

ATTACHMENT AND LEARNING – THE LINKS BETWEEN EARLY EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSES IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Many children are underachieving in schools and some are presenting very difficult behaviours that challenge and stress the teacher and affect the measures of school achievement. The purpose of this paper is to summarise the research findings reported in 'Attachment in the Classroom' (Geddes, 2006) with the aim to inform and support teaching practice in the classroom and to enhance engagement in learning for the vulnerable pupils. In this paper, I review the different patterns of attachment first and their related patterns of behaviour that were observed in data from Geddes (2006). These patterns of behaviour were evident in the research findings that highlighted the significance of response to the teacher and engagement with the learning task. This has implications for classroom practice and the article seeks to briefly describe the patterns of insecure attachment responses to inform and support responses to the challenging pupils and to implications for interventions in the classroom. Each insecure attachment pattern is described as are the related responses in the classroom and briefly linked to interventions in terms of task and classroom practice. Awareness of the different meaning of these behaviours reduces teacher anxiety and enables the child to feel understood and to gradually adjust in terms of their responses to the teacher and the learning task.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the vulnerable children in school arises from the challenges I faced as a classroom teacher and then as a teacher in a social services unit, where I could not understand how children could know and understand so little about the world they lived in. I trained as an Educational Psychotherapist (Caspari Foundation, <http://www.caspari.org.uk/>) then worked as a therapist in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) so became aware of the experiences many children carried into school, affecting their expectations and behaviour. Later, research into cases referred to CAMHS teams gave me access to their stories, the nature of their behaviour and learning difficulties and also the observations of their relationships with their carers that are available in clinical practice. Formal examination of these data for a PhD thesis exposed the links between the relationships with their significant carers and their responses in the classroom.

The most significant and well-researched theory that supported this research was attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and when the research data

were analysed, attachment theory was the framework used to examine the behaviour of the children and so linked early experiences of care to experience of difficulties in school. The research exposed the links between differing patterns of attachment and behaviour and responses in the classroom, to the teacher and to the task. This research thesis was then written as a book specifically for teachers, 'Attachment in the Classroom' (Geddes, 2006) which explored the links between children's early experiences, emotional wellbeing and performance in school.

In this paper I seek to summarise these issues as an introduction to the understanding of children struggling to learn in school, with implications for intervention in terms of task, classroom and whole school practice. The premise is that when problems are understood, we are more likely to develop a response that can make a difference and so improve learning outcomes for children, as well as lessen the impact on the teacher of (often) very challenging behaviours.

There are rising concerns about the levels of achievement of many children in schools mainly

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identified by academic performance. This has created a pressure on education services and teachers in particular. However, I would argue that many children underachieve in school, not because of their 'inadequacy' or the work of teachers but because their social and emotional development has not prepared them for the demands of the classroom. We all pass through school so it is a critical experience for all and has significant implications for future engagement in life and work. We start at four years old (if not sooner at nursery) with separation from family carers. This is within the context of the support of a teacher and other classroom support workers, thus bringing new relationships into the child's life. Starting school can be a challenge and it takes time to adapt and participate and most children do, but a significant number do not. The children who struggle to adapt to school and to engage in learning can create challenges to the system and to teachers. It is the difficulties children experience that need to be understood so that appropriate support can be provided to enhance engagement in learning and performance. Early social and emotional experiences are critical in the development of the capacities to cope with the challenges inevitably presented by school and life.

The work of John Bowlby on attachment theory arose from his experience of working with pupils in a school for delinquent boys (in 1944) who were struggling with behaviour and learning issues. He started exploring the early-life experiences affecting children's emotional and social development, and Ainsworth and colleagues carried the research forward (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978); they conducted extensive observations on the nature of these early-life experiences, focusing in particular on interactions between mother and child. The behaviours that emerged in the observations highlighted the significance of 'secure enough' early experiences in preparing a child for the future in terms of coping with life experiences and relationships with others. The observations of the mother/infant interactions were used to identify patterns of relating that reflected the responsiveness of the mother and impacted on the child's future expectations of adults: critical in the classroom. The implications for learning are significant, and awareness of the effects of early experiences on behaviour and expectations can inform the teacher about the way that the challenges of learning can impact on the child.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SECURE ENOUGH ATTACHMENT EXPERIENCE

In the context of one-to-one early care, the infant experiences feelings and sensations that are all entirely new: comfort, hunger, noise, bodily excretions. These sensations and feelings are understood by the carer, whose response makes them tolerable and understandable. Over time, the infant becomes aware

of their own feelings: 'We begin to know ourselves because someone else knows us first' (Barrows, 1984). Gradually as movement develops the infant begins to explore the outside world and engage with curiosity with objects as well as with the carers. To do this, the infant needs to feel confident that the carer is available when anxious or afraid; the carer is therefore acting as a 'secure base'. The availability of the carer is crucial in the experience of exploration and feeling safe to do so. Over time the infant is reassured of the availability of the carer; even when 'she' is not visible, 'she' will return and her presence can be 'held in mind' and reassuring.

The capacity to tolerate separation starts here. By just over a year old, when the child is mobile and can range free, confidence that the carer will be available in times of fear and uncertainty is at the core of the confidence to explore the outside world. The experience of having one's emotions understood and using words to express feelings and needs is at the core of relationships. The capacity to cope and communicate fear and uncertainty is a significant aspect of resilience. In this sense, the experience of the relationship with early carer/s is at the heart of resilience reflecting a sense of safety, self-awareness and the capacity to empathise with others, the peer group and the community. The quality and nature of the care also reflects the experience of the carer. The social network around the carer also plays a significant role in particular the father, family and friends. The engagement of fathers has also been proven to be a significant aspect of children's later engagement in relationships and work.

Thus the child begins engagement with the outside world cognitively and socially reflecting early experiences of sensitive and reliable enough care and support. The characteristics of 'secure enough' early attachment experiences are the foundations of learning, as it brings the confidence to explore the outside world and provides opportunities to seek support and comfort when challenges arise, and to use words and thoughts to communicate distress and uncertainties and so share with others and accept support. Self-awareness also has implications for the capacity to empathise with others and so is the basis of relating to others and sharing experiences. Tolerating difference with others is a critical social skill and is critical in school as peer groups are an important aspect of school life. In the primary school the playground can be a challenge to vulnerable children whose behaviour can be a challenge to others. Often a mentor helps, and also organised games can structure the time and the interactions with others. In adolescence the peer group is the means of transition into adulthood so belonging to a peer group is significant, hence the importance of online communications within the groups.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INSECURE ATTACHMENT

However, what is described above is not always the experience of early attachment and care. The experience of being a mother can unconsciously remind us of our own experiences of being cared for as infants and so without deliberate, conscious intent, carers may respond with negative emotions and behaviours to the demands of the infant, an acting out of unprocessed experiences in the context of our own early care: a form of intergenerational re-enactment. When the carer experiences emotional pain then their responses towards the child may be unsupportive, and they may avoid any involvement with services seeking to help. Often these are the parents who do not attend meetings and avoid engagement with school or other services.

Other factors can also add stress to the caring relationship, in particular the current stress many families feel (work, finances, housing) related to the real outside world and other demands that can be distressing and distracting. And so, the infant can experience 'insecurity' in the early stages of care influencing self-awareness, the development of confidence in self and others, confidence in the availability of the carer, the response to adults, the experience of feeling understood and the capacity to communicate feelings and thoughts. Resilience is affected, so challenges including learning may be overwhelming rather than interesting, and engaging learning may become difficult. This can be the experience that children bring into the classroom and we see acted out as behaviour that can be difficult to understand and to respond to and that impact on engagement in learning and performance.

The start of school is a crucial time, when we engage with a new environment and community and face new challenges. The entrance to school in early years is an interesting area to observe as children and parents navigate the transition from home and community to a new world of experience. It is a critical time of separation. In the context of the classroom the pupil experiences new relationships with unfamiliar adults and a new peer group of social contacts within a routine that is set by the practice of the school. Where to be and where to sit and access to resources are all built into the classroom practices that the new pupil has to become familiar with. School soon becomes as familiar as home. But there is also the expectation that the child will respond with interest and engagement in learning tasks set by the teacher and shared with others. For securely attached children this is possible, but for less securely attached children whose caring experience has been of less reliable presence and support, this can present a challenge when they are expected to rely on an adult and experience what they don't know. This can trigger uncertainties and reactive behaviours to the teacher and the learning task.

BEHAVIOUR AS COMMUNICATION

Behaviour raises considerable concerns when lack of co-operation and reactivity challenge the teacher and in severe cases can lead to exclusions. The quiet worried children are often overlooked but the acting-out children are noticed and in particular the 'naughty' boys lead the concerns. However, behaviours are often the only manner of communicating when language and emotional sensitivity are poorly developed. Experiences can be acted out rather than talked about:

- a pupil can attack another who reminds him of his own painful experiences and unprocessed distress;
- the bullied can become the bully;
- aggressive response to the teacher can reflect an unprocessed anger at the lack of support in earlier years;
- the task can be a threat to insecure children for whom support was not available when new experiences were a threat and so it is rejected as 'rubbish';
- experiences of violence can be acted out as aggression towards others.

When children react in the classroom with challenging behaviour, it is therefore important that we think about what the behaviour might be telling us about that child's own experiences. It is also significant that the teacher can tolerate the experience the child is communicating so that the child experiences an adult who understands how they feel and help them to process the experience rather than continually re-enact it. The relentless behaviour often expresses a need to be relieved of the overwhelming feelings the early relationships have not coped with.

Direct communication about this can be challenging, but the school presents an opportunity to explore feelings and reactions to events through the medium of the stories: a basic tool of early classroom engagement. Legends, fairy tales and well-written children's stories are an excellent opportunity to explore and think about life events and strong feelings using metaphors. Fear, separations, loss, new arrivals, danger and threat are common features of children's stories and provide the opportunity to explore experiences, enhance personal awareness and the language of emotions without direct reference to personal experience. Story time is invaluable to explore the 'unthinkable', providing opportunities for emotional development in a safe and unthreatening way and shared by others. The book itself is significant as an object that can be held, shared and lasts, to be looked at again and again. An example of this is 'Badgers Parting Gift' by Susan Varley which expresses loss so well and in ways that can be thought about (Varley, 1984). Even at secondary school level,

the children's stories can be used for developing the language of feelings, such as when a Year 7 class in a special school reviewed children's stories as an exercise in the English class and discussed their use for younger children. This proved a very significant experience for a particularly challenging boy unable to resolve his rage with his mother: he chose to review 'Where the Wild Things Are' (Sendak & Schickele, 1963).

PATTERNS OF INSECURE ATTACHMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Attachment research identified patterns of parenting affecting the behaviour of children in the context of relationships (e.g. Ainsworth et al., 1978). They were described as **Avoidant, Resistant Ambivalent** and **Disorganised**, all on a continuum from mild to severe and with implications for the child in the classroom. These behavioural patterns and responses reflect the coping mechanisms that have developed and has implications for the pupil in the classroom. In a modest research sample of less than a hundred cases (Geddes, 1999), examples of these patterns of behaviour emerged from the data. Without being 'searched for' they were easily identified. Clear patterns emerged with implications for responses to the teacher and engagement in the learning task: a triangular dynamic between the pupil, the teacher and the learning task.

It is important to note the role of parents and care givers when trying to resolve children's difficult behaviours. The behaviour and responses of all parents is affected by early experiences of care. The behaviour of the carer/mother is not interpreted as a deliberate response to the child but as an unconscious response reflecting their own unprocessed experiences of early care. Blaming the parent is a common response to challenging children in the classroom but does not help the process of resolving the issues affecting the child. The parent also needs a form of response that reflects awareness and support that can contribute to more positive experiences for the child.

Avoidant responses in the classroom

The life events reported by the sample of Avoidant cases investigated (Geddes, 1999) also related significant experiences of separations and loss that appeared to have been unprocessed emotionally but were carried with them and re-enacted in later generations. The challenge to the Avoidant pupil is to trust in the reliable presence and responsiveness of the teacher. The sample pupils who were investigated were underachieving and showed a tendency to avoid creativity and open-ended tasks with limited use of language, preferring concrete solutions.

Interventions with the Avoidant pattern need to acknowledge the anxiety that direct contact from the teacher can trigger. They often choose to 'sit at the back' and may avoid approaching the teacher and physical proximity and face-to-face interaction is avoided so that working with them in small groups is more tolerable than in one-to-one contact. Interventions with such pupils involve an acknowledgement of their need to avoid the support of the teacher and to make the tasks as independently doable as possible with all necessary 'tools' available. The pupil can then experience engagement in the learning task and the success of completion and learning but without triggering the anxiety of fear of failure and the need for an adult support. The teacher can then acknowledge success and show respect for achievement. Over time this can be experienced by the pupil as an awareness of him/her and interest in him/her without the association of perceived rejection. The pupil gradually experiences the availability of support if and when needed and gradually the pupil's confidence in the availability and reliability of the teacher develops.

Gradually, with greater awareness of the teacher's availability, the child can begin to experience some sense that the teacher will not reject them when help is needed so safety in the proximity and availability of the teacher increases. The pupil can then experience being understood and emotionally supported and can become less Avoidant and permit greater support and so make more progress in learning.

The Resistant Ambivalent attachment pattern

This pattern of response arises in a relationship with the carer that reflects the needs of the carer rather than the needs of the infant. This can arise when the carer is emotionally needy themselves and needs the constant presence and attention of 'another'. The infant thus experiences a mind that is not available to them but preoccupied by their own emotional needs and fears, and needs to have emotional engagement with another where the infant is often the provider of that presence, but attunement to the infant's needs is not available. To achieve proximity and closeness the child learns to be physically, emotionally and verbally available to the carer and to stay in touch with the carer in terms of their attention and presence to feel 'safe' enough. They become focused on seeking and keeping adult attention and separation is a significant challenge that organises their behavioural responses to adults. Attendance at school can be a major challenge for child and carer. Separation can be a significant threat to the child and to the parent. This pattern of behaviour is associated with absences and frequently with many related to 'illness'. The child may be kept at home to meet the parent's needs for the presence of another. In extreme cases the carer may be afraid to be alone in the outside world and need the child to accompany

them when going outside the home. In a police 'stop and question' day in a Sheffield it was reported that almost all children not in school were accompanied by their parent ('Often parents just want company when they go shopping'; Smithers, 2002), perhaps reflecting the parent's need to have a companion when outside the house, rather than be alone.

In school the child can re-enact this in their relationship with the teacher and seek her constant attention and presence, is frequently described as 'attention seeking' and creates significant demands on the teacher. Often the pupil is designated a classroom assistant who manages their need for constant adult presence and attention so that the teacher manages the many other tasks of their work. However, this colludes with this pattern of behaviour and so reinforces the pattern of response.

This clearly has implications for learning. The pupil's skills at attracting and keeping attention may be very highly developed and they are often able to talk and engage attention very skilfully but the task is experienced as an intrusion into the relationship and so must be ignored as it threatens the engagement with the teacher/adult. Their focus is not on learning new things but on retaining attention. They underachieve, in the sample investigated, and numeracy was weak which I interpret as the initial challenge of separation from the 'one-ness' with the relationship with the primary carer to the two-ness of separate identities. The enmeshed relationship between carer and child can obscure the experience of being two separate individuals with their own identity and autonomy. Any separations and change of adults can be perceived as a threat so the end of terms and changes of class and teacher can trigger anxiety. Even the end of the week can do this. School phobia is at the extreme end of the behaviour continuum.

Such pupils often have very well-developed language skills and the capacity to engage adults in talk and conversation but otherwise are often underachieving and often with numeracy difficulties as 'taking away' can be a challenging concept. Games involving dice were found to be useful as it involved counting the numbers of dots and moving on to new places on the board. Helping the pupil to feel noticed without continuous engagement with the adult is a significant aspect of intervention and differentiation of the task. A regular reminder of the teacher's awareness of the pupil is supportive but not continuous attention. It helps if the tasks are broken down into small steps that can be experienced as one small independent step at a time so that the separation from attention is not felt as a threat and does not trigger anxiety. An egg timer was successfully used in a class to do this. The awareness of the anxieties that the task can trigger

can then influence the differentiation of the task, which is the expertise of the classroom teacher. The pupil can then begin to experience being a separate person with their own identity and needs recognised by the teacher.

Disorganised attachment behaviour

This is the most challenging behaviour often diagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and may be treated by medication. It arises from the experiences of extreme adversity and trauma within the context of the carer/child relationship/s with an absence of a secure base that can support or process experience. This can be violence, extreme abandonment, absence of care, drug and alcohol misuse, witnessing traumatic events and can influence the behaviour responses to the extreme. Such experiences of the absence of reliable care can result in children being looked after by the community services and often adopted; looked after children can have a high incidence of disorganised behaviour and can be challenging. They are also likely to be challenging in terms of behaviour, frequently excluded from school and may be educated in special units.

The development of the brain in early years is crucial and instead of adaptation to the environment in terms of thinking and language, the early development of the neural fibres is organised around responsiveness to fear and uncertainties: to reaction rather than reflection. Any unexpected event, no matter how slight, for example, a door banging, a chair falling over, can trigger a reactive response often involving aggression. The brain is organised for flight and fight rather than thought and reconciliation. Extreme cases of absence of consistent care can also confuse thinking about self, identity, time and geography (Beaumont, 1988, 1991, 1999). The child who has not been understood by another can have a very poor sense of who they are, as well as what they are feeling. If the carer is not available when needed and frequently absent with little sense of where or for how long, it can be difficult to understand the passing of time as there is no reliable return and similarly a sense of where they are can be affected when the whereabouts of the carer is never understood. This affects how children then interact with the basic understanding of self, time and geography: basic concepts that are a part of everyday learning. What day it is and what time it is can be a challenge. These can be addressed in the curriculum. My experience of working in the Social Service Unit led me to adapt the curriculum so that it was led by 'Who am I' – a study of the human body, 'Where am I' – a study of local geography widening into world geography and 'What time is it' – a study of dates and calendars and referring to actual time during the day. This made a considerable difference to the involvement and engagement of otherwise very disengaged pupils.

Such unreliability in early years also affects any sense of safety and fear can be a significant aspect of their experiences with implications for emotional and physical vulnerability. Extreme fear and vulnerability may also be an aspect of recidivist offenders who described their fears when released from prison, driving them to re-offend and so be returned to prison where they felt safer than on the street. Gangs can also provide a sense of safety, especially when their vulnerability and fears are projected on to others outside the gang, making others feel afraid and threatened. Imprisonment and gang membership that can seem intimidating, may be an expression of extreme vulnerability.

For these children, school is often their first experience of a consistent, safe place where they are known, acknowledged, respected and safe with adults who are reliably and predictably present; perhaps their first experience of feeling noticed, as having their own identity and a responsiveness to their feelings and experiences. Despite the challenge they present in the classroom, school clearly matters to them. They are often 'persistent attenders' perhaps reflecting their profound need to feel safe. Their challenging behaviour may be a communication about their chaotic development and the absence of any sense of safety or certainty or reliability. The predictability of school routines and procedures, consistent and trustworthy adults, rules that are based on keeping everyone safe, opportunities to enhance awareness without threat and the opportunities to develop the language of emotional experience through stories and the recounted experiences of others are all aspects of reliable school life. The safety of the school environment may be the beginning of the possibility of relationships. It is unlikely that relationships will develop until the reactivity of the child has lessened and they can begin to experience feeling safe. Their reactivity can be a challenge in the classroom and having a response when behaviour is triggered is helpful, a quiet corner with do-able concrete tasks can be calming – having a 'calm box' available. I found the series of 'Where's Wally' books useful (Handford, 1989), as searching and counting was a calming distraction. The teacher can then acknowledge the need to feel calm so that they can return to thinking in the lesson.

FROM REACTION TO REFLECTION

Despite the challenge presented, vulnerable children can be enabled to learn. But it is important that their difficulties and needs are understood so that teaching practice reflects this. Differentiation of the task to reflect the different ways in which children react to the challenge of not knowing and the fear of failure can be a useful start. The staff can be greatly supported in this by the inclusion of children's social and emotional development in their initial and ongoing training and

reflected in their ongoing support. This does not imply that teachers should be social workers but it does imply that without adequate understanding of the factors that can affect learning, they are less likely to enable all children to learn. It is also important to acknowledge that schools are a very significant experience for all children, where apart from the home, most children spend their most significant years of social and emotional experience and make the significant progress in terms of later engagement in work and community. School is not just about learning and qualifications.

This is apparent when working with teachers in support groups where the teacher can present and discuss the concerns about children in their class. This form of intervention is based on the work of Gerda Hanco (1995) who worked with groups of teachers to address the challenges and needs of difficult to teach pupils. With the support of a therapeutically trained leader the behaviour can be understood. Sharing their professional experience as teachers also leads to planned, consistent interventions reflecting a broad range of experience and expertise, which are collectively understood and so more consistent for the pupil. From this work my experience has been that the teachers make fewer referrals to mental health services because they have an awareness and understanding that informs their practice, and the problems become more manageable in the context of their work as teachers with implications for the learning outcomes of the child (Geddes, 1991).

The response of the teacher is affected by many factors including their own experiences of early life and self-awareness helps in this respect as they are otherwise vulnerable themselves. The behaviour of children can evoke negative responses and feelings in the teacher as the child will project on to the teacher their expectations that can affect the teacher's response to them. Vulnerable pupils very often act out their expectations of adults on the teacher who finds themselves filled with feelings of rejection and anger which are not 'theirs'. Many teachers have commented on feelings of inadequacy and helplessness after a day in the classroom but when this is understood as the feelings of a particular child projected on to them they are able to become more aware of the child's feelings and so less vulnerable to the projected feelings.

There are interventions that can affect and support school practice and outcomes for the challenging children. A recent book by Marie Delaney is focused on the interventions in the classroom and contains many suggestions that support classroom teaching and practice (Delaney, 2017). Identifying vulnerable children as soon as possible is significant, as the longer their behaviour remains misunderstood

and reacted to, the more their negative patterns of responses are strengthened as their behaviour is their means of survival. Early years is the most positive time to intervene. The work of nurtureuk for example, offers this in the context of school practice by identifying the children who are challenged in the classroom and not engaging with the learning expectations. They are then offered selective small group work which seeks to understand and support their anxieties and encourage trust and more positive responses to adults and more hopeful and positive responses to education staff and trust in the system. Change is possible. Other forms of training enhance skills in working with these children, offering training to enhance their awareness and intervention skills: for example, nurtureuk, Place to Be, Educational Psychotherapy and other interventions are available to schools. As the local CAMHS services have shrunk, many schools have taken the mental health initiative into their own practices.

I would argue here that attachment theory is a core aspect of our understanding of the issues affecting learning and performance in the classroom with implications for the wellbeing of the teacher. Understanding the causal factors can enhance the opportunities for teachers to use their teaching skills in a way that supports a wider range of pupils and relieves the tensions they frequently have to work with. This also has implications for the expectations imposed on schools concerning achievement outcomes.

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