Why we should train teachers on the impact of childhood trauma on classroom behaviour

Stephanie Little[1*]

And

Rachel E. Maunder[1]

[1]The University of Northampton

Address for correspondence:

Faculty of Health, Education and Society

The University of Northampton

University Drive

Northampton

NN1 5PH

Corresponding author: stephanie.little.20@ucl.ac.uk

Word count of full paper (including references): 4084

Word count excluding references: 2956

Why we should train teachers on the impact of childhood trauma on classroom behaviour

Abstract

Two inter-connected problems affecting the UK education system are the number of young people who have experienced early trauma which impacts on their well-being and classroom behaviour, and the number of teachers who leave the profession. In this paper we will discuss the link between childhood trauma and young people's disruptive behaviour in the classroom and argue for the need for teachers to receive training on 'attachment aware' approaches to help them respond effectively. When considering the evidence for what therapeutically supports young people to move out of a pattern of trauma-influenced coping, there is scope for schools to play a systemic part in building positive interpersonal relationships. We will suggest that a fortuitous side effect of this is the evidence that it could be beneficial for adults in the education system to take an alternative approach, potentially acting as a buffer for professional burnout and aiding teacher retention.

Introduction

Attachment – the bond between caregiver and child - serves many functions, yet the quality of attachment relationships varies, and these experiences can have longitudinal impacts beyond early childhood (Music, 2017). Adverse early childhood experiences can now be linked with scientific evidence to differences in brain development that are rooted in attachment theory (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; Hart & Rubia, 2012). This can help to explain some patterns of behaviour and emotional responses displayed by young people in schools and provides insight into how these might be most appropriately responded to. In this paper

we look at the role that early attachment trauma can play in neurobiology, and its impact on classroom behaviour. We will examine why educators would benefit from becoming 'attachment aware' and argue that this could impact positively on both pupils and staff. The potential advantage for the teaching profession in terms of retention and wellbeing is a new line of argument that we adopt in this article, supporting our claim that attachment aware schools can offer all round benefits for the education sector

Theoretical Context

Pupil behaviour in schools is an ongoing concern, being both a source of stress for teachers and impacting on pupil outcomes (Barmby, 2006; DfE, 2012). A key recommendation arising from a recent report into improving behaviour in schools was for teachers to know and understand their pupils and what influences their behaviour (EEF, 2019). This was based on the principle that insight into the context surrounding the young person's behaviour can help teachers to respond effectively. In addition, the value of supportive teacher-pupil relationships was emphasised. It is interesting to note the relational nature of these recommendations - reflecting positive empathic approaches to behaviour management. This very much resonates with our premise in this paper that educators would benefit from understanding the roots of behaviour and being sensitive to the role that relationships play in young people's development.

From the perspective of attachment theory, Bowlby (1988) proposed that the relationship children formed with their primary caregiver and the extent of caregivers' attunement to their needs impacted on a child's behaviour and development. Whilst all infants show the propensity to attach to their caregiver(s), the quality of this attachment varies.

In secure relationships, children experience nurturing, warm and responsive interactions where their needs are met. This enables them to establish trust in others and build coping strategies to manage their emotions. It therefore provides long term developmental advantages (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008).

In insecure relationships however, the child's needs are either not met at all, or met inconsistently or inappropriately by their caregivers. There is a lack of attunement to their needs, and therefore lack of reassurance, emotional responsiveness and security in the relationship. Insecure attachment can be avoidant, resistant or disorganised/disorientated, each characterised by particular patterns of caregiver actions and child's behaviours in response (see Bergin & Bergin, 2009 for a summary). For example, in insecure-avoidant attachment, caregivers are often unavailable to respond to infants' distress, or they are rejecting, insensitive or intrusive towards them. The child learns to suppress their negative emotions– often appearing to be very independent and indifferent. In insecure-resistant attachment, the caregiver is often distracted and seeking approval – being insensitive or unresponsive towards the child unless they exert very strong signals. As a result, the child is difficult to soothe, their emotions are exaggerated, and they can become overly demanding, clingy, and attention-seeking. With insecure-disorganized/disorientated attachment, caregiver behaviour is incomprehensible or frightening to the child. The child therefore displays contradictory behaviour, can take control of situations to reduce uncertainty, but is likely to be highly stressed and anxious (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Bowlby (1988) proposed that the quality of attachment builds an internal working model which provides the framework for future relationships. This is based on the messages that children internalise about the extent they can trust others, how worthy they are of affection, and how well they can build relationships with others. The implication here is that attachment has biological as well as social consequences.

There is evidence to show that relationships play an important role in neurobiology. For example, Blakemore (2018) writes about the significant influence that parents/caregivers have on the development of their child's brain. Positive, warm, and responsive interactions within securely attached caregiving relationships contribute to cognitive-affective neural structures - forming a template for future relationships, and building emotional regulation (Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2012). In contrast, children with trauma or adversity in early childhood go on to create blueprints of interactions with adults that embed caution and contain expectations of negative outcomes, provoking more combative responses. This is supported by brain imaging research reporting differences between the brains of individuals from a neglectful or abusive environment compared to those from a warmer and more positive environment (Tiecher et al., 2003).

There are critics of attachment (see Slater, 2007), but it is a very well-established theory and more recent interpretations of the core principles highlight the importance of other attachment figures in a child's life beyond the primary caregiver – traditionally presented as the mother (Thompson, 2018; Volling, 2020). Teachers, for example, can be seen as attachment figures providing a secure base for children and young people at school, and therefore need to be sensitive to their needs (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). However, children's previous attachment experiences can also impact on the relationships they form with teachers (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Rose et al., 2019).

Attachment in the classroom

Attachment theory is valuable to help understand relationships, experiences of trauma and explain some of the emotionally driven behaviours that may be seen in settings such as schools (Slater, 2007). Bergin and Bergin (2009) discuss the need for teachers to understand the role attachment plays in the classroom, as this can help them work more effectively with

challenging pupils. Security in attachment can influence young people's behaviour in school, including academic performance, acceptance of challenge and independence, social competence, emotional regulation, and attention (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). One example is that insecurely attached children can display contradictory emotions and behaviours, be fearful, withdraw or act aggressively. Webber (2017) summarises possible classroom behaviours linked to insecure attachment styles, including being clingy or hostile towards teachers, erratic, coercive or controlling behaviours, attention-seeking, disruptive social relationships and hypervigilance. Without the means to effectively self-regulate, some young people will stay at a heightened level of arousal in their threat response. In the classroom, this leads to students who are unable to ask an adult for help (or accept help) when they need it and whose concentration is poor after a perceived slight or threat. The inability to attend over long periods of time and the increased propensity for confrontation in adolescence can both be explained by early overexposure to stressors (Barlow & Underdown; 2012; Conkbayir, 2017; Flatau, 2018).

Neuroscientific evidence has supported this: these maladaptive patterns of behaviour are seen reflected in different patterns of brain activity in response to threat compared to securely attached people (see Simpson & Rhodes, 2015). Areas such as the hippocampus (responsible for new learning and memory) and prefrontal cortex (with functions including attention and ability to control intrusive thoughts) perform less well where people have experienced extensive stressors (increased release of cortisol) in early life (Carrion & Wong, 2012). Neuroscientific research has also shown adolescence to be a particularly vulnerable period where the brain undergoes a period of rapid development (Tottenham & Galván, 2016). Changes in the function and organisation of the brain during adolescence include increase in grey matter, reorganisation in the pre-frontal cortex and increased triggering of the amygdala in the processing of emotional stimuli (Mears, 2012). This can lead to more

extreme 'fight or flight' responses to perceived threats or confrontation (Mears, 2012), helping to explain why volatile behaviour may be more prevalent in this developmental period.

The difficulty for schools is that young people with experiences of early trauma may act out negative expectations of the adults in their world through their relationships with teachers (Geddes, 2018). These young people do not feel safe in the world and have an increased chance of displaying combative behaviours. Whilst there are explanations of adolescent brain development and evidence from early trauma research to explain why young people can demonstrate challenging behaviour, teachers do not have ready access to neuroscientific knowledge such as this (see Coch, 2018). It would be beneficial for school staff to be able to translate students' emotional responses in this context. Indeed the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2015) does provide guidance suggesting school staff would benefit on training around attachment difficulties, but it is not yet on the curriculum for initial teacher-training (Department for Education, 2011).

Being 'Attachment Aware' in schools

Teacher training is highlighted in trauma-informed models of practice and is a suggested area for development for all staff who work in schools (Geddes, 2018; Loomis, 2018). Geddes (2018) found that when teachers were given explanations of where students' projected feelings were coming from (and time to discuss them) they made fewer referrals to outside services. This suggests an increase in perceived professional competence and ability to handle the behaviour resulted from increased understanding and reflects the recommendations of the previously mentioned report into improving behaviour in schools (EEF, 2019).

One initiative that delivers interventions to in-service school staff is 'Attachment Aware Schools' (Rose et al., 2016; 2019). This involves training teachers in attachment theory and related neuroscientific processes to help them understand the needs underlying young people's behaviour and support the use of relational strategies in their engagement with pupils. An 'Attachment Aware Schools' project involving extensive work over a period of 2 years in 2 UK local authorities with over 200 participants showed improved pupil achievement and behaviour, and increased confidence, self-regulation, and control in staff (Rose et al., 2019). This was achieved through a training phase, including workshops for teachers and support for interventions, and an action research phase where educators implemented attachment-aware strategies in their everyday practice, reported progress and tracked selected pupils. Whilst the authors noted the lack of control group and the restricted sample in terms of socioeconomic and cross-cultural representation, the findings are encouraging and provide initial empirical data of the impact that attachment aware approaches can have on pupils and staff.

When staff understood what was driving the challenging behaviours, they felt better able to respond appropriately to young people, model self-regulation and facilitate improved relationships (Rose et al., 2016). Research has shown that teacher responsiveness can become more positive when staff are given information that helps them to assess that the young person's response has a reason beyond the situation (Hart & DiPerna, 2017). Having an increased understanding of the neuroscience of challenging behaviour in young people does appear to help teachers to recalibrate their responses (Little & Maunder, 2020).

Empathy was used as a focal point in a small-scale school study exploring what happens when teachers are trained in attachment awareness (Little & Maunder, 2020). Empathy was an ideal point of emphasis as it is a measurable inter-personal characteristic that plays an important role in developing good quality teacher-student relationships (Cornelius-

White, 2007). Qualitative feedback showed a shift in teachers' appraisal of challenging behaviour (cognitive empathy), where teachers reported reflecting, after the event, how their response could be different if they had had more time to think. If cognitive empathy shifts with a greater understanding of the emotional context that the students' behaviour comes from, can teachers 'hold' the challenging behaviour in a different headspace? If so, it might have the double benefit of supporting teacher wellbeing at the same time as creating a more positive environment for young people.

Potential benefits for the teaching profession

Teacher retention is a national concern, with figures showing large numbers of teachers leaving the profession (Worth et al., 2018). Only 15% of the 39,675 FTE teachers who left the workforce in 2019 retired (DFE, 2019) the rest chose to leave the profession for other reasons. For those who remain in teaching, there are concerns about stress and wellbeing. For example, The Education Support Partnership (ESP) reports 29% of teachers using their service feel stressed (compared to 18% in the UK workforce overall – ESP annual review 2018), and the use of their service had increased by 35% in 2018. Whilst it is not clear how much of the challenge to teachers is caused by teacher-pupil dynamics, we suggest that replacing negative narratives about challenging pupils with a deeper understanding of classroom behaviour would be beneficial and could be therapeutic for teachers (Hart & DiPerna, 2017). Understanding the roots of psychological differences that underpin challenging classroom behaviour can lead to more empathic responses in school staff that could help buffer burnout of staff and help to keep teachers in a profession that is haemorrhaging staff (Education Policy Institute, 2018).

The dual impact of training for improving teacher and student wellbeing is the main selling point for attachment-aware approaches in schools. A trained and supportive workforce

could provide a layer of therapeutic understanding for students in a world where their belief in positive adult relationships is either fragile or non-existent (Riley, 2011). If we aim to provide students with an opportunity to break out of multi-generational cycles of trauma, teachers will remain an untapped source of support whilst we continue to view 'therapeutic' responses as the sole responsibility of 'specialist' responses beyond the classroom. We suggest the profession needs to make a big shift in its focus to deliver a fully inclusive education and that the research supports potential for success in areas that are within the boundaries of classroom practice.

Challenges exist with this approach to teaching, including that the teacher role is typically assessed at the level of 'instructional'. The competencies of classroom practice often focus on measurable qualities of teachers that whilst being underpinned by excellent relationships, are not explicitly valuing them in ways that promote teachers focusing their practice on them. If teacher evaluation tools did champion this view, the role of the teacher could confidently adapt and change to the higher level of need in the classroom that would facilitate emotional inclusion for those with attachment difficulties (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Until schools are judged beyond their examination and assessment results it is difficult for them to prioritise emotional wellbeing over academic achievement (Conkbayir, 2018; Shooter, 2012). For example, up to this point, school performance in England has been predominantly judged on pupils' attainment in key stage assessments (see DFE, 2020a), and the result of rigorous quality inspections by independent regulator Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). The inspection framework provokes fear in teachers (see Gallagher & Smith, 2018), and this climate of performativity, accountability and target-driven cultures has been identified as a key aspect of why UK teachers choose to leave the profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). However, the recent global pandemic has resulted in widespread cancellation of formal examinations and

suspension of statistical data collection on these indicators. In addition, whilst the school

visits conducted Ofsted in England have resumed following the national lockdown in Spring

2020, their emphasis is not currently on formally inspecting or grading schools (DFE, 2020b).

Perhaps now there is receptivity for change, and there is the opportunity to pause for

reflection and encourage a review of priorities for the education system.

Concluding remarks

The Coronavirus lockdown and school closures during 2020 saw the call for a shift in

emphasis towards relationships and wellbeing over performativity and outcomes in education

(McInerney, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Enabling children and young people to maintain bonds

between their school friends and with teachers lead to a range of creative strategies adopted

by schools (DFE, 2020c), supported with guidelines on how to manage the changes (BPS,

2020). The teaching community, when in a crisis, did indeed embed psychologically relevant

and therapeutic principles as the first response to support children at home as a priority,

especially in times of trauma (see DFE, 2020d). Perhaps we now are at a time where we can

make a confident shift towards a 'relationships above all else' framework for education.

Starting with an attachment aware approach is, we suggest, an incredibly positive starting

point. We therefore encourage Educational Psychologists, and other practitioners working

with schools, to seize this opportunity and encourage schools to engage with attachment

aware approaches through the provision of training and interventions, and the collation of

evidence about its effects. As far as we are aware, this paper is the first of its kind to suggest

the potential for attachment awareness in schools to help address both pupil behaviour, and

the challenges of the teaching profession relating to wellbeing and retention. This provides

the basis for empirical research to examine this further and build the evidence base needed to

justify increased attention and resources in this area.

References

Barlow, J. & Underdown, A. (2012). Attachment and infant development. In C. Jackson, K. Hill and P. Lavis (Eds.), *Child and adolescent mental health today: A handbook* (pp. 47-54). Brighton: Pavillion Publishing.

Barmby, P. (2006). Improving teacher recruitment and retention: the importance of workload and pupil behaviour, *Educational Research, 48(3),* 247-265.

Blakemore, S. J. (2018). *Inventing ourselves: The secret life of the teenage brain*. London: Transworld Publishes.

Bergin, C. & Bergin, D. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review, 21,* 141-170.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development.* London: Routledge.

British Psychological Society (May 2020). *Back to school: using psychological perspectives to support reengagement and recovery*. https://www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources/public/back-to-school

Carrion, V. G. and Wong, S. S. (2012). Can traumatic stress alter the brain? Understanding the implications of early trauma on brain development and learning. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 51*(2), S23-S28

Coch, D. (2018). Reflections on neuroscience in teacher education. *Peabody Journal of Education, 93*(3), 309-319.

Conkbayir, M. (2017). *Early childhood and neuroscience: Theory, research, and implications for practice.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 77*(1), 113-143.

Department for Education (DFE). (2011). *Teachers' standards: Guidance for school leaders, school staff and governing bodies.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards

Department for Education (2012). *Pupil behaviour in schools in England.* Educational Standards Analysis and Research Division. Research Report DFE-RR218. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184078/DFE-RR218.pdf (accessed 12/9/20)

Department for Education (2019). *School workforce in England.* Retrieved 02/07/2020 from https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england

Department for Education (2020a). Statistics on the attainment of primary, secondary and post-16 pupils. Retrieved 17/9/20 from

https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-performance-tables

Department for Education (2020b, 2nd September). Ofsted visits to schools and colleges to begin this month. [Press release]. Retrieved 17/9/20 from

https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-visits-to-schools-and-colleges-to-begin-this-month

Department for Education (2020c). Education and childcare during coronavirus: Examples of teaching practice during coronavirus (COVID-19). Retrieved 17/9/20 from

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/remote-education-practice-for-schools-during-coronavirus-covid-19

Department for Education (2020d). Education and childcare during coronavirus: Supporting wellbeing. Retrieved 17/9/20 from https://www.gov.uk/guidance/supporting-pupils-wellbeing

EEF (2019). *Improving behaviour in schools: Guidance report.* Education Endowment Foundation.

https://researchschool.org.uk/public/docs/EEF_Improving_behaviour_in_schools_Report.pdf

Education Policy Institute. (2018). *The teacher labour market in England: shortages, subject*

    expertise and incentives. Retrieved from https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-

    research/the-teacher-labour-market-in-england/

Education Support Partnership (2018). Annual review 2017/18. Retrieved on 02/07/20 from

    https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/sites/default/files/annual_review_2018.pdf

Flatau, K. A. (2018). *Trauma training in educational settings: Developing a universal*

    approach training manual. PCOM Psychology Dissertations. 464. Retrieved from

    https://digitalcommons.pcom.edu/psychology_dissertations/464

Gallagher, C. & Smith, R. (2018). The Experience of Ofsted: fear, judgement and symbolic

    violence. In Bennett, P. and Smith R. (Eds). Identity and resistance in further education.

    London: Routledge.

Geddes, H. (2018). Attachment and learning: The links between early experiences and

    responses in the classroom. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education, 4,*15-

    21.

Gunnar, M., & Quevedo, K. (2007). The neurobiology of stress and development. *Annual*

    Review of Psychology, 58, 145–173.

Hart, H., & Rubia, K. (2012). Neuroimaging of child abuse: A critical review. *Frontiers in*

    Human Neuroscience, 6(52), 1–24.

Hart, S.C., & DiPerna, J.C. (2017). Teacher beliefs and responses towards student

   misbehaviour: Influence of cognitive skill deficits. *Journal of Applied School*

   Psychology, 33(1), 1-15.

Little, S. & Maunder, R. (2020). Training secondary school teachers on early attachment

   trauma and adolescent brain development: impact on empathy. *Educational Studies*

   [Advance online publication].

Loomis, A.M. (2018). The role of preschool as a point of intervention and prevention for

   trauma-exposed children: Recommendations for practice, policy and research. *Topics in*

   Early Childhood Special Education. 38(3), 134-145.

McInerney, L. (2020). Education was never schools' sole focus. The coronavirus pandemic

   has proved it. *The Guardian,* 14/4/20.

   https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/14/education-was-never-the-sole-

   focus-of-schools-the-coronavirus-pandemic-has-proved-it

Mears, D. (2012). Theory into practice: Adolescent brain development and implications for

   classroom management. *Strategies, 26*(6), 32-34.

Music, G. (2017). *Nurturing matters: Attachment and children's emotional, sociocultural and*

   brain development. Second edition. London: Routledge.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence. (2015). *Children's attachment: attachment in*

   children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going

into care. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng26/chapter/Key-priorities-for-implementation

Perryman, J. & Calvert, G. (2020). What motivates people to teach, and why do they leave? Accountability, performativity and teacher retention. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 68*(1), 3-23.

Ranson, K. E. & Urichuk, L. J. (2008). The effect of parent-child attachment relationships on child biopsychosocial outcomes: a review. *Early Child Development and Care, 178*(2), 129-152.

Riley, P. (2011). *Attachment theory and the teacher-student relationship: A practical guide for teachers, teacher educators and school leaders.* London: Routledge.

Rose, J., McGuire-Snieckus, R., & Wood, F. (2016). *Impact evaluation of the attachment aware schools project for Stoke and B&NES virtual schools: A pilot study.* Bath Spa University. https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/media/bathspaacuk/education-/research/attachment-aware/Attachment-Aware-Pilot-Findings.pdf

Rose, J., McGuire-Snieckus, R., Gilbert, L. & McInnes, K. (2019). Attachment aware schools: the impact of a targeted and collaborative intervention. *Pastoral Care in Education, 37*(2), 162-184,

Schore, A. (2001). The effects of early relational trauma on right brain development, affect regulation and infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 22* (1-2), 201–269.

Shooter, M. (2012). What is mental health? In C. Jackson, K. Hill and P. Lavis (Eds.),

    Child and Adolescent Mental Health Today: A Handbook (pp. 7-18). Brighton:

    Pavillion Publishing.

Siegel, D. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape*

    who we are. New York: The Guildford Press.

Simpson, J.A. & Rholes, W.S. (2015). *Attachment theory and research: New directions and*

    emerging themes. London: The Guilford Press.

Slater, R. (2007). Attachment: Theoretical development and critique. *Educational Psychology*

    in Practice, 23(3), 205-219.

Teicher, M. H., Andersen, S. L., Polcari, A., Anderson, C. M., Navalta, C. P and Kim, D. M.

    (2003). The neurobiological consequences of early stress and childhood maltreatment.

    Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 27(1-2), 33 – 44

Thompson, R. A. (2018). Eyes to see and ears to hear: sensitivity in research on attachment

    and culture. *Attachment & Human Development* [Advance online publication].

Tottenham, N. & Galván, A. (2016). Stress and the adolescent brain: amygdala-prefrontal

    cortex circuitry and ventral striatum as developmental targets. *Neuroscience and*

    Biobehavioral Reviews, 70, 217-227.

UNESCO (2020). Prioritize health and well-being now and when schools reopen. Retrieved

12/9/20 from https://en.unesco.org/news/prioritize-health-and-well-being-now-and-

when-schools-reopen

Verschueren, K., & Koomen, H.M.Y. (2012). Teacher–child relationships from an attachment

perspective. *Attachment & Human Development, 14*(3), 205-211.

Volling, B. L. (2020). Widening the lens on family processes and the development of parent-

child attachment relationships. *Attachment & Human Development, 22*(1), 124-128.

Webber, L. (2017). A school's journey in creating a relational environment which supports

attachment and emotional security, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 22*(4), 317-

331.

Worth, J., Lynch, S., Hillary, J., Rennie, C. & Andrade, J. (2018). *Teacher workforce*

dynamics in England. Slough: NFER.

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3111/teacher_workforce_dynamics_in_england_final_re

port.pdf