1.4. Relationship-Building and Parental Engagement

Hart's consideration of psychodynamic strategies, based on attachment theory to support children's behavior, recognized the importance of the relational model and relational actions [45]. They can help to address the meaning of behaviour, rather than merely the behavior itself. The literature further demonstrates the importance of stable, caring, and trusting relationships to promote success at school and beyond [46]. Agreeing with the CDC [30], the AAS program acknowledged that "children develop within an environment of relationships that begins in the family but also involves other adults who play important roles in their lives such as teachers and other school staff" [30: p. 5].

Parental involvement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, school climate, and behavior, as well as an effect on teachers' functioning [47, 48]. Research reviews indicated that schools that have strong links with parents and engage with the community secure higher academic achievement [17]. Therefore, as part of a wider target to improve outcomes and life chances for all children, parental engagement has been the focus of UK government policy. Supporting parents to increase their knowledge and skills in managing behavior is viewed as a key target and benefit [49].

Goodall and Vorhause [49] outlined 3 main areas for promoting engagement – home-school links, support and training for parents, and family/community based interventions. Two key principles woven throughout these areas include building positive relationships and whole school approaches. Interventions should always be informed by parental needs within the context of a whole school improvement strategy. Epstein, Sanders, Salinas, Jansorn, and Voorhis's [50] model of parental involvement advocates supporting parents with parenting skills and understanding of child development, as parental involvement<sup>1</sup> helps enhance the relationship between teachers and parents [48].

## 2. METHODS

Case study methodology follows the interpretative tradition to research and is context-specific rather than context-independent [51]. This is believed to be more reflexive of human experience in that it offers in-depth, holistic accounts of "events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring at that particular instance" [52: p.52]. Case study methodology allows examination of differing aspects and layers in an attempt to capture reality and reference the situation through the participant's experience [53]. Vasconcelos [54] recognized cases studies as a vital tool for those "who aim to describe and deeply understand the context of teaching and learning" [p. 329].

Friedman's results based accountability [55], known in the UK as Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA), informed the project and was used to structure the individual case studies. (OBA) is a way of thinking and taking action that can improve outcomes for organizations, communities, and individuals [55]. The primary focus of attention is on results or desired outcomes. Friedman [55] argued that it is the identification and focus on measureable and monitored progress

indicators that are integral to promoting better outcomes and real change. An OBA approach asks for the evidence to answer three simple questions: (a) how much are we doing, (b) how well are we doing, and (c) is anyone better off [55: p.4].

As part of the AAS project, a series of small case studies (N=49), were collected from a range of UK school settings in two different Local Authorities. One was located in the South West and one in the Midlands, both with areas of deprivation. Using Friedman's [55] OBA framework, each case study was based on a target child, chosen by the lead teacher for the AAS project at the school. Demographics and information for each case study comprised details and context of the child; age; gender; background to the child, including rationale for selection; behaviors exhibited pre-intervention; outcomes, including behaviors, post-intervention; and evidence from people involved with the child, including the family. Given that the case studies were completed by school staff, the majority of the evidence reflects the school or child's perspectives. However, during the process of analysing the case studies, it became apparent that some case studies incorporated the families' perspectives, and this paper reports on these incidental data sets.

A total of ten case studies were drawn from the original set of case studies and analyzed to detect impact on the wider family, particularly in relation to Friedman's [55] key question of "is anyone better off?" [55: p. 4]. The sample comprised of nine boys and one girl, aged between five to 13 years of age. Three children attended primary school; two attended secondary school; four attended a primary special school for children with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties; and one attended a special secondary school for children with cognition and learning difficulties. All the schools involved used Emotion Coaching as their chosen intervention with the children, and thus provided a common intervention strategy for cross-study comparison. All children included for case study were selected by the schools on the basis of their vulnerability and identified behavioral concerns, and they were all deemed to be at risk in terms of their academic progress. Examples from the sample of ten case study children included a child who was Looked After, a child adopted at five years of age, a child with an ADHD diagnosis, and one child diagnosed with autism.

The qualitative data from the case studies were analysed thematically according to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's [56] framework for qualitative data analysis. This approach identifies stable relationships amongst the data based on regularities and patterns linking the data. Data reduction methodology involved coding the data and evidencing that the codes actually represented what was being researched (they are valid), that there was no overlap (they are mutually exclusive), and that all data fit into a category (codes were exhaustive) [56]. First level coding involved assigning descriptive codes to begin the analytic strategy and enable the researchers to get a feel for the data. Second level coding involved assigning pattern codes to draw together the descriptive codes into meaningful themes. Independent analyst triangulation was employed for verification and to increase credibility [57].

### 3. RESULTS

Three themes were identified within the study. The themes were: Increased home-school engagement, sharing and modelling common practice between school and home, and improved family dynamics. In this section, the results are discussed in accordance with these themes.

#### 3.1. Theme 1: Increased Home-School Engagement

Integral to all the case studies was the way in which the AAS program and accompanying strategies facilitated communication between families and school staff, such as the provision of review meetings and the particular strategies being adopted by the schools as part of the project. The review meetings were conducted in a spirit of mutual respect and equitable relationships as advocated by the literature [17, 48].

The review meetings also enabled parents or carers to sustain their engagement and participate in the process of supporting the child. Case study 9 reflects how the communication between the school and home was enhanced through the school's attachment-based understanding of the child's behavior. This provided staff with an alternative and constructive way of approaching the child's "meltdowns," and an opportunity to engage positively with the parents to model practical support. Similarly, a parent of the case study 10 expressed her gratitude and relief to the school about the opportunity the review meetings provided to "talk with people who understand [her child's] world." This parent went on to comment that since her child had attended the school it had "provided light and hope after a long period of uncertainty." She felt that her child had made significant progress since attending an "attachment aware school ...

<sup>1</sup> Although parental involvement and parental engagement might be viewed on a continuum in terms of depth and activity [47, 48], the terms are used interchangeably here.

getting an education, socialising with his peers, and having fun, all of which were missing for a long time.” This parent had strong views that working with the school had helped to create a “foundation for a brighter future, and for that we are very grateful.” This suggests that the AAS approach supported a sustainable positive attitude towards, and relationship with, the school. This impact is echoed in the following quote from the parent of case study 8 who declared “I had arrived at school in a distressed state with a feeling of complete despair [and] feeling very helpless, but left feeling very positive and motivated.” She thanked the school for “the hope you gave me” and for believing “that my son is not a lost cause.”

Another dimension to this theme was the increased parental confidence in the school’s ability to manage their child, which in turn improved home-school engagement. In case study 1, the family had been identified by the Local Authority’s Connecting Families Program, which formed part of the Government’s “Troubled Families” Initiative, which was launched in 2012 [58]. Emotion Coaching had a significant impact on the mother’s engagement with the school and her own approach in relating to and managing her son. Although she was keen to end her support from the Connecting Families Program, she wanted to remain engaged with the school, and her working with the school increased. The contact was voluntary with the mother attending the school to work alongside staff in using Emotion Coaching with her child. As a result, internal and fixed term exclusions for her child dropped dramatically. This active and positive engagement by the mother implies that the working relationship between home and school was more reciprocal and that parental trust in the school increased. There also appeared to be a greater sense of shared understanding and connectivity between the teacher and the parent. The mother began to undertake home learning activities provided by the school, suggesting increased receptivity to school initiatives.

A key aspect of this theme is the way in which the AAS program facilitated the sharing and transferability of a common strategy that could be used in both the home and school. This became a vehicle for home-school engagement, facilitating a stronger working relationship between school staff and the child’s caregivers. This relates to the second key theme of sharing and modelling common strategies.

### 3.2. Theme 2: Sharing and Modeling Common Practice Between School and Home

All the case studies testified to the value of sharing and modeling a common practice (Emotion Coaching) that could be used in both the school and home, creating consistency and continuity for the child. A quote from the mother of case study 8 child expresses this: “I thank you for your time and efforts in helping introduce a new technique to help control my son’s behavior<sup>2</sup>.” According to staff, the mother in case study 1 was able to transform the way in which she responded to her child’s behavior by, for example, adapting “her tone of voice when talking to him.” The staff also used Emotion Coaching with the mother herself in order to model a calming, shame-avoidant approach. In this way she could experience and then use Emotion Coaching with her child, and the parent testified to the way she had since changed how she communicated with her child.

Emotion Coaching was also used effectively between home and school to support the child in case study 4, who was finding coming to school very difficult and separating from parents very challenging. This collaborative approach enabled to child to “detach from Mum without worrying or running away.” The child was also witnessed using Emotion Coaching himself with other children when they had difficulties with their behavior in school.

The way in which the AAS program facilitated transformations in parental practices and guided parents into new ways of approaching their child’s behavior is also reflected in case study 9. The parent talked about the discussion she had with school staff, which provided her with a different way of responding to her child, leading to better outcomes. She commented: “I realized that I had to catch up with where [child’s name] was emotionally ... and handle situations in a different way.” She described how learning to validate and acknowledge her child’s emotions and how understanding “feelings were ok but not the behavior, totally changed the way [child’s name] responded to the situation.”

Case study 3 exemplifies how the AAS training deepened staff’s understanding of attachment and attachment difficulties, and gave insight into children’s emotions and behavioral expression. Staff knowledge was often shared with parents and caregivers to ameliorate and help re-frame their perceptions and attitudes towards their child’s behavior. The foster carers of a Looked After Child initially viewed the child’s behavior as a “presentation of defiance” that was “within his control.” Talking and working with staff helped the foster carers to develop a better understanding of the child’s emotions, and the difficulties he had in regulating his behavior. At a review meeting, the carers confirmed that

<sup>2</sup> Although this parent used the term control, the discourse promoted by the AAS program was regulating and supporting behavior.

they found using Emotion Coaching had resulted in calmer behavior and less incidents of physical aggression at home and school. In addition to a de-escalation of incidents, the carers experienced increased empathy and an improved relationship with their foster child. Improved family dynamics was another key theme identified within the case studies.

### 3.3. Theme 3: Improved Family Dynamics

With the Emotion Coaching, parents became more aware of their own and their children's emotions, what Gottman et al. [24] referred to as meta-emotion philosophy. Meta-emotion philosophy reflects the integration of values, beliefs, and awareness of personal emotions and the emotions of others, and being able to take these into account when interacting. The changes outlined in the previous theme testify to adjustments made in how parents perceived and interacted with their child. This then had a positive impact on family dynamics as one parent (case study 9) explicitly commented:

“The dynamics within our household changed for the better. The next time [child's name] was upset and angry, I used this approach [Emotion Coaching]. He was able to engage with me and calmed down quickly. I have practiced this a few times now and each time it has worked and has therefore been a positive experience. . . . Peace and calm has been returned to the family home.”

The family of child case study 2 also benefitted as a result of the work of staff involved in the AAS project. The staff described the family dynamics as “a vicious cycle of behaviors.” The case study child was on the autistic spectrum, and his anxieties were manifesting as violent outbursts at school and at home. His mother was struggling to deal with both his and his brother's behavior without herself dysregulating. The case study child's sibling was demonstrating poor academic progress, lack of peer engagement, and low self-esteem. Through the use of the shared strategy, Emotion Coaching, the mother was able to recognize her own feelings towards her situation and her sons. The realization and validation allowed her the emotional space and time to reflect and calm, and so respond to her child differently. As a result, she noticed his outbursts were reduced and he became less violent. Moreover, the mother was able to then Emotion Coach the older brother, and to better recognize his feelings, which had included anger and jealousy towards his sibling and towards his mother. He also talked to her more and expressed how isolated he had been feeling. As a consequence, she declared that “home is a calmer place. School for both boys has improved greatly.” The case study child's brother was noted to be happier at school, have more appropriate social engagement with his peers, and enjoyed increased academic progress. He reported that he now felt more connected to his mum and “less angry with his brother.” He talked about how he could now tolerate his brother's condition, and “understand him more.” The mother expressed how she felt calmer in managing her child's autism, and how this was supporting him to be calmer at home.

Another notable example of how the AAS project led to greater family awareness of emotions, more positive family dynamics, and greater family cohesion is illustrated in case study 5. Prior to the school's engagement in the AAS program and use of Emotion Coaching, this child was extremely disruptive and defiant. He was physically violent with staff and aggressive with his peers. Not only did the staff see an improvement in his ability to self-regulate, a decrease in the levels of aggression and length incidents, they testified to improvements in his ability to talk through his feelings and problem-solve, making better choices for his behavior. These changes were echoed in the home. The parents stated that they have seen an “amazing difference” in the child's behavior: “he is like a different child compared to how he was a year ago.” They reported this had “a massive impact on the family” and went on to say:

“A year ago we couldn't go anywhere as [child's name] would play up so much that we would avoid going anywhere. He has been able to cope a lot better and we have been able to spend some quality time together as a family. The main difference is that his levels of aggression have decreased and he is talking more about how he is feeling . . . he will listen to suggestions about how to cope with situations that scare or worry him.”

In case study 6, Emotion Coaching was believed to have positively contributed to the development of the child's meta-emotion philosophy. This teenage girl had difficulties in her home life with her mother having mental health issues and also had problems with her own self-care. As a result of the project, the child increased her self-confidence and awareness of her own needs and the needs of others. She shared with staff how she had “learnt to empathise with how mum is feeling and recognised the need for help herself.”

## 4. DISCUSSION

Grayson [17] identified that the provision of advice, emotional support, and training in empowered positive parenting was an effective strategy for working with families. Supporting parents requires specialist skills, and the

literature calls for additional training for teachers to feel competent and confident to fulfil this role [49]. The AAS model and support offered by staff to families *via* sharing and modelling Emotion Coaching resonates with this evidence. Moreover, the research on parental engagement also highlights the importance of establishing a personal and meaningful relationship which is underpinned by an equal power status [49, 59]. Yet this is often not the case in home-school partnerships, which are invariably tokenistic, driven by the school's agenda rather than parental needs, and incorporate "one-way traffic" communication [59]. The AAS model viewed parents as partners, and the findings presented here suggest that a shared use of a common strategy provided a vehicle for authentic parental engagement and a two-way exchange within the home-school relationship. Strier and Katz [48] noted how mutual goals facilitate the development of trust and utilisation of Emotion Coaching operated as common ground to fertilize the relational dyad between home and school. Sharing and modeling joint practice between home and school might facilitate shared responsibility and parental ability to operate more effectively within the "cultural capital" of schools [59]. It helps to generate a sense of "we're all in this together" and helps to minimize potential deficit models of parental engagement.

The need for trust and respect in home-school partnerships and for non-threatening strategies has been identified by the government as a key factor in supporting children's learning [59]. The literature on relationships between teacher and student also testifies to the importance of trust and respect [60 - 62]. Emotion Coaching fosters nurturing relationships, facilitating trust and respect [34]. Although the data from this study did not reveal any explicit reference to trust and respect, inference can be drawn from the statements made by the families within the theme identified on parental engagement, implying that a "cycle of trust" was generated. In reviewing effectiveness in parental engagement, Grayson [17] emphasized the importance of parents feeling consulted and to feel that their opinions are valued. The statements made in the case study material seem to reflect this. The AAS approach and the practical shared strategy improved communication, allowing caregivers to feel heard and validated, thereby helping to create a "cycle of trust." This corroborates with Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, Gross's [63] findings that effective communication is believed by parents to be integral to trusting partnerships. This acceptance appears to have generated increased engagement, and thereby improving outcomes for the child and family, such as enhanced family dynamics.

Although this paper cannot address the range of literature related to the complexities of family dynamics and educational opportunities, by adopting a socially critical approach to changing educational relationships the AAS program hopes to alleviate feeling of powerlessness and promote new learning relationships for adults and children alike [64]. The research on attachment makes clear links between the impact of the home environment on school success [7, 65], suggesting that strategies which improve parent child relationships facilitate improvements at school [47, 49]. Moreover, "parents' greatest expressed need is for advice and emotional support" [17: p.2] of the kind provided in the AAS program. They also prefer universal strategies which helps to reduce stigmatism [66] and Emotion Coaching is a practical solution to this need. A common finding from the evidence on the use of Emotion Coaching is how it enables both children and adults to feel calmer, thereby helping to moderate stress and improve children and adults' capacity to moderate their behavior. It empowers adults to feel more confident and the testimonials here certainly appear to endorse findings elsewhere [35, 67, 68]. Indeed, parental confidence in managing children's behavior appears to be a fundamental ingredient of successful interventions [17].

## CONCLUSION

This small pilot study reveals a promising way forward for school staff to develop authentic relationships with vulnerable families and support family dynamics, with a consequent improvement in school learning. The vignettes emerging from the case study material suggest that AAS might be a vehicle for facilitating positive and empowering home-school collaborative partnerships with shared use of strategies like Emotion Coaching. The findings open up opportunities to explore the potential for the AAS model to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people, and the creation of a more robust evidence base for attachment-based work in school and families. As Rimé [69] noted "emotions experienced by individuals are not only instruments at the service of individual adaptation, they are also major tools serving the adaptation of members of a community" [p. 82].

This study has a number of limitations. Case study methodology is criticized over concerns with the credibility and transferability of findings due to its context specific nature, selective bias and the relatively small numbers involved in research studies. The limited case study material prohibits generalizations, and only emerging themes can be claimed. Lack of follow-up to data also testifies to short-term impact. Moreover, the findings can only hint at the likely contribution made by the use of Emotion Coaching as the main vehicle for improvements, since other influencing variables have not been addressed within the qualitative analysis. Nonetheless, giving attention to detail "captures the



thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them” [70: p. 543]. This then increases rather than decreases case study data credibility to reflect the lived experience.

The pilot research has not directly addressed attachment research related to attachment in multiple relationship contexts along with its implications for teacher-parent and student-teacher relationships [71]. However, given the relative lack of empirical evidence in the parental involvement literature [49], this study gives some weight to the evidence base on effective school-home relationships. It was guided by measures deemed pertinent for educational contexts and demanded by statutory government policy, *i.e.* attainment, attendance and behavioral outcomes. Research methods were therefore selected for their functionality and convenience for busy practitioners to use in the context of school practice, and Friedman’s framework [55] was considered a sufficiently robust and accessible tool to use. It is also acknowledged that data collected using this framework focuses on positive outcomes (on “what works”) and so may neglect to identify challenges and limitations (“what doesn’t work”) of the approach.

### **ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

Not applicable.

### **HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS**

No animals were used in this research. All human research procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the committee responsible for human experimentation (institutional and national), and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

### **CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION**

Not applicable.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

Some authors of this paper are co-founders of Emotion Coaching UK, which provides practitioner training in Emotion Coaching.

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