

Attachment and trauma awareness training: analysis of training delivered in 26 local authorities

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Key findings:

- Overall, the quality of training observed was high, with no obvious inaccurate or misleading content
- While trainers in different areas had somewhat different emphases, there was a significant shared corpus of content
- Staff seemed particularly focused on practical strategies to use with pupils, but also valued an overview of neuroscience to enhance their understanding
- Training was enhanced by time for staff-to-trainer and peer-to-peer discussion about unfamiliar concepts or practical examples
- There was a trade-off between local authority trainers (with professional experience and local knowledge) and commercial trainers (who tended to be more polished in their delivery)
- Training appeared less effective when insufficient time was allowed to cover the content thoroughly
- While most local authorities were keen to involve all school staff, this could pose practical problems (e.g. rooms)

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 with schools and local authorities when the first lockdown period started and consequently paused most fieldwork between March and September 2020. The second school closure lockdown 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 and local authorities, 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 waiting for a final report, we are publishing a series of 'working papers' to provide access to our findings which we hope will assist local authorities and schools.

The focus of this working paper is on the training provided by the 26 local authorities that engaged with the Programme. The content and delivery of this training was determined by each local authority according to local needs – there was not a single specified training package and the Rees Centre had no role in determining or delivering the training.

We observed sessions and reviewed training materials in 23 local authorities, and received copies of training materials from two others.

We have not evaluated the individual sessions, but rather sought to provide some 'broad brush' insights into what elements appeared to be more or less successful. In particular, we hope this may assist local authorities in devising their own training programmes.

We will be publishing working papers throughout early 2022. The final report is planned for publication in October 2022.

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, usually organised through their virtual school or educational psychology service.

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 website¹.

There is no national training package, so the content of the training and identity of the trainer varied between areas, based on the local needs identified by the virtual school and/or educational psychology service.

One consequence of the ‘local needs’ approach is that there was substantial variation in the nature of the training offered and experienced between local authority areas and often between individual schools; the Programme included primary, secondary and special schools, as well as some alternative provision. No attempt was made by the Programme to enforce ‘fidelity’ beyond that the training should (a) be substantial, (b) engage with attachment and trauma, and (c) benefit all school staff – i.e. not solely for senior leaders or those with particular responsibilities.

The remainder of this section provides a brief overview of the variation in the organisation of the training provided to schools. In addition to the training itself, many local authorities also provided post-training support (e.g. staff supervision, inter-school networking opportunities, advice with policy reviews), but

these are outside of the remit for this working paper.

1.1 Selection of schools

The local authorities approach to recruiting schools for the programme varied².

Overall, almost all local authorities worked with schools who had an openness or existing alignment to attachment and trauma informed practice. This occurred because almost two-thirds of the local authorities openly advertised the training offer to all schools, then schools approached the virtual school or educational psychology service to take part.

A small number of local authorities invited specific schools to take part; this selection was based on existing relationships with and knowledge of the school, the number of looked after children on roll, and whether schools had already asked for support in this area. At least three local authorities prioritised schools with a high number of exclusions.

Similarly, the mix of schools trained was also determined at a local level. Twenty-two local authorities chose a mixture of schools; secondary, primary, special or pupil referral units, while four focused on only one specific phase.

Some local authorities offered the training to a single ‘wave’ of schools, but around one-third had multiple waves across different academic years. This led to very different numbers of schools receiving training between local authorities; two organised training for 28 schools and another two authorities trained 18 schools each. However, the majority of local authorities trained between five and 12 schools in a single wave.

¹ <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools>

² We will return to this in more detail in later working papers and the final report.

1.2 Organisation of training

The source of the training was split, with half of the local authorities drawing on well-established commercial training organisations who used experienced trainers, usually from relevant backgrounds such as social work or education. The others used ‘in-house’ trainers typically from their educational psychology service, where the professionals involved in the training were often already known to the schools. Two local authorities had a mixture of training sessions delivered by external and in-house trainers for their schools.

The configuration of the training could also vary between local authorities. In most instances, it comprised a full-day session in the style of an INSET³ day. However, a third of the local authorities split the training over multiple shorter sessions, often ‘twilight’ sessions held after the school day⁴. Four local authorities used a ‘train the trainer’ approach, where a small team of school staff was trained in-depth and then expected to later cascade the content to their colleagues.

The majority of the training took place in schools between 2018 and early 2020. As might be expected, some in-school training was postponed because of the Covid pandemic. As a result, training providers adapted their material to be delivered online. Eleven schools in four local authorities received training between March 2020 and June 2020, with 42 in twelve local authorities being trained between September 2020 and June 2021, which marked the end of the training phase of the Timpson Programme.

2. Methodology

In order to explore the training content, we observed sessions and reviewed training

³ In service training.

⁴ Some local authorities had follow-on training for a subsets of school staff, typically focusing on particular topics or approaches. We did not observe these sessions, but we did attempt to obtain copies of presentations and handouts.

materials for 23 local authorities, and received copies of the training materials from two others. One local authority did not have an observation, nor material reviewed, as the training provider had already been observed multiple times in other areas.

While attending the training observations we collected paper copies of the presentations and any handouts or resources used during the session. We also made informal observation notes during the presentation.

Due to the resources available, the training observed was usually the first or introductory session, whether it was delivered as a whole day or a twilight session.

We read through all the training materials, to identify topics covered and style of the training and to review the extent to which the content was evidence-led, while using the observation notes particularly to review how the attendees engaged with the sessions. Notes on these were recorded on a spreadsheet for reference.

In all, 37 training presentations, as well as fourteen researcher observation notes and other sources, were analysed. We also referred to interviews with the local authority staff leading on the training for background information⁵. In total, 30 of the 37 training sessions reviewed for this paper took place before the pandemic struck. The remaining seven were online sessions in four local authorities, in late 2020 and during 2021⁶.

3. Overview of school training

3.1 Approach to training

Most first or introductory training sessions were for all school staff, including administrative and support staff, typically

⁵ These are discussed in more depth in Working Paper 4 which will be published shortly.

⁶ In two local authorities more than one online session was observed.

delivered over a whole day. In a few local authorities, and particularly when training was delivered online, this first session was shorter, (e.g. two hours, or half an INSET day). Where shorter sessions were used this was often followed up by additional short sessions to cover additional content. In a small number of local authorities, follow-up sessions were delivered to a focused group of staff with particular roles or responsibilities (e.g. pastoral workers, teaching assistants or the schools' SEND team). Of these approaches to training, we observed that when training was completed over a whole day participants appeared to engage well with the topic, particularly if case study examples of their own pupils were used to illustrate points. When training was over multiple sessions then future sessions were often positively anticipated by staff.

In some observed sessions, the number of staff attending could be so large that some staff could not hear the trainer, or see the screen showing the materials. Some of the on-site school training observed became quite chaotic with staff getting distracted by colleagues or other work. One local authority decided to hire a hotel conference room to ensure staff would focus more carefully on the training.

The design and number of slides used in the training presentations varied. A few presentations tended to focus mainly on the information on the slides, rather than design aesthetics, while those used in the other local authorities managed to achieve both – attractive designs and informational content that was easy to understand. Naturally, longer training sessions included more slides.

Much of the attendee engagement depended on the trainers' delivery with their slide presentation. Where the content was given in easy-to-understand language, we observed more engagement from attendees, seeing them able to vocalise how they understood the material for their own context. While other

trainers used more complex and 'academic' language and principles throughout, and were potentially less accessible, especially for non-teaching staff.

3.2. Delivery of training

Training sessions, both in-school and online, differed markedly in the amount the trainer would ask for questions during their presentation and how much they stopped to allow participants to either form smaller discussion groups or do practical activities. Feedback from attendees' discussion groups and activities was sometimes disseminated to the whole audience, but not always – if time was running out, for instance. We tended to observe that if the attendees were asked for feedback this would enhance their participation through the rest of the session.

A majority of the training delivered had a conversational, relaxed style and used humour to lighten the demanding, and potentially stressful, subject matter at times. These sessions tended to be very interactive, with participants engaging throughout by asking questions and making comments to the trainer and contributing to group discussions. Conversely, a small number of sessions were primarily didactic, with little chance for follow-up activities for the staff, their questions or discussion. This could be too 'academic' in style to keep staff engaged.

When there were two trainers sharing the presentation, especially over a long session, this offered variety both in terms of styles and voices, but also in the experiences they drew upon to illustrate different points. For instance, when two trainers came from different previous or current professions, like social work and education.

While it was not always the case, commercial trainers could give a more polished and confident performance in presenting the training compared to local authority staff who

may have had less experience of delivering training or to have been trained in presentation skills. However, the latter added knowledge of the particular school(s) and were able to relate the training more directly to the schools' needs – in a few instances, training was bespoke to the schools setting with preparation done before the session to create pupil profiles for discussion.

The number of handouts given at the various training sessions also differed across the different trainers, with some supplying detailed comprehensive booklets for staff, while most others gave several handouts at the end of the training, and provided comprehensive reading lists and links to resources. Those trained by external providers were often provided with online resources for staff to access at a later date. Those who completed online training might even have access to recorded training sessions to watch again in the future.

3.3 Content of training

All training that occurred included the topic of attachment. However, the way this was included varied across different trainers. Attachment theory was included for all local authorities, typically this was described in terms of how attachment relationships have a foundational role in child development. At the minimum, training in all local authorities gave a definition of attachment with a brief explanation based on attachment theory. All but three local authorities' training covered attachment styles and/or attachment behaviours.

With trauma, content included details of its meaning along with related topics such as adverse childhood experiences (in over half of local authorities), toxic stress (in a third), regulation, resilience, attunement (included in the majority of local authorities) or

combinations of these. In total, 20 of the local authorities had training that mentioned trauma in some way. Neuroscience and brain development were also covered in 22 local authorities' training. A small number also covered other theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development.

Approaches and strategies for working with learners who had attachment issues or had suffered trauma were discussed in all training. The most common practical strategy to be included was 'emotion coaching', which featured in over half of the training. Other strategies introduced include: the 3 or 4R's⁷; PACE⁸; relational support plans; restorative approaches; transition support; allocation of trusted adults in school to pupils; and use of physical spaces in classrooms or additional rooms for pupil self-regulation. Most presentations covered these areas in general terms or with respect to primary-aged children; just one discussed specific strategies for teenagers in secondary schools or further education colleges.

Some of the presentations covered all or some of these introductory topics in one session while others split them – e.g. attachment on one day and trauma or teaching strategies on another. Our observations suggested that covering all the topics in one session could be too much for some staff, especially when there was a lot of theory involved.

In a small number of local authorities, the training was tailored to the needs of specific schools, to recognise their individual priorities. For example, one virtual school headteacher worked with their school group in advance of the training to develop different foci for each schools' sessions (see Figure 1).

⁷ An approach to support children with emotional self-regulation: relate, regulate, reason and repair.

⁸ A trauma-informed approach to working with young people: playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy.

Figure 1: Two examples of tailoring training content for individual school contexts in one local authority

School A: An urban primary school.

Whole day training delivered to the whole school. This school was focusing on developing the use of relational support plans, using regulation skills and developing restorative practice.

School B: A rural secondary school.

Whole day training delivered to the whole school. This school focused on working relationally through relational support plans for a group of key children who had been identified as being in need and who were at risk of exclusion.

3.4 Impact of Covid

The vast majority (252 out of 305) of schools had had their first training before the first Covid lockdown in March 2020, but some had to postpone their arranged training. With the training shifting to being online, trainers had to adapt quickly to new ways of delivering training. This was more successful in some cases than others due to technological or administrative challenges. However, our observations suggested that trainers became increasingly expert in presenting online over time.

The introductory online training lasted between one and two hours. Of the two examples observed, one had two follow-up sessions of a similar length that were only weeks apart, each starting with an overview of the previous session(s). The other example observed was for only one hour, which had an additional hour set aside for a question-and-answer session. This was also expected to be followed by regular two monthly online network meetings where the virtual school headteacher would present training requested by the schools attending.

Where the ‘train the trainer’ approach was used, school staff may have missed out on the cascaded training because of the lockdowns; indeed, this model was always susceptible to issues of ‘follow-through’. Educational psychologists were also less able to do follow-up work during lockdowns.

4. Elements of good practice

Based on the descriptions in the previous section, we have identified the following elements that we feel may contribute to best practice in this area:

- Training needs to be given sufficient time to cover the relevant topics, including for questions, reflection and discussion – in essence, the training should not be rushed.
- Those presentations that separated out attachment and trauma allowed more time to reinforce what were often new and difficult concepts for school staff.
- A combination of the trainer presenting in a conversational style interspersed with group activities and discussions led to the best engagement of school staff.
- Slides and handouts that contained a mixture of straightforward, uncomplicated text with illustrations and diagrams were well-received in the sessions observed in person and also worked well online.
- The use of videos and other resources to demonstrate unfamiliar concepts helped to make the training both engaging and accessible. As an example, in one training session observed in a primary school, the trainer used puppets to represent different attachment styles.
- In a small number of local authorities, the training was geared to the needs of specific schools, recognising their own current priorities, which added to the relevance and engagement.
- Training was particularly well-received when trainers gave examples from their

own work experience which demonstrated a concept or approach being discussed. For example, when the trainer had experience as a teacher, their professional knowledge and expertise kept interest from school staff high.

- Daytime training had advantages ensuring staff had energy to engage and be attentive through the training sessions. Occasionally, twilight sessions appeared harder for staff to concentrate on.
- With online training, shorter multiple sessions were advantageous for maintaining engagement.

5. Conclusion

Our observations and review of training materials used in local authorities have demonstrated a wide variation in the number of training sessions, their duration, content and presentation.

Our goal was not to evaluate individual training packages or trainers, but rather to identify what training appeared to work well, depending on the time available to schools and other circumstances. Overall, the quality of training was generally strong.

We are not, therefore, recommending a particular configuration of training; we continue to believe that this is a decision for local authorities, based on local needs and priorities. However, our findings may assist local authorities in devising or commissioning training that is successful in its goal of making school staff more aware of issues around attachment and trauma.

