

## **Critically Evaluate How Attachment May Impact on Learning**

The social and emotional aspects of learning have recently seen what Ubha and Cahill call a 'renewed emphasis and growing appreciation by government' (2014, p. 272). Thus, increasing recognition that improving the quality of teaching alone is not enough as more focus on the social and emotional wellbeing of pupils is also needed (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2008). Many, including Zeanah (1996) and Bomber (2007) assert that attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) provides one of the most crucial frameworks for understanding the main risk and protective factors in social and emotional development and that schools possess the potential to use this knowledge to increasingly support a systemic approach to children's learning (Bomber, 2007, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This essay therefore seeks to explore and critically evaluate how attachment may impact on learning and educational experiences for children and young people.

Deriving from Bowlby's work (1969) with contributions from Ainsworth (1989), attachment theory draws from: psychoanalytic theory, ethological theory and cognitive and developmental psychology (Slater, 2007). It focuses on the process of attachment of children to their caregivers; subsequently providing a framework towards understanding how children view themselves in relation to the world (Unha and Cahill, 2014). A person who has experienced a secure attachment is seen as more likely to have had a responsive caregiver in infancy and resultantly developed trust which helps them face the world with increased confidence (High, 2012). They are more likely to have developed a complimentary internal representation of themselves and to view themselves as a person who will be responded to (Bowlby, 1980). Conversely, a lack of secure attachment can adversely impact a person's internal representation of themselves and their social and emotional development thus, impacting on how they function socially and within relationships (Colverd and Hodgkin, 2011). As their needs have not been adequately met, they may see the world as 'comfortless and unpredictable and respond either by shrinking from it or doing battle with it' (Bowlby, 1973, p. 208). Therefore, adverse attachment and its effect on a child's adaptive capacity towards the environment around them can profoundly affect future psychological development and ability to negotiate developmental crisis; resulting in psychosocial problems which can impact on multiple areas including learning (Thompson and Kaplan, 1996).

However, as Marshall (2014) points out, it is important not to over-generalise regarding attachment or use it deterministically, as children have individual personalities and temperaments with a myriad of factors and variables impacting. Not receiving 'good enough' nurturing as an infant will not necessarily result in attachment disorder (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985). In this respect, the four attachment styles: secure, avoidant (internalising behaviours), ambivalent (attention needing behaviours) and disorganised (externalising behaviours) are useful towards understanding attachment styles however, should not be used to pigeon hole children (Marshall, 2014). Rutter (1977) particularly warns against over-reliance on attachment theory, asserting that it can discount later life experiences which may overcome even the most adverse early life experiences. Additionally, O'Conner, Bredenkamp and Rutter (1999) discuss the danger of the theory blaming the mother and that impacts of other social and environmental factors need to receive full consideration.

All this withstanding, Slater (2007) highlights how Bowlby's theories and ideas on attachment became more developed in later work (Bowlby, 1988) and less deterministic; concentrating on resilience factors and how later positive attachment can help reshape insecure attachments. Thus, she amongst many others reiterate the enrichment that attachment theory provides towards the support of pupils; with schools having the potential to be a nurturing safe place for children whose home life may be chaotic and non-conducive to secure attachment. Importantly, other significant adults, such as teachers and support staff can aim to provide important attachments for children and young people (Bergin and Bergin, 2009). Thus, seeking to compensate for earlier adversities via consistent, trusting and secure relationships that help children to build more positive ways of experiencing themselves therefore improving self-image and confidence (Prior and Glaser, 2006). In turn, coping skills, resilience and social skills can be increased which influence school engagement, cognitive development and learning (Dobbs and Arnold, 2009; Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). The flip side, of course, is that negative child-teacher relationships can create further detrimental impact to children's emotional knowledge and learning (Garner and Wajid, 2008).

Rose and Parker (2014) highlight that schools aiming to provide proactive support, need to be aware of the predominant risk factors linked to attachment disorder. These include:

poverty, poor parental mental health, bereavement and frequent moves of house or school. In particular, physical abuse and neglect are linked (Daignault and Herbert, 2009). It is key to note that children from non-vulnerable backgrounds can also be affected. Behaviours vary widely and can include pupils being: unfocused, disruptive, controlling, withdrawn or destructive. These pupils can underachieve at school and are often punished or even excluded, with little that the schools do seeming to work (Rose and Parker, 2014). A holistic approach needs to be employed, thus seeking to understand the emotions behind the behaviour and remembering that children need to feel safe and secure before any learning can take place (Maslow, 1943).

This is further supported by theory regarding the impact of attachment towards the brain and emotions. Marshall (2014) explains how, within brain development, the reptilian (survival) part develops first, then the Limbic (emotional) and finally the Neocortex (thinking, reasoning and creativity). A child who has experienced emotional trauma is likely to have an over-stimulated reptilian (survival) part of the brain and as the reptilian and thinking brain cannot work at the same time; an over-active reptilian brain tends to render the thinking brain inactive. A hypersensitive reptilian brain can result which may be on constant alert and be slow to calm/recover or to remember information. Hence, if in the classroom, the child is asked to volunteer an answer, for example, they may easily become over-anxious of what might happen to them if they do not get it correct, meaning they remain in the reptilian part of the brain, unable to access the part of the brain (frontal cortex) they need to retrieve the information (Bomber, 2014). It can also explain why children may be able to do something one day but not the next, as something may have changed for them to make the different parts of the brain more active. This upholds how key it is for practitioners to support a child to calm down and feel safe in order that the reptilian part of the brain becomes inactive and the frontal cortex active and learning can take place (Marshall, 2014).

Furthermore, the less stressful and more secure and nurturing an environment is in early life, the more neural connections are made in the brain overall, thereby increasing the progress of a child's thinking both cognitively and emotionally (Seigal, 2012). These connections (synapses) are the key functioning elements of the brain and they make sure communication is happening around the cells in the brain and that signals are sent out for

the body to function. Conversely, these vital connections are reduced or lost when a child experiences stress or trauma, especially when it occurs in key developmental times, like infancy (Marshall, 2014). It seems a self-perpetuating cycle as the more an insecurely attached child remains primarily concerned with maintaining security and remains in the reptilian part of the brain, the less they have opportunity to build new neural connections, develop other parts of the brain and increase emotional autonomy/ resilience and learning. Whilst conversely, a child with positive attachment is more confident in exploring new situations and therefore resultantly builds more neural connections and generally learns new information and emotional autonomy successfully (Seigal, 2012).

However, as overwhelmingly important insight into neuroscience is towards further understanding effects of attachment for children and how to provide effective support, it is also key to remember that the impacts to the brain are not rigid (Bomber, 2014). Although severely negative and profound effects can occur with substantial consequences (sometimes surfacing in behaviour much later than when the original trauma occurred) there is plasticity in the brain meaning that it has the ability to adapt and gradually flourish in response to new, positive experiences. Therefore, in the right environment there is capacity for healing and change over time; although a level of vulnerability is likely always to exist (Gopnik, 2009; Greenfield, 2001). This journey towards adaption though is long and requires a sincere, consistent, sensitive and enduring attitude and approach from practitioners that eventually builds trust in children. 'Each and every relationship has the power to confirm or challenge everything that has gone on before. But the benefits inherent in healthy relating takes time', (Bomber, 2014, p. 6). Hence, every negative social encounter, small or large, intentional or not tends to have an instant and profound impact, potentially provoking setback for individuals. Whereas, positive relationships take much longer to solidify and therefore genuinely create a beneficial emotional effect on the child or young person, that in turn can positively affect internal regulation, adaptivity, cognition and learning (Immordini- Yang and Damasio, 2007).

Therefore, key to educational practice seems the incredibly important school staff/ pupil relationship together with a whole- school ethos of awareness. Training is paramount towards empowerment of staff and a more inclusive approach via clear understanding of attachment together with knowledge of evidence-based strategies and interventions, such

as nurture groups (Marshall, 2014, Balisteri, 2016). To this end, school checklists have been developed for understanding attachment in mainstream, building on the important work from the Nurture Group Network and the Boxall Profile (1998). Ubha and Kahill (2014, p.289) uphold the support of emotional literacy as key and state that teachers and children need to talk about the negative emotions that can arise in learning in order that children can gradually try to understand and regulate their reactions more and know that these are not 'abnormal' in any way. Feelings of acceptance and belonging are needed from both teachers and peers. Furthermore, stability over time is paramount, with the same staff and peers together with consistent discipline and structured classroom activities. Bomber (2014, p.14) explains how structure, stability and security are essential for pupils in order to genuinely attend to the attachment system and allow the 'exploratory system' to kick into its full potential so that pupils can take the risks required in the process of learning. Strong partnership working with external agencies and parents or carers is also important towards stability, consistency and inclusiveness for children together with a culture of support for educational practitioners themselves to ensure isolation in their role is avoided and their wellbeing and professionalism is safeguarded (Bomber, 2015).

Finally, Glasser and Easley (2007, p.227) argue that inclusiveness in schools can work for children with attachment disorder however, 'not without leaps within school philosophy'. They state an overall attitude change is required as classrooms need to be therapeutic as well as academic if pupils, who have experienced developmental trauma, are to be helped to settle to learn. Although some teachers may not have 'signed up' for this when they entered the profession, this joined-up approach is what Glasser and Easley claim is needed in order to move more pupils onto higher level functioning. Bomber (2014) upholds this, asserting that generally our current school system has been set up for pupils who can enter having received 'good enough' care for them to understand and make the most of education. Unfortunately, it seems increasingly apparent that this assumption is not true for many pupils and that we need to look to be adaptive in our ways of educating in order to reflect the realities of the communities in which we live. Ensuring that every child does in fact matter and we are supporting attainment for all. The YIPPEE project by Jackson and Cameron (2011) further illustrates this need for philosophy change as, when it explored the post compulsory education of children and young people in care in five different European

countries, it found that in every country bar one, children felt school was the safe and secure haven that they needed; with the one country of exception unfortunately being the United Kingdom, where the majority did not feel this.

In conclusion, attachment theory and the wealth of research surrounding it, including that from neuroscience, seems of enormous value towards understanding the impacts of developmental adversities on children's emotions and learning. An individual's internal working model and adaptive capacity to the environment is key together with psychological and psychosocial wellbeing. Many children experience trauma and chaotic beginnings in life, non-conducive to secure attachment, with profound effects. However, with the right knowledge and understanding, school staff can aim to provide a safe, nurturing place and attachment opportunity that builds positive ways for children to experience themselves. Thus, looking to improve self-image, emotional literacy, internal regulation, cognition and therefore learning. Although adverse attachment can cause extremely negative effects on brain development with substantial consequences, the brain has plasticity and thus, given positive conditions, has the ability to adapt over time and gradually thrive. Overall, a philosophy change may be needed within education so that social and emotional wellbeing is consistently prioritised as much as academic success, as the two seem intrinsically linked.

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