

Training secondary school teachers on early attachment trauma and adolescent brain development: impact on empathy

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Brief report.

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Abstract

This small-scale study investigated the impact of training teachers on early attachment and adolescent neuroscience. The aim was to assess change in empathy pre and post training. Forty secondary school teachers in England completed the Empathy Components Questionnaire before and after Attachment Awareness training, showing small but non-significant changes in empathy post-training. Qualitative interviews with four staff showed a positive response to the training, and changes to teachers' cognitive appraisal of pupils' challenging behaviour. However, barriers to implementation were identified with some negative reactions from staff. This provides an avenue for future research exploring how Attachment Awareness training can be implemented in schools to improve outcomes for adolescents.

Keywords: Early attachment trauma; adolescent brain development; teacher empathy

Introduction

With roots in attachment theory, there is scientific evidence linking adverse early childhood experiences with brain development. Young people who have experienced early trauma have not learnt that the world is safe, that their needs will be met, and often act out this negative expectation through their relationship with teachers (Geddes, 2018). The neuroscience of early trauma alongside an understanding of typical adolescent brain development explains why this developmental period can lead to volatile classroom behaviour, particularly in response to perceived threat from authority. In the UK, National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2015) guidance recommends that school staff should receive training on attachment difficulties, and understand the consequences of maltreatment, however it is not currently included in initial teacher-training.

Attachment Aware Training (Rose, McGuire-Snieckus, & Wood, 2016) helps teachers to engage more effectively with young people by demonstrating emotionally regulated responses when responding to behaviour rooted in early attachment trauma. Positive change in teachers' responses to challenging behaviours is reported when they understand the reasons behind that behaviour (Hart & DiPerna, 2017). Contextual knowledge increases teachers' ability to perceive poor behaviour as out of the child's control and respond with more positive emotional responses (empathy). Empathy has two main components: 'cognitive empathy' considers other people's viewpoints and 'affective empathy' shares others' emotional experiences (Swan & Riley, 2015). Empathy represents a significant and measurable inter-personal characteristic shown to be important in positive student-teacher relationships (Cornelius-White, 2007).

This study aimed to assess change in empathy pre and post training by comparing secondary school teachers' empathy before and after Attachment Aware training, alongside the qualitative accounts of teachers post-training. Does knowing the basis for difficult behaviour increase teacher empathy and is this helpful in promoting positive teacher-student interactions?

Method

Participants comprised an opportunistic sample of teachers at a large mixed rural Upper school in England for 13-18-year olds about to undertake Attachment Awareness training. Two repeat training sessions were being run at the school to cater for staff availability, enabling the second group (Training Group 2) to act as a naturally occurring wait list control.

Prior to training, all teachers ($n=105$) were invited to complete the 27-item Empathy Components Questionnaire (ECQ; Batchelder, Brosnan & Ashwin, 2017; $\alpha = .83$). Forty teachers voluntarily completed this pre-training (response rate 38.1%).

The training was delivered on school premises by a trained member of the senior team. It involved a 30-minute presentation explaining how attachment issues in early life impact on brain development and can explain challenging classroom behaviour, and how teachers can develop more empathic responses to improve teacher-student relationships. Copies of materials with short summary were sent afterwards for discussion in departmental meetings.

Two weeks post-training, respondents were invited to complete the ECQ again, along with feedback questions about the training. This allowed comparisons of pre and post training empathy measures.

Participants in Training Group 1 completed the ECQ twice: once before their training ($n=27$) and once after their training ($n=12$). Participants in Training Group 2 completed the ECQ 3 times: once before Training Group 1 received their training ($n=13$), once prior to their own training ($n=11$), and finally post-training ($n=4$).

Three teachers and the senior staff member who led the training ($n=4$) participated in a semi-structured interview about the training.

Statistical Results

Non-parametric analysis was conducted due to skewed data. Mean empathy scores in Training Group 1 (86.00) were comparable to Training Group 2 (86.67) at baseline ($U=67.5$, $p=.80$) – suggesting no pre-existing significant differences between the two training groups.

When paired pre-post data for both groups were combined, scores for Total Empathy increased following training (pre-training mean=84.04, $sd=9.46$; post-training mean=86.31, $sd=7.26$, $d=.27$), but these changes were not statistically significant.

When looking at the training groups separately, Cognitive Empathy in Training Group 1 increased a statistically significant amount after training ($Z=-2.38$, $p=.02$, $d=.69$), but no other differences were significant. In Training Group 2, Total Empathy scores increased following training ($d=.28$), and although this difference was not statistically significant, the small sample who completed both pre and post measures in this group meant low statistical power.

From the 18 respondents who provided feedback on the training, 83% reported that the training was useful, 39% felt the training had changed their views and 50% believing it was consistent with their current practice. Concerns were raised by some respondents about how the training aligned with the schools' behaviour policy.

Qualitative analysis of interviews

Interviews with four staff members following training were analysed thematically. Three main themes were identified: Impact on practice, Challenges and Future Needs.

All three teachers found the training useful and impactful on classroom practice. There was evidence of the training effecting their cognitive appraisal of situations:

“It’s made me think! More than anything. Just that there could be an underlying cause and is there a different way in which I can handle it?” (teacher 3)

Accounts referred to moments where they paused and reflected on what was happening in the classroom before responding, suggesting the training encouraged them to consider situations from a different perspective. Challenges were identified around limited time to think through classroom responses in an attachment-aware way, and concerns about ensuring equal treatment between students.

“it’s not always practical, do you know what I mean? To sit there and be right, “I need to remember what kind of way they’re going to respond to me telling them what they’ve done wrong” (teacher 3)

“why should you...be seen by others to be treating somebody different?” (teacher 2)

There was conflict between being empathic towards differing student backgrounds and delivering a ‘fair’ response as perceived by other members of the class. The philosophy behind the training was embraced but accommodating the emotional diversity in the classroom was a perceived challenge, along with uncertainty about achieving a consistent approach. Teachers wanted more direction and support on how to incorporate the training material into their practice. This was also reflected in the feedback responses post-training. Respondents felt the training was too short and should have been complimented with subsequent sessions and applied examples.

Discussion

The training did appear to lead to small (but non-significant) post-training increases in empathy. Cognitive empathy increased by a medium-large effect size in Training Group 1. There was also encouraging evidence in the interviews that the training affected some teachers’ cognitive appraisal of classroom incidents – provoking reflection on the context for the behaviour (Hart & DiPerna, 2017). This suggests the potential of the training to instigate

change in teachers' evaluations of challenging behaviour and consider alternative perspectives – echoing increases in cognitive empathy measured by the ECQ. Cognitive empathy has been associated with fairness and improved student-teacher relationships (Cornelius-White, 2007; Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016), which is particularly relevant when dealing with challenging behaviour.

Small sample sizes reduced the statistical power of the analysis and make wider applications from the findings difficult. The decrease in participation at each data collection point reflects practical issues with collecting data in a busy school environment alongside lack of enthusiasm from some staff. Anecdotal feedback suggested some staff expressed negativity towards the training, highlighting that training around attachment awareness is contentious and may provoke mixed reactions.

The interviews showed that staff perceptions of conflicting roles in the classroom created difficulties when implementing attachment-aware responses. They responded positively to the main philosophy but found implementing it challenging due to limited time and perceived pressure to be fair and consistent with students. Some teachers also felt the training was incompatible with the school's behaviour policy. Actively discussing differing interpretations of policies and reviewing applied examples of how incidents could be responded to should therefore be included in future training. Time for staff to digest, reflect and debate the issue, and sustained consolidating work to retain an emphasis on attachment aware principles is also recommended (Geddes, 2018). Next steps would be to measure impact with a larger sample, consider the effects over time, and study students' perceptions of teachers' empathic responses towards them and their peers.

The small signs of change to teacher cognitive empathy following one short training session add credence to NICE (2015) guidelines that teachers should be trained in attachment awareness.

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