

University of Southampton
Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology

Title: Attachment in the Classroom: How does a secure teacher-child relationship compensate for the negative impacts of an insecure parent-child attachment?

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Abstract

It is largely accepted that insecure parental attachments are likely to impact negatively upon children's social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural development. It is now thought that a warm and nurturing relationship with a teacher can help to compensate for some of these detrimental impacts. This essay examines the extent to which a teacher-child attachment can buffer for poor attachment histories and how this effect might take place, with consideration of these four areas of development. The applications for an Educational Psychologist, in terms of encouraging and promoting secure teacher-child relationships are considered throughout. The essay concludes that in consideration of the evidence, educational professionals need to increase their awareness of attachment theory and of the nature and impact of the teacher-child relationship, as this is likely to help them to better understand and support the behaviour and needs of children coming from less secure attachment backgrounds. Despite large increases in the research base supporting the influence of teacher-child attachment, many adults working with these vulnerable children in schools remain unfortunately unaware of the power of relationships and of the importance of identifying and intervening with these pupils. Given that roughly four out of ten children are thought to have insecure attachments with their main caregiver (Moullin, Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2014), the significance of these insights and interventions that attachment theory and the surrounding research can provide is clear.

Attachment in the classroom: How does a secure teacher-child relationship compensate for the negative impacts of an insecure parent-child attachment?

It is widely accepted and well-evidenced that children with insecure parental/caregiver attachments are likely to experience negative impacts on their development (e.g. Barrett and Trevitt, 1991; Bowlby, 1953). Theorists are now suggesting that a sensitive, nurturing attachment between the child and his/her teacher can alleviate these effects and bring about more positive outcomes (e.g. Baker, 2006; Howes, 1999). Research into teacher-child relationships has increased over the past two decades (Verschueren and Koomen, 2012) and has revealed insights into the mechanisms and magnitude of the effects that this bond can have on pupils' behavioural, social, emotional and cognitive development. This essay will review attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) in relation to what it tells us about teacher-child attachments and will consider the degree to which research and theorists are now able to support and explain the compensatory effects of teacher-child relationships, particularly for pupils with insecure attachment backgrounds. The role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in promoting positive, secure teacher-child relationships will be discussed.

Overview of Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) suggests that 'the propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals (is) a basic component of human nature,' (p3) and in early childhood, serves to keep the infant close to the caregiver, maximising survival. Securely attached children rely on this person as a safe haven to

turn to for comfort when distressed, as well as a secure base from which to explore the world confidently and inquisitively. Using the 'Strange Situation Procedure (SSP)', researchers have shown that there are individual differences in children's attachment styles (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970), with children being classified as secure, insecure avoidant, insecure resistant or insecure disorganised. These styles depend on the infant's early experiences with their caregivers (e.g. Ainsworth, 1982) and influence later behaviour and functioning.

Children develop 'internal working models (IWMs)' of themselves, their caregivers and the world based on their early interactions (Bowlby, 1980). These models are 'memories and expectations that children carry into new interactions with others,' (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; p145) which become 'filters through which incoming information is processed' (O'Connor, Collins and Supplee, 2012; p267). These models guide thoughts and behaviours in future interactions. The 'quality of the attachment relationship has implications for how the child learns about him/herself and others. It acts as an organiser of behaviour towards others' (Geddes, 2006, p40). Developments in neuroscience have helped to link early relational experiences with brain development (e.g. Perry, 1994; Schore, 2000), by showing that connections and pathways in the brain develop in response to early social experiences, laying the foundations for later responses.

Attachment Theory in the Classroom

Whilst developmental research for a long time focused 'almost exclusively on parent-child relationships as the primary context of children's development,'

(Verschueren and Koomen, 2012; p205), over the past two decades, the focus has broadened to include teacher-child relationships. 'Recently, the focus on relational processes in an effort to support children's development in the classroom has proliferated,' (Sabol and Pianta, 2012; p213) and Read (2010) proposes that 'having the capacity to care and to attune to individual children has now become the responsibility of care-giving settings beyond the family,' (p5). Attachment Theory has played a key role in guiding and inspiring research into teacher-child relationships.

Children with insecure attachment backgrounds can be identified within the classroom (Geddes, 2006). Insecure avoidant children are likely to demonstrate poor language, limited creativity, hostility towards the teacher being directed towards tasks and a denial of the need for help. Insecure resistant children are likely to show poor school attendance, clingy and dependent behaviours towards the teacher, good verbal skills which can be used to dominate and manipulate the teacher's attention and a fear of being lost from mind. Children with disorganised attachment are likely to be hyper-vigilant (on constant alert for immediate danger), unable to self-regulate their emotions and behaviours effectively, lack empathy and show no trust in the authority of adults. 'Trying to teach or discipline them with conventional educational methods is not different to attempting to communicate to them in a language they don't understand,' (Glasser and Easley, 2007; p227).

Research indicates that positive teacher-child relationships will benefit all children (e.g Verschueren, Doumen and Buyse, 2012; Hughes, Luo, Kwok and Lloyd, 2008). Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder (2004) found that children with a more positive

relationship with their teacher demonstrated better academic performance and social skills and less externalising behaviours. Mashburn, et al (2008) found that the teacher-child relationship was more predictive of academic, language and social skill development than any other aspect of the school setting. Many theorists are now suggesting that it is the pupils with insecure parental attachments, who benefit the most from a secure, nurturing relationship with the classroom teacher (e.g. Bomber, 2011; Riley, 2011).

Riley (2011) suggests that we should consider IWMs to be ‘not static, but subject to change through the lifespan’ (p13) and Taylor (2010) argues that experiencing positive relationships with new adults outside of the family, can trigger cognitive re-evaluation of these models and expectations of ourselves, our attachment figures and the world. Sabol and Pianta (2012) suggest that teacher sensitivity has the potential to modify IWMs and can buffer poor attachment histories.

A possible downfall of these suggestions is that these vulnerable pupils will often have the most difficulties in forming a good bond with their teacher. O’Connor and McCartney (2006) found that children with insecure parental attachments were more likely to develop insecure relationships with their teachers, whilst Cugman (2007) also found a moderate association between parent-child and teacher-child relationships. However, with this ‘moderate’ association in mind, it can be suggested that the teacher-child relationship is complex, with many determining factors. Silver, Measelle, Essex and Armstrong (2005) believe that teacher-child closeness is ‘more likely to be fostered by skilful teachers through sensitive and responsive support,’ (p133) than child-related factors, suggesting that teachers should be aware of the

challenge of bonding with this subgroup of pupils, but also that with appropriate effort and skills, a secure relationship is possible.

The Teacher-Child Relationship as an Attachment Relationship

There remains some uncertainty over whether the teacher-child relationship can be considered an ‘attachment.’ Ainsworth (1989) doubted that a child could form a fully-fledged attachment bond with a teacher, because of the lack of exclusivity and durability. Due to the nature and organisation of the school setting, exclusivity and durability are almost impossible (Cassidy, 2008); children share their teacher with numerous other pupils and change teachers at least every year, if not every hour in most secondary schools. Hamilton and Howes (1992) argue that the emotional investment that a parent is likely to bring to a relationship with the child is significantly greater than that of a teacher. Other theorists propose that more research into the development and maintenance of teacher-child relationships is needed before strong conclusions can be drawn (e.g. Verschueren and Koomen, 2012).

Alternatively, Bomber (2011) believes that teachers can become a ‘surrogate secure base’ (p14) whilst Zajac and Kobak (2006) regard the teacher as an attachment figure. Evidence supporting this view that the teacher-child relationship is an attachment can be taken from studies demonstrating concordance between parent-child and teacher-child relationships. Howes and Ritchie (1999) found that the quality of teacher-child and parent-child relationships varies along the same dimensions of security, resistance and avoidance, and that children demonstrate equivalent

separation and reunion behaviours towards parents and teachers. Additionally, Ahnert, Pinquart and Lamb (2006) found associations between teacher-sensitivity and particular separation and reunion behaviours, as in the SSP studies of parental attachments. The present author adopts this viewpoint and suggests that secure, caring teacher-child relationships closely reflect the main principles of a parent-child attachment relationship. Children can rely on teachers for 'safety, security and stability' (Bomber, 2011; p6) and develop healthy IWMs of this attachment figure as sensitive and responsive.

Vershueren and Koomen (2012) suggest that attachment theory provides four major contributions to our understanding of teacher-child relationships, including our conceptualisation of the quality of these relationships, our knowledge of the importance of the sensitivity of teachers to children's needs, providing guidance for research and hypotheses regarding the consequences of the relationship quality and shaping interventions aimed at improving the bond between children and their teachers. Pianta (2001) proposes that the teacher-child relationship can be defined using three dimensions; 'closeness' refers to the level of warmth, affection and open communication within the relationship, 'conflict' relates to the level of anger, negative feelings and discordance, whilst 'dependency' describes how clingy, reliant or possessive the child is regarding the teacher. Many studies have investigated how these different aspects of the quality of the relationship effect development.

Social Competence

One focal point for research has been the potential compensatory effect of teacher-child attachment on the social development of children with insecure parental relationships. The hindering effects of insecure attachment on social competence have been well documented; in reviewing the research, Copeland-Mitchell, Denham and DeMulder (1997) stated that 'children who are securely attached to their mothers are more socially competent in many ways; they are peer leaders, more positive in their interactions with peers in preschool, more behaviourally and emotionally empathic, more popular, more cooperative and rated by teachers as having a higher level of social skills,' (p28). Their experimental study found that preschoolers with insecure parental attachments who had formed secure attachments with teachers were seen to be more socially competent than those experiencing insecure parental and teacher relationships, concluding that 'a secure attachment relationship with a pre-school teacher may partially compensate' (p27) for early caregiver experiences.

More recently, Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) found that teacher-child closeness was positively correlated with social competence and Oades-Sese and Li (2011) suggested that teacher-child attachment can 'provide a protective mechanism' in the absence of positive or secure attachments with parents, particularly with regards to social competence. Kusche and Greenberg (2004) found that increasing teacher responsiveness to children's social and emotional needs led to increases in social competence.

Zhang and Nurmi (2012) investigated the interactions of teacher-child closeness and conflict with longitudinal measures of children's social competence, at school and at home. Increased closeness and lower levels of conflict measured at three

months after school entry predicted greater social competence in school and at home one and two years later. Social competence tended to be transferred from school to home but not vice versa (highlighting the critical teacher role) and boys were more likely to transfer gains in social competence from school to home than girls.

This study did not consider individual differences in children with secure versus insecure parental attachments, but, based on previous evidence suggesting that the social development of insecurely attached children benefits from good teacher-child relationships, it can be suggested that these findings would be likely to relate to this group of children. The study takes an attachment perspective to explain the noted results, claiming that ‘high quality teacher-child interactions provide children with adaptive (internal working) models of how to solve social problems’ (p125).

EPs should ensure that teachers are aware of the associations between insecure parental attachments and children’s social competence; this might prevent teachers from assuming a within-child cause of undesirable social behaviour. EPs can also promote the potential impact of teachers’ own relationships with these children, ensure that teachers don’t see the child’s social abilities as static, and discuss strategies for increasing closeness and reducing conflict.

An intervention that could be recommended is ‘Banking Time,’ (Pianta and Hamre, 2001), which involves the teacher and child taking part in interactive one-to-one child-directed play sessions and the teacher’s role is to observe the child, narrate what the child is doing, label the emotions that the child might be experiencing and develop relational themes. In a study of this intervention in Head Start classrooms in

the United States (which provide education and health services to low-income children and their families), children who received the intervention showed better social competence than children who did not (Driscoll and Pianta, 2010).

Regrettably, there are a limited number of interventions aiming to improve insecurely attached children's outcomes through improving the teacher-child relationship (Driscoll and Pianta, 2010); so an important role for EPs is to conduct more research and develop new interventions which target the teacher-child relationship. Attachment Theory can provide the basis for putting such ideas into practise.

Cognitive Development

In addition to social development, researchers have examined the extent to which teacher-child relationships can protect and enhance vulnerable pupils' cognitive development, including their academic achievement, attention span, self-concept and language skills. The negative developmental impacts of poor parental attachment on children's cognitive abilities have been well-documented. Geddes (2006) suggests that without a secure, loving relationship children are not ready to engage in learning or access the school curriculum, an idea supported by the neuroscientific research conducted by Schore (1994), which found that in insecurely attached children, left brain thinking (needed for learning new concepts) is over-shadowed by right brain reactivity (dealing with stress or the fight or flight response). Colwell and Lindsey (2003) used a puppet interview technique to show that five year olds with insecure parental attachments possessed a more negative self-concept than those without

attachment issues, whilst Frankel and Bates (1990) found insecurely attached toddlers to have shorter attention spans. Piker and Rex (2008) found that insecurely attached children demonstrated lower language capabilities than those with positive parental relationships.

Bergin and Bergin (2009) argue that ‘enhancing teacher-student relationships is not merely an add-on, but rather is fundamental’ (p141) to improving cognitive development and Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) propose that positive relationships with teachers can defend against the low school attainment associated with an unsupportive home environment. Attachment theorists would agree that experiencing a warm, nurturing attachment with a teacher and being able to rely on the teacher as a secure base, should enable children to develop a positive sense of self and to feel comfortable in tolerating the uncertainty and exploration necessary for academic learning.

Various researchers have established a link between positive teacher-child relationships and aspects of cognitive development; Commodari (2013) concluded that children’s secure base behaviour within the teacher-child relationship was related to greater attentional skills, whilst Stuhlman and Pianta (2004) found shorter attention spans and lower levels of academic achievement for children with insecure teacher relationships. Ladd and Burgess (2001) found that increased conflict in this relationship predicted attention difficulties and low engagement in lessons and Oades-Sese and Li (2011) suggested that increasing the quality of teacher-child relationships leads to improvements in children’s language abilities.

Only a small portion of studies though, consider the impacts for more ‘vulnerable’ children and even these do not include individual differences based on secure versus insecure parental attachments. Gregory and Ripski’s (2008) participants were youths who had been suspended from school, who were observed to become more cooperative and engaged in learning when teachers focused on building warm, trusting relationships and Osterman (2000) worked with ‘high risk’ pupils who were found to experience positive impacts on cognitive development when attachments to teachers were secure. Sabol and Pianta (2012) believe there to be a ‘dearth of research into the teacher-child relationship as a protective factor in academic development,’ (p220).

In terms of cognitive development, a secure teacher-child relationship is likely to partly compensate for the negative impacts of an insecure mother-child attachment, but strong conclusions are yet to be fully backed by the research. The present author suggests that a secure teacher-child relationship may play a key role in enabling these children to become ready to learn, but the process of learning and increasing one’s understanding is influenced by a range of other factors, such as working memory and concentration. The role of the EP includes enhancing the evidence base in this area. Within consultations and intervention planning, EPs could consider the quality of the teacher-child relationship as a potential area for improvement or a tool for increasing children’s access to the curriculum. Whilst ‘secure teacher-student relationships may seem like a low priority in an era of high stakes testing,’ (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; p162) an EP must reassure teachers that their relationships with students, in addition to other aspects of schooling, are likely to be an important factor in increasing attainment.

Emotional Development

‘Understanding the needs of the child in school means understanding what the child needs ... emotionally as well as cognitively,’ (Bomber, 2011; p1). This has been the focus of much research, linking insecure parental attachments to maladaptive outcomes for the child. Levy (2000) suggests that insecure parental attachments can prevent the child from developing the ability to regulate their own emotions or defend themselves against stress by acquiring a good level of resilience and Bergin and Bergin (2009) claim that attachment is ‘the foundation of socio-emotional well-being,’ (p141).

Attachment theory suggests that caregivers who accurately read a child’s emotional cues and respond attentively, help the child to learn about their own emotions and to develop the ability to cope and self-soothe (e.g. Pianta, 2003). Bion (1967) talks about ‘containment,’ where the mother responds to the child’s needs/distress in such a way that communicates that she understands and can help. Helping a child to experience containment allows them to learn (and internalise) that feelings can be coped with. Geddes (2006) suggests that this emotional development might be most deprived for children with an insecure-disorganised parental attachment, as they do not develop a sense of safety in their primary caregiver and experience confusion because their source of comfort is also their source of fear.

Pianta and Walsh (1996) consider the teacher-child relationship to be a vital influence on children’s emotional development, specifically, increased closeness and

low levels of conflict help the child to develop more positive emotions and more adaptive ways of coping with negative feelings. Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler, Eckstein-Madry and Milatz (2012) found that teacher-child relationships characterised by high conflict and dependence were associated with less down-regulation of the stress hormone cortisol over the school day (than those children with better teacher relationships). Focusing on children with insecure parental attachments, Copeland-Mitchell et al (1997) found that these children were more emotionally positive if they had developed a secure teacher attachment.

It can be seen that research is supportive of the idea that teachers can aid emotional development, being a powerful source of emotional well-being and resilience, which is likely to be most important for those children with insecure parental attachments. An EP should ensure that teachers are aware of the link between insecure parental attachments and poor emotional development, as these children can often be experienced as overly sensitive, uncompassionate, impulsive and even labelled as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, due to their hyper vigilance in school (Storebo, Rasmussen and Simonsen, 2013).

Pianta, Hamre and Stuhlman (2003) suggest that teachers should receive more training in detecting children's emotional cues and responding in a sensitive way which promotes containment and self-regulation and some suggest that teachers are only just becoming aware of the emotional needs of children in the classroom (e.g. Bomber, 2011). EPs should be telling teachers that through a supportive and responsive relationship with these vulnerable children, they have the potential to change the ways in which they deal with their emotions. By supporting schools in the

implementation and maintenance of programmes of 'Emotional Literacy' (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) an EP can also encourage teachers to help children to further their understanding and control of their own feelings and empathy towards other people's emotions. Often these children will not have had anyone at home giving them the correct vocabulary to help them to describe their emotions and to understand how to deal with them appropriately.

Behavioural Development

Children with insecure parental attachments are also likely to display maladaptive behaviours in the classroom. Barrett and Trevitt (1991) suggest that distorted attachments with one's caregiver can predict behaviour problems in school; Geddes (1999) proposes that insecure attachments are related to conduct disorder and Holmes (1993) found that insecurely attached children often behave aggressively towards peers.

Adding more detail to our understanding, O'Connor et al (2012) found that for children with insecure parental relationships, when the teacher-child relationship was high in conflict, children displayed more externalising problem behaviours (e.g. aggression, over-activity, impulsivity) and when the teacher-child relationship was low in closeness, children exhibited more internalising problem behaviours (e.g. withdrawal, anxiety, depressive behaviours) than would have been predicted based on earlier behaviour problems alone. Baker (2006) agrees that high quality relationships with a teacher appear to decelerate the risks and promote healthy functioning for those showing externalising or internalising behaviours and Hughes and Cavell (1999)

believe that close, positive relationships with teachers can exert an ameliorative influence on development for those children with poor attachment histories showing behavioural problems in school. Researchers have found that teacher-child attachment mediates the relationship between insecure attachment backgrounds and externalising behaviours to a greater extent than internalising behaviours (e.g. Sabol and Pianta, 2012).

Attachment theorists suggest that teacher-child relationships are a helpful influence when they challenge the child's IWMs; Lynch and Cicchetti (1992) propose that experience of a positive relationship with a teacher has the power to challenge existing IWMs and promote their revision. When a teacher-child attachment is characterised by high levels of conflict, children are likely to have their initial representations of adults confirmed, rather than re-evaluated. They are likely to continue to interpret the actions of others with overly-negative intentions (e.g. Dodge et al, 2003) and to respond with aggression rather than more adaptive social behaviours. A child's internalising behaviours could be explained by considering that they are likely to have developed IWMs of relationships as characterised by rejection, meaning that they withdraw in school, to protect themselves from further upset. A responsive, nurturing teacher seems able to challenge these models.

EPs should ensure that teachers understand that the quality of their interactions with children, whom they might be finding especially difficult to manage, could bring about improvements or could be a risk factor for escalating problem behaviours. An EP can aim to lead teachers towards an understanding of the needs and insecurities of these children. 'Teacher-Child Interaction Therapy (TCIT)' (McIntosh, Rizza and

Bliss, 2000) could be a recommended intervention; this aims to improve the quality of the teacher-child relationship, increasing closeness and reducing conflict, in order to challenge the child's maladaptive IWMs. Lyon et al (2009) found that TCIT reduced children's externalising problem behaviours. Although this sort of intervention is also likely to improve internalising behaviours, there is a need for further research for clarification.

Conclusion

Research suggests that warm, supportive teacher-child relationships can be considered to be 'attachment relationships' and can compensate quite significantly for the negative impacts of poor attachment histories. The research is very supportive of the magnitude of these effects on emotional, social and behavioural development, and provides a worthy indication that children's cognitive development can be influenced. Attachment theory provides useful explanations for the mechanisms of these effects, suggesting that secure teacher-child relationships trigger cognitive re-evaluations of children's IWMs of themselves, others and the world around them. They develop more positive beliefs about the social world, their emotional experiences, their ability to learn and their choices of behavioural responses in school.

EPs have a significant contribution to make; using attachment theory and the surrounding research to inform and support teachers' relationships with children with insecure attachment histories. This is especially relevant when considering that 'schools give scant attention to developing the competence of teachers to connect with students at risk,' (Powell and Marshall, 2011; p13) and 'most education staff are still

only just beginning to receive information regarding attachment theory,' (Bomber, 2011; p1). Teaching is 'profoundly relational in nature,' (Smyth, 2007; p222) and it seems that this message must be promoted and prioritised, in order for us to better support some of the most vulnerable children in our schools.

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