



North Yorkshire Virtual School Attachment & Trauma Aware Schools Project: developing trauma responsive practice

Summary

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Abstract

This report provides an impact evaluation of The North Yorkshire Attachment Aware Schools Project (AASP), commissioned by the Virtual School. The project aims to support schools on the journey of developing trauma responsive practice. This is designed to reduce the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which can negatively affect children and young people's (CYP) emotional regulation, ability to form social relationships and make good academic progress (Cook et al., 2017; Currie & Spatz-Widom, 2010; Dfe, 2019; Sebba et al., 2018). It is a rolling programme with snapshots of data taken at different time points.

In March 2020, 53 schools were involved in the project, with 28 having completed the programme. Seven schools are also involved in the Timpson Attachment Aware Project. In June 2019, 984 participants (from 24 primary, 9 secondary, 2 special, 3 PRUs) had taken part in full school training in attachment / trauma and recovery. Evaluation results show that 98% of participants developed their understanding of early developmental trauma and understanding about how difficulties affect learning and social development. Over 94% of the 709 participants taking part in Emotion Coaching training indicated that their knowledge and understanding of Emotion Coaching had increased. 177 participants (from 14 primary, 2 special and 2 PRUs) took part in a mixed-methods action research addressing the impact of Emotion Coaching on professional practice.

Results from data taken at three time points within the project (T1 = start, T2 = midpoint and T3 = end of project, on average 16 weeks later) suggest a statistically significant change (between T1 and T3) in adult confidence in discussing emotional wellbeing with children, self-awareness and self-regulation of their own emotion and confidence in their use of emotion coaching. 128 participants (94 from primary and 34 from Special schools) completed an Emotion Coaching Exit Questionnaire (ECEQ) gathering qualitative and quantitative data. Results suggest that 93% recognise the positive impact on professional practice.



In March 2020, 85 participants completed a Circle of Adults evaluation questionnaires from twelve complete Circle of Adults action research sessions in four secondary schools. Results indicate that the process was highly effective for helping staff develop a better understanding of the young person's experience and the psychological needs driving behaviours. 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that involvement in the Circle of Adults action research developed a deeper understanding of the child's story and of the systems around the child.

Introduction

The invitation to carry out the NYCC AASP came from the Head of the Virtual School. Use was made of the RADIO action research approach (Timmins et al, 2006). Following best practice in other LAs the NYCC AASP was devised and delivered by Senior Practitioner EPs Marianne Doonan & Dr. Clare Stephens. The project is offered to primary, secondary, special Schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) within NYCC where at least one Looked After Child is on the school roll. Involvement in action research was by school self-selection, but a commitment had to be made to the action research in order to qualify for the free training.

As of March 2020, 53 schools were included in the project with 28 having completed the programme. This includes 33 primary, 13 secondary, 3 special schools, 3 PRUs and the NYCC Virtual School. Schools are offered an Attachment Aware auditing tool, whole school staff training on attachment and trauma and Emotion Coaching. Alongside this, schools are supported to carry out bespoke action research focused on Emotion Coaching or the Circle of Adults approach with the aim of embedding practice. Schools are also encouraged to develop Relational as opposed to Behaviour Policies. Seven schools are also involved with the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Aware programme.

Aims of the NYCC Attachment Aware Schools Programme (AASP) Developing Trauma Responsive Practice

Aims of the whole-school Attachment and Trauma Recovery training

1. To increase participant school awareness of Attachment, ACEs and Developmental Trauma
2. To increase participant understanding of the impact of early trauma experiences on development, behaviour and learning
3. To facilitate adults to begin to explore approaches to support children with difficulties in these areas

Aims of the Emotion Coaching Training

1. To increase participant understanding and knowledge of Emotion Coaching

Aims of the Emotion Coaching Champion Action Research

1. Develop adult confidence in practice, specifically in the areas of Emotion Coaching
2. Promote adult self-awareness and self-regulation via Emotion Coaching

3. Increase adult confidence in discussing child emotional wellbeing
4. Increase adult confidence in dealing with and understanding the meaning behind perceived challenging behaviour
5. Contribute to the evidence base

Aims of the Circle of Adults Action Research

1. Through the collaborative Circle of Adults approach to facilitate deeper understanding of the child's story and of the systems around the child
2. To increase a deeper understanding of presenting behaviours in the context of unmet Psychological needs
3. To increase the confidence of participants in working with the young person

Aims of the final evaluation

To measure how far the aims of this project have been met. Due to the rolling nature of training and action research, at this point, the full evaluation is still in progress. This document will concentrate on data collected between 2018 up to March 2020.

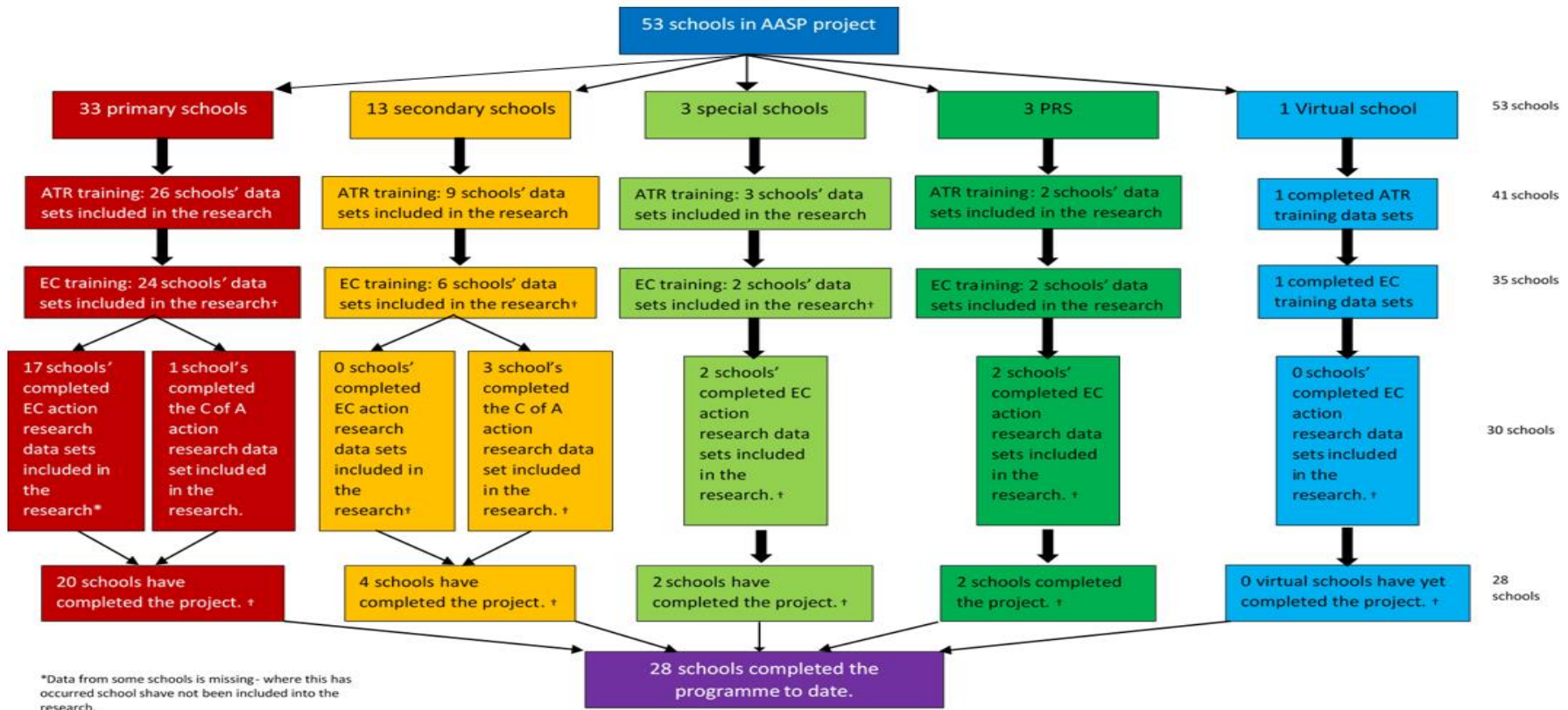


Table 1. Chart showing types and numbers of schools involved in March 2020



Methodology

An action research design was selected for the project, as a whole, based on the RADIO model (Timmins, et.al., 2003) because of its capacity to bring action, reflection theory and practice together in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to pressing concerns (Reason and Bradbury, 2006). This also recognises the cyclical nature of the project, as research to complement the development of practice and application of theory (Kelly, P. et al., 2020). A mixed-methods approach is used with the Emotion Coaching and Circle of Adults action research elements of the project. Qualitative and quantitative data is collected from school staff after training and at three time points during the action research. Ethical issues were addressed to safeguard all participants following BPS guidance (BPS, 2018). A hybrid inductive and deductive approach, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), was selected to illuminate perceptions of the Emotion Coaching and Circle of Adults approaches.

Results

Quantitative results from Attachment Trauma and Recovery Training

As of June 2019, 984 participants (518 from primary schools, 305 from secondary schools, 117 from special schools and 44 from PRUs) from 38 schools (24 primary schools, 9 secondary schools, 2 special schools, 3 PRUs) completed the Attachment Trauma and Recovery CPD evaluation form. Participants showed a high degree of agreement with the following statements:

- **96.01%** of delegates indicated that the training had developed their understanding about early developmental trauma
- **96.32%** of delegates indicated that the training had developed their understanding about how attachment difficulties begin and present in children and young people
- **96%** of delegates indicated that the training had developed their understanding about how such difficulties may affect learning, educational and social development.
- **94.61%** of delegates indicated that the training had developed their understanding of the meaning behind some of the behaviours that they see
- **91.86%** of delegates indicated that the training had developed their understanding about how to support children and young people with difficulties in these areas
- **93.26%** of delegates indicated that they were satisfied with the input that they had received from the training

These results seem to suggest that the Attachment Trauma and Recovery training increased participant school staff awareness of Attachment, ACEs and Developmental Trauma (Aim 1.). It increased **96.32%** of participants' understanding of the potential impact of early trauma experiences on development, behaviour and learning (Aim 2) and it helped **91.86%** of participants to begin to explore approaches to support children with these difficulties (Aim 3).



Emotion Coaching Training

Quantitative Results

As of March 2020, 709 participants (403 from primary schools, 181 from secondary schools, 72 from special schools, 47 from PRUs and 6 from the Virtual School) have completed the Emotion Coaching post-training evaluation questionnaire. Results showed that over **94%** of participants 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the training session raised their understanding and knowledge of Emotion Coaching.

These results suggest that participants understanding and knowledge of Emotion Coaching increased due to this training in line with the aim of this training.

Emotion Coaching Action Research

Quantitative Results

As of March 2020, 177 participants from 17 schools (14 primary schools, 2 special schools and 2 PRUs) contributed to a mixed-method action research study to consider the impact of Emotion Coaching on professional practice. Emotion Coaching is a high guidance, high empathy approach, which offers a relational framework for adults to respond to 'in the moment' emotional needs of young people. Following training, three coaching (Champion) sessions were delivered by a Virtual School EP to groups within each school. Data was collected at three time points within the project (T1 = start of the project, T2 = midpoint and T3 = the end of the project). There was an average period of 16 weeks between T1 and T3. Analysis suggests a statistically significant change (between T1 and T3) in adult confidence in discussing emotional wellbeing with children, self-awareness and self-regulation of their own emotion and confidence in their use of emotion coaching. Although the mean number of successfully resolved incidents increased between T1 and T3, this change was not statistically significant.

128 participants (94 from primary schools and 34 from Special schools) completed an Emotion Coaching Exit Questionnaire which gathered qualitative and quantitative data. Results suggest that:

- **93.75%** of participants felt that Emotion Coaching had a positive impact on professional practice, and
- **75%** perceived a positive impact on child behaviour.

Qualitative Results

Open questions within the Emotion Coaching Exit Questionnaire were analysed to consider the benefits for staff, relationships and pupils. Use was made of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to gain a richer picture from the data.

Across all questions within the Emotion Coaching Exit Questionnaire responses indicate different levels of adult engagement with the approach. It will be interesting to discuss these findings in relation to previous research by Gilbert (2018), indicating that "you have to



practise to improve your practice” (Gilbert, L.,2018). This may suggest that ‘you get out what you put in’.

After a number of cycles of reflection on coding the data, themes emerged for each question and these were ordered in relation to an increasing level of engagement with the Emotion Coaching approach. It seems that to really embed the approach, the data suggests that it is best to use a whole-school approach; however, this was not always possible.

The following themes are reported, along with examples of raw participant data representing each theme:

Whole-school approach

‘I strongly feel that emotion coaching should be a ‘whole school’ approach for its true effectiveness/ impact to be realised.’

The importance of on-going training is also recognised as a means of decreasing barriers.

‘Cascading to all staff mid-day supervisors, office staff, cleaners, to ensure that pupils understand that all adults within the school community will listen.’

Being willing to make mistakes

At the beginning, the approach can be tricky where mistakes are an important part of learning.

*“It reminded me of things I’d missed out when attempting to emotion coach so far.”
“Stop panicking about completing all stages”.*

Meta emotional philosophy of the adult

Where the approach does not fit with the meta-emotional philosophy of the adult, the adult may be more defensive and would probably not continue to use the approach.

‘It is all about the child, and not what I’m feeling as an adult.’

When individual beliefs and values around behaviour clash with the Emotion Coaching model, the approach is not likely to be integrated into practice.

‘Some staff, despite the training, are reluctant to buy in when faced with ‘naughty’ behaviour and feel there should be sanction.’

‘Finding the window of opportunity to use this approach – this can be very small.’

Self- reflection is essential

Evidence suggests that increased engagement with the process is essential in developing practice and that reflection, including self-reflection on one’s own emotional state is a core aspect of emotion coaching.



'It has impacted on my own self-regulation in that I identify quickly when I am not the right person to assist in helping the pupil self-regulate.'

This perhaps also reflects the non-judgemental aspect of the process in relation to all emotion.

A strategy and an approach to change adult behaviour

Increased practice appears to lead to increased empathy and the ability to stay socially engaged when under stress. To begin with, emotion coaching is an approach or strategy, which over time can build adult confidence, emotional awareness and trust in themselves.

'Sometimes it's still quite difficult in the 'heat of the moment' but it's good to have a different strategy that can help to keep both the adult and the child calmer'.

'It made me stop and think before I react.'

'The awareness of the neuroscience that forms how/why children behave as they do has made me more patient and also more open about my own emotions.'

Positive impact on child self-understanding, self-regulation & well-being

With increased use over time, it is noted that Emotion Coaching can have a powerful impact on child self-understanding and ability to manage emotion. Skill development is incorporated into the approach.

"For pupils having Emotion Coaching is hugely beneficial to help them understand why they are feeling the way they do, normalising and managing it."

"I've seen evidence of it improving self-regulation in children in my team."

"One child in particular has stopped flipping his lid and is able to explain how he feels and why. This has resulted in fewer fallings out with peers and a happier classroom."

"Children come down from anger outbursts quicker when they know you listen and care."

Emotion Coaching as a 'tool of empowerment'

Those that use the approach regularly commented on it increasing feelings of confidence and leading to a sense of empowerment for adults.

'Given me the confidence to know that I am approaching situations in the right way.'



“Having the knowledge of the basic principles of emotional coaching has helped me to feel much more equipped as a professional, I feel more confident I can address situations more effectively.”

Psychological containment via the process

An increased level of engagement with Emotion Coaching also appears to have a positive impact on psychological containment for the adult, through the structured approach.

“I am probably less stressed in the face of students’ emotional struggles.”

Emotional well-being of the adult and self-care is important

Comments indicate the positive impact on adult emotional wellbeing and the importance of self-care.

‘I have also looked at my own mental health and how I can help myself.’

Impact at all levels

As adults and pupils increasingly engage with the process at whole-school level, evidence suggests that Emotion Coaching has the potential to operate at individual, interpersonal and system levels.

‘It is good to see the approach being used across the school, with adults supporting each other to use the steps of the Emotion Coaching model. I see far less internal exclusions from classes now that this is being used.’

Incorporating with other approaches.

At the most advanced level, when the approach is more deeply embedded, the approach appears to be incorporated into how the person / organisation functions and adults begin to incorporate the approach alongside other approaches, which have the same intrinsic value system.

‘I use Emotion Coaching alongside Restorative Practice to support children in recognising, regulating and adapting their responses to situations and resulting behaviour.....It will also very much support the mindfulness sessions which are due to begin with the older children in school. It all joins up.’

A vehicle to build stronger trusting relationships

The impact on adult-pupil relationships is commented on by many practitioners.

‘Pupils and adults can develop stronger, trusting relationships through emotional coaching approaches.’



Ongoing reflection is key for impact

The reflective aspect of emotion coaching and importance of increasing self-awareness for both the adult and child may also help to guard against falling back into old habits and keeping this 'fore brained'.

'Sometimes when life in school is really busy one has to take time to remember the key principles and not slip into old habits.'

Barriers to success

'External pressures', 'balancing demands, 'staffing ratios', 'physical space' and 'tight budget' are all seen as possible constraints.

Time is mentioned repeatedly as a key issue, particularly the challenge in trying to balance competing demands.

'Sometimes it's hard to be in five places at once!'

'Top down pressures (SATS) can cause stress and this can make it harder to recall the key principles.'

Competing behavioural approaches at home or school are also recognised to cause tensions.

Circle of Adults Action Research

Quantitative results

The Circle of Adults process aims to support adults in forming a deeper, richer understanding of the underlying issues, which may be triggering and maintaining perceived difficult behaviours. Adults gain increased confidence in managing pupils with perceived challenging behaviours within mainstream settings. This allows the emergence of wide-ranging practical strategies to effectively impact behaviour, a deeper understanding of inclusion and opportunities to reflect on professional practice (Newton, C., 1995; Stockley, S., 2006; Turner, J. et al., 2020) within a structured forum (Stockley, S., 2006).

In March 2020, the evaluation included 12 complete sets of Circle of Adults action research sessions from four secondary schools (with three Circle of Adults sessions completed in each school).

85 participants completed the Circle of Adults evaluation questionnaire. Results indicate that the process was highly effective in helping staff develop a better understanding of the young person's experience and the psychological needs driving behaviours.

- **100%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed that participants in the Circle of Adults action research developed a deeper understanding of the child's story and of the systems around the child (Aim 1).



- **Over 95%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their understanding of presenting behaviours in the context of unmet Psychological needs had increased (Aim 2).
- **83%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their confidence with working with the young person at the centre of the Circle of Adults process had increased (Aim 3).

Circle of Adult Exit Questionnaires were given to all members of staff who attended all three sessions from each of the schools at the end of the action research. The school SENCo was usually the only member of staff to be present at all three sessions. Three Questionnaires were completed by participants attending all sessions in their setting. All three participants agreed that the Circle of Adults sessions had an impact on their professional practice. Two agreed that the process had impacted on adult self-regulation, with one answering 'maybe'. All three participants agreed that the process had impacted on the support that the school now provides for young people.

Qualitative results

The qualitative aspect of the Circle of Adults evaluation questionnaires and exit questionnaires were coded as one data set using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Emerging themes arising are combined into one data set.

Value of the process

Participants valued the group process itself as a major contributory feature in moving forward in complex cases. Making connections between the past and present in the child's story and stepping into the shoes of the child was valued.

'All the staff involved have found the process useful and enlightening.'

'The process enables you to hear the story and link it to the present.'

Feeling safe leads to open collaboration

The collaborative nature of the process was appreciated with 'open' and 'honest' discussion being noted. A process of 'positive sharing' and 'working together' was described. This included feeling safe enough to talk about how 'frustrating' it can be to work with complex young people.

'It has brought to light just how frustrating our jobs can be and how we can be emotionally affected...'

There was depersonalisation of affect, possibly allowing a lowering of psychological defences.

'our responses were recognised as normal.'



Psychological containment from the approach

It appears to have a positive impact on psychological containment for the adult, through the structured approach.

'it has been reassuring to have these responses recognised as normal in a professional context.'

Building a shared understanding and view of the child

It was felt that the process did impact on practice and shift how the child was viewed, which opened up further possibility for interaction.

'Leading to more focused approaches to the student that address the emotional needs rather than the behaviour.'

'Collaborative working between the School, EP, Foster Carer all working together.'

Impact and changed practice

Comments were made about how the process helped adults to see not only the child differently but gain a deeper understanding of the interaction with their own emotion and as such change their practice.

'Reframe for teachers how to look at/respond to/support vulnerable learners.'

'I have noticed others change the way they approach and react to students.'

'This has enabled me, and colleagues in school, to think carefully about a student's life experiences and relate them to the behaviours they exhibit, leading to more focused approaches to the student that address the emotional needs rather than the behaviour.'

'Anecdotes from staff suggests that this has changed their practice and in turn this has helped them.'

'There has been some evidence of carers modifying their approach to the child and reacting less emotionally to the child's behaviour.'

'Adults in school can then consistently focus on how our own behaviours can influence how the student feels and responds.'



Factors perceived to improve or reduce impact

There were a number of features of the meeting, which were felt to enable the session to be more effective or could curtail the effectiveness of the meeting. Getting the 'time for staff to attend the circle meeting' and 'money to release staff' was mentioned by many as an issue. 'Getting the right people to the meeting' was also critical to success. In order for schools to invest in spending time on the Circle of Adults process, schools need to recognise this as an investment which may save time in the long run. The 'skill of the facilitator' was also valued. To have more impact, some staff noted that revisiting the Circle of Adults would increase impact.

'It is time consuming and requires several members of staff to be present at the same time. However, we feel this is justified for the level of difficulty we are tackling.'

'Many of those who attended did well with this but possibly not all of the staff who needed this attended?'

'Money - Getting support in school to allow all adults involved time to participate'. "It would be better if I didn't have to go and teach.'

'Knowledge and experience of the lead is valued.'

'Need to revisit CoA already completed on a termly basis.'

Deeper understanding can influence system change

It is possible that participation in this approach can influence change at other levels.

'I have become a rather fierce (harsh?) advocate for Emotion Coaching/nurturing responses to students and am trying to tackle how our current behaviour policy does not work for the vulnerable students.'

Conclusion

Evidence suggests that the North Yorkshire Attachment Aware Schools Project offered to schools is highly effective in developing staff understanding of early developmental trauma and developing understanding and knowledge of Emotion Coaching. Both the Emotion Coaching and Circle of Adults action research has proved highly effective in supporting schools to begin to embed an aspect of practice with deeper understanding. Both Emotion Coaching and Circle of Adults enhance staff reflective processes regarding both intrapersonal and interpersonal development. Evidence also suggests that this can provide psychologically containing processes, which can support staff and student wellbeing. Results suggest that this may also contribute to increased levels of staff self-efficacy. Emotion coaching, when used across the school, over time becomes a way of communicating and can support positive relationship development, hence contributing to a positive school ethos. The value system of both approaches is based on empowerment and the approaches work best when they align with the meta-emotional philosophy of the adult



and school leadership. Both approaches can be said to operate at many levels systemically, providing ecologically embedded interventions.

Learning points and reflections from practice

- The 'point of entry' to the organisation by the outside provider (in this case the EP) is important. The project seems to work best when there is already some interest or discussion around the topic areas within the organisation, even if just with a few members of staff. If the school actively seeks support, there seems to be a pre-existing level of commitment that facilitates acceptance of the project.
- Support from the school leadership is essential. Making sure that the school leadership is 'on board' and actively committed to the work to be completed is essential for this work to have impact.
- If a school feels that they are 'not ready', they are 'not ready' and there will be resistance to 'big change'. We have found that working on individual complex casework may be a good point of entry to begin having relevant conversations with schools about the areas of Attachment Trauma and Recovery.
- It needs to be recognised that this is a journey not a destination. An example of this comes from one of the participant schools who obtained the ARC Good Practice Award in this area in 2019. Their EP began work in this area with them in 2016 i.e. it takes time to really embed practice and due to staff 'turn over' it needs to be built into systems within a school. An example to support continuity is the Emotion Coaching UK Organisation award.
- Whole school training has the best impact but training is only the beginning of a conversation. Action Research can provide a way to develop practice further, but this also requires the commitment and time from school to pay dividends. Ideally, this needs to be part of an on-going process of improvement in practice and for emotional wellbeing of the whole school community. Findings from this research support the need for additional whole-school training and approaches to support embedding practice within schools. Regional on-going top-up training is also given to schools on request.
- Once conversations have begun, it is easier to support schools to look at Behaviour Policies and work towards more relational approaches. Including schools in further support e.g. via a regional Emotion Coaching UK interest group and an NYCC Emotion Coaching interest group supports staff in developing trauma responsive practice, as well as sustainability and the sharing of good practice.
- If a school loses key members of staff that can have a big impact on maintaining development, which is why it is best if there are a group of key people in the school



interested in continuing the journey. Support and resource allocation are required for success. A wide group of people involved in training / action research works best e.g. governors, parents, foster parents, admin staff, lunchtime supervisors etc.

- The school EP can support the school to continue this journey. Regular contact can keep this going.
- Using the Attachment Aware whole-school audit and incorporating targets into the school development plan is also a way to maintain progress.
- It would be useful if attachment and trauma awareness was consistently built into initial teacher programmes, perhaps this could be combined with a small piece of action research to support trainee understanding. This is a very complex area and reflection on practice is demonstrably an effective aid to developing practice.

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