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Early Childhood Teacher-child Attachment: A Brief Review of the Literature

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This review of the literature on attachment theory seeks to highlight important concepts relevant to teacher-child attachment. It includes a brief overview of attachment theory and adult conceptualisations of attachment, and then discusses more specifically teacher-child attachment. Much of the literature in early childhood focuses on child attachment to primary caregivers, which is highly relevant, but a greater understanding of adult attachment, and attachment to other caregivers, is also deemed pertinent. It is also noted that a greater understanding of adult attachment in the early childhood context is particularly relevant as New Zealand has an increasing uptake of early childhood education and care services, necessitating an understanding of attachment by all the caregivers involved.

Introduction

The development of close relational bonds in childhood is crucial to the development of adaptive emotional regulation and an individual's self-concept. Over time attachment experiences of self in relation to others form the blueprint for the manner in which children and adults approach and negotiate relationships (Treboux, Crowell, and Waters, 2004). In addition, attachment has been linked to learning and academic performance (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004; Jacobsen & Hoffman, 1997). The central role and influence of teachers, particularly early childhood teachers in the life of young children, cannot be underestimated. This review will explore attachment theory in relation to both children and adults, before discussing teacher-child attachment.

Attachment Theory

Drewery and Bird (2004) define attachment as the "strength of feeling between two people, such that they will strive to maintain and even develop their relationship" (p. 110). Attachment relationships are particularly relevant in the early childhood context where young children, particularly infants, are not yet able to care for themselves and, therefore, need a reliable caregiver to assume care. Infants' initial attachment to primary caregivers are formed by approximately seven months (Main, 1996) and these first relationships hold the key to how people become who they are and greatly influences future well-being (Karen, 1998). According to Bowlby (1979), a renowned figure in attachment research, "attachment behaviour is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave" (p. 129). Drawing on psychoanalysis and evolutionary theory, as well as research on human and nonhuman primates, attachment theory developed as a conceptual framework for explaining attachment behaviour. In early childhood, children



establish increasingly secure attachment bonds with caregivers who nurture and protect them, and who are available on a predictable basis (Honig, 2002).

Bowlby (1988) sees attachment behaviour as an individual's attempt at attaining or maintaining proximity to some other individual who is perceived as more capable in dealing with the world, in particular when feeling threatened or unwell. An important theoretical anchor for attachment theory is the concept of the secure base. Bowlby (1988) sees the secure base as a key element in the concept of caregiving and refers to the provision of a secure base by caregivers from which the child can venture out into the world and to which the child can return. This is predicated by knowing with certainty that he/she will be, "nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, reassured if frightened" (p. 11). Apart from providing a secure base, an attachment figure should also function as a safe haven in times of need (Ainsworth, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).

An integral pattern of human behaviour, attachment is thought to have developed as a result of the interplay between inherent behaviour (such as crying, sucking and smiling) and learned behaviour (Bowlby, 1979) as a means of protecting the vulnerable infant (a combination, thus of nature and nurture, see for instance Levy & Orlans, 2003). This protective function of attachment in turn increases the probability that the young child will survive to the reproductive years. As such, it has the function of enhancing species' survival.

Following on from Harlow's studies in the late 1950s on the effects that maternal deprivation has on rhesus monkeys (Harlow & Zimmerman, 1959), research on young children has revealed the importance of the secure base. Using the *Strange Situation Test*, an experiment in which the young child's emotional reaction is observed when placed in a range of strange and progressively more stressful situations, Ainsworth and her colleagues identified three main attachment patterns (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Secure relationships are characterised by a young child's confidence that their primary caregiver (e.g., mother) will be available, helpful and comforting should a frightening situation arise (Bowlby, 1988). These caregivers are readily available, as well as sensitive and responsive to the child's needs. Children who have an anxious-ambivalent relationship are unsure whether their caregivers will be responsive. Bowlby (1988) suggests that this pattern is promoted by a primary caregiver who is not consistently available, by separations and by threats of abandonment. As a result children make conflicted and often ineffective attempts to receive support from caregivers (Simpson & Rholes, 1998). Children who develop avoidant relationships with their caregivers have lost all confidence that the caregivers will be helpful, and therefore do not seek support when they are distressed. Bowlby (1988) suggests that this pattern is the result of a caregiver constantly rebuffing his/her child when the child seeks comfort or protection. These children attempt to cope internally by becoming emotionally self-sufficient. Insecure attachments are not pathological states in themselves (Goldberg, 1997), although research findings (Jacobsen & Hoffman, 1997) suggest that there is a strong connection between early attachment bonds and social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes (cited in Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004).

Bowlby (1988) believes that these patterns persist for a number of reasons including caregivers treating children in the same manner over time, whether it has favourable or unfavourable responses. He adds that many of these



patterns are self-perpetuating: for example, an anxious-ambivalent child who is whiny and clingy is more likely to elicit an unfavourable reaction from the caregiver. Bowlby believes that over time these patterns become internalised so that the child displays these patterns in other new relationships. With regards to the stability of attachment patterns, a study (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, & Albersheim, 2000) monitoring 50 individuals over a period of 20 years found that attachment classifications were relatively stable over that period at 64%, although they were more stable (greater than 70%) for individuals without any major negative life events, and less stable (less than 50%) for those who had experienced a major negative life event, such as death of a parent or parental divorce.

Adult Conceptualisations of Attachment

Building on previous research (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Mikulincer & Arrad, 1999; Pierce & Lydon, 2001), Overall and her colleagues (Overall et al., 2003) researched the manner in which the adult attachment system is cognitively represented. They found that it consists of a multilevel network of attachment representations. More specifically they distinguished between a global attachment style, general attachment representations within particular relationship domains, and working models of attachment within specific relationships. This model is consistent with the notion that different relationship domains serve separate attachment purposes (Overall et al 2003.). Building on Overall et al.'s model, it is foreseen that, similar to familial, friendship and romantic relationships, teachers also have specific attachment relationships to various children, within what could be termed a teaching relationship domain.

Along similar lines Treboux, Crowell, and Waters (2004) argue that attachment systems in adult relationships consists of two components: a generalised/global representation of attachment (with its origins in childhood attachment experiences with the primary caregiver), and a specific representation of attachment which emerges out of attachment experiences within various other relationships. Their research indicates that more intact and complete attachment systems (both global and specific) increase the likelihood that the quality of attachment behaviour will be enhanced (Treboux et al., 2004). Cugmas (2007) found little concordance between the child's attachments to mother, father or kindergarten teacher. This means that these relationships can be assessed separately, as attachment is an individual relationship construct and not just the child's general working model with the primary attachment figure. Attachment theory also posits that working models can change as they accommodate and incorporate new interpersonal experiences (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1980). West and Sheldon-Keller (1994) support a more fluid notion of internal working models, and based upon Edelman's (1987) theorizing they suggest that:

There is no discrete model maintained in memory, but rather a potential to reclassify and re-categorise past experiences in the light of current experiences working models are dynamic, associative, affective categories that have the potential to be rediscovered or reformed in new situations (p. 61).

In this regard, attachment styles have been found to be stable but also open to changes as a result of new experiences (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Pierce, Senécal, Gauthier, & Guay, 2006).



Bartholomew (1990) extended previous work on attachment styles by describing internal working models in terms of two dimensions: positivity of a person's model of self and positivity of a person's model of others. As an adjunct to previous research on adult attachment which distinguished between secure, avoidant and anxious attachment descriptions, Bartholomew (1990) described four categories that can be distinguished, based on an adult's view of self and others. These are secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissing adult attachment styles. Empirical support that behaviourally validates these categories has been found in several studies (for example, Guerrero, 1996).

Bartholomew (1990) asserts that secure individuals will have a positive self-model and a positive model of others: they have a high self-esteem and they will be at ease with intimate relationships. Preoccupied adults have a negative self model but a positive model of others. This leads them to fretfully seek the approval of others in a belief that if other people respond positively towards them, then they will be safe and secure. Cassidy and Kobak (1988) term these intense attempts 'hyperactivating strategies' due to the vigilant attitude, as well as ongoing and insistent efforts that are made by the individual until such time as an attachment figure becomes available and security is achieved. Mikulincer, Gillath and Shaver (2002) found that even in non-threatening contexts individuals with a preoccupied attachment disposition showed a heightened degree of accessibility to mental representations of attachment figures. Individuals with a fearful-avoidant attachment style are characterized by negative models of self and other. Similar to the preoccupied individuals, they are highly dependent on the approval of others, yet they stay away from close relationships to avoid the pain of rejection. Lastly, a dismissive attachment style (another type of avoidant style) is identified by the individual's positive model of self and negative model of others. According to Simpson and Rholes (1998) these adults maintain their high self-esteem through defensively rejecting the worth of close relationships (which they avoid because of negative expectations). Cassidy and Kobak (1988) term the strategies involved with these styles 'deactivating strategies', and presumably deactivating the attachment system would minimize the distress caused by an unavailable attachment figure. Mikulincer et al. (2002) found that avoidantly-attached individuals' accessibility to mental representations of attachment figures were inhibited in a threat-related context.

Teacher-child Attachment

Xu (2006) notes that in the field of child development, "Vygotsky believed that the child's reasoning was socially constructed through interaction with adults and peers" (p. 663). Although traditional perspectives on attachment theory focus on the role of the primary caregiver, the rapid growth of the New Zealand early childhood education sector (Kane, 2005) necessitates that research occurs with other caregivers who form attachment bonds with children, and the impact it has on children's care and learning. Within a Māori context Drewery and Bird (2004) extends the traditional view of attachment between primary caregiver and child (p. 115):

Durie and others (e.g., Metge, 1995) describe the reliance of traditional hapu on a sophisticated system of child care that involved 'tribal parents' as much as biological parents (Durie, 1985). Such practices bring into question significant aspects of attachment theory. Does attachment have to be with the mother alone, or can a child be attached to more than one



person at a time? And is it impossible for someone who did not have the psychologically prescribed attachment experiences of bonding in early infancy to ever develop healthy relationships in later life? Māori society is one of a number of cultures in the world that expect many people in the group, not just the biological parents, to accept responsibility more or less equally for the care of the children. It therefore seems that the belief that a child must be securely attached to only one person, who is biologically related to them, is a product of a particular culture at a particular time in history (p.115).

For many modern New Zealand children the reality is that they experience care and education from multiple carers at a young age, whether through family members, network connections and/or professional early childhood teachers. The opportunities to develop very specific attachment relationships with a range of carers/educators thus prevail from a young age. The literature (e.g., Xu, 2006) notes some contradictions as to an appropriate age for children to first be separated from their primary caregivers (e.g., parents). Xu (2006) indicates that some psychologists are critical of mothers working outside the home whereas others do not believe that children are harmed by these separations. The quality of care provided seems to be the prevailing factor and Xu (2006) notes that “when children have to be away from their parents temporarily (e.g., a few hours a day) many high-quality early childhood programs have been found to play a positive role in supporting children to move successfully through Erikson’s social emotional stages (Feeney, Christensen, & Moravcik, 2001)” (p. 662).

With regards to teacher-child attachment, Pianta (1999) notes that the key qualities of child-adult relationships appears to be linked to the adult’s skill at accurately reading the child’s signals, “to respond contingently on the basis of these signals (e.g., to follow the child’s lead), to convey acceptance and emotional warmth, to offer assistance as necessary, to model regulated behaviour and to enact appropriate structures, and limits, for the child’s behaviour” (p. 67). Previously, Pianta and Sternberg (1992) identified that the manner in which teachers perceive children’s attachment needs are largely based on their internal working model of that specific teacher-child attachment bond.

Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2004) in their study on teacher and child attachment, with children aged 8 to 11, found that attachment based factors played a role in socio-emotional and academic adjustment. For example, teachers’ perceptions of closeness towards children made a unique contribution to the children’s sense of coherence and academic functioning; and from the other perspective children’s feelings of closeness towards teachers contributed to the children’s sense of well-being and their academic functioning. They also found that global attachment style and teacher-specific attachment style, although related, had unique contributions to children’s socio-emotional adjustment (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004). This study also highlights that children with learning disorders frequently present with insecure patterns of attachment and seldom view the teacher as a potential secure base: “children with learning disorders viewed their teachers as more rejecting, less available and less accepting than did typically developing children”; and in turn, “teachers reported lower levels of emotional closeness to children with learning disorders than to the typically developing students in their classrooms” (p.120). This is in line with a previous study of Al Yagon (2003) which found that secure attachment could act as a protective buffer for young children with mild developmental delays.



These studies highlight the importance of establishing close attachment bonds between teachers and children. For children establishing a secure bond is paramount to quality care, as well as a healthy learning environment. Bowlby (1969/1982) advocates that “learning is most efficient within the context of exploration of the environment from a secure base” (cited in Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, p. 251).

Conclusion

As indicated by the literature, attachment plays a crucial role in the life of young children. As many children are experiencing care and education in an early childhood context from a younger age, and for longer periods, it is pertinent that we understand teacher-child attachment. Further research which identifies strategies that teachers employ which either hinder or support the development of these close emotional attachments with children in their care, is important. In addition, in keeping with the importance placed on family and community (*whānau tangata*) in Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996), it is also relevant to further study the interrelationships between parents and early childhood teachers to determine the influence of these relationships on teacher-child attachment.

Teachers bring into the classroom their own previous attachment experiences and an expectation regarding their interactions with children, and it is presumed that these factors are related. Kesner (1994; 1997) found that there was a link between the teachers’ own childhood attachment experiences and the relationships they developed with children; for example, teachers with secure attachment histories developed relationships with children that were less dependent. More recently Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) made the comment that “individuals with a dismissing (avoidant) status, typically distance themselves emotionally and may appear less sensitive and responsive to the overtures and needs of others” (p. 251). A teacher who displays this attachment style may, as a result, be viewed by children as someone who is not accessible or supportive (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). In turn, adults with secure attachment are able to pragmatically evaluate their own relational histories, and respond appropriately and sensitively to children’s attachment needs. Finally, Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) note that:

Helping teachers recognise the impact of negative emotions on classroom behaviour, the benefits of positive student-teacher interactions and the need to view children’s behaviour as the cumulative results of their relationship histories, may enhance teachers’ sensitivity to student needs as well as increase the understanding of contextually based behaviour (p. 253).

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