

Attachment Security in the Classroom: A Proposed Professional Development Framework for Teachers

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Abstract

An attachment theory lens is used to explore the models that teachers carry into their personal and professional relationships. Attachment insecurity affects a teacher's ability to effectively collaborate with teaching peers and administration. It also affects teachers' sensitivity, consistency, and empathy toward students in their charge, particularly if the students themselves are relationally insecure (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006). Several scholars (Cohen, 2015; Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Moscheta, 2015) stress the importance of self-reflective practice in creating relational

engagement in education as it results in better student outcomes. The ability of those to engage in relational self-reflective practice, often the cornerstone of education and counsellor training, would not reach the required depths to effect meaningful behavioral change in those with attachment insecurity. An alternative professional development concept using guided book study is discussed.

Overview

Teachers at all levels of instruction are required to balance the academic requirements of the coursework with group process. Increasingly, there is a requirement in education to build competencies in social/emotional learning. This course content has the potential of eliciting emotional triggers for both students and instructors. This can result in the need to put aside curriculum to focus on process. The degree to which teachers are effective in first noticing and then acting on emotional processes is intrinsic to good pedagogy. However, if teachers are working through their own histories of loss, trauma, abuse, or relational insecurity and find themselves similarly triggered by the course content, this might affect their ability to remain psychologically present for students. This chapter discusses how educators might engage teachers in a process of professional development that indirectly encourages self-reflective pedagogy, particularly if these teachers are resistant to self-reflective practice. The goal will be to enable them to be more relationally engaged in the classroom.

A review of the history of problems educators witness in the classroom when instructors themselves are relationally unavailable and the relationship of this problem with attachment research and the teacher/student relationship are discussed. A model of teacher professional development to engage teachers in self-reflective practice is presented.

Review of the Literature

Since Bowlby (1969/1982) developed his theory of attachment security, numerous studies have suggested that individuals carry attachment styles into many types of relationships, including the classroom as both students and teachers (Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler,

Eckstein-Madry, & Milatz, 2012; Cassidy, 2008; Castro, Cohen, Gilad, & Kluger, 2013; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Attachment theorists describe *attachment style* as a particular way in which we perceive ourselves in relationships. If we receive sensitive, consistent, and responsive caregiving during the sensitive phases in our infancy (birth up to roughly three years of age), we develop a positive model of self and others (*attachment security*) based on our success in consistently eliciting the care we need. Conversely, if our caregiving is inconsistent, less sensitive, or inappropriate, we develop negative models of others as being unresponsive or overly responsive and a negative sense of self as we have not been successful in eliciting the care we need. Those with *attachment avoidance* aim to keep their attachment needs inactivated or dormant because in the past the caregiver had not been present for them. Those with *attachment resistance/ambivalence* cannot control their attachment system activation and become preoccupied with their relationship needs (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Main & Goldwin, 1998).

As this model of ourselves in relation to important caregivers is formed during pre-language stages of development, it stays largely in our unconscious. This *working model* is responsible for a particular line of movement or schema of our perception of the world and ourselves in it. We then internalize experiences with primary attachment figures and carry these internal models into future relationships. Hence, if individuals were insecure in their caregiver/child relationships, they might be insecure in their romantic relationships (Castellano, Velotti, Crowell, & Zavattini, 2014). There is evidence to suggest that this insecurity is transmitted to children (Fearon, Shmueli-Goetz, Viding, Fonagy, & Plomin, 2014) and to professional relationships (Richards & Schat, 2011) including the classroom.

Attachment Security in the Classroom

Many adult caregivers, including teachers, act as attachment figures for young children. Children in school will seek out their teacher as a secure base for exploration or a safe haven when frightened (Koomen & Hoeksma, 2003; Pianta, 1992), or for comfort seeking when otherwise distressed (Howes & Ritchie, 1999). There are also similar behavioural reactions in the patterns of separation-reunion behaviours between teachers/children and parents/children suggesting that the teacher/student

relationship in children under the age of twelve mirrors a primary caregiver attachment relationship (Pianta, 1992).

However, the degree to which a child feels comfortable approaching a teacher when frightened or anxious is determined by the teacher's approachability. Ahnert et al. (2006) found that teacher sensitivity was instrumental in communicating approachability. Other dynamics such as the affective quality of the teacher-child relationship, in terms of closeness, lack of conflict, and low dependency (Pianta, 2001), and teacher responsiveness to students (Bakermans-Kranenberg, van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003) predict relationship quality. A higher-quality relationship then predicts measurable outcomes in students' academics, social, emotional, and behavioural competencies. A sensitive and responsive teacher will serve as a secure base that enables students to succeed (Ripski, LoCasale-Crouche, & Decker, 2011).

Attachment Insecurity in the Classroom

The insecurely attached child (either resistant/ambivalent or avoidant) arrives at school with risks for academic, developmental, and socioemotional difficulties (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In kindergarten, attachment insecurity predicts an increase in peer conflict, externalising and internalising behaviours (O'Connor, Collins, & Supplee, 2012). Moreover, children with attachment insecurity-avoidant behaviours are more likely to engage in conflict-loaded relationships, and those with attachment insecurity-resistant/ambivalence behaviors are more dependent and anxious. Ahnert et al. (2012) found that both attachment insecurity models were related to higher cortisol profiles, indicative of higher stress response activation, which affects students' ability to absorb information. In adolescence, insecure internal models are linked to risky sexualized behaviours (Kobak, Herres, & Laurenceau 2012), behavioural reactivity (Ahnert et al., 2012), peer difficulties, and low academic achievement (Verschueren, Doumen, & Buyse, 2012).

The problem is exacerbated when insecure children are paired with an insecurely attached teacher. Buyse, Verschueren and Doumen (2011) found that teachers with an underlying insecure attachment-dismissive style are less sensitive, less responsive, and less likely to recognize the child's attachment needs, therefore less likely to provide a secure base. They did not form close alliances, and this lack of attachment affected

student success. Table 1 provides an alignment of adult and child attachment categories.

Table 1.

Categories of attachment style for adults and children (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Main & Goldwin, 1998).

Adult Attachment Classifications	Child Attachment Classifications
<p>Autonomous/Secure Values attachment relationships; has compassion and understanding of parental behaviour, compassion for self, and ability to self-reflect on the effects of their own behaviours</p>	<p>Secure Shows a balance of secure base and safe haven behaviour; separations don't decrease exploration; clear safe haven behaviour in reunion</p>
<p>Dismissive Distances themselves from early experiences to keep attachment system inert by claiming lack of memory; presenting an idealized image of early experiences; presenting derogatory views of parents without compassion</p>	<p>Avoidant Little outward response to separations from parent; little or no safe haven behaviour (e.g., no greeting, no acceptance of parents' reunion attempts)</p>
<p>Preoccupied Overactivation of attachment needs; emotionally overinvolved with parents, little compassion or understanding of parents; evidence or role reversal (child acts as parent); little self-reflective ability</p>	<p>Resistant/Ambivalent Child is fearful of exploration when parent is absent and clearly distressed. When parent returns, their attachment system does not deactivate: parental comfort is not effective</p>

Unresolved/Disoriented

Lapses in monitoring discourse about traumatic experiences of death of an attachment figure or in recounting incidences of abuse or trauma (dissociation; overprovision of details; magical thinking)

Disorganized

Disoriented behaviour such as moving away from parent when upset; mix of approach and avoidant behaviour; freezing or stilling; signs of fear of parent

Attachment Insecurity in Professional Contexts

A person's underlying model of self and relationships is reflected in school classroom relationships. Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, and Chun (2010) found that this explanation also extends to collegial relationships. Testing scenarios from corporations in a laboratory, they found higher levels of inauthenticity and dishonesty in individuals with attachment insecurity. The components of authenticity include an accurate awareness of one's motives, feelings, desires, strengths, and weaknesses; unbiased processing or not denying, distorting, exaggerating, or ignoring private knowledge or internal experiences; behaving in relation to one's values; and having a relational orientation in which one is genuine in relationships with others. Those with attachment-dismissiveness and attachment-preoccupation were both found to score higher on measures of inauthenticity and lying (tendency, frequency, and reasons). Similarly Richards and Schat (2011) found that individuals with attachment-dismissiveness were self-reliant and less likely to form affiliations with colleagues, suppressed negative emotion, and did not seek support for work-related difficulties. Castro et al. (2013) also found that such individuals avoided deeper conversation. Those with attachment-preoccupation displayed dysfunctional interaction patterns, less affiliative behaviour, and were more likely to want to quit their jobs. They were ineffective listeners because they were concerned with ensuring conflict avoidance throughout their interactions. Their underlying attachment style had a direct effect on their professional life. These studies suggest that an underlying dismissive or preoccupied attachment style hinders the expression of authentic, honest, and collaborative interactions at work.

Although Bowlby's (1969/1982) original research suggested that attachment models were trait based and therefore set for life, there is more recent evidence from neuroscience that attachment insecurity is reversible should the insecure individual encounter future relationships with secure individuals, such as a romantic partner, therapists, or teachers. In these cases, the negative model of self and others shifts to a more secure trajectory (Roisman, Padrón, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002). The resolution of negative models through later secure attachments is known as *attachment earned security*.

A New Approach to Teacher Professional Development

Many scholars suggest that educators would benefit from reflective processes to create a deeper understanding of their relational intelligence. Cohen (2015), Gergen (2009), and McNamee and Moscheta (2015) argued the importance of teacher relational engagement with students and colleagues. To be relationally engaged, educators must engage in "a reflective exploration of one's own values and taken-for-granted ideas about education, learning and knowledge generation" (McNamee & Moscheta, 2015, p. 26). In this model, the teaching relationship takes prominence over the content of interactions (e.g., dialogue). In other words, knowledge is generated from the "embodiment of people relating with each other" (p. 27) and not to what is being said.

To be fully attuned to this process of deeper self-reflection, an individual would have to want to and see the benefit from *inner work* (Cohen, 2015). Those with attachment insecurity models are less likely to see the benefit of this work or not able to access deeper reflective processes as they are still caught up in their unfulfilled attachment needs: fear of activating their dormant attachment needs (dismissive); or obsessing over their attachment fears and anxieties (preoccupied). Hazan and Shaver (1990) found that those with dismissive relational strategies are less likely to share reflective processes. In addition, although they are open to exploring new ideas, they are generally less likely to collaborate on projects with peers. The research therefore suggests that self-reflective inner work would not be successful for the insecurely attached.

The creation of a safe place for students in the classroom begins with the teacher's ability to build a safe community. A teacher's ability to do this

would be compromised if he or she lacked secure relational strategies due to attachment insecurity. Self-reflective practices that feature *inner work* (Cohen, 2015) alone would not achieve the goal of deeper reflection to effect positive relational change. However, approaching the self-reflective process as a professional development opportunity instead of inner work or personal growth might be perceived as less emotionally threatening. Those with dismissiveness could be encouraged to use the collaborative process when there is a set work plan involved that has a set curriculum with established goals or competencies. One such example is the use of book study groups in teacher education.

Early developmental theories such as Vygotsky's (1997) often cite the usefulness of collaborative learning opportunities in education, such as study groups. Vygotsky's (1997) zones of proximal development (ZPD) is an example of communicating learning and culture through collaborative peer efforts. Learning communities are either "formal or informal learning communities [that] can act as powerful mechanisms for [teacher] growth and development" (Desimone, 2011, p. 69).

The proposed method would consist of a book study, in which a text would be chosen to meet professional development goals. It is based on the assumption that the expertise lies with the community not the individual, and that collaboration will ensure that all have ownership in the goals attained (Hirsh & Killion, 2009; Moore & Whitfield, 2008). Teachers would meet weekly to discuss the book contents and also reflect on their own personal growth. The chosen book should pertain to some aspect of relational or collaborative learning or to the application of attachment security in the classroom. For example, Kirke Olson's (2014) *The Invisible Classroom* applies attachment theory and neuroscience to the creation of safe learning communities in schools. As the focus of the book study is on achieving student success instead of personal exploration, it should encourage a deeper discussion of reflective practices.

As in any type of group collaboration, there is a balance required between content and process. Stanley (2011) suggested five important considerations for study groups: (1) establishment of group rules (number of sessions, absences), (2) group norms (role of facilitator or member), (3) conflict resolution between pedagogy and content, (4) assignments, and (5) the applications of findings to the classroom. While these considerations are often found in group counseling (Yalom, 2005), the aim of these

groups will be educational even though the material may uncover deeper reflective processes seen in counseling psychology groups.

The most important aspect of the study group is the technique of the leader as the group's norms are shaped and then modeled through the leader. According to Yalom (2005), "the posture of the [leader] must be one of concern, acceptance, genuineness, empathy" (p. 117). The group itself is the "agent of change." While the group leader will establish the norms of interaction, all members will be tasked to collaborate, accept, and support all members; encourage interpersonal learning; act in an altruistic manner; and provide hope and encouragement (Yalom, 2005).

An experienced educator and attuned group leader will mold content with process while creating a safe place to explore new ideas and deeper reflection. The modeling of a deeper reflective process by the group leader along with the presence of relationally secure group members may encourage the less secure to take a step toward self-reflection. This would only occur if the book study does not explicitly discuss the self-reflective content.

The explicit benefit and attraction of the book study for teachers will be the application of the book contents to specific classroom practice. For example, Olson's (2014) *The Invisible Classroom* provides a thorough discussion of the neurobiology of classroom safety, attachment in the classroom, the impact of implicit and explicit memory on learning, and finally, interventions to build a strengths-based collaborative classroom and school culture. Book study participants would read a portion per week and discuss their experiences of implementing the suggested strategies. The implicit benefit would be the subsequent discussion of book content to student success, the teachers' teaching strategies, and its effects on their own personal relational strategies both inside and outside the classroom.

Limitations and Recommendations

As with any collaborative enterprise, the consistent attendance of participants is required to gain the most benefit. As it is less likely that those with attachment-dismissiveness would see benefit from the collaborative process, the school administration or group facilitator may have to identify those individuals who might benefit from the group and employ

counseling-informed *person-centered strategies* to build *unconditional positive regard* (Rogers, 1980) with these individuals. The alternative would be to mandate participation. However, as Lopez, Osterberg, Jensen-Doss, and Rae (2011) pointed out, mandated participants may initially adopt new learning, but this learning is not maintained in the long term.

The recommendation would be to build a book study series into teachers' schedules using different content to appeal to a broad group of educators. For example, novels or biographies might be initially selected. The book study might then discuss strategies for student success, such as reading instruction or critical analyses. Subsequent books chosen in the series would begin to explore psychological and emotional processes, balancing content and process throughout. The aim would be to have a coherent group membership with set norms and rules before more sensitive texts were chosen. In other words, attachment security between the facilitator and members would have already been modeled and a space of safety created to now delve into more emotive content. The attachment-dismissive teacher would be on the road to attachment security as trust, safety, and empathy are routinely modeled in the book study group.

Conclusion

While there are many factors that affect the teacher/student relationship, an attachment theory lens to discuss the effects of teacher attachment insecurity in the classroom and its impact on learning outcomes for students and professional relationships is proposed. The primary aim was to present one model of professional development that would encourage participation by those teachers with insecure relational strategies, particularly those attached-dismissive. Approaches used in counseling psychology and education that employ self-reflective practice might not be most effective for those teachers with a dismissive strategy as they would be less likely to participate in a collaborate process that delves into insecure models of self.

Professional development based on a featured book would instead focus teachers on the intellectual exercise of applying content. A skilled group facilitator would model self-reflective practice; secure group members would do the same. If the content of the book relates to social emotional learning, there would be an opportunity to reflect on one's own

attachment history in the process of the book study. The implicit result would be that those teachers with attachment insecurity would be more likely to reflect on the impact of their attachment insecurity in the context of the book study; then, they could consider inner work in a more explicit way. The ultimate aim would be that this attachment security experience would then be more effectively modeled in classrooms.

A lack of connection with secure, empathic teachers and administrators has increasingly negative outcomes for a child progressing through school. There is a pressing need for all educators to address their personal barriers to building real connection in the classroom and school community, whether through inner work or a more structured professional development book study model.

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