

# Attachment and trauma awareness training: headteachers' perspectives on the impact on vulnerable children, staff and the school

February 2022

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## Key findings:

- Online questionnaire with 112 responses from headteachers in schools that received attachment and trauma awareness training (43.1% response rate)
- Nearly all headteachers reported a positive or 'transformational' impact from the training in their school
- Nearly all reported a positive impact on staff confidence
- Substantial majorities reported improvements in the engagement, attendance, learning and attainment of vulnerable children
- Over three-quarters reported less use of sanctions with vulnerable children
- Over one-third reported their school had made permanent changes due to the training – this was higher where there was ongoing support from the local authority
- The remainder felt that they had made progress, but there was more work to do to embed this fully into the school

## Report overview:

This report continues the publication of findings from the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme, hosted at the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford.

As with many other school-based research projects, the Programme has been profoundly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. We were

actively engaged in data collection in schools when the first lockdown period started and consequently paused most fieldwork between March and September 2020. The second school closure period between January and March 2021 led to an additional pause.

As explained in more detail below, this has significantly disrupted our schedule for data collection and analysis. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on schools, bringing novel challenges in supporting vulnerable young people and placing a new emphasis on young people's wellbeing and mental health.

We have therefore adapted our research strategy and our publication plan. We had originally planned to analyse published school-level data on attendance, progress and attainment and local authority records on exclusions. We were intending to look at these measures over time to see whether schools that had training showed measurable changes in these outcomes in subsequent years.

The pandemic has seriously impacted on these school-level measures and we do not believe that there is year-on-year reliability as a result of school closures and changes to assessment. This makes it impossible to distinguish any impact from the training within the statistical 'noise' caused by the disruption.

Reflecting the need to undertake some form of evaluation of the school-level effects of the training, we decided to add a survey of headteachers. We asked for their professional opinion on what impact the training had had on young people, staff and the school as a whole. This is necessarily a pragmatic compromise resulting from the pandemic; the limitations of the approach are discussed in the conclusion section of this working paper.

We will be publishing additional working papers through early 2022. The final report will be published in October 2022.

## Executive summary:

1. This report summarises data from 112 headteachers whose schools received 'whole school' attachment and trauma training between 2018 and early 2021. Data were collected through an online questionnaire in late 2021.
2. The purpose of the questionnaire was to survey their professional opinions on the impact of the training on key outcomes for vulnerable children. It also asked about the confidence of staff and the process of change management within the school.
3. This approach was necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with school closures rendering the school-level outcome measures of questionable reliability and validity for year-on-year analysis.
4. The overall response rate was 43.1% - it was slightly higher in primary and special schools, but slightly lower in secondary schools and other school types.
5. Headteachers across all school types and local authorities rated the training highly and felt that it had led to a positive impact in their school. Overall, 12.5% of respondents described the impact for their school as 'transformational'.
6. Nearly all headteachers (96.5%) felt that the confidence of their staff in working with vulnerable children had been improved by the training.
7. Headteachers asserted that the training had a positive impact on vulnerable children's engagement (97.4%), learning (92.0%), attainment (78.6%) and attendance (71.5%), as well as reducing the use of sanctions (81.2%).
8. Respondents reflected on the difficulties in making assertions about attainment due to the Covid-19 disruptions – some drew on ongoing teacher assessments, while others described informal 'theories of change' based on improved staff confidence, stronger staff practice, greater engagement, fewer behavioural incidents and more time spent learning.
9. There were no consistent patterns in the findings between different school types – improvements in engagement were somewhat higher in special schools, while secondary headteachers were most likely to report a fall in the use of sanctions.
10. In general, the reported impact of the training was higher among experienced headteachers and those whose local authorities provided ongoing support after the training, but this did not hold for all the outcome measures.
11. Headteachers reported a wide range of changes in the school that had been catalysed by the training. These included reviews of behaviour policies, a greater focus on individual pupil needs, the adoption of new everyday practices (with a focus on emotions, language and relationships), additional staff training and induction, staffing reviews and physical space changes.
12. Around one-third of respondents felt that these changes had been sustainably embedded in their school. This was substantially more common where there was significant ongoing support from the local authority in the form of follow-on training, networking and other services.
13. The remaining headteachers felt that there was still progress to be made and/or that the changes had not yet been embedded fully; several mentioned delays due to staff turnover and the Covid-19 pandemic.
14. Several headteachers specifically employed the analogy of 'a journey' for the long-term process of change resulting from the training – i.e. that the impact took time to realise, with challenges along the way. Some also mentioned related initiatives around wellbeing and mental health, seeing attachment and trauma as part of a wider agenda.

## 1. Background

Launched in 2017, the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme has worked with 305 schools across 26 local authorities in England. Participating schools receive training in attachment and trauma organised through their virtual school or educational psychology service – the content of the training and identity of the trainer therefore varies between areas, based on the local needs identified<sup>1</sup>.

The purpose of the Programme is to explore the impact of the training in schools, from the perspectives of staff and young people and – as initially planned – through analysis of aggregate school-level data on attainment, progress, attendance and exclusion. More information about the Programme and links to our previous working papers can be found on the website<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Covid-19 pandemic

The original research plan for the Timpson Programme included a time series analysis of the publicly-available data for schools on attendance, progress and attainment, as well as data on exclusions obtained from local authorities. As local authorities did not randomise the schools that received training<sup>3</sup>, a formal trial was not possible.

Our intention was, therefore, to compare several years prior to the attachment and trauma awareness training with the subsequent years as a form of ‘natural experiment’ to see whether schools that received training (a) had identifiable changes in these key indicators in the period after training, and (b) had identifiable changes relative to the overall local authority data (i.e. including schools that had not had training).

While not strictly causal, this would have provided useful evidence for the effectiveness of the training and subsequent development work in the participating schools.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had many profound effects on schools. Salient to the Timpson Programme has been that the school closures and home-schooling periods will have substantially impacted on young people’s learning, but with differential impacts between areas, schools and individuals. Similarly, the continuity in attendance and exclusion figures for 2019/20 and 2020/21 has been strongly impacted by school closures and pupil sickness. In addition, the loss of standardised testing at Key Stages 2 and 4 makes valid comparisons of attainment over time and between schools very problematic.

We were forced, therefore, to review our initial intention to compare aggregate data on attendance, exclusions, progress and attainment. In doing so, we came to the regrettable conclusion that such comparisons would be largely spurious and a poor basis for making valid inferences about the impact of attachment and trauma awareness training. Any relationship between training and the outcomes measures would likely be lost in the statistical ‘noise’ associated with the Covid-19 disruptions, leading to an unacceptable risk of either (a) inferring impact where none existed, or (b) inferring an absence of impact where one did exist.

In light of this epistemological challenge, we decided that the most appropriate compromise would be to seek the professional judgement of headteachers about the impact of the training in their own school. While this has a degree of embedded subjectivity, headteachers have access to school data about attendance, exclusions,

<sup>1</sup> Examples of training from each local authority have been observed and while there are some minor differences of scope, emphasis and delivery, the training is broadly comparable between areas – see Working Paper 3 for more information.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools>

<sup>3</sup> See Working Paper 4.

progress and attainment on which to draw for their judgement, alongside their everyday experiences of working with staff and pupils. We concluded that this would provide a more valid reflection of the impact of the training than the disrupted data that we had originally intended to use prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This working paper therefore reflects an additional data collection exercise that aimed to bring together the views of headteachers whose schools had participated in the Timpson Programme. We will come on to discuss some of the limitations of this approach in due course.

### 3. Methodology and data overview

The data reported in this working paper were collected between October and December 2021 using an online questionnaire delivered through the Qualtrics survey software. We sent invitations to headteachers of schools that were recorded as having had attachment and trauma training through the Timpson Programme at any point up to February 2021, excluding a small number who had requested not to be contacted further for research purposes. E-mail reminders and telephone calls were used to maximise the number of responses.

A total of 260 headteachers were invited to complete the survey, with 112 doing so – a response rate of 43.1%. Table 1 below summarises the responses by school type, with primary and special schools being somewhat more likely to respond. We are conscious that renewed concerns about Covid-19 in late 2021 will have suppressed response rates to some extent.

Table 1: School overview

School type	Sent	Completed	%
Primary	157	74	47.1
Secondary	61	21	34.4
Special	24	11	45.8
Other <sup>4</sup>	18	6	33.3

Response rates within local authorities varied between 0% and 100%. Those with lower responses rates tended to be where training had been disrupted or curtailed due to Covid-19 and where the schools possibly had less sense of being part of a national research programme. There is therefore a degree of self-selection bias towards responses from schools who had received face-to-face training earlier within the Programme.

Of the 112 schools responding, sixteen had their initial training during 2017/18, 52 in 2018/19, 39 in 2019/20 and five in 2020/21. We explored the date of the initial training as a potential explanatory factor, but it did not have any relationship to the findings.

We also make analytical use of a three-way typology reflecting the level of support provided to schools by their local authority, as explained in Working Paper 4: Simple, Moderate and Complex. In brief, **Simple** local programmes consisted of a one-off training session. **Moderate** programmes included a degree of follow-up training and support spanning two or more school terms. **Complex** programmes lasted at least a year and included additional structured support from the virtual school and/or educational psychology service. These types do not reflect the quality of the training (which was not directly evaluated), but more the intensity and overall investment of resources by the

<sup>4</sup> This includes a mixture of middle schools, further education colleges, pupil referral units and alternative provision. Each of these types was too small to permit meaningful analysis alone.



local authority in supporting schools to become attachment and trauma aware.

Of the responding headteachers, eighteen represented schools that had received Simple support, 77 that had received Moderate support and seventeen that had received Complex support. This broadly reflected the overall number of local authorities providing these levels of support (six Simple, sixteen Moderate and four Complex).

Ninety-five of the responding headteachers (84.8%) were in their role when the school received their training. Twelve (10.7%) were in the school in different roles, while the remaining five (4.5%) were at different schools. Sixteen respondents (14.3%) had been headteachers for less than three years, 58 (51.8%) for between three and ten years and 33 (29.5%) for more than ten years; the remaining five were not headteachers<sup>5</sup>.

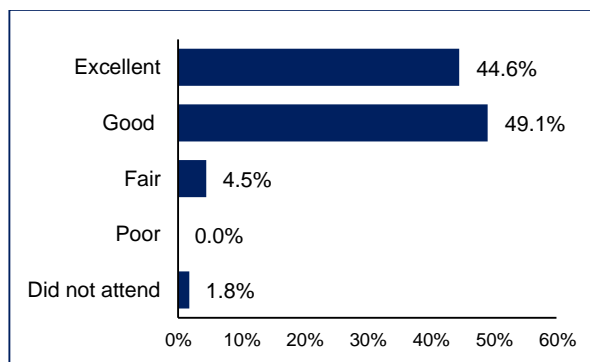
#### 4. Findings

In this section, we explore the headline results across all 112 schools, but we also look for meaningful differences in responses: (a) by school type, (b) level of local authority support, and (c) length of headteacher’s experience. For reasons of space, we have not reported the instances where there is no meaningful difference within these categories.

##### 4.1 Quality of training

Headteachers were asked to provide their feedback on the quality of the training their school received on a four-point scale. As can be seen in Figure 1, nearly all rated the training as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’.

Figure 1: Reported quality of training



Throughout the remainder of the findings, headteachers who felt that the training had been ‘excellent’ were markedly more likely to report that it had led to a positive impact on their school; this held across all measures.

##### 4.2 Staff confidence

Headteachers were asked to report on their perception of the impact of the training on the confidence of staff in their school with respect to working with vulnerable<sup>6</sup> children. This was requested on a five-point scale from ‘very negative’ to ‘very positive’.

No headteachers felt that the training had a negative effect on staff confidence and only one felt there had been no impact. Sixty-three (56.3%) reported that the impact was ‘somewhat positive’ and 45 (40.2%) ‘very positive’; the remaining three stated that they did not know<sup>7</sup>.

Assessments of the impact on staff confidence tended to be higher among very experienced headteachers (57.6% ‘very positive’) and those receiving Complex support from their local authority (61.1%).

<sup>5</sup> These responses were provided by other senior staff, for example, where the headteacher was sick or where the school was awaiting a new headteacher starting. We have nevertheless referred to the respondents as headteachers throughout for simplicity.

<sup>6</sup> We asked respondents to use the following definition for ‘vulnerable’ in answering the survey: “Those who might be

*expected to benefit from attachment and trauma awareness. This would include those in care and designated as ‘in need’, but also other young people who have had significant adverse experiences. We do not mean those with special education needs more generally.”*

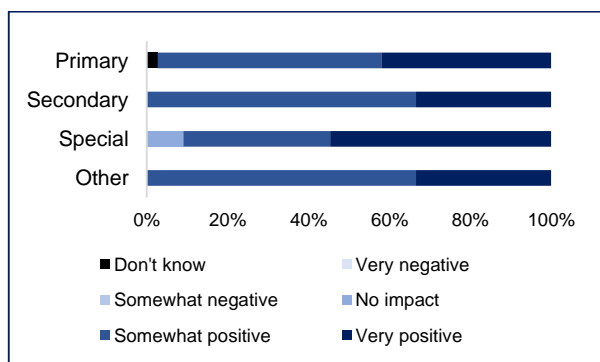
<sup>7</sup> The ‘don’t know’ responses throughout tended to come from inexperienced headteachers or new starters in the school.

There was no apparent difference in headteachers' views between school types.

### 4.3 Engagement of vulnerable children

Headteachers were asked to assess the impact of the training on the engagement of vulnerable children in their school using a five-point scale from 'very negative' to 'very positive'. Sixty-three (56.3%) felt that the effect of the training had been 'somewhat positive' and 46 (41.1%) 'very positive'. One reported no impact and two did not know.

Figure 2: Impact of training on engagement, by school type



As can be seen in Figure 2, the impact of the training was felt to be slightly greater in special (54.5% 'very positive') and primary schools (41.9%) in comparison to secondary and other schools (both 33.3%). Very experienced headteachers were also more likely to think that the training had a 'very positive' effect on the engagement of vulnerable children in their school (51.5%). There were no apparent differences by the type of local authority support provided.

### 4.4 Attendance of vulnerable children

Headteachers were asked to assess the impact of the training on the attendance of vulnerable children in their school using a

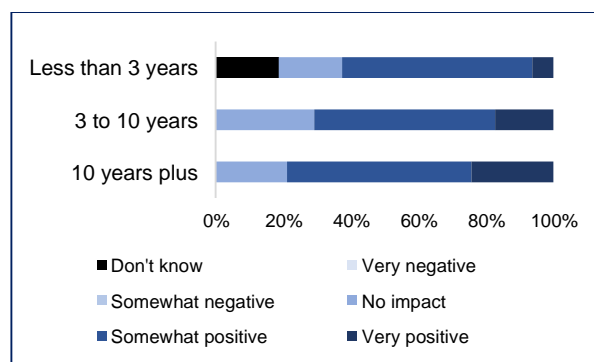
five-point scale from 'very negative' to 'very positive'.

Responses to this question were notably less positive than those detailed previously. Twenty-eight headteachers (25.0%) felt that the training had no impact on attendance and four did not offer a judgement. Nevertheless, 60 (53.6%) reported that the training had been 'somewhat positive' and twenty (17.9%) 'very positive'.

There were no differences between responses by school type, except that no headteachers from special or other schools felt that there had been a 'very positive' impact on attendance. This perhaps reflects the nature of attendance in these schools, some of which were residential or used dedicated transport (e.g. special schools), or where attendance was more strictly enforced (e.g. pupil referral units) or subject to frequent sickness absences. There were no apparent differences by the type of local authority support provided.

There was, however, a notable pattern in responses with respect to the headteacher's length of service (Figure 3). Headteachers with over ten years' experience were more likely to assess that there had been a 'very positive' impact (24.2%) than those with three to ten years (17.2%) and those with less than three years (6.3%).

Figure 3: Impact of training on attendance, by headteacher experience



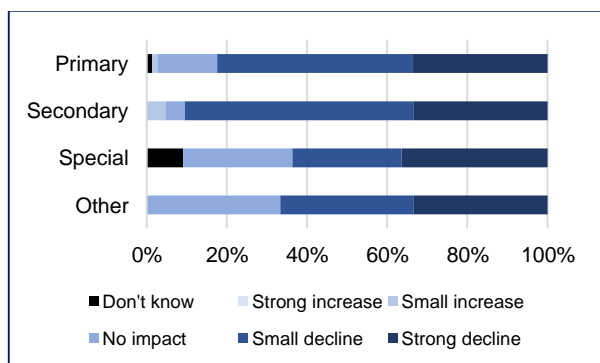
#### 4.5 Use of sanctions with vulnerable children

Headteachers were asked to assess the impact of the training on the use of behavioural sanctions including exclusion within the school. This was requested on a five-point scale from ‘strong decline’ to ‘strong increase’.

A ‘strong decline’ in the use of sanctions was reported by 38 headteachers (33.9%) and a ‘slight decline’ by 53 (47.3%). Seventeen headteachers felt that there had been ‘no impact’ (15.2%), two felt there had been a ‘slight increase’<sup>8</sup> and two did not know.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of findings by school type. Secondary headteachers were the most likely to report a positive impact on the use of sanctions (90.4%), followed by primary headteachers (82.4%). The proportion of headteachers reporting a ‘strong decline’ was roughly constant across school types (between 33.3% and 36.4%).

Figure 4: Impact of training on the use of sanctions, by school type



There were no meaningful patterns in the findings by the headteacher’s length of experience or the level of support provided by the local authority with respect to the use of sanctions

<sup>8</sup> At different points in the Timpson Programme, a small minority of schools have reported an increase in the use of sanctions. This is usually explained as being a temporary

#### 4.6 Learning of vulnerable children

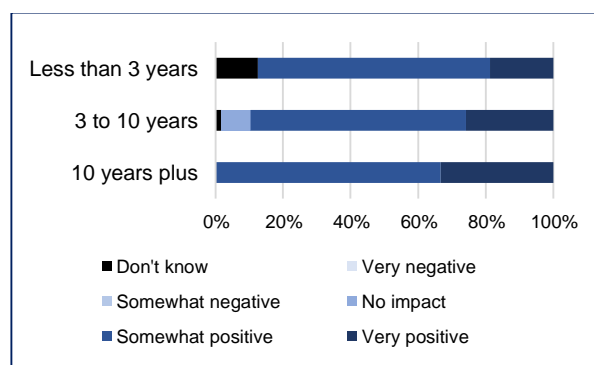
Headteachers were asked to assess the impact of the training on vulnerable children’s learning using a five-point scale from ‘very negative’ to ‘very positive’.

Thirty (26.8%) reported that this had been ‘very positive’ and 73 (65.2%) that it had been ‘somewhat positive’. Five reported no impact and four did not know; none felt that it had been negative.

There were no meaningful differences in headteachers’ assessments by school type. There was some indication that headteachers were more likely to report a ‘very positive’ impact if their school was receiving Moderate (29.9%) or Complex (27.8%) support from their local authority, compared to Simple (11.8%).

As can be seen in Figure 5, headteachers with longer experience were somewhat more likely to report that the impact of the training on learning had been ‘very positive’.

Figure 5: Impact of training on learning, by headteacher experience



#### 4.7 Attainment of vulnerable children

Headteachers were asked to assess the impact of the training on the attainment of vulnerable children using a five-point scale

result of staff and pupils getting used to a more relational approach, with changing policies, expectations and procedures.

from ‘very negative’ to ‘very positive’. This, of course, has very different meanings across educational contexts and this is reflected to some extent in the responses from headteachers. For example, attainment is actively tested in secondary schools much more regularly than in primary schools, while special schools will have distinct conceptualisations of attainment that are relevant to their own pupil body.

Overall, fourteen headteachers (12.5%) felt that the impact of the training on attainment had been ‘very positive’, with 74 (66.1%) indicating ‘somewhat positive’. Eighteen (16.1%) felt that there had been ‘no impact’ and six did not know; none felt that there had been a negative impact.

Figure 6: Impact of training on attainment, by school type

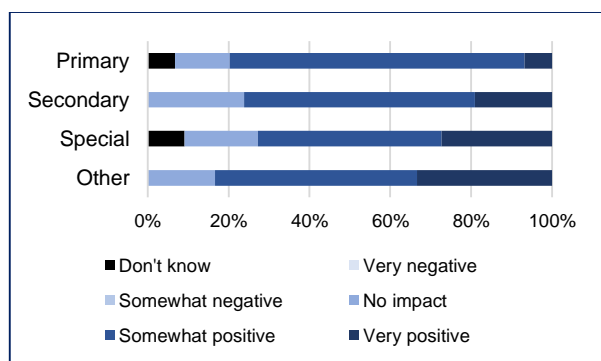


Figure 6 shows the responses by school type. The impact of the training on attainment was judged to be lowest by primary headteachers (6.8% ‘very positive’), perhaps reflecting the lower emphasis placed on formal tests in this phase. It was higher among secondary headteachers (19.0%), but highest of all among headteachers in special schools (27.3%) and those in other forms of provision (33.3%); it should be remembered that the numbers in these latter two groups are small.

<sup>9</sup> Typographical errors in the quotes have been corrected for readability.

There were no meaningful patterns by the headteachers’ length of experience or by the level of support provided by the local authority.

Headteachers were asked to explain the basis on which they made their evaluation of the impact on attainment through an open text response; 55 (49.1%) did so. Several used this opportunity to specifically reflect on the challenges of assessing learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. One explained that it had been *“Difficult to judge the attainment ... as a result of lockdowns and social distancing measures in school”*<sup>9</sup>, while another felt that *“Hard data has been unreliable over recent years”* due to disruptions to the usual patterns of testing (e.g. Key Stage 2 SATs).

Around half of those providing an explanation had drawn on regular teacher assessments to evidence their assertion that the training had been effective. This was supplemented in some cases by the use of other methods such as externally-validated reading scales, past test papers, individual pupil progress reviews and ‘learning walks’ by governors.

The remainder presented a case that referred to measurable or observable antecedents of learning, effectively expressing an informal ‘theory of change’ that they were confident would lead to improved attainment. This was articulated in slightly different ways between schools, but with an overall coherence that saw attainment as the culmination of incremental changes for staff and pupils.

For example, some focused on greater staff awareness of the prior experiences and needs of vulnerable children:

*“Those children that have these challenges are better understood by staff and we now have some of the strategies in place for all children. So all children benefit but those with*



*attachment needs are better supported.” (Primary)*

*“Targeted teaching and the use of trauma informed practice has led to children’s needs being better understood and hence interventions have had greater impact and allowed children to fill in the learning gaps more quickly.” (Primary)*

This was seen to be reciprocated through more positive relationships and a stronger engagement with learning:

*“The biggest impact has been the engagement of children and their focus on learning, which hopefully will produce positive attainment results.” (Primary)*

*“Children have certainly been more willing to engage with staff and as a consequence been attending lessons for longer periods. Staff are approaching situations differently and this has been well received by the children.” (Other – Middle School)*

*“Staff have been able to support children to engage more with their learning, with a particular strength in supporting them back into the classroom after there has been a problem (for example on the playground or at home) which previously would have been difficult for them.” (Primary)*

Pupils were more “ready to learn” and spending more time in the classroom, while there was less need for behavioural sanctions (which itself meant more time for learning):

*“Attendance of children ‘on the edge of care’ .... has improved and behaviour incidents have decreased.” (Secondary)*

*“Improved attendance. Reduced negative behaviour incidents. Reduced FTEs [and] no PExs<sup>10</sup>. Improved GCSE outcomes for our most vulnerable learners, and groups.” (Secondary)*

Finally, headteachers made two specific observations about the consequences of Covid-19. The first was that the training would likely have had greater impact on attainment under normal circumstances, but that the disruption of the pandemic had compromised this to some extent; a “loss of momentum”, as one described it. The second was that the training had been extremely useful to the school in handling the pandemic, which had itself been traumatic for many pupils. This is encapsulated in the following quotes:

*“The training that we received had a huge impact on the way in which the school planned the [Covid-19] recovery curriculum. The material from the attachment training was central to our planning and thinking. Staff were much more aware of the needs of the young people and felt confident in using it. Without this training the approach would have been far less effective. I am so pleased that we had engaged in the programme. The assessment results do show a gap between vulnerable children and the rest of the cohort, however, by using the attachment approach we are now able to make a positive impact on their learning and their emotional wellbeing.” (Other – Middle School)*

*“I really enjoyed this course and I truly believed it helped us as a staff to get through the trauma of Covid and to help all our children [and] school community to move on.” (Primary)*

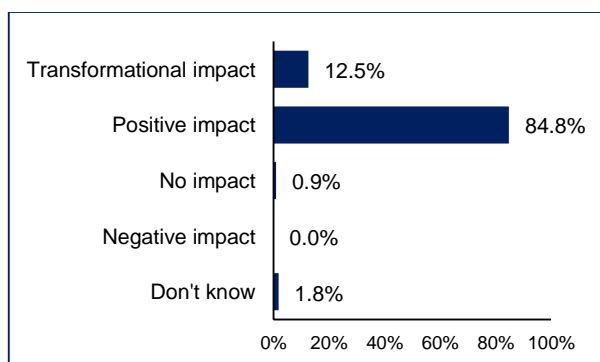
<sup>10</sup> Fixed-term and permanent exclusions.

#### 4.8 Overall impact on the school

Headteachers were asked for their professional opinion on the impact of the training on the school as a whole, using a four-point scale: ‘negative impact’, ‘no impact’, ‘positive impact’ or ‘transformational impact’.

As seen in Figure 7, fourteen headteachers (12.5%) felt that the training had led to a ‘transformational impact’, with a further 95 (84.8%) judging it to have had a ‘positive impact’. None felt there had been a ‘negative impact’; one felt there had been ‘no impact’ and two did not know.

Figure 7: Overall impact of training within the school



None of the headteachers whose school had received Simple support from their local authority felt that there had been ‘transformational impact’ – all of these had received Moderate or Complex support. Headteachers who had more than ten years of experience were the most likely to report ‘transformational impact’ (18.2%). There were no meaningful differences between school types.

#### 4.9 Post-training changes within the school

Finally, headteachers were asked for their professional opinion on the change that had occurred within their school through the

question: ‘Do you think that attachment and trauma awareness has been sustainably embedded within the school?’ They were asked to respond through one of six options:

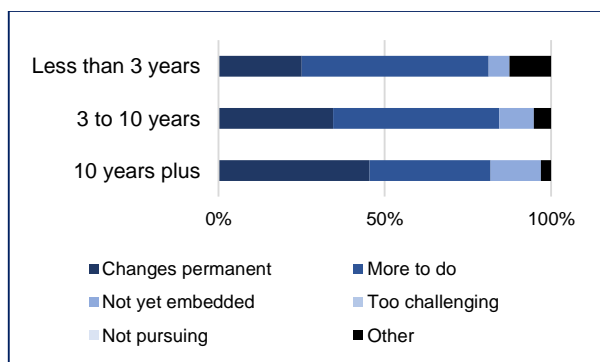
- Yes – we have made changes that are now permanent
- Maybe – we have made progress, but there is more we want to do
- Maybe – we have made progress, but it’s not yet fully embedded
- No – we have tried to make progress, but it has been too challenging
- No – we have decided not to pursue attachment and trauma awareness
- Other

Overall, 40 headteachers (35.7%) stated that their school had made permanent changes as a result of the training. A further 53 (47.3%) reported that they had made progress, but that the school had more to do, with thirteen (11.6%) reporting that the progress made had not yet been fully embedded. None of the headteachers felt that no progress had been made, for either of the available reasons. The remaining six chose the ‘other’ option: three of these explained that progress had been challenging due to staffing changes at the school, one described challenges with specific pupils, one described their next steps with changes in the school and one explained that they had only recently joined the school.

Headteachers in primary schools (37.8%) and other providers (50.0%) were somewhat more likely to report embedded changes than those in secondary (28.6%) and special (27.3%) schools.

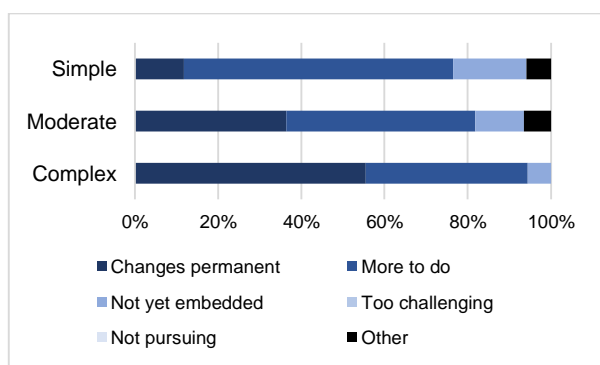
Figure 8 shows that headteachers with more than ten years’ experience were also more likely say that changes in their school were permanent, with 45.5% doing so, compared to 34.5% of those with between three and ten years’ experience and 25.0% of those with less than three years as a headteacher.

Figure 8: Nature of change within the school, by headteacher experience



Furthermore, Figure 9 shows the relationship between change within the school and the level of support provided by the local authority. Headteachers in schools receiving Complex support were markedly more likely to report permanent changes (55.5%) than those receiving Moderate (36.4%) or Simple (11.8%) support.

Figure 9: Nature of change within the school, by level of local authority support



Headteachers were asked to identify the specific changes that their school had made following the training through an open text response; 86 (76.8%) did so. Table 2 below summarises the responses; as many headteachers identified multiple changes, the percentages sum to more than 100%.

Table 2: Changes made following training

Changes made	%
Revision of school policies – behaviour, wellbeing, mental health etc.	58%
Adoption of new everyday techniques or approaches – e.g. emotion coaching	26%
Additional staff training, new reflection time and integration into staff induction	21%
Increased focus on needs of – and support for – individual students	16%
Increased understanding of pupils’ needs and changed staff attitudes	15%
Shift in the language used and new focus on relationships	13%
Involvement of pupils and parents in discussions about emotional health	8%
Recruitment of new staff or reallocation of existing staff	8%
Changes to physical spaces – nurture hubs, quiet zones etc.	7%
Reinforcement of changes made prior to the training	3%

The groupings used in Table 2 were developed inductively from the responses. It is important to remember that these responses were unprompted and will likely therefore represent an underestimate of their prevalence. In addition, some of the changes are effectively nested – for example, revisions to a school-wide policy will lead to changes in everyday strategies and staff awareness, but headteachers may not have specifically noted the latter. Table 2 therefore gives an indication of the ranges of the changes made and the percentages should be treated as indicative only. The remainder of this section provides more detail about each of these groupings.

The most commonly mentioned changes were reviews to existing school policies. In around three-quarters of cases, this related to the behaviour policy. The typical change described was a shift in emphasis away from

sanctions and punishment and towards a more relational approach, such as in the following example:

*“We have re-written our behaviour regulation policy to encourage a more humanist approach to understanding behaviour regulation. There is a wider understanding, amongst staff, that behaviour is communication and there is generally a need behind the behaviour. Strategies for regulating behaviour are more considerate and thoughtful. Restorative conversations are used effectively as a reparation tool after crisis events, have had a greater impact on relationships around school.”*  
(Primary)

Several noted that they had rebadged the policy as a ‘relationship policy’ or similar to stress the shift in emphasis towards *“behaviour [being] managed in a way that prevents escalation”*, with several noting a fall in exclusions. Other schools reported creating or reviewing their policies on mental health, wellbeing, safeguarding and/or looked after children in light of the training.

Around one-quarter of headteachers mentioned the adoption of new techniques or approaches to supporting vulnerable children. In most instances, no precise details were provided (e.g. *“We were already using some of the strategies that were suggested so we have built on these”*). Specific practices that were mentioned included emotion coaching, nurture groups, play therapy and meet-and-greet at the start of the school day. Several described their new approach as being more *“flexible”* or *“responsive”* to individual needs.

The third most commonly mentioned change was the ongoing integration of attachment and trauma awareness into the staffing infrastructure of the school. This included the provision of regular follow-up and refresher training sessions and its inclusion in the

induction procedures for new staff. This could be supplemented by setting aside time for staff to reflect on and discuss their practice in the context of continuing professional development. Four headteachers conceptualised this change as marking and embedding a wider shift in their school’s ethos or values.

One-in-six headteachers reported that the training had led to a greater focus on the needs of individual vulnerable children within their school and how these might best be met. This is clearly related to the earlier grouping about techniques and approaches, but responses were placed in this group if the emphasis was on highly individualised practices rather than more general classroom or group practices.

Some of these responses related to the identification of vulnerable children and building a robust evidence base about their needs. One talked about how they had *“set up an ACEs<sup>11</sup> register”* and another a *“risk and protective factor profile”* for each pupil, while a third had engaged more closely with parents:

*“With some parent conversations, we now ask sensitively about birth, post birth and early experiences. This sometimes helps us to identify challenges with some junior school children and helps us to support the family more effectively. It has been interesting how many times this has been identified as a significant issue from parents in engaging with their child or developing a good relationship.”*  
(Primary)

The other responses placed in this grouping related to how the school was meeting pupils’ identified needs. Diverse practices were outlined, including allocating a lead member of staff to each pupil, the use of a team-around-the-student approach and the

<sup>11</sup> Adverse childhood experiences.



creation of support cards. A headteacher for a specialist provider for young mothers described how they had rethought staff meetings:

*“We look at [the] mums’ behaviour and babies’ behaviour and school and nursery staff agree strategies / scripts / consistent approaches to both.”* (Other – Alternative Provision)

The next two groupings, mentioned by 15% and 13% of headteachers respectively, were closely related. The first grouping focused on how the school was supporting a growing understanding around attachment and trauma among staff that enabled them to engage more positively with pupils. Some also remarked on changing attitudes, with more empathy for pupils’ unseen challenges. The second grouping related to conscious changes in the language used by staff towards (and about) pupils and the concomitant development of more positive relationships. These two elements were often seen as being closely linked:

*“Staff are far more communicative and understanding of our most vulnerable students.”* (Secondary)

Consistency and appropriateness of language was noted as important by several headteachers, including in the context of emotion coaching, which one felt had been “a very positive success” in their school. Another felt that the training had “given us a shared language to explore the challenges that children face”.

The remaining four groupings were all relatively small and each mentioned by fewer than ten headteachers. The first related to the active involvement of pupils and parents in discussions about wellbeing in the school. One school held information events for parents, while three had developed curriculum content for pupils:

*“[We have a] new PSHE<sup>12</sup> programme linked to emotional literacy in place.”*  
(Primary)

The second related to the recruitment of new staff (or redeployment of existing staff) to meet the school’s objectives around attachment and trauma awareness, typically through ELSAs<sup>13</sup> or the development of a pastoral support team, but one secondary school had engaged a school counsellor.

The third related to physical changes to the school. Most of these were new spaces being created to support pupils’ wellbeing and their ability to regulate their emotions; nurture hubs, sensory rooms, reflection areas and safe spaces were all mentioned. Two headteachers (one primary and one secondary) discussed their shift away from using internal exclusion/isolation spaces, with one rethinking this space as being about “supportive ‘time in’ with teachers [and] support staff”.

Finally, three headteachers reported that their school had made (unspecified) changes prior to the training, but that the training had helped to reinforce these.

#### 4.10 Anticipated future changes

Headteachers were asked what future changes they anticipated making with respect to attachment and trauma awareness; 76 (67.8%) provided a response, but around half of these simply said that they were going to continue to embed the work that they had described in their previous answer.

Many of the remaining responses described planned changes that were identical to those outlined in the previous section – e.g. reviewing their behaviour policy where they had not already done so. For brevity, these are not repeated here.

<sup>12</sup> Personal, social, health and economic education.

<sup>13</sup> Emotional literacy support assistants.

Of the novel responses, four headteachers described their desire to implement a system of psychological supervision for their staff; especially those working most closely with vulnerable children. This recognised the strains caused by supporting pupils and the potential for secondary trauma. Three headteachers had identified particular challenges (break times, inexperienced teaching staff and supporting young women) that they were seeking to address. Two referred to joining networks with other schools to share experiences.

Finally, several headteachers used this opportunity to reflect on the additional challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of the organisational disruption (which had delayed progress) and the direct impact on staff, pupils and their families:

*“Our nurture and pastoral provision is under review as we have seen SEMH<sup>14</sup> needs soar as a result of the pandemic. We are looking to increase the dedicated team and how we might adjust the practice further so that those with the highest need are more often supported in class by any staff member to engage with learning.”* (Primary)

*“We have not [yet] embedded our whole-school behaviour approach to ensure that all students can meet their potential. At the end of the year we will be undertaking a significant piece of work to refresh this approach and bring in all our learning from the Trauma project, lockdown and good mental health in schools.”* (Secondary)

Notable here is the link being drawn between attachment and trauma awareness and wider agendas around mental health and emotional wellbeing.

#### 4.11 Summative comments

At the end of the questionnaire, headteachers were given the opportunity to make any additional comments. Some of these related to the previous questions and have been included therein as appropriate (e.g. they further described past or planned changes). Most of the remainder were general comments about the quality or effectiveness of the training or wider support provided by their local authority:

*“The training has been wonderful. The impact on our children and practice has been fantastic and the wide reaching impact on understanding behaviour will be immeasurable.”* (Primary)

Others described it as “a transformational and exciting journey”, where the majority of their staff had “come on leaps and bounds”. Two headteachers noted that it had been difficult to bring all staff on the journey, with one suggesting that there could be additional training for headteachers about implementing change in this space.

Two extended quotes were particularly notable in the nuanced professional judgements that they presented. The first focused on the additional challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and how this created uncertainties about the efficacy of an attachment and trauma aware approach:

*“Unsurprisingly we have found the return after lockdown challenging. We had a very high number of [behaviour] cases last year (and again this term) when school was/has been in session. This and the number of staff absent has made it extremely challenging. I know we are not alone with this, but it has sometimes been hard to convince staff (and ourselves) that this is the right approach (we know it is!), as it would*

<sup>14</sup> Social, emotional and mental health.

*be easier to exclude students... We have however had to [exclude] some students purely because we have no other options, but we have kept these to a minimum and spent time to make the reintegration meaningful. We knew this would be likely, but it is hard in practice when there is reduced capacity in the staff body.” (Secondary)*

The second was from a headteacher who had joined the school since the training and so they were able to reflect on its impact with a degree of detachment:

*“When I first joined [school name] I was struck by how caring the staff are. It was what encouraged me to apply for the headteacher post here and I'm sure this is founded on the attachment approach taken. I know we are a very caring group of people which makes this a special school [in which] to work. Despite all the challenges we have in our area with high deprivation and a range of other tricky social and economic factors, our attendance is high, children are really happy at school and we work very closely with the families. It is a strong community, extending to the home.” (Primary)*

## 5. Conclusions

This questionnaire was intended to compensate, in part, for the loss of school-level measures of school outcomes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We took the view that it would be invalid to evaluate the impact of attachment and trauma training using data on attendance, exclusions, progress and attainment that had been profoundly affected by school closures and related factors. This was substantiated by the headteachers themselves in their comments about the difficulties of reliably assessing learning at the current time.

Instead, we have surveyed the professional opinions of headteachers whose schools received attachment and trauma training. The accounts provided by the 112 respondents offers a clear view that the training had a positive impact on outcomes for vulnerable children in their schools; indeed, one-in-eight felt that this had been transformative.

The findings here triangulate well with those from Working Papers 1 and 2, especially with respect to the analogy of ‘the journey’, where the implementation of attachment and trauma awareness takes time and concerted effort in the face of challenges and competing priorities.

Headteachers saw standalone value in the training itself in increasing staff understanding, raising confidence and seeding new everyday practices like emotion coaching. However, it was also valued for its role in catalysing higher-level changes to policy (e.g. behaviour), macro-practices (e.g. monitoring) and ethos (e.g. staff induction) in the school, which were also seen as key to supporting vulnerable students.

It is important to note that while the response rate was relatively high for a school-based survey, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, just over half of those headteachers invited to participate declined to do so. As mentioned earlier, this was partly related to the timing of the training, with fewer responses from schools receiving it in late 2020 or early 2021 – this is potentially because they felt that it was too early to assess the impact or that they did not feel as connected to the Timpson Programme as the earlier waves of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is also likely that headteachers who felt that their school did not benefit from the training would be less disposed to respond – indeed, these were barely represented in the data collected. It is difficult to judge the scale of this form of self-selection bias in contrast to

other headteachers who did not respond due to time pressures or as they had only recently joined the school, for example.

What it is possible to securely conclude, therefore, is that a large proportion of schools who received attachment and trauma awareness training had experienced an improvement in outcomes for vulnerable children, based on the headteacher's professional judgement. In the responses, 109 headteachers expressed this view; this is 41.9% of the 260 to whom the questionnaire was sent. This can therefore be seen as a minimum figure, given that the views of non-responders are unknown and at least some are likely to have shared this positive assessment.

This strongly suggests that the training was an effective catalyst for change leading to improved outcomes in many (and probably most) schools. While it is unfortunate that the Covid-19 pandemic precluded triangulation against published measures, there is no good reason to question the professional judgement of headteachers across different school types and local authority areas; indeed, the most experienced headteachers tended to give the most positive assessment of the training's effectiveness.

Finally, we note that several respondents took the opportunity of the open text sections of the questionnaire to make two particularly useful observations about the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, the school closures and staff sickness had impeded their progress on making organisational changes in the school. They felt that the impact of the training would have been stronger and more sustained in more normal circumstances. Secondly, the content of the training and the resulting changes in policy and practice had helped the school to adapt to the new emotional and mental health challenges (e.g. pupil bereavement) presented by the pandemic itself.