

Attachment and trauma awareness training: analysis of pre-Covid staff interviews and pupil focus groups in five case study schools

November 2021

Key findings:

- Attachment and trauma training was well-regarded by school staff across all roles
- All five schools reported important changes in practice and policy as a direct result of the training
- Training seeded increases in staff knowledge and confidence in working with vulnerable young people
- Increase in relational practice, with an emphasis on language and emotions
- All five schools reviewed their behaviour policies – emphasis on relationships and restorative approaches over sanctions
- Schools reported positive impact on young people – wellbeing, engagement and academic progress
- Low engagement or inability to adapt reported among a minority of staff
- Changes happen at different speeds – analogy of the whole school ‘journey’, dependent on internal and external factors
- Changes could be precarious and needed attention to sustainably embed them

Report overview:

This report continues the publication of results 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 lockdown period between January and April 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. Rather than publishing the findings from three distinct ‘waves’ of schools, we are now viewing the pandemic as a watershed moment. This working paper therefore analyses data collected from five schools (three primary schools and two all-age special schools) in two data collection ‘sweeps’ prior to the pandemic.

This pragmatic approach reflects the reality that our research strategy has been unavoidably compromised. The schools represented in this report are a small subset of those involved in the Programme and their inclusion here results from being those first in the schedule for data collection prior to the lockdown period.

As a result, the findings in this report should be treated with some caution. It is possible that the schools included are atypical for some reason, although there is no indication that this is the case. This approach echoes that used in Working Paper 1 (published in October 2020), which focused on pre-Covid responses from the staff survey.

We will be publishing additional working papers throughout the remainder of 2021 and early 2022. The final report will be published in October 2022.



Executive summary:

1. This report summarises interview and focus group data from five schools (three primary and two all-age special schools). Data were collected around the time that the school received ‘whole school’ attachment and trauma awareness training (in 2018 and early 2019) and again one year later.
2. The report draws on 40 interviews with school staff across various job roles, plus ten focus groups with pupils. Most of the data were collected face-to-face prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, but a small amount was collected online during the first lockdown.
3. The five schools had somewhat different starting points with respect to attachment and trauma awareness. All five reported making meaningful progress, partly as a result of the training itself and partly through subsequent changes in school policy and practice.
4. Participants reported that the training had increased both their understanding of attachment and trauma issues and their confidence in working with vulnerable young people. They felt that this was generally reflected across the schools in which they worked.
5. A key element in this increased confidence was a focus on the language used with young people, which participants felt enabled them to de-escalate difficult situations and develop more positive relationships with pupils. This was often conceptualised as a ‘toolkit’ that could be (and was being) applied in everyday contexts.
6. Since the training, all five schools had reviewed their behaviour policies and had shifted towards a more relational and restorative approach. Participants were generally supportive of this and felt it was working well, but there were some concerns around parity.
7. Participants identified several barriers to the implementation of attachment and trauma aware approaches. The most important of these was ensuring buy-in across the staff team, with several examples given of colleagues who were disengaged from the training or struggling to adapt their practices to the school’s new expectations.
8. Other identified barriers included a lack of staff time, perceived conflicting priorities and staff who had their own issues with attachment and trauma (e.g. with their own children). There were also reported instances of misunderstandings about changes in policy and practice, highlighting the importance of senior leadership and strong communication.
9. Several participants discussed the importance of ongoing training, reflection and discussion to successfully embed attachment and trauma awareness over time. The progress in the school was seen as potentially precarious and threatened by changes in senior staff.
10. One school talked about how recruitment procedures were used to attract staff who were comfortable contributing to an attachment and trauma aware setting. This was seen as providing long-term sustainability for the approach.
11. Participants generally felt that the changes resulting from the training had supported pupils’ wellbeing, engagement and learning.
12. The pupil focus groups provided little confirmatory data for this, potentially reflecting their limited scope to perceive incremental changes over long time periods. They did, however, talk about staff being kind and – in one instance – reported that the school environment had become calmer.
13. At the time of the second data collection sweep, all five schools were intending to continue building their attachment and trauma awareness.

1. Background

Launched in 2017, the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme is working with over 300 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 identified¹.

The purpose of the Programme is to explore the impact of the training in schools, from the perspectives of staff and young people and through analysis of aggregate school-level data on attainment, progress, attendance and exclusion. More information about the Programme can be found on the website².

Under the original research design, the schools are split into three waves based on the date of their training: Wave 1 prior to July 2019, Wave 2 between September 2019 and July 2020, and Wave 3 planned for between September and December 2020.

Among these, 30 schools were identified to be case studies, with interviews with a range of staff³ (senior leaders, teachers, teaching assistants and others) and focus groups with young people. Similar to the surveys, these were to take place prior to the training (Sweep 1) and one year later (Sweep 2) to explore changes in the school over time.

Local authorities were asked to nominate potential case study schools across a spread of phases and school types, as far as possible. This was broadly based on their assessment of which schools were likely to engage positively with the training and be in a position to participate in a research study

spanning several years; in some instances, the schools actively volunteered.

The final case study schools were selected following discussions with the headteacher or other senior staff where the research design was explained in detail and gatekeeper permissions sought. They nominated which staff and pupils would participate, subject to securing their consent or assent. They were asked to identify five staff across a range of roles (e.g. senior leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, support staff and others) and a mixture of around six pupils, including a subset who were in care or otherwise considered by the school to be likely to benefit from an attachment and trauma aware approach.

As such, it is important to note that the case study schools were not randomly selected and nor were the individual participants within each school. Rather, they represent those chosen for their likely willingness to engage with a research study and – to a greater or lesser extent – probably represent those schools and individuals that felt most likely to be positively disposed to attachment and trauma awareness (although this is not the brief that we provided). We therefore acknowledge the scope for selection bias in these data; a wider selection of voices was sought through the staff and pupil surveys⁴.

2. Covid-19 pandemic

The Programme was midway through undertaking Sweep 2 case study interviews and focus groups in our Wave 1 schools and Sweep 1 interviews and focus groups in the Wave 2 case study schools when the Covid-19 pandemic struck in March 2020. We subsequently paused data collection while

¹ 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.

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

³ Includes governors in some schools – ‘staff’ is used throughout for simplicity.

⁴ We previously published Working Paper 1 focusing on the pre-Covid survey responses from 24 primary schools, which can be found here: <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Timpson-working-paper-1.pdf>

schools adapted to circumstances, recommencing tentatively from June 2020 using Microsoft Teams.

It is important to note, therefore, that this report reflects a response to the exigencies of the Covid-19 pandemic. Feedback from schools suggests that the pandemic has radically changed the importance of attachment and trauma work and so we have taken the decision to publish earlier and shorter reports covering only the data for those Wave 1 schools that had completed Sweep 2 of the interviews and focus groups before the pandemic.

There is no particular reason to believe that the schools covered by this report were atypical – they were simply those coming first in the cycle of data collection.

This report therefore draws mainly on the Sweep 1 and 2 data collected from Wave 1 schools staff prior to the pandemic – i.e. one year after the schools had received attachment and trauma awareness training. Specifically, it covers three primary schools and two all-age special schools across three local authorities who had their training prior to March 2019 and therefore completed their Sweep 2 interviews and focus groups prior to March 2020⁵.

The primary focus of the analysis in this report is on changes within the school since the training took place, whether in terms of policy and/or practice, attitudes among staff or levels of confidence in working with vulnerable young people.

3. Data overview

Three case study primary schools and two special schools took part in pre-Covid focus groups and interviews. Across the five

schools, seventeen interviews and five focus groups were carried at Sweep 1 followed by 23 interviews and five focus groups in Sweep 2. Of the Sweep 2 interviews and focus groups, 56% of staff were interviewed at both Sweep 1 and 2 with 72% pupils followed up in the Sweep 2 focus groups. The profile of these responses is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: school overview

School	Type	Sweep 1 staff	Sweep 2 staff	Focus groups
School 1*	Primary	3	4	Sweep 1 and 2
School 2*	Primary	3	4	Sweep 1 and 2
School 3	Primary	4	5	Sweep 1 and 2
School 4	Special (2-19)	3	4	Sweep 1 and 2
School 5	Special (2-16)	4	6	Sweep 1 and 2

* same federation with same executive headteacher and some shared staff

The majority of the interviews and focus groups were carried out prior to lockdown, however a small number in Sweep 2 were carried out after lockdowns had been enforced. These interviews, however, focused on practices at the school before the Covid-19 pandemic.

We used framework analysis⁶ to analyse the case study data. This deductive approach allowed the data to be organised thematically, whilst also allowing for the coding of emerging themes.

After initial familiarisation, we organised emerging themes according to questions we wanted the data to answer. Any codes that could not be organised in this way were

⁵ A small number of interviews and focus groups were completed online after March 2020.

⁶ See Ritchie, J and L. Spencer (1994) Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research, in B. Bryman and R

Burgess (eds.) Analyzing qualitative data, Routledge: London and New York, pp. 173-194.



included, as they emerged, through the analysis process. We worked together to code the data based on the established framework, with the flexibility to identify and discuss the appropriateness of any emerging areas.

4. Sweep 1: starting points

We begin by presenting vignettes of each pre-Covid case study school to illustrate the point at which each school was at Sweep 1 of the data collection – i.e. at the point at which the school had training organised through their local authority.

4.1 School 1 and School 2

Schools 1 and 2 are both primary schools, part of the same federation. School 1 is more established whereas School 2 is a more recent amalgamation of two primary schools in a phase of development and improvement. Interviews at these schools mentioned a variety of support staff who were able to provide additional provisions of care for children within the school. These provisions ranged from teaching assistants, parent support advisors, play therapists as well as specialist support for teachers who might be affected by the impact of working with a child with history of trauma. The schools both took a holistic approach to supporting children, and the schools' ethos was geared towards this:

'He [executive headteacher] always talks about the importance of education but the importance of children being happy first.' (School 2, parent support advisor)

Recognition of these needs indicated that the school had a whole school approach to embedding attachment and trauma informed practice into their schools. Although this was discussed in depth by the executive head, it

was confirmed in interviews with a teacher and teaching assistant.

Schools 1 and 2 felt ready to learn more about attachment and trauma related practices in an effort to ensure all staff were able to follow this approach and work *'to the same standards.'* Staff at School 1 reported feeling prepared to continue on this journey whereas the parent and pastoral support workers at School 2 recognised that not all of their colleagues were quite ready for the transition. Staff recognised that it was important for the pupils that there was a consistent approach to behaviour management:

'If we're all singing off of the same hymn sheet that helps with the progression as that child goes up the school.' (School 2, pastoral support worker)

For Sweep 1, we assessed staff perception of their understanding of attachment and trauma and their confidence working with vulnerable children. On the whole, staff at Schools 1 and 2 had a good understanding of attachment and how trauma can present through children's behaviours. The schools were already focused on working with children to help manage behaviours and support learning bearing in mind any issues linked to attachment and trauma. A SENCO at School 1 identified that:

'teachers have a very good understanding of how it can sort of manifest and present itself and how we are able to see it. But I also feel that we don't know enough about what we do with it next.' (School 1, SENCO)

Staff appeared to welcome strategies to help them address issues that pupils with attachment and trauma difficulties might present. Teaching and support staff at Schools 1 and 2 reflected positively on the training, especially the delivery by *'enthusiastic and knowledgeable'* trainers; the

impact of which helped them to feel more confident in their responses to pupil behaviours. Attachment and trauma awareness training was delivered by a professional training company and attended by teaching and support staff. The trainer covered emotion coaching, attachment, trauma and resilience in practice over a one-day session. The inclusion of both theory and practice was useful, as reported by staff at both schools. The techniques employed by the training professionals were appreciated, allowing staff to be introduced to or review concepts related to attachment and trauma, as well as reflect on current pupils and managing their behaviours. Staff reported that they felt it was important to recap and revisit the training regularly to keep it at the forefront of people's minds. The safeguarding governor at School 2 suggested a whole school approach would have been beneficial, for example, including lunchtime supervisors in the training to develop consistency in their responses to pupil behaviour.

4.2 School 3

School 3 is a primary school that was starting the journey to becoming attachment and trauma aware, led by the headteacher. The headteacher had been interested in the school becoming attachment aware for a few years prior to the training but did not have the resources to pursue it until this point.

Learning mentors provide support to pupils both in lessons and out of class, either in groups or on a one to one basis. The school was able to offer limited therapies for those children who need them.

Despite having staff who are able to offer varying levels of pastoral intervention, school staff still felt a pressure to support pupils with high levels of need:

'So, there are children that shouldn't actually be in this school, but because of the other place being shut down or

now not being available, or the threshold is so high to try to get them in, there are more in mainstream. So, we're dealing with more attachment issues and there's no more staff for it.'
(School 3, learning mentor)

There were mixed responses to becoming attachment and trauma aware. The headteacher was a key driver in the school's journey,

'Children in general are dealing with more, families are dealing with more, but also the academic expectations have been raised so high and as a head, I feel that my primary role is to make sure I don't put the pressure on the teachers and I don't put the pressure on the children. So that's the angle that we sort of come from, that we've got to say, you know, "What do we think our children need? What can we do about it? What is the training that the staff need?"' (School 3, headteacher)

Despite this it was not clear whether the rest of the staff were ready to participate in changes initiated by the training:

Interviewer: 'But at the moment would you say School 3 is probably at the beginning of that journey and are staff feeling supported to be on that journey? Are they feeling torn?'

Participant: 'I wouldn't say they feel torn. I don't even know if they'd know they're on a journey to be deadly honest with you.' (School 3, learning mentor)

Although the learning mentor acknowledged the benefits of being attachment and trauma aware, she was also concerned about the mixed messages being presented to other pupils with regards the use of sanctions:

'So, people were actually seeing that it doesn't matter how you behave in those

classes, you get taken on a trip the next day, and it upset the staff because all these other children ... they've got no power.' (School 3, learning mentor)

She felt that there might be some confusion around how using a more attachment and trauma informed approach might be seen as rewarding particular behaviours which then might be repeated again. This suggested that, prior to the training, not all staff in the school fully understood why their pupils might have been behaving in this way.

Staff at School 3 had mixed awareness of attachment and trauma, associating this mainly with children in, and on the edge of, care. However, the training also increased awareness that all children may be susceptible to the effects of disrupted attachment or traumatic events, regardless of care status. There was an acknowledgement of thinking about how they could support their pupils' needs. Staff spoke about responding to pupils' emotional needs by having a designated space for a child if they needed to leave their classroom to self-regulate:

'We're going to move a cloakroom downstairs so that we've actually got that area that we can sort of say "That is a safe space."' (School 3, headteacher)

There was also reference to the importance of teachers being able to understand pupil behaviour and responding appropriately:

"The teacher needs to adapt to the child, not the other way around" (School 3, learning mentor).

Reflection on the attachment and trauma training suggested that most staff from School 3 found the training useful. An educational psychology service delivered a one whole-day session covering attachment awareness, then schools could choose particular topics (e.g. Theraplay^{®7}, Emotion

Coaching) to have as follow up training offered by the same provider. Although that initial training day was reported to be overwhelming for some, the benefits of delivering theory and practice were noted and reported by staff, however, not all staff were able to attend the training session.

Participants suggested that engagement in the training session was varied, leading to questions of prioritisation between different staff roles. The headteacher was keen to ensure that all staff were given the opportunity to take part in the training in order to start working towards moving the school, as a whole, in this direction. Despite this, an observation made by the learning mentor indicated that not all staff were invested in the training:

'One teacher sat there on his laptop carrying on doing his planning, because that was how important it was to him.' (School 3, learning mentor)

As with Schools 1 and 2, staff at School 3 felt that it was important to recap and revisit the training regularly to keep it at the forefront of people's minds. For some staff in the school, doing the training has developed more peer support among the colleagues:

'I benefited from the training. It opened my eyes to a few more things within my classroom, especially with the two challenging children that I have. It opened my eyes to know that there is support around me, I don't have to deal with it on my own. I'm not afraid to ... when I've had a bad day with these two boys in particular, it's okay for me to get upset about it because it's quite draining on me and I know that I can go and talk to somebody, a higher member of staff, about that and then they're there to pick up my pieces and say, "Right, okay. Well, tomorrow it's a new day. Let's do this. Why don't you have a

⁷ Theraplay[®] is a family and child therapy based on play.

bit of time out? I'll take them to do a nice activity, and then we'll bring them back." I've benefited from it, and I'm okay talking about it.' (School 3, teaching assistant)

offer those pupils that we weren't sure how to support before I suppose."
(School 4, pastoral manager)

4.3 School 4

School 4 is one of two special schools included in this working paper. It is a school for children and young people aged between 2 and 19 with learning and cognition difficulties who may also have a range of additional special educational needs, such as communication and interaction difficulties, speech and language difficulties, physical difficulties and sensory impairments.

School 4 employs various therapists to do sessions for speech and language, animal, music, play and art therapy. Most staff had previously been trained in de-escalating challenging or violent situations, using spaces to calm pupils down rather than isolation. However, there had been nothing specifically aimed at attachment and trauma.

A high proportion of children in care attended School 4 and staff felt that a deeper understanding of attachment and trauma would help them to support these pupils better:

'I think we're aware that there is a lot of our pupils that have attachment issues, and more and more of our pupils are being diagnosed with attachment disorders⁸... we've got quite a lot of looked-after children ... And a lot of our pupils may have had difficulty at birth or in their early childhood that have affected them as they've kind of grown up, and we can see ... I think the more and more we've learnt about attachment the more support we can

This view was also conveyed by a parent governor at School 4. She reported that teaching staff had shown an interest in pursuing attachment and trauma training and thought it would be helpful given the needs of the pupil population at their school, including those children with recognised needs relating to attachment. At the time of the data collection, soon after the first training session, School 4 had begun implementing specific techniques to support children experiencing such difficulties. Examples included providing a safe space in a staff office, playing games and giving the child the time and opportunity to express themselves. Despite this, the parent governor felt that not all staff understood how to support children with attachment needs:

'Even in a special school I don't think that they sometimes see that it's not bad behaviour... He's not happy with this situation, it's making him feel really nervous, really scared, and that's why they're lashing out.' (School 4, parent governor)

This was echoed by the learning mentor at School 4, so although those interviewed thought the majority of staff were committed to changing their responses to challenging behaviour, others struggled to move forward:

'Another 40 percent probably aren't as in tune as some staff, so they are quick to ... not escalate the situation, but are quick to use physical restraint ... I think they think that's the safest way to protect the other children but not specifically that one child that is going through that crisis.' (School 4, learning mentor)

⁸ We draw a distinction here between 'attachment disorders' as relatively rare psychiatric diagnoses and more general issues with relationships that will be experienced by many young

people. Some participants conflated the two terminologies and it was sometimes unclear which they meant.

Despite this, all of the staff at School 4 spoke about the importance of training in attachment and trauma awareness to help understand challenging behaviours. There was also recognition that the wider school staff (e.g. lunch time supervisors) should take part in attachment and trauma awareness training in order to create consistency in all of their responses to pupil behaviour. The importance of ensuring all staff received the training, was highlighted by the parent governor.

The training for School 4 staff was delivered in after-school twilight sessions, rather than over an INSET⁹ day and was attended by a large proportion of teaching and support staff. Although some staff reported that the training covered topics that they were already familiar with, they still enjoyed the way the training was delivered and having the opportunity to refresh their learning. The practical applications of the training, such as emotion coaching, were also well received.

4.4 School 5

School 5 is a large special needs school for children aged 2 to 16 years. Children attending this school have severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties and physical difficulties. A small number of pupils have moderate and additional learning difficulties. The school is able to offer various therapies and has specialised facilities for its pupils.

Similar to the previous school, School 5 reported a high proportion of children in care attending the school, for whom the attachment and trauma training would be appropriate:

'And out of that we have a lot of children that come from backgrounds of all different kinds, but a number of our children are in social care, do have

foster carers, and a lot of them have had traumatic beginnings to their lives. So, it sort of ticked all the boxes really.' (School 5, parent governor)

Although there was a good understanding of attachment and trauma amongst staff in School 5 there was still some difficulty in putting the definition into words:

'And it's just about understanding why they're possibly misbehaving and whatever, and that actually although the behaviour is almost ... that always seems to come to the forefront, oh, you know, they're messing about, they're kicking, they're hurting, whatever, but they don't mean to do that. There's something else deep down that you have to sort of get to and unravel and unpick, and try and sort that out in the child's mind, as well as their special need obviously as well with our type of children, to try and work on mend those areas of being a good friend or whatever, to try and stop, break the habits.' (School 5, learning support worker)

Training for School 5 was provided by a commercial training provider and covered emotion coaching, attachment, trauma and resilience in practice. The grounding in attachment and trauma issues and practical strategies were something that staff felt they needed:

'We'd had an awful lot of training on identifying mental health issues, but staff would constantly say, "We feel we know how to identify them, but we don't know what to do about them." And I think the ... training really helped the staff come up with some positive strategies they could use in the classroom.' (School 5, headteacher)

⁹ In-service training day.

The training was delivered on an INSET day to a mixed group of support staff and teaching staff. One staff member found the training helpful as it allowed consistency of learning across the staff groups:

'I think because all the staff, they were on the INSET, so ... all their knowledge and skills were sort of updated at the same time. It was very much a training day where you could ask questions, where you didn't feel silly asking those sort of questions, and it was quite thought provoking really. And it did raise awareness, I think, to, well, I think to everybody – you know, personally, it did to myself – of traumas and attachment difficulties and why and how they happened and how to go forward with it.' (School 5, learning support worker).

The training was delivered during a one-day session. However, given the large number of staff at School 5, training was only attended by those staff who were able to (e.g. some part-time staff were not available on the day of training). The information was then shared with all staff with the help of educational psychologists:

'And to be honest in a big school like this that is very, very difficult. To have a whole school training session, we need everybody in the main hall and that's [omitted] class based staff in total, so that's a bit of an asking. What we have to do is use a working party who then disseminate that information down through heads of department, through people like that.' (School 5, principal)

Staff agreed that the training was helpful and appreciated the practical aspects of being able to discuss particular cases amongst a group with varying job roles bringing with it different perspectives:

'You're eight different people, most of us didn't know each other so with sort

of different aspects of life, and we were sort of throwing different ideas in, and associating what would be great for that child' (School 5, parent governor)

As with responses from the other schools, ongoing training was seen as preferable to one-off training sessions.

5. Sweep 2: changes over time

Each of the pre-Covid case study schools were revisited one-year post attachment and trauma awareness training. Interviews highlighted the differences and similarities both between schools and also within schools themselves. We will look thematically at the impact of the training on the staff and the schools they work in, ending with reflections on the schools' journeys between Sweep 1 and Sweep 2.

5.1 Attachment and trauma understanding

Staff were able to describe how their understanding of attachment and trauma had changed since the training had been delivered:

'And it was really sort of understanding of the attachment and why he behaved in this way, that I was able to sort of put myself in his shoes and to think of sort of behaviour strategies and just understand why he was attention seeking all the time, just looking for that attention. It was because it was like a physical need for him' (School 1, teaching assistant).

Training about the neurobiological lens for understanding how attachment and trauma impacts on the brain was particularly popular, with many staff members reporting that this had a big impact on the way that they understood attachment and trauma in pupils. Training had helped staff with the knowledge, techniques and strategies needed to manage

difficult situations and a reminder of the theory behind this was useful. Staff appreciated the sessions where they were able to reflect on specific pupils they were working with, giving the training a more practice-driven approach.

Most staff felt better equipped to deal with challenging behaviours. They were able to reflect on the training and utilise strategies that had been shared in the sessions:

‘So I do think it has had a positive impact on me like that because I will stop and think, think through the situation and then respond to how I think would be most appropriate.’

(School 1, teaching assistant)

Other staff reported that they had always responded to pupils empathetically with a view to understanding the reasons behind their behaviours. Nevertheless, they still felt that they were able to learn something from the training:

‘I think for me the main thing that I have appreciated is that my way of working with young people is exactly the same now as it was, you know, ten years ago, twenty years ago in that I have always had a very relationship focused approach to them. And now I feel like it's validated. Instead of me being the namby-pamby one ... So, I found that really helpful in moving this sort of more relational approach on through the school. But there were so many things, things about attachment friendly ways of managing a situation. So, we have things like, you know, scripts for restorative conversations that are really helpful, and we've differentiated them and got symbols alongside them to do with pupils who are operating at a different communication level, thinking about helping to, you know, ground the pupil in the here and now, and different strategies that we try to support that.’

(School 4, deputy headteacher)

The majority of staff at all schools reported learning and practicing strategies they had learnt through the attachment and trauma awareness training, regardless of the level of knowledge they had prior to the training.

5.2 Confidence

All staff reported feeling more confident following the training sessions. They felt that the increased knowledge of theory and strategies gave them the tools to be able to deal with challenging behaviour, especially when other staff members were available to support them:

‘And with some pupils, with most of the pupils they'll come in and I'll feel confident in being able to manage them because they know what they want and what they need, and then once they've done that they'll go back to their classroom. But there was one child in particular who would come in and I didn't know what she needed, she didn't know what she needed, and it just felt – she was quite frantic, which made me feel quite frantic and I just couldn't manage her in that situation ... And I feel that now, it's probably a bit of both of us though, but I feel more relaxed when she comes in and that I don't need to kind of find anything for her, or try and, you know, find her something so that she's able to return back to learning as soon as possible. That I can just let her be and let her explore and ask her “Oh, what's she looking for?” and if I can help her.’ (School 4, pastoral manager)

Training had made understanding attachment and trauma and applying the knowledge practically: *‘more accessible and not intimidating.’* Additionally, the training had helped a small number of staff to feel more confident challenging or opposing colleagues

who perhaps were not responding appropriately to challenging behaviours:

'I think I'm more confident in voicing my opinions with staff now. I'm a lot more confident to say, "Well, no". Yeah, basically saying, "No", but that's about it, really. (School 4, learning mentor)

The perception of confidence of staff was discussed in relation to their relationships with pupils and being able to respond in a more informed way:

'I'm confident that the vast majority of staff can meet the needs of the children. I wouldn't say I'm confident that all the staff can, but certainly a massive improvement from when I started governing about ten years ago now probably.' (School 4, parent governor)

Although confidence seemed to have increased across many of the staff interviewed, in the case of more difficult behaviours, staff still reported struggles:

'So yes, so extreme behaviours I suppose I do not feel confident to deal with, but otherwise I would give my best go and I would know who to go to if I needed some support.' (School 1, assistant headteacher)

However, they felt supported and confident that colleagues could help and support them if needed, especially as they felt that everyone was *'on the same page'* due to the training.

5.3 Changes in practice

Following the training there seemed to be more of a consistent response from staff members at Schools 1 and 2 to challenging behaviours, which in turn meant that pupils were more trusting of staff and knew what to expect from them. There were changes in how staff communicated with children:

'Speaking for myself personally here but I've definitely changed the way that I speak, and I would think very carefully about the words that I was choosing. And I would say, "Oh, how are you feeling" or "I can see that you're feeling so angry" or "I can see that you're feeling upset. What can I do to help you?'" (School 1, teaching assistant)

These changes in communication and language used with children were also reported in the other schools:

'They're saying the right things in terms of, "It's OK, you're OK, you need to calm down," but they're much better now at saying, giving the children a label for what they're feeling and helping them. So they might say to a child, "I can see you're really angry, I'm trying to help you." So I think there's been a culture shift.' (School 5, headteacher)

In some cases, this extended to communication between staff members:

'I would say the language around school is the thing that I've noticed the most. Absolutely, definitely noticed that, it's unmissable. Because the way the staff interact in the corridor, the way they speak to the children, the way they speak to each other, the language used is so much more positive.' (School 3, parent governor)

The specific changes in the way that staff used language also linked with how they were beginning to change their thinking about the behaviour and actions of pupils. Rather than demanding to know *why* a pupil was behaving in a particular way, staff were using language to explore emotions underlying the actions:

'I was thinking ... I can understand that's actually making it worse for them by using the question "why?", because

a lot of them don't understand why they can't - they haven't got the knowledge or the experiences to actually say [why] they're feeling like that. So I try to leave the word 'why' out now and try and put it in a different way... But more like, "What are you feeling? What's happening in your body?" (School 2, pastoral support worker)

This allowed children the capacity to articulate possible reasons for their behaviours and connect with their teachers. The pupil support team at Schools 1 and 2 were engaged to help teachers with individual pupils, worry boxes were introduced and one teacher reported greeting each child in her class every morning with a preferred greeting (e.g. a high five). This teacher also tried to incorporate using toys from a popular children's film to help her class explore and communicate their emotions. Following training, staff at all schools moved to using more restorative approaches to behavioural issues, which staff believed had a positive impact on pupils' interest and engagement in school.

Despite some of the barriers reported by School 3 staff, this school seemed keen to implement changes and this was evidenced by the approaches they had adopted to help manage behaviour, including playing games, using Theraplay® and thinking about children using animal analogies introduced in training. Following the training the behaviour policy had been simplified to make it more straight forward for the children to understand. The head teacher reported that *'the engagement of children has actually improved'* as a result of children feeling better supported and able to regulate their emotions with staff support. Staff felt that they were more empathetic and had better understanding which helped the child to better understand their own behaviour.

The relevance of the training was felt by some but not all staff. The headteacher was

keen to try to embed it into the approach of the school and felt it could have helped her had she had the opportunity at the beginning of her career:

'If attachment aware is the baseline in all schools then we'd be a happier place' (School 3, headteacher).

Staff were encouraged to share experiences with one another, but it was difficult when not all staff were convinced of the usefulness of the training. One staff member reported that with so many conflicting priorities in the school, some staff were not engaged in applying the strategies shared within the training. Conversely, office staff had become more involved in helping teachers to get a more informed picture of a child's situation. The training also highlighted for some staff, the proportion of children who they thought were showing signs of attachment or trauma related issues (though not specific diagnoses) as opposed to behavioural difficulties. This realisation was quite difficult to process as it may have highlighted how much work needed to support these children.

As a result of the training and subsequent changes, staff reported a positive impact on relationships with pupils:

'We try to make sure if children need us we are there for them.' (School 1, SENCO)

The parent governor at School 1 suggested that, from their perspective, availability of staff to pupils, positive feedback and a change in the way that behaviours were managed produced higher pupil engagement and in turn good progression in mathematics and literacy. Dedicated spaces for pupils had been implemented around the school or in classrooms to allow access to a quiet space for children. However, not all staff found it easy to adapt to new ways of working in line with the attachment and trauma training. These staff were to be offered additional

training by the school to ensure that they were working within the new ethos:

'There is no room in our school for [pupils] to be dealt with in a way where voices have to be raised.' (School 1, assistant headteacher)

All schools reported various practices amongst staff that changed post training. For example:

'I think now people are starting to think, "oh" before they're putting it down to bad behaviour, that there could be underlying things that - if we can break down them, barriers first, will help the child settle down a bit more. So it has - it probably took a bit of time to get in, but it has, yeah. I wouldn't say it's second nature, I'd just say there's more thought for it.' (School 3, learning mentor)

One teaching assistant described the steps she now took to help distract a child or de-escalate a challenging situation, for example to ask a child to help with a task:

'So it was like right... "My water bottle's on the other side of the room, oh did you want to go and fetch that for me, Miss is feeling a bit lazy, go and get it" and just sort of like - and then by the time they'd physically got up out of their seat and done something it was very much like, they came back – "Right okay, so what were you doing? What were you stuck on?" And it sort of like changed them. They'd totally forgotten about what they were actually going to blow about.' (School 3, teaching assistant)

The head teacher at School 5 referred to a 'toolbox' that staff could now use to help them in altering their approach in difficult situations:

"There used to be a little core group [of staff] who would say, "well, we can't meet the needs of that child, we need

to move them on to another school". And I used to say, "Where? But what other school is there?" There isn't; we have to learn to meet the needs. But I'm hearing that less, people are much more enthusiastic about, wow, this child's got significant or trauma-related difficulties, what can we do? Look at our toolbox in effect we've put together, which includes all these different interventions.' (School 5, headteacher)

Several senior leaders for some schools felt many staff already practiced in an attachment and trauma informed way, therefore the training created a platform to show support of that approach and deliver the message that this way of working was now expected school-wide:

"It's never been that kind of school anyway where it's more punishment-reward system. It's always been more of a "Let's try and redirect the attention, let's try and focus on the good". So, I just think that it's a more on the whole expected, whereas before it's what most of the staff really just believed in, now it's less about this is what you believe in so you can do it, it's more this is what is expected of all our staff." (School 4, parent governor)

The learning mentor at School 5 also felt that the training had somewhat of an impact on the school's ethos, but that the school was also already careful in recruiting staff who would support the school ethos, prior to the training:

'I would say, as a school anyway, and the type of staff that we employ, and our ethos anyway, we are very kind and caring, and listening and understanding of all the children's needs. So, I'd like to say that the training has had an impact on that, but also, I'd like to say that we actually choose very carefully the people that work within the school.' (School 5, senior learning advisor)

The introduction of solution circles¹⁰ was specifically mentioned by School 1, although all schools mentioned that having a space to ‘share and reflect’ would give staff the opportunity to discuss approaches to pupils who were having difficulties.

5.4 Policy development

Changes in policy were apparent in all five schools, each of which had amended their behaviour policies in response to the training. The majority of schools reported that the behaviour policy was now referred to as a ‘relationship policy’, stressing the relational nature of the school ethos:

‘We have moved away from having a behaviour policy and we’ve written a relationship policy... Yes, and we think that this is the direction of travel and what does it mean. It doesn’t mean there’s no sanctions, it doesn’t mean there’s no boundaries, it doesn’t mean there’s no punishment, but it does mean we approach it in a different way. That’s what we’ve been pushing. So, that underpinning has made a difference too. That’s one of the reasons we’re quite keen to talk to parents about this new approach.’ (Schools 1 and 2, executive headteacher)

Amendments to the behaviour policy were seen as being for the benefit of both staff and pupils:

‘The behaviour policy we’ve redone. They’ve made the behaviour a lot clearer. There was too many things going on, I think it was getting a bit confusing for some children. They made that a little bit clearer’ (School 3, teacher)

Staff reported a change in the way that behaviour was managed and a move away from sanctions to conceptualising repercussions of actions in terms of consequences:

‘So, I think it’s much more relationships driven, much less – there’s no mention of sanctions. So, you know, there’s talk about natural consequences, which is a big area that I think staff need support in understanding ... because often it’s the only thing that’s different is the language that you use, I think. So, it might be, for example, you know, a pupil has upended everything in the classroom, and you might say, if you’re following a sanctions thing, “You have trashed the classroom, I am not letting you go out at lunchtime” ... So, now it might be that they’re still not going out at lunchtime, but that’s because, “The classrooms are messy, we need to learn in it, so we need to work together to tidy it up.” So, it’s exactly the same thing is happening, but the language behind it is different, it’s more about, you know, the consequence of what’s happened is that, “Now the classrooms are messy, and how on earth are we going to learn? Come along, let me help you, we’ll get it ...”’ (School 4, deputy headteacher)

Pupils had also been included in applying restorative approaches to situations. In this school, pupils were part of the problem solving process in deciding what consequences should happen:

‘So, what he means by that is that the teacher will then talk to the person who’s been upset by whatever has happened and it will be down to them to decide what the outcome can be. So, it will be “What is going to make you feel better about what has happened

¹⁰ See <https://inclusive-solutions.com/circles/solution-circles>.

today?” And sometimes they just want someone to say, “Sorry”, to them, that’s all it takes. So there doesn’t need to be a sanction. There doesn’t need to be somebody missing their playtime or a letter going home today. Sometimes they want a bit more than that but they are becoming really quite creative now. They’ll be saying things like, “Well, could we spend some time together, playing a game. Because they are my friend but we’ve fallen out and I’d like to make friends with them again.” So, they’re really thinking about how they can make it better rather than punishing the person.” (School 2, designated teacher).

5.5 Barriers to implementation

Barriers to implementation and difficulties in changing practice were apparent across all five schools. In particular, all acknowledged that a lack of staff buy-in was a potential challenge to implementing new strategies and ways of working introduced through the training. The parent governor at School 4 reflected on why this might be the case and how to address the issue:

‘I think there’s always some staff that don’t really – that are struggling with the philosophy really, and I think that they’re feeling that they’re not empowered to deal with difficult situations with children. I think they’re struggling because they’re not really – they feel like they’re not being able to handle those situations in the way that they’ve always handled them, and I don’t think that they’re really convinced that this new way is the right way. And I would imagine that that’s the biggest challenge that the leadership team and the class teachers or whoever are trying to incorporate it. I could imagine that’s the only place where it might be a bit difficult really. And I would imagine

that that’s in the case of retraining, and ... we’ll keep training actually, and just keep trying to reinforce that message and understanding of how it’s going to work.’ (School 4, parent governor)

However, the reluctance of staff to embrace the training and new ways of working seemed only to apply to a minority:

Interviewer: ‘There is perhaps a few that are still not fully on board?’

Participant: ‘And I would say that’s possibly because of a lack of awareness, that they weren’t here for that training. And, you are always going to get the odd one that isn’t totally flexible and adaptable and whatever, but I think, in a way, they’re overshadowed, overpowered by the rest of us that do ... are of the correct thinking, if that makes sense, yeah.’ (School 5, learning support advisor)

Staff were asked how these barriers to change might be overcome. The pastoral manager at School 4 suggested that pairing colleagues for support, providing a steady stream of information relevant to attachment and trauma and supporting less confident staff might help to implement strategies from the training more successfully. A designated lead on attachment and trauma was suggested as a facilitator to change as well as strong leadership to steer the journey:

‘I actually think that the people we’ve got that are sort of pushing from the top anyway with this, it is driven all the way through that it’s very important that we all need to think this way, we all need to buy into it and this is how we need to sort of support the children.’ (School 5, learning support worker)

It was further argued that a clear message from senior management about the direction the school should be heading might help to

encourage staff to think in a more attachment and trauma focused way.

Staff at Schools 1 and 2 highlighted that there may be resistance to change due to a lack of additional resources that might support that change. Despite this it was felt that staff would want to implement changes if it meant helping their pupils:

“I think again that’s down to individuals because the majority of people are here and in this job because they want what’s best for the families and children.” (School 2, parent support advisor)

The pastoral support worker at School 2 suggested that increasing staff awareness of attachment and trauma might trigger ‘secondary trauma’ as a result of colleagues’ own past experiences:

Participant: ‘Possibly a few might identify that they’ve had attachment issues with either their own children or with their own parents, and then it’s like opening old wounds and it’s an experience and you can’t always see the bigger picture because you’re already in this as well. I know when we did the training in September a few people said, “Oh, that sounds just like my relationship with my mum,” or whatever, and you’re thinking, “That’s quite interesting, isn’t it?”’

Interviewer: ‘Do you think then that people might shy away from it, because it’s personal, because it’s sensitive to them?’

Participant: ‘Some people I think, but some people will think, “Oh, I don’t want people to go through what I went through and if I can help someone, then that would be good.”’ (School 2, pastoral support worker)

Conversely, the same pastoral support worker also acknowledged that personal

experiences of attachment difficulties could be a motivator for staff to help improve pupil’s experiences.

At School 3 the learning mentor highlighted the struggle with considering the needs of a child with challenging behaviour whilst still managing the needs of the whole class. A solution given to address this particular problem was having a safe space for the pupil to have ‘a mood swing’ (under supervision of a staff member) which the learning mentor felt might be better than having the whole class experience such an episode.

At School 4 a similar observation was made by the parent governor, who argued that:

‘The biggest difficulty is in managing the behaviour because you can understand the behaviour ... but ... you’ve still got to protect your staff and your other children in your class’ (School 4, parent governor).

There was clearly, for some, a difficulty in how to balance the needs of pupils and staff in the least harmful way. The learning mentor at School 4 suggested that the majority of their staff were able to use non-physical techniques to calm a pupil down, but the remainder were still too quick to use physical restraint (an approved method at this special school):

‘Either their lack of understanding or that’s what they’ve learnt, they don’t want to change, they’re set in their ways.’ (School 4, learning mentor)

Another key barrier reported by School 3 staff was the competing demands on teachers’ time; how to prioritise new ways of working with attainment targets, as well as acknowledging that some staff were not currently open to change. There were also struggles with supporting children with transitions between school years or from one member of support staff to another. Although

trauma and attachment informed strategies were used on occasions when staff perceived they were necessary, the approach was not consistently applied – for example, where a child was not seen to have additional needs:

'I believe in barriers, and I believe in boundaries, and that a child should know that because of that action [they'd] just done ... it's okay to be angry, but it's not okay to act that way, and because of that this is the consequence, because you are the same as every other child regardless of what's happened.' (School 3, learning mentor)

5.6 Staff wellbeing

Being more aware of attachment and trauma issues for pupils highlighted the additional burden on staff and the potential negative impact on staff wellbeing:

'Because we don't just leave our children here at three o'clock at the end of the day, they come home with us, you know. They're in our minds. So, yeah, I think if we can - there's got to be an element of, "Yes, we're supporting the children", but we also need to be supporting those teachers who are ... taking that on and it's important that we don't build [negative] opinions and demonstrate those opinions I think to other people, to parents.' (School 1, SENCO)

Staff spoke about supervision and support from colleagues to help with management of difficult situations. There were discussions about taking time to share and discuss cases as a way of reducing the burden on individuals. Two staff members at School 4 described measures already in place to address and encourage staff wellbeing. However, these methods did not seem to have taken priority in recent months:

'So we used to have kind of as a training day, for half that day we might have staff wellbeing time which I think has slowly dripped off because learning is so important, but I think reintroducing that to support staff in looking after themselves and giving them that time will then help them look at it for our pupils as well' (School 4, pastoral manager)

Several participants acknowledged that pupil behaviours and reactions to staff might be taken personally, even at School 4 where instances of challenging behaviours were perhaps more commonplace:

'It's not actually directed at you, this little person's just angry and upset.' (School 4, parent governor)

School 5 had a counselling service available to staff and the headteacher also had an 'open door' policy if staff felt they needed support. The importance of focusing on staff wellbeing was also highlighted by staff at Schools 1 and 2 and consequently there were plans to complete a secondary trauma training session. Supporting the teachers working with these children, for whom the work was 'not cost free,' had positive implications for staff mental health and wellbeing:

'Yeah, they're going to do some work on secondary trauma because that's the next thing. Because staff are spending such a lot of time unpicking all this behaviour and taking on some of the really difficult home lives that our children have, they are finding that actually emotionally they are – you know, their bucket of compassion is running out and that they need some way of protecting themselves as well. So that will be really helpful. I did the training as part of a designated teacher day.' (School 2, designated teacher)

There was an acknowledgement of the impact on staff members of working in a trauma and attachment aware setting. Staff supervision¹¹ was introduced to give staff space to think about how their work might impact them negatively and how to address this.

5.7 Impact on pupils

School staff reflected on their perspectives of the impact the training in attachment and trauma awareness had on pupils. Staff noticed the differences in the way that they themselves and colleagues related to the children in the use of language:

‘When I talk to children you can see little bits and pieces coming out of from the training,’ (School 2, pastoral support worker)

This also impacted on the general atmosphere of the school, where teachers reported a more nurturing approach to behaviour management. There was recognition that children were responding to the changes in interactions with staff:

‘It’s made a massive difference to how she’s been able to regulate herself in a school environment ... she’s gone from having nine or ten episodes of poor behaviour a day to once a month.’ (School 5, teacher)

One teacher gave an example of a blossoming friendship for a child who had previously struggled to form relationships:

‘He’s still challenging, but his personality has come through, you can see there are others in his class that he likes to spend more time with and have

normal friendships’ (School 1, assistant headteacher).

The same staff member also suggested that attachment and trauma awareness was inviting a more open relationship between staff and young people:

‘We’re probably going to get more children sharing information with us.’ (School 1, assistant headteacher)

This more relational mindset also signalled a greater flexibility among staff around adapting to the needs of young people, even if this led to some rather unconventional approaches:

‘If you’d come a couple of years ago...you might have encountered seeing was a lot of focus on trying to get the child into the classroom whereas ... what is the problem of sitting alongside the child in the corridor and learning there?’ (School 4, deputy headteacher)

Overall, there was a general feeling across all five schools that attachment and trauma aware approaches appeared to be having a positive impact on behaviour, engagement and learning for vulnerable young people:

‘They’ve become a lot more interested and lively during class discussions and they actually, you get the feeling that they really want to learn’. (School 1, teaching assistant)

Whilst teachers were able to give examples of the changes that they had perceived in pupils, there were no data to corroborate this from the focus groups. In Schools 2, 3 and 4, pupils spoke of ‘kind’ and ‘nice’ teachers at both Sweep 1 and Sweep 2¹², reporting

¹¹ In the sense of having a reflective space to discuss their practice, rather than a managerial procedure.

¹² Schools 1 and 5 completed their Sweep 2 focus groups online due to Covid-19; rapport was difficult to establish and responses were mainly limited to one word answers.

positive traits about their schools and teachers:

‘Respondent: It feels really happy being here.

Respondent: It’s fun because there’s lots of teachers to support you.’ (School 2, pupil focus group)

However, pupils did not refer to many differences between the two time points. This could have been because the period between the focus groups was simply too long to be meaningful for the young people – in other words, they did not remember what things had been like in the school prior to the training and associated changes in policy and practice. Where differences were reported it was in reference to *‘less fighting’* and *‘less shouting’*, which may point indirectly to a happier and calmer environment in the school.

6. Summary: journeys and next steps

Prior to the training, both Schools 1 and 2 were already on a journey to incorporate a more relational approach within the school environment. The executive headteacher and leadership team were keen to create a nurturing environment for their pupils. Staff at both schools were ready to learn more about attachment and trauma related practices and following the training sessions, introduced changes to both policy and practice. Overall, staff found the attachment and trauma awareness training to be a positive move. Staff who currently were struggling to adapt practices to this new way of working would receive further training so that there was consistency across the school and changes to the overall ethos of the school could be made. Moving forward, the consensus was that the trauma and attachment training had been positive for Schools 1 and 2, but it should be revisited regularly. The two schools seemed committed to continuing training in

areas linked to attachment and trauma. Lunchtime supervisors had previously been highlighted as staff who had not received the same level of training as other school staff, so there had been some thinking around how to support and involve this staff group to provide a consistent approach to children at the schools; one way was to provide training in ‘positive playtimes’. Schools 1 and 2 had also signed up to a mental health awareness programme.

Of the case study schools in this paper, School 3 appeared to be at the earliest stages in its attachment and trauma awareness journey. Staff awareness of attachment and trauma was mixed, but senior leaders were motivated to start to incorporate it into everyday practice. Embedding attachment and trauma awareness in this particular school seemed to encounter more barriers than the other schools due to the early stage of its journey. Nevertheless, the training was viewed favourably by those who attended and more than one member of staff emphasised the hope that a focus on attachment and trauma awareness would continue and be supported with additional training. As a school, it was difficult to ascertain whether it would continue on its journey to becoming trauma and attachment aware with changes to the leadership of the school:

‘I hope even in September when we have a new [omitted], that they are updated, they know that this is what we do for attachment, yeah. I know it’s something I feel strongly about because having been in a situation and going through it and having the support’
(School 3, teaching assistant)

This highlights the importance of leadership in adopting and maintaining new ways of working and new approaches within a school. Uncertainty is likely to have impacted the attachment and trauma awareness journey. If the school was to continue embedding

attachment and trauma awareness, teaching staff felt that attention should be focused on a ‘whole school’ approach, rather it being only a concern for some staff and only relevant in certain situations.

Schools 4 and 5 are both special schools, so there was an expectation that attachment and trauma awareness was a familiar concept to staff. School 4 was already offering wide-ranging therapies to its pupils. Staff however, felt that they could benefit from more targeted training, specifically in attachment and trauma awareness. This was largely influenced by the high proportion of children in care who attended the school. Following training, there was an expectation from the senior leadership team that an attachment and trauma informed approach was taken in response to challenging behaviour. However, the school still experienced some resistance to this change in practice from some of the staff. Strong direction from management was highlighted as being key to encouraging all staff to engage and work in this new way. The parent governor from School 4 summed up what she hoped to see in the future:

‘In a long time to come maybe this training wouldn’t be as necessary because people would understand it and some of the cycles would get broken because children are getting the right input.’ (School 4, parent governor)

To achieve this, the parent governor felt that attachment and trauma focused practice would need to be embedded in everyday practice within the school in order to become a part of the school’s ethos and values.

Similar to School 4, School 5 also had a high proportion of children in care. Staff felt that this group of pupils, in particular, would benefit from improved awareness of attachment and trauma. Staff training led to a change in practice, specifically a change in communication with pupils to help them to verbalise how they were feeling. Staff felt more able and confident to respond to

challenging behaviours and to meet pupils’ needs, which for some, they had previously struggled to do. School 5 was committed to continuing the journey to embed attachment and trauma awareness into everyday practice despite challenges with staff changes during their journey. Changes in senior staff led to initial difficulties, however the journey to becoming attachment and trauma aware continued with practices and training handed over to new members of staff:

‘The new person leading at [School 5] is new. And she wasn’t at the initial training, she was on leave at the time. So it’s wobbled it in terms of the management of the [attachment and trauma work] in school, but that doesn’t mean that the work hasn’t been going on with staff and for pupils.’ (School 5, previous headteacher)

The importance of follow-up training was relayed by the majority of staff who felt that the knowledge gained in the training session, though helpful, might wane over time and refresher sessions or further training could help to ensure staff maintained this information:

‘If I was to identify one thing we need to do next it would be repeat training would be really good for us, just for all the new staff. And whether that’s cascaded by the people who give the original training, I think we could do that or what, I don’t know. But I think we need some more training in that.’ (School 5, current headteacher)

Almost all staff felt that multiple training sessions would be helpful. Revisiting information over time might allow those staff members who were not fully ‘on board’ more time to understand the relevant concepts beyond the scope of one or two training sessions.

7. Conclusions

In this report, we have summarised the findings from five case study schools – three primary schools and two all-age special schools. We spoke to staff and pupils around the time that the school had training in attachment and trauma awareness and again a year later. These five schools were selected for this report as the majority of interviews and focus groups were collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and so this was not a factor in the accounts we collected.

The five schools were at different starting points at the time of the training – some had already started thinking about attachment and trauma, while others were starting afresh. We have drawn on an analogy of ‘the journey’, with schools starting from different points and travelling at different speeds. Those schools that had already a strong focus on pupil wellbeing generally reported a smoother transition than those schools that were new to this way of working.

All five schools reported changes to policy and practice resulting from the training. In general, staff described a more relational approach to working with young people – especially those who were felt to be vulnerable. They reported that this was leading to better relationships in the school and positive outcomes for young people in terms of wellbeing, engagement and learning.

The majority of participants were very positive about changing their practice and school policy in line with the attachment and trauma training – they felt more knowledgeable and confident. However, several did report concerns about conflicting priorities and also that some colleagues were struggling to engage in the new ways of working.

This suggests that the changes resulting from the training need frequent reinforcement (e.g. follow-on training or on-going discussions in the staff team) in order to be sustainably embedded in the long-term. We also noted

that changes were potentially precarious in light of changes in staff, especially members of the senior leadership team.