



Peer-reviewed paper

Searching for a rich line of understanding: revisiting psychoanalytic theories of self, attachment and compassion

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This article seeks to explore ideas from psychoanalytically based literature which can be used by teachers to think further about the emotional world of children and their responses to their communications. Literature explored include attachment theory, writing by Daniel Stern about the development of the senses of self, which are formative to early development, a reflection on the sequence in which emotional regulation best develops, and then consideration of some of the ideas from Alfred Adler and current thinking within writing about 'compassion communication.'

Introduction

This article seeks to generate a renewed interest in ideas that are associated with theoretical understandings concerning attachment, concepts of self and compassion with regard to young children. It is concerned with the ways in which early childhood teachers think about children in relation to their social and emotional development and the development of their personality. Of particular interest is the work of Daniel Stern who is considered a 'modern psychoanalytic' and who has elaborated on principles that originally came from Sigmund Freud as the father of psychoanalysis. The potential richness that exists within both modern and past psychoanalytic theory provides hypotheses and ideas that are useful to consider in relation to the unseen processes that are going on in the child, and which are considered to have influence on the child as development unfolds. For teachers, this theory can provide opportunities (i) to reflect on personal experiences they have had with children, and (ii) to consider and understand more deeply the processes operating within the child to assist teachers in their formulation of what a child might need from the teacher. As, indeed, the goal of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious, it is hoped that discussions following from this article will do some of this. As a starting point, this discussion begins by focusing on attachment theory which is also underpinned by the principles of psychoanalytic theory.

The value of attachment theory

Attachment theory is widely applied to the early childhood environment, and this may in part be due to the unavoidable evidence that young children can be seen showing their more prominent attachment behaviours at times such as separation or change, or as part of tiredness or illness. Additionally, it is well documented by authors such as Karen (1998) that, according to attachment theory, children will formulate a dominant style or mode of relating to others, based on their interpretation of the experience they have with their significant caregiver(s). An



attachment pattern formed then goes on to be the template for understanding and responding to other significant close relationships. Understanding that children do have a range of attachment patterns does mean that a range of behaviours will be in operation within an early childhood setting and that there needs to be sensitive thought put into both what a child might be feeling in relation to their interactions and how then to respond to children.

Karen (1998) discusses the varying attachment patterns and how they may be signalled at different ages, but the general understanding is that children will develop an attachment pattern which falls under the categories of either *secure* or *insecure*. The dominant potential insecure patterns are *anxious* (sometimes referred to as ambivalent) and *avoidant* (sometimes referred to as dismissing). Children with a secure attachment pattern are thought to be comfortable seeking support for their range of feelings and needs and are seen to be able to settle once their emotions and care needs have been responded to. This is generally not the case for a child who has developed an insecure attachment pattern. A child with an anxious attachment pattern will be prone to becoming overwhelmed by their own emotions and in doing so, will inadvertently overwhelm those who care for them, which closes the loop to confirm their own worst fears of being unable to be tolerated in relationships. The avoidantly attached child will avoid their own feelings and as a consequence avoid relationship by walling off their own feeling states to themselves and to others. The child with a *disorganised* attachment pattern is the least likely pattern to be seen and has a level of complication to how the child presents, therefore it is not discussed in detail in this article.

Infants, who have had the experience of a caregiver as warm, available and able to respond to their cues, tend to formulate and live by the theory that they can share with others and have their needs met, they develop a secure attachment pattern. This attachment pattern is thought to involve a relatively easy trajectory, whereas the anxious or avoidant attachment patterns may involve a lack of internal confidence in the ability of a caregiver to meet their emotional needs and concerns, which then in turn impacts on children's feelings about themselves and their feelings in relation to being close to others. Understanding the impact and behavioural sequence of one of the insecure attachment subtypes can provide a teacher with greater understanding of individual children and their idiosyncrasies and also alert the teacher to the importance of working towards responding to individual children in ways that do not confirm an established insecure attachment pattern.

Neuroscience has helped to confirm the existence of attachment processes and also to make clear that the neural pathways for attachment patterns are set up markedly in the first year of life (Rowley, 2016). Main (1995) noted the way attachment patterns will pass on from one generation to the next and that by one year of age, one of the attachment patterns will be well established to the point where it is said to be around a 70% predictor for an on-going attachment pattern. This information tells us how important it is that we as a society consider how to optimise experiences for children in this first year of life so that the neural pathways for secure attachment are established to be secure from the child's point of view.

Evidence suggests that it is the repeated experience that is of most importance when it comes to developing an attachment pattern (Stern, 1998). Secure



attachment develops when the child experiences multiple micro moments of being understood and having their needs met, rather than through the opposite experience of potential inconsistency or misattunement, which would be a way of how one of the insecure attachment patterns could develop. The discussion in relation to this is then not about giving praise or guiding the child to a particular behavioural response but about teachers being sensitive to what the child is communicating and responding to this. Attunement involves connecting with joyful or pleasurable states as well as the upset ones (Karen, 1998). Considering how to attune to or connect with children within an early childhood setting would be worthwhile to be discussed in more detail. To illustrate this further, a vignette of a personal experience during an observation is presented below:

I was once in an early childhood centre and I saw a young girl who was toddler aged and who looked to be interacting with someone about what was on her mind. To do this, she was walking near and past a group of children who were sitting singing. The girl kept coming near me in a back and forth manner and was pointing to her hair clip and I said to her how special the clip looked. I thought about the meaning the clip might have to her and wondered if perhaps her mother had put it on her that morning in a special moment and so in touching the clip the girl (in my mind) was also connecting to this memory, but I also wondered if she was saying 'look at me, don't forget to look at me.' The hairclip was potentially a symbolic reference to the concept of 'look at me – I want to be seen and interacted with.' Although there was the singing going on nearby where a teacher sat with a small group of children, it was as if what was going on in the room wasn't what was important to her.

Of course to some extent this is speculative in that it is a hypothesis about a young child's internal world, but it could also be said to be about thinking about that which is less obvious and wondering 'what might a child be doing to show us their feeling and how might this be used as the opportunity for connecting to the child.' My intention in relaying this vignette is that attachment theory can be usefully applied to assist teachers to think and talk about everyday practice and not just for understanding separation anxiety or meeting displays of upset behaviour. Thinking can go into wondering what the opportunities are for connecting to children and then reflecting on whether we as teachers are valuing these times and try to see their potential benefit in ways that do not necessarily relate to measurable outcomes.

We know also that children have a range of feeling states (anger, sadness and joy are all key emotions), as indicated by Berk (2003), and that there are many opportunities for engaging with these rather than providing other types of learning. Other responses teachers might have to feelings that children have include avoiding emotion, not noticing it or even deliberately distracting children from what they might be feeling as if it was bad to feel this way. In doing so, we could hypothesise that this is teaching children to move away from their feelings rather than learning to tolerate, digest and accept the range of feeling states that they are likely to have in life.

Around 60% of the population (and this has been looked at cross culturally) is considered to develop a secure attachment pattern. This means that around 40% of the overall population does not. For those who have developed one of the insecure attachment patterns (avoidant, anxious or disorganised, with the latter



being the least likely), friendships in early childhood and relationships with teachers will most likely be negatively impacted. The long term effect of an insecure attachment pattern will also show in the dynamics of intimate relationships as children move into adulthood, and the pattern developed can also impact on the quality of close relationships. The attachment pattern developed in these early years thus must be considered to be of lifelong significance. The brain is always malleable to change throughout life, but once a pattern becomes entrenched there seems to be a tendency for the pattern of relating to become self-confirming (Karen, 1998).

Goldberg, Muir and Kerr (1995) provide a detailed discussion, based on clinical studies, on the idea that the attachment pattern an adult has will come to alter their own perspective of feelings and their reactions to the signalling of needs that others show. For instance, an avoidantly attached adult is likely to be dismissive of feelings while a securely attached adult will be more sympathetic and understanding of other's feelings. If we extrapolate from this, we can assume that each teacher carries with him or her their own internal working model of relationships, which is very likely to influence their responses to children in terms of attitude and response to the feeling state of children. For example, if a teacher regularly seeks to close off emotion, particularly difficult emotion, then this could signal an avoidant attachment response. If the teacher is comfortable with supporting children with their range of feelings, this may show that the teacher has a secure attachment pattern, or if the teacher is somewhat ambivalent about their own feelings and those of others, this will possibly represent an anxious attachment pattern.

Another point of examination would be to look at or at least tentatively consider what attachment pattern the child shows. Teachers are said to be more comfortable with children who are secure, as these children will naturally move to and from a teacher under the belief system that security will be available (Karen, 1998). Conversely, children who are avoidantly attached are likely to seek out little support and seek to play independently. Self-sufficiency in this way may mean that the child is attempting to shut out feelings and to cope on their own. Such children may be left alone as this is what the child signals they want but, in fact, by continuing to leave the child alone then has potential to self-replicate and confirm the child's belief that they are not worthy and that their feeling states are not tolerable (Karen, 1998).

The concept of self and the importance to value and respond to non-verbal communication

The writing of Daniel Stern crosses path with attachment theory but provides a more singular focus on what *the self* is and how it develops in each individual. His work is of evidential nature and has resulted in a theory that provides a model, in which the development of self and a self-concept is said to grow strata like, with the overarching sense of self being influenced by the formulation of four *senses of self*, which are developing within the first two years of life. Each sense of self is said to have continuity throughout life. He named these senses of self: *emergent* (0 to 2 months), *core* (2 to 6 months), *subjective* (7 to 15 months), and *verbal* (from 15 months onwards). The core-self is said to form the underlying layer to the self, which exists as the experience upon which all the other senses of self-develop. The verbal self, which exists at the upper level of these senses of self, is



said to be a double edged sword because, while language has many amazing qualities such as the ability to retell or re-story experiences, it can also be a disconnecting medium if the language does not stay connected to these earlier underlying felt states (Stern, 1985).

The theory from Stern provides some evidence for the idea that language needs to connect up to what the child feels (which also links to the earlier vignette) and that it is important that the child be able to experience their own authentic or felt sense of self by having teachers that recognise what the child does feel, rather than what they might alternatively or preferably feel. Moving away from what others want or believe the child should be feeling involves what Miller (1986) would describe as a level of compliance, which is not a close link to what the child actually does feel. The idea of how a true or false self might form is also echoed in the writing of other theorists such as Winnicott (1971).

The writing of Stern presents ideas which seem to indicate the need for cautionary thinking, where it would seem to be important that teachers use language that fits and makes links to the child's felt states or shows understanding in what the child might be feeling. Teachers can place themselves in the role of asking children to use their words around their feeling states, which can potentially be empowering or assist the child to deal with day to day experiences with other children. However, it is worth treading with some caution here as it is also important that verbal language be connected to what the child experiences him- or herself as actual feeling. The child can be reliant on the adults around them to recognise with some accuracy what the feeling he or she is experiencing might be. Being able to note and connect with what the child is actually feeling with a level of sensitivity would also involve teachers to closely consider what language they ask the child to use, and not necessarily asking a child to use their words as if the body expressions and felt signals were not sufficient enough to draw meaning from. Using gross language or a stock of language phrases with children they are supposed to use, may not mirror to children that their feelings have actually been understood and noted by those around them.

Children's learning to emotionally regulate

In addition to the knowledge that the first two years of life bring about very formative aspects for a child's personality, there is also room to reflect on the overall and on-going developmental task that children have, which is to learn to emotionally regulate. Young children will face a raft of experiences which will potentially arouse an emotional response in their person. Emotional regulation will ideally proceed in a particular order, but this order cannot be assumed to have taken place in a child over the course of their first five years, which is why a teacher would need to expect that some children will need a lot of time with a close and trusted adult to even start to achieve stage one of this process. Trevarthen (1980) states that initially feelings are organised by the caregiver, then feelings are organised with the help of the caregiver, and finally feelings can be organised by the child. The ability for children to manage their own feeling states will only come when the child has received sufficient support from another. If a child has not had the help of a caregiver, then the child may struggle to emotionally regulate by becoming easily dysregulated, or he or she could avoid feeling states altogether. Either way, this would result in children becoming over aroused internally (for reasons which the child will not understand) or in manifesting difficult



behavioural responses externally. This idea links back to the earlier discussion of the development of attachment patterns, where information from this theory has potential to help teachers think about how best to support the need of a child and to think about the processes that are going on in the child. The shaming, ignoring or showing preference for what the child might feel does not, according to these theories, contribute to the child's ability to tolerate the range of emotional states that they are likely to feel.

In this context, Donald Winnicott (1971), a British paediatrician and psychoanalyst, who is particularly well known for the understanding he has of such things as transitional objects, introduces a term called *holding*. This term varies from the more common association of physical holding or giving a hug to someone who is upset. Winnicott is referring to the ability of an adult to tolerate and digest or register the feeling of the child. Often, when we are with a child who is upset, we too have a set of feelings evoked. We feel some of what they feel. Doing this in some way helps us to know the state of the other, and to also not be overwhelmed by what the other person feels but to let them know in tone and expression that it is ok to be upset so that they might move through the experience. The task of holding is not to do or to fix but to tolerate, and with this the child too can accept themselves, have the feeling attended to, and to move through the experience. The task of holding is also not about stopping children from expressing their feelings, but it is about holding the feeling that then allows the child to find their equilibrium (Winnicott, 1971).

Another relevant aspect has been explored by the American psychoanalyst Adler, who has written about how children organise their behaviour around themes. Examples of these are given in terms of mottos "I must be a superior individual." 'I must hide my deficiencies from others' 'I must always please'" (Forgus & Shulman, 1979, p. 103). Adler would describe behaviour that works in continuous ways as "mistaken attitudes to life" (Forgus & Shulman, 1979, p. 109). His view is that a strong behavioural attitude means that striving becomes an obstacle to other opportunities or experiences. Examples given of distorted goals include "to never submit" or "to be perfectly secure" (Forgus & Shulman, 1979, p. 107). Our own tightly held behaviour, or when we see a type of theme, could be used to help understand ourselves or a child to some greater degree. How this might be done in practice on an individual basis would need to be sensitively considered.

Another related aspect in the context of children's learning to emotionally regulate is compassion, which is now more strongly emphasised in arenas such as secondary education and the judicial system as a tool for helping to respond to experiences of difficulty a person has shown. The emphasis within this paradigm, if applied to the early childhood setting, involves meaning making by seeking to uncover the unmet need that the behaviour of a child might signal. Behaviour is thought to be an expression of feelings which needs to be met. To use this model, the teacher would, in a similar way as Adler suggests, involve seeking to understand and make sense of the behaviour that a child shows, particularly if the behaviour is of a reoccurring nature. While the behaviour may be upsetting for the teacher, the response from the teacher is to show compassion and to meet what the child signals (but cannot name) is needed. This method has often been shown to deliver quick and astonishing results. When the need is met, the child no longer needs to deliver a negative or difficult behaviour. An example of this could be a child who is particularly guarded. This might tell us that the child is feeling vulnerable and that the teacher could do more to assist the child to feel



comfortable, which could then help the child to be less guarded or insecure (Restorative relationships, 2015). In the same way that psychoanalysts will say that behaviour represents communication, another way of phrasing this according to the set of ideas from restorative relationships is that behaviour can be a signal of an unmet need or set of feeling(s). Examples of feelings that a child has could be annoyance or confusion, so if a child evokes these feelings in us, we could reflect on them and think about how we might assist the child so that they can move into a place where other feelings can come into being, such as to a feeling of engagement or curiosity. These ideas require a more interpretative response to children and their feelings.

To summarise the points made in this article, it has been argued that children can become more at ease when they are and feel understood. Psychoanalytic theory does alert us to the idea that children have a great range of experiences going on within themselves and that unless we work towards reading the need in the initial instance then we may miss meeting the requirements of the child. Many of the experiences children (and adults) may be having are unconscious. The unconscious simply means “‘unknown’ ... the shape of things in the unconscious cannot be directly known, but is filtered and altered through consciousness” (Sedgewick, 2001, p. 26). There is a general understanding in psychoanalytic literature that, when considering adults, it is the more painful and negatively felt states and experiences which are likely to be relegated to the unconscious. The same is likely for children, too, if they perceive that how they feel is unacceptable or simply not seen, then they too will have increasingly difficult access to understanding themselves. The unconscious can drive childhood (and adulthood) behaviour in ways that are perplexing and, on occasions, in ways that are less than optimal. Linking the idea of an unconscious to a Māori world view where at the beginning there is darkness and from this comes light, through exploration of what may lie within the less well lit up places within children and teachers, lies potential for more life.

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