Scotland’s vulnerable children

'The unfairness comes if children, by dint of circumstances acting over years, are deprived of the opportunity to flourish.' – Marmot (2015: 11)

The Learning Together About Making Choices (LTaMC) project was undertaken in 2011-2014. It aimed to develop and sustain a secure base for learning for some of Scotland’s most vulnerable children as they moved through mainstream education.

The children at the centre of this project have experienced adverse socio-economic circumstances or unmet attachment needs in their early lives. These children are most likely to have been denied the experience of learning how to build a warm, trusting, and reliable relationship with anyone, including their parents. They have rarely if ever had the security of knowing what it is to come first in any adult’s life and they have depended on instinctive survivalist behaviours to keep themselves in perceived safety. The resulting unacceptable and/or inappropriate behaviours lock them out of the benefits of their years in primary school and ‘hide in plain sight’ their chronic distress and need for help. Regular or typical responses from teachers often exacerbate their distrust of adults and ensure their likely continued exclusion.

Where children are unable to understand or keep pace with the demands on their cognitive, physical or emotional abilities, the results are clear. School failure, usual for children with negative attachment issues, exacerbates the disadvantage they already endure. With knowledge and understanding however, school can be a place of stability if not a refuge for the child.

In spite of the underlying complexity, with the advice and support of the research team and an experienced practitioner, the LTaMC project successfully showed that sound foundations can be laid on which to build positive changes for some of the most vulnerable children in our schools.

Participants

In 2011-2014, the research team worked with teaching staff in two Glasgow primary schools who had received a small group of children moving into Primary One from the Jeely Piece Nursery, Castlemilk. Previously in 2007-2010 the Jeely Piece Nursery undertook a collaborative project with staff, parents and children to transform early negative attachment experiences through direct positive experience with trained staff. Their desire for the LTaMC project was to ensure the effort and benefits achieved for children and parents in nursery continued through to primary education.

The number of children involved in LTaMC expanded over the duration of the project as class teachers grew in their confidence to identify other vulnerable children.

While the project initially focused on children who had experienced highly adverse socioeconomic circumstances in their early lives, the mid-to-long term aim was to recognise and develop this support as appropriate for all children.

Project activities

Over the three years - 2011 to 2014 - the research team and school staff engaged in a continuous cycle of learning, monitoring, and developing aspects of teaching practice based on an action research model.

Teachers were supported in face-to-face discussion and the advice of an experienced practitioner – a Director of Liaison (DoL) – in real time as issues arose. This enabled teachers to link new theoretical knowledge they gained through briefings and workshops with practical responses in their classrooms.

Timeline

Year 1  Pupils from Jeely Piece Nursery entered both schools; Director of Liaison
Year 2  Teachers and research team developed teaching practice; consolidated links to national policy (i.e. GIRFECC)

Year 3  Developed a sustainable model of practice for schools; began to embed the model and DoL role into the senior management teams.

Research question

The action research project examined the question:

*How can we develop and sustain a secure base for learning in mainstream primary schools for children who have experienced adverse socio-economic circumstances and or unmet attachment needs in their early lives?*

In the initial stages of the project the research team assessed the readiness and existing provision of support for these children, and the likelihood that any new practices will be sustained. They identified signals of change over time and assessed the impact of the project three years later, particularly upon:

- the way teachers identified and perceived children’s behaviour
- discussions about relationships with the children in positive, helpful ways
- teaching practices
- support structures and procedures for children with unmet attachment needs
- growth of self-reflection and self-awareness amongst teachers that foster changes in teaching practice and professional development.

Five interlocking principles towards a secure base for learning

With reference to findings from the successful Jeely Piece Nursery Project and other leading authorities in the field, the research team identified five interlocking principles for developing teaching practice that they proposed would support a secure base for learning for children with unmet attachment needs. The research team then set out to determine, alongside teaching staff, how this understanding could inform appropriate planning and responses in the schools.

The five principles were:

- Establish a positive relationship based on a real interchange, *rethinking set patterns of relationship* between the teacher and the child
- Be sensitive and responsive, recognizing that individual children are entitled to have their feelings recognized and acknowledged
- Treat children as individuals and *explicitly recognize their dignity and value*
- Treat *parents as individuals*, rethinking patterns of relationships and recognizing their dignity and value
- Recognise the above principles in a *whole school commitment* to the help and support of children who have experienced negative attachment, developed from a shared understanding that is consistently monitored and addressed. This culture to be inclusive of both teachers and parents.

Key concepts to understanding the challenges for vulnerable children

The research team identified concepts that were key to understanding the difficulties that vulnerable children face and the implications for how schools may respond. These concepts were central to all aspects of the project:

- **Secure attachment**: From their first experiences of human interaction, children learn the basics of the self-regulation essential for later competence in social, emotional and learning relationships. Securely attached children feel safe and cared for and are ready to explore, examine, risk, investigate, play and cooperate. They have learned to trust adults enough to expect that if trouble calls or there is something to celebrate, someone will be there to respond to them in a way that
soothes and reassures. Children with secure attachment have the most solid base from which to build and thrive in the primary school.

- **Impaired or unmet attachment needs:** Children in this situation have not had in their lives a consistent adult to turn to or depend on when they were afraid, anxious or needing comfort. Their focus is on managing fear and abandonment, the chief motivation being to keep safe and survive in an inconsistent, untrustworthy world. They regularly present with less development in the physical, cognitive, linguistic, and emotional domains compared with their securely attached peers. Children with impaired attachments exhibit the kinds of undesirable behaviour that will mask their distress but provoke a negative reaction in those around them. However, the development of warm, trustworthy and consistent relationships with other adults, including teachers, can successfully address the damaging impact of abuse and or neglect in early years.

- **A secure base for learning:** This refers to the interior life of the child. In particular their need to be, as far as possible, free from chronic fear and anxiety and other negative emotions in the classroom. A ‘secure base’ focuses on the *quality and depth of the interaction* with the child and with their family; rather than functions and procedures – such as having an organised and controlled classroom environment.

- **Behaviour/behaviour management:** Schools depend on an ever-increasing and wide-ranging number of techniques or strategies for managing behaviour. For most children these are effective. However, for a child with impaired attachment whose behaviour is instinctive and self-protective, these strategies exacerbate both the child’s problem and that of the teacher attempting to take control. With an informed understanding of *why* the behaviour is occurring at all, the focus shifts from ‘managing’ the child’s actions to those of the teacher and progress can then be made.

- **Choices:** The ability to make choices is deeply relevant for the child with impaired attachment whose behaviours are instinctive and unplanned. Making choices is an important indicator of their growing self-regulation, sense of agency, and ability to assess and reflect on situations to choose a course of action. It requires first that adults allow choices to be possible. Beyond the individual, in a wider societal context we often assume that ‘free choice’ is available to all. However, our choices extend to or are limited by the circumstances in which we are born, grow, live, work and age. This is a reminder that the choices of some children are influenced by things over which they may have little or no control.

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**Observations in the beginning**

‘I have run out of ideas and I feel frustrated, not with the children, but with myself because I do not know where to turn to for help.’ – Teacher

Observations at the beginning of the project showed that a positive school ethos and Additional Support Needs (ASN) responses were routinely in place in the schools. These effectively supported the majority of children. However, the experiences of the teachers or schools showed they:

- struggled to provide effective and appropriate help on a day to day basis for their most vulnerable and challenging children. Faced with chronic, disruptive behaviour teachers’ responses indicated frustration, exasperation, a sense of diminished professionalism.
- held implicit beliefs that children should and can conform to the requirements of the school as an organization; that behaviour should be managed/controlled rather than understood; and a pervading influence of the traditional distance regarding family and home life
- had limited connection with the lived experience of some children - particularly those with abuse and/or neglect in their personal histories
- had gaps in awareness and knowledge of available advice and guidelines,
evident in the lack of depth and inconsistent monitoring of plans for individuals over time.

The team felt confident that these experiences of the project schools were shared by, and relevant to some degree, to the majority of Scottish primary schools.

Impact of the project

Findings from the three-year action research project showed that sound foundations for a secure learning base can be established on which to support some of the most vulnerable children in our schools.

At the end of the project, the likelihood that these foundations would be sustained in the project schools’ was evident in teachers and schools having:

- embedded knowledge and understanding of attachment
- a degree of self-initiated engagement
- empathic responses to difficult behaviour
- positive changes to classroom practice
- a genuine, increased interest at all levels of the organisation for children with impaired attachment.

Indicators of change

At classroom and school-level, the teaching and school staff:

- responded with enthusiasm both personally and professionally to the call for help for vulnerable children
- showed an increased awareness and understanding of attachment and a recognition of the importance of this in a whole-school approach
- used the new information, discussed the implications for teaching practice, and put into place strategies and approaches to reach children formerly unrecognized
- began to identify children as requiring support who previously would have been over-looked through the existing school-based support structures
- showed clear changes in attitude and a degree of self-reflection in discussions with the DoL and colleagues
- increased support given to particular children who had come through the Jeely Piece Nursery, which was being maintained
- began to think more strategically about how important information could be shared and communicated.

Challenges

Whether the progress made in the classrooms becomes embedded as part of established Additional Support Needs (ASN) policy, or whether children with unmet attachment needs would still be subject to the attitude and beliefs of individual teachers will depend on what impact the project had at the level of a school as an organisation and the response of the management teams.

Recognition of the on-going challenges that schools faced included:

- issues relating to communication and transition processes and gaps in transition records. Schools were putting specific strategies in place, and also recognised this as an inter-agency problem which could not be resolved by schools alone.
- establishing positive dialogue with the parents of the most vulnerable children. In the Jeely Piece nursery project, the closeness of the collaboration built slowly and painstakingly between parents and nursery staff was significant if not central to its success. This situation did not easily transfer to the primary school context.
- relating to well-being and resilience frameworks, such as GIRFEC, in a formulaic way against the curriculum and its delivery, rather than as a holistic, collaborative and responsive approach for ensuring effective support for individual children.

Critical success factors to enable and sustain new working practices

‘I’ve certainly found it much better since (DoL) has been involved that she is providing that liaison between us all.’ — Teacher

The context of developing practice within the primary school was so completely different to the Jeely Piece Nursery project in terms of organisational structures, procedures and culture.

The research team identified critical factors that enabled schools to develop and sustain new practices concerning the teaching of children with impaired attachment. These included:

- working collaboratively alongside an experienced practitioner in situ (the DoL). Teachers were not left to determine how to move forward with new knowledge unsupported.
- having a whole-school approach with ongoing support and quality leadership to ensure that staff had the opportunity to develop this understanding not only at a theoretical level but most importantly in their classrooms.
- the degree to which teachers have ownership of, and an investment in, changes that they perceive to be meaningful and ultimately helpful to them as they carry out their professional duties
- consistent, dependable guidance for teachers in the organisational structures and procedures related to children’s support
- recognition that change cannot be imposed through a top-down model of delivery of theory, practice models or policy with an expectation that this will be absorbed and enacted.

Recommendations to the project schools

‘My staff love the project and they are looking forward to being involved this year. Every council should become involved because it is so useful for the whole school. It has transformed our thinking.’ — Head Teacher

The research team congratulated the project schools on their considerable achievements and suggested actions to continue to embed changes. They recommended that the schools:

1. regularly address the type and quality of ASN policy guidelines they produce concerning the teaching of children with unmet attachment needs
2. continue to support and develop the process, involving all teachers and led by the DoL; the aim being to identify the particular needs of their own school and develop a consistent, formalised service
3. enable teachers to investigate the issues with informed practitioners to develop a school approach to building closer links with parents of children with unmet attachment needs
4. provide informed input (CPD) followed by regular focused discussion within and between staff on relationship issues; the aim being to improve their ability to recognise the feelings and perspectives that drive their own practice as well as those of the children they teach
5. focus on opportunities to build trusting and non-judgmental relationships with the parents or carers of vulnerable children.

Sharing practice

The research team have drawn on the project findings to:

- inform content for teaching of undergraduate student teachers, and post-qualified teachers at the University of Strathclyde
- inform the content of a module, submitted for academic approval, on attachment and supporting emotional well-being in the MEd in Inclusive Education at the University of Strathclyde.
In April 2016, almost two years after the research project ended, one researcher returned to the schools to identify any enduring gains with the senior staff.

In both schools, the Head and Depute teachers felt that participation in LTaMC had provided a whole school focus on the issue of attachment and had enhanced their response and practices for their most vulnerable children.

In particular:

- the group training sessions on attachment were invaluable. Staff described “light bulb moments” and that having in-situ training post-qualification gave optimum value. However, given staff turn-over, both schools identified the need for annual training on attachment.
- current collegiate meetings within each school regularly featured a discussion on attachment needs of children
- the improved understanding of the impact of attachment needs had supported the use of the National Practice Model and Getting It Right for Every Child frameworks, and complimented use of other approaches in relation to the Inclusion Agenda
- both schools had increased contact with parents and developed innovative ways to engage them in education
- both schools emphasised that the senior and classroom teachers had an increased in their ability to demonstrate empathy
- one head teacher identified that the use of these approaches has prevented multiple exclusions for a particular group of pupils
- each school identified various other practices they developed as a result of the project. These included training for new staff drawn from LTaMC information; ‘pass-on’ sheets to share information during transitions; a ‘nurture class’ for children as they moved to upper school; and a school-wide ‘Respect’ code underpinned by knowledge and understanding of attachment.

The Robertson Trust is actively exploring ways to share and build on the success of the LTaMC project. The Trust is open to discussing opportunities to:

1. Enhance resources, training, and/or support offered to teachers on how to link their theoretical knowledge about attachment to practical responses in their classrooms as issues arise (e.g. through CPD or during their probation year)
2. Share the learning from the LTaMC project with key stakeholders in policy and practice to build positive changes for some of the most vulnerable children in our schools
3. Implement the LTaMC approach elsewhere in partnership with other school(s)/Local Authorities
4. Understand whether the benefits achieved for the 2007-2010 cohort of Jeely Nursery children continued long-term through to the end of primary education and beyond

References


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1 These findings are from a separate report compiled by Hazel Whitters (part of the LTaMC research team) in April 2016 for The Robertson Trust. The findings from these follow-up visits were not included in the LTaMC Final Report.