Looked after children: embedding attachment awareness in schools

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Abstract
The educational potential of many children in the state's care, including those in institutional homes and fostered or adopted children, is unfulfilled. One possible contributory factor to their lack of success is that schools do not fully address their wider personal anxieties and insecurities. Attachment theory has been adopted in several educational districts ('local authorities') in England, and this study reports on an evaluative mixed-methods research study of such training; it also theorises this as a broader question about how schools engage with research. There was rich evidence that the programme had an impact on whole staff understanding of attachment theory. Teachers and staff commented positively on the impact of the programme; impact on pupils' outcomes was hard to quantify, though qualitative findings suggested that well-being was improving. Senior leader commitment, support and resource allocation were crucial to effectively embedding the training, and various structural issues were illuminated. The implications for embedding attachment awareness more widely are discussed, and for our understanding of research use by schools.
Keywords: attachment, care, looked after children, research use.

Дети, находящиеся на попечении государства: внедрение теории привязанности в школы

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Аннотация
Образовательный потенциал многих детей, находящихся под опекой государства в домах-интернатах, а также приемных и усыновленных детей не раскрыт. Одним из возможных факторов, влияющих на плохую успеваемость таких детей, является то, что школы не решают проблемы неуверенности и нестабильности у таких детей. Теория привязанности (attachment theory) была адаптирована в разных образовательных районах, регулируемых местными органами власти в Англии, и данная статья представляет результаты исследования подобной подготовки с использованием смешанных методов. Статья также теоретически разрабатывает вопрос вовлечения школ в исследовательские процессы. Наши результаты продемонстрировали, что разработанная программа оказала значительное влияние на преподавательский состав и их понимание теории привязанности. Учителя и другие сотрудники школы прокомментировали значение программы в позитивном ключе, но общий уровень влияние программы на образовательные результаты детей было сложно замерить в количественных показателях. Однако качественные показатели демонстрируют, что общий уровень благополучия детей повысился. Усилия руководящей команды, поддержка и ресурсы сыграли важную роль в процессе организации образовательных мер, и были выявлены разные структурные вопросы. В статье обсуждаются возможности и последствия внедрения теории привязанности в различных школах.
Ключевые слова: привязанность, попечение, дети на попечении, применение исследований.

Introduction

It is well recognised around the world that many children in the state's care, such as those in institutional homes (or orphanages), and fostered or adopted children, struggle emotionally throughout their lives (e.g. Stein, 2014; Stepanova & Hackett, 2014), that the causes and consequences of their struggles have been widely interpreted through the notion of attachment (e.g. Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Slater, 2007). The importance of attachment theory for their carers is well known, with a range of support being offered and researched, even while the theorisation of attachment is itself under scrutiny and development (Slater, 2007). Drawing on a range of psychological models, proponents of attachment theory argue that parental neglect, abuse or other failures to support the child results in insecure attachment, and they also then suggest ways of overcoming or mitigating this insecurity.

This approach to pupils has potentially significant consequences for schools, both in understanding pupils' emotional states, and in seeking to work therapeutically in ameliorating them (Ubha & Cahill, 2014). Some recent interventions have themselves become the focus of research, and this paper seeks to contribute to these emerging discussions by drawing on a recent evaluation of one intervention across one Local Authority in England, Leicestershire County Council (Fancourt & Sebba, 2018, see also Dingwall & Sebba, 2018), to illuminate both some practical issues around the mobilisation of attachment theory as well as research use in schools more generally.

Literature review

The literature review first considers recent studies of attachment theory in schools, and then considers some of the themes within the wider literature on research use in schools.

Attachment theory in schools

Much educational analysis shows many looked after children and young people are leaving school without having fulfilled their potential (Sebba et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly therefore the implications for teachers have long been in focus (Barrett & Trevitt, 1991; Geddes 2003, 2005, 2006; Riley, 2010; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). At one level, this is nothing new: unsurprisingly, children bring the emotional state of their home life to school with them – their troubles, anxieties, insecurities or their calm, contentment and happiness. And unsurprisingly, this emotional state will be played out in their behaviour at school:

> The insecurely attached pupils, who have experienced, or are experiencing, either rejection/abandonment or inconsistent parenting struggle to pay attention or form a good relationship with teachers, or will have difficulty focusing on the materials presented in class. These situations can lead to low engagement… (Nash & Schlösser, 2015, p. 143)

Furthermore, the consequences are not simply in the pupils own learning and attainment:

> If pupils are not engaged in class, they are more likely to seek stimulation and validation in a different way, resorting to clowning around, constantly demanding attention from teachers or peers, or occupying themselves in other distracting and off-task activities…so attentional difficulties and concomitant misbehaviour [are] likely to follow. (ibid.)

Pupils with insecure attachments therefore appear disruptive and/or distracted, and are unlikely to respond to the usual kinds of approach to addressing these issues, because they will interpret any sanctions or punishments through the lens of their insecure attachments.

However, many teachers around the world have reported that they do not feel equipped to support children and young people who have behavioural or attachment difficulties (e.g. Darmody et al., 2013) so there have in recent years been a variety of attempts to address this professional need, both within initial teacher education (e.g. Riley, 2010; Kearns & Hart 2017) as well as in ongoing professional support (e.g. Geddes, 2006; Nash & Schlösser, 2015; Nash, Schlösser, & Scarr, 2016). Nash and Schlösser (2015) take one school as a case study in identifying the challenges of developing a continuing professional development programme on attachment theory, and highlight the need 'to bridge the worlds of Education and Psychology' (p. 150). They focused on the extent to which teachers considered that pupils could control their behaviour, and suggest that,

> …in reframing "difficult" pupils as "troubled" pupils, or pupils with emotional difficulties, new perspectives and energy can be brought to maintaining relationships from the teachers' point of view. Moving away from blaming and labelling young people as "troublesome", "challenging" or "disruptive", will provide space to reconsider the most conducive response to managing the behaviour of the most troubled and vulnerable pupils in school (p. 151).

They noted the importance of support from senior leadership for this reframing, especially in its implications for the school's behaviour management, though they also pointed to continuing concerns amongst staff in balancing these two elements of organisational culture.

CPD and research

Alongside this development, there has been a burgeoning of research in recent decades into the use of research and evidence in schools. We therefore do not seek to review the underlying research on attachment theory, but rather to consider this as an example of how teachers engage with research, as teachers are increasingly called upon to review and deploy a variety of forms of research in their work (Brown, 2016; Childs & Fancourt, 2018). Indeed, not only are teachers called upon to respond to research, they are also called upon to carry it out, though the terminology can be bewildering, with such terms as 'research', 'knowledge', 'evidence', 'impact', 'enquiry', 'data-use', 'exchange', 'mobilisation', and 'transformation' being used indiscriminately. Here, focusing on the implementation of attachment theory allows us to review both attachment-specific issues, as well as these broader concerns.

Two key points from this research are of interest. First, some researchers have pointed out how teachers can be mistrustful of research and evidence (Shkedi, 1998; Nicholson-Goodman, & Garman, 2007). This may be because it appears remote and irrelevant ('too academic'), or because it is delivered unsympathetically or patronisingly (too 'top down'). The puzzle behind many recent studies is in how to address these perceived problems (Brown, 2013; 2015). Second, this is linked to conceptions of 'expertise', either the notion that researchers or academics have expertise and teachers do not, or that any expertise takes considerable time to develop (Lemov, Woolway, & Yezzi, 2013) – even progressing through a series of stages (Flyvbjerg, 2001). These views might suggest that it would take some time for teachers to become experts at implementing research in schools and classrooms.

Methodology

As noted above, this paper draws on a recent evaluation of one intervention across twenty-three schools in one local authority in England, Leicestershire County Council. This is the administrative body with responsibility for all the looked after children across all its schools, who are taken to constitute a Virtual School. The schools were offered two different attachment-awareness programmes. The first basic option was on attachment-awareness, and the supplementary alternative was on emotion coaching. Some schools opted for the first alone, others had previously conducted the first and so chose the second, and some chose both on the same day.

Here we seek to answer three questions:

1. How have the participants' professional repertoire and confidence changed?
2. How have schools' organisational structures and responses changed?
3. How is attachment-theory research mobilised in schools?

We had adopted a mixed-methods pre-post intervention design, drawing on school data, surveys and interviews. The surveys and interviews were conducted twice: once before the training, and once at the end of the summer term. However, the school-based approach to the training meant this was difficult because the schools were doing the training at different times. Overall, a considerable quantity of data was collected. Of the twenty-five schools that had one or both programmes, staff from ten contributed to the initial survey, and staff from seven to the follow-up survey. This represents a full return from 28% of the schools.

It should be noted that no claims are made about the efficacy of the programme in raising the attainment of looked after children. This would have necessitated a profound degree of interference in the programme, not least in deciding on and creating full randomisation, with the concomitant requirement for a control group, and complex instrumentation.

The participants in the initial survey (n=102) were from a selection of primary phase schools (including both infant and junior schools), secondary schools and the special school. They had a range of years' experience, from NQTs to over thirty years. 39 were in the first five years of teaching, with 20 having 6-10 years' experience, and another 20, 11-15 years. The primary staff were from a range of Key Stages, including Early Years. The secondary teaching staff had a range of specialisms, such as technology, PE, and Mathematics. The designated teachers for looked-after children were also included within this survey.

Of 39 participants on the post-programme survey, 3 had not completed the initial survey, and 8 were unsure. They were also from a range of types of school, though the majority were from the primary sector, with 24 in primary schools and a further 7 in infant schools; only 7 were in secondary school, and 6 of these were from one school. Overall, they had a range of years' experience, with the median range being 3-5 years, and 3-5 and 5-10 years being the most common.

Analysis

Three sub-sections are set out. The first two relate to the development of professional repertoire, in language and strategies, and in diagnosis and problem-solving; the third considers organisational culture.

The development of professional repertoire: language and strategies

In the survey, some participants' stated reasons for wanting to do the programme focused on the development of professional expertise, described either as requiring better knowledge or understanding of the behaviours, or as techniques or strategies, or both:

> *The first part is actually understanding what the terms mean. That's quite key, and then the next part is about strategies for teachers, working with parents, working with students, to ensure that there are effective strategies in place to make sure that we can work with children with attachment issues. (Head teacher, interview)*

Some of these were linked to the potential benefits to pupils, which were usually described either in pastoral terms, such as emotional development and well-being, or else as more academic terms, such as accessing education.

Other participants, mostly head teachers and the designated teachers, highlighted the value of whole school coherence on these issues:

> *Better awareness of attachment theory across our school so that all staff have a better working understanding of how they can support these pupils to reach their full potential. (Designated teacher, survey)*

However, some participants were also aware of the limitations of attachment theory, and felt that this should also be part of the programme:

> *So, it's also helping the staff to even understand as the theories develop, understanding that firstly they are theoretical constructs to help us explain what we see, and that that theory might not be the final piece, that it's an ongoing process to helping staff understand that. (Designated teacher, interview)*

Most participants (73%) felt confident in dealing with looked after children, highlighting their own experience and school support as the main factors in this. 21% were unsure and only 6% did not feel confident. These were attributed to: lack of experience; lack of support in the past; or the complexity of the issues, especially in dealing with them in a classroom setting with multiple demands.

The development of professional repertoire: diagnosis and problem solving

There was a range of positive responses concerning the nature of the learning from the programme, because staff felt that they could deploy this new-found expertise to address behaviour and needs.

> *I wasn't aware of the different types of attachment issues and it helped me to realise that children may have more barriers to learning. (Primary teacher, survey)*

However, participants also felt that they learnt how to pinpoint particular pupils and deploy more appropriate strategies:

> *I was able to identify children where emotional competency may be an issue and use different strategies to help them access and engage with their learning. (Primary teacher, survey)*

Further, they could be quite specific about this process:

> *I have realised that the start of each lesson is new and that the key language I use with these students is very important to provide reassurance and build resilience, so they can succeed. Their emotional wellbeing is important and without these being supported, the student will find it very stressful in the classroom situation. (Primary teacher, survey)*

This teacher linked attachment to lesson planning (i.e. starters and the use of language) and to their pupils' sense of agency – and reflected on how these are inter-linked.

Organisational structures and responses

Some wider developments at a whole school level also emerged. First, in the survey, wider issues of pastoral support were identified as having improved:

Whole school development of mental health and wellbeing of all in school, staff and pupils (Infant teacher, survey)

This was often because it had been a whole-staff programme but if not then it had been cascaded outwards, e.g. sharing it with lunch supervisors. An important example was the use of attachment theory in wider school decision-making:

And certainly, when we've been changing and looking at class groups for this next academic year, we've been very careful about…where we put people. And we've looked at the progress we've made with some students with attachment disorders and being mindful where they're going to be and who they're going to be with and how that's going to impact on them (Secondary Teacher, interview)

Here the school was using insights from attachment training to inform its academic and pastoral group arrangements, rather than simply dealing with it at the classroom level.

One feature was the use of a specific 'safe' place in school that pupils knew that they could go to in order to calm down for example, which was also raised by teachers, mentioning, for example that pupils would be…

Given time and space in which to explain their feelings in a calm safe place (Secondary teacher, survey)

Another highlighted how existing space was deployed better:

The refurbishment of the withdrawal space in school (designated teacher, survey)

Pupils also listed the range of types of support on offer:

Usually, people go to Pupil Support, if they've got a problem, if it's like at home or with their friends (Secondary Pupil)

Interview data with pupils generally showed that the programme was part of a wider menu of supportive strategies. Many pupils automatically pointed to the support that they received in schools, and it was impossible to attribute this to the programme directly, rather there was an ongoing culture of support, of which this was a further strand. The following exchange is with Joe, a primary school pupil who was being cared for by other relatives as his mother was a heroin addict:

Researcher: Joe, anything in particular that stops you working?
Joe: I always think of my Mum when she's not there…I start scribbling on my book...
Researcher: Right. Is that when you go and see … who did you say you went to see? – Miss?
Joe: Smith [the teaching assistant] …. She takes me out of class for a bit… She is a nice woman. I stay outside for a bit.

Strikingly, the question was broadly about barriers to learning, not about his relations with his birth mother, but this was what he identified as a major preoccupation, which caused him to react negatively. However, he could outline the school's standard process of support when his anxieties about attachment loomed up in lessons. Further, in this group interview, other pupils in the school could all describe such a process – as if it was almost self-evident.

Pupils also listed the range of types of support on offer:

> *Pupil: They talk to you really and try and calm you down.*
> *Researcher: Who is 'they'?*
> *Pupil: The teaching assistants, and the form teachers, and the teachers. (Year 7 pupil, interview)*

These pupils point to a range of people and places where they feel they will receive support. However, some pupils were also confident enough not to rely on this support continually:

> *I don't come here all the time, but when I have it's because – I remember once I had this massive argument with my friends (secondary pupil – interview).*

It was important both that a there was a safe space, if needed.

Discussion and conclusion

From the two emergent themes of a developing professional repertoire and changing organisational cultures, we can draw some wider conclusions on how teachers engage with research. First, it is striking how positive these teachers were about attachment theory, yet this is in marked contrast to many studies that highlight teachers' caution and scepticism towards research, or that teachers need to engage in research in order to engage with it. Here, teachers were willing to take on board often complex research ideas, including neuroscience, and its status as research was unproblematic.

Second, in considering why this should be the case, the examples above shed light on the inter-relationship between different forms of expertise. Attachment theory is not part of the pedagogical domain of teachers' expertise, such as an approach to literacy or mathematics; teachers therefore lack this kind of professional expertise, and the CPD provides it. However, this new information simultaneously speaks into the practical domain of teachers' expertise in that they regularly have to handle a wide variety of different kinds of behaviour in the classroom, and make complex judgements about how to react to such behaviour in the light of the needs of the individual pupil and the rest of the class. The CPD provided research from an alternative professional domain which matched existing practical domain. Thus, they could both grasp the new language and terminology, and almost instantly apply it to pupils and situations. This suggest that existing models of expertise are too rigid, and more nuanced understanding of different domains may be helpful. Finally, this paper has sought to explore some of the successes and challenges of embedding attachment theory in schools – and in doing so it has also opened up new perspectives on how knowledge is mobilised in schools.

Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

a) The data is not accessible, as it is confidential for reasons of research ethics, especially as it concerns vulnerable children and young people.

b) The research was carried out under the research governance of the University of Oxford, and in line with the British Educational Research Association's (2011) guidelines. Consent processes were completed prior to data collection, and for interviews all adults

gave written consent. For pupils, the school selected appropriate individuals, and then their carers were offered opt-out provision; this ensured that the voices of all types of pupils were heard, not just those with more organised home lives. In this report, schools are anonymised, and neither the school's name nor status is identified, to avoid recognition; the only exception is that the type of school or age of pupils within which teachers worked is given, but this applies neither to the head teachers nor designated teachers, as the sample of interviewees was small.

c) There is no conflict of interest.

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