

# The Looking After Looked After Children in School Initiative 2017 to 2022: A Concluding Summary

## Introduction

The 'Looking After Looked After Children in School' (LALACS) initiative was funded by the Alex Timpson Trust (ATT) from 2017 until 2022. However, the initiative, which later became known as the 'Attachment and Trauma Awareness in School Project' began to emerge in 2015 with a national working group. This working group was established by Sir John Timpson when he began to explore the viability of applying the principles of attachment theory in school. The group was attended by experts in the field, including Dr. Elizabeth Harlow, Prof. of Social Work at the University of Chester, who had previously furnished Sir John with a research report which had highlighted the challenges faced by adoptive parents (see the related publication Harlow 2019a). One of these challenges was in persuading school staff members that the biographical and emotional needs of their children should be taken into account. Given Sir John's role as an adoptive father, his previous work promoting the value of attachment theory, together with his investment in creating quality education in the north west of England, this research theme chimed with his own experience and interests. In consequence, he began to explore possibilities:

***Sir John:** As an adoptive parent myself, I could understand the struggle that was described by the interviewees in ... [the] study. I could also see that school staff in particular did not understand attachment theory and the emotional needs of children. I could see that this might be another area in which I could 'spread the word' [about attachment theory]...*

The start of the LALACS initiative in 2017 coincided with the creation of ATT itself. Income for the Trust was primarily generated by the 'small jobs' system in the Timpson outlets. Approximately £1 million was invested in LALACS which was scheduled to conclude after five years. The overarching aim was to influence the regime in schools in England, Wales and Scotland, and in the longer term, to encourage teacher training courses to include content on attachment theory. These aims were to be achieved by means of a collaborative and networked approach: that is, although Sir John gave freely of his own time in influencing groups and organisations (see below), influence was also brought to bear when the ATT resourced or supported other groups that might achieve these aims on its behalf. In taking this approach, other groups and organisations, as well as schools, were impacted beneficially. Following a section on first principles (the meaning of attachment theory and its application in schools) this summary provides an indication of the overarching and multifaceted impact of LALACS.

## First principles

*'Attachment is the strong, affectionate tie we have with special people in our lives that leads us to experience pleasure and joy when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness in times of stress. By the second half of the first year, infants have become attached to familiar people who have responded to their needs'* (Berk 2013: 428).

Children who have suffered abuse and neglect are less likely to have benefitted from sustained secure attachments, that is, they are less likely to have had familiar people

responding to their needs. In consequence, they may be insecure and anxious and the provision of a safe and calm environment, with understanding relationships, may become beneficial for their future growth, development and learning. According to the published literature (see Bergin and Bergin 2009), when attachment theory is applied to the whole-school system, structures, processes, and policies can create a warm socioemotional environment that is inclusive, safe and nurturing. Building positive relationships with children and their parents, as well as understanding the meaning behind behaviours, is essential in enabling schools to function as a secure base for the ongoing development and learning of all children, not just the most vulnerable.

The education of teachers in England, however, does not include the topic of child development. However, a fundamental premise of the LALACS initiative involved introducing all school staff members, not just teachers, to the principles of attachment: that is, it was assumed that by becoming apprised of attachment theory, staff members may be more able to understand some principles of child development and the emotional needs of children, which in turn would improve the school environment and benefit the children's educational achievement. Although this may be particularly important for children who are, or have been, looked after by the local authority, children who remain at home may not have enjoyed secure attachments. Attachment theory is therefore relevant for school staff and children in general.

#### [Impact on charities and third sector organisations that furthered the goals of the ATT](#)

As indicated above, in harnessing the supportive potential of charities and third sector organisations, these organisations also benefitted for the LALACS initiative. At the outset, organisations that offered training on the application of attachment theory in schools were scoped. Sir John either offered encouragement or patronage, and in some instances the ATT provided funding, to those organisations that could support schools to effect change. These organisations included: Nurture UK (NUK); Scottish Attachment in Action (SAIA) and most importantly the Attachment Research Community (ARC) which was launched in 2017.

In addition to ARC, NUK and SAIA, training agencies (often small-scale and having been set up by adoptive mothers), were promoted in advertising materials that were written and circulated by the ATT (see below). Furthermore, representatives of these organisations were invited to participate in networking events (see below). Directly in response to the research described in Harlow (2019a), and the promotion of this topic by the ATT, the charity Adoption Matters developed its strategy and service offering: by 2020 it had delivered 90 courses on attachment and trauma in schools and colleges.

#### [Impact by the creation of a new post, artefacts, and events for the purpose of raising the awareness of attachment theory in schools](#)

##### *Funding of a knowledge transfer post at the University of Chester (from 2017 to 2022)*

By funding a knowledge transfer post, the ATT enabled Prof. Harlow to work on the LALACS initiative for one day per week for five years. In keeping with this consultancy role, and in order to help shape the work of the new charity, Prof. Harlow was recruited onto the Board of

Trustees of the charity the ATT. This funding and the board membership benefitted the University by contributing towards the achievement of its strategic ambitions.

*Production of accessible publications:*

In order to promote the application of attachment theory in schools, accessible and academic publications were produced. The accessible publications were:

Timpson, J. (2016) *Looking After Looked After Children* Timpson Ltd: Manchester. This book, which illustrates the principles of attachment theory and their relevance to children in the school environment, is available either free (or a charitable donation) in Timpson's 2,122 commercial outlets across the UK, or free in bulk by order from Timpson House.

Timpson, J. (2018) *A Guide to Attachment Awareness in Schools* This publication contained adverts for the above charities and relevant training organisations.

Harlow, E. (2018) Attachment Theory and Schools, *Headteacher Update*, Spring, 1, January, pp. 38-39. This publication contained adverts for the above charities and relevant training organisations. < <https://www.headteacher-update.com/best-practice-article/attachment-theory-in-schools/167068/> >.

Harlow, E. (2020) Attachment Theory and Children's Learning in School, *Headteacher Update*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020. < <https://www.headteacher-update.com/best-practice-article/attachment-theory-and-childrens-learning-in-school-trauma-sen-pastoral-education-timpson-1/227496/> >.

The academic publications were:

Harlow, E. (2019a) Defining the Problem and Sourcing the Solution: a Reflection on Some of the Organisational, Professional and Emotional Complexities of Accessing Post-adoption Support, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 33(3): 269-280, first published online: 16<sup>th</sup> May 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2018.1460588>

Harlow, E. (2019b) Attachment Theory: Developments, Debates and Recent Applications in Social Work, Social Care and Education, *Journal of Social Work Practice*. First published on-line in December. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2019.1700493>

*Information sharing and networking events:*

There were four main information sharing and networking events:

Two symposia were hosted in 2018. These were hosted by Sir John together with the virtual school headteacher (VSH) for Greater Manchester. Attendees included: 28 VSHs, 3 chief executive officers of children's charities; 6 directors of attachment training organisations; a headteacher; and 2 regional representatives of Ofsted.

In March 2019, a partnership between the charity Adoption Matters/CfAS, the University of Chester and the ATT led to the national conference 'Navigating Adoption Support'. Addressing the topic of attachment theory in school, there were 100 (approx.) delegates including adopted adults, adoptive parents, school personnel, academics, and social

workers. Feedback was very positive with indication that the content was going to inform changes in practice (see Adoption Matters Achievement Report 2018-19 < [https://www.adoptionmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/7021FD\\_AM\\_Annual-Report-2019-WEB.pdf](https://www.adoptionmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/7021FD_AM_Annual-Report-2019-WEB.pdf) > ).

In October 2019, the ATT funded the network organisation SAIA, to mount a promotional event in Glasgow which was attended by approximately 50 professionals, including educational psychologists. Following on from this, the ATT funded this organisation to conduct research which explored and mapped the approach to, and provision of, attachment related practice in schools across the nation. The report, which is entitled 'Mapping Attachment-Informed Trauma Sensitive Practice in Scottish Education', is now available internationally by means of the SAIA website < <https://scottishattachmentinaction.org/education-project/> > . The conclusions of this research were disseminated in a national conference which was held in 2022.

#### *Creating information and training materials:*

Webinars resulting from action research on the topic of attachment theory in school (see below) have been created and are available internationally by means of the website of the Rees Centre, Oxford University < <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/> > These webinars report on the research as it progressed, and in so doing, provide case studies of improved practice in schools and the positive outcomes for all concerned.

The ATT funded the recording of Dan Hughes, an international expert on attachment theory. This artefact was made available for a fee via the website of the SAIA with 70 recordings having been sold by 2020. The fees benefitted SAIA.

The ATT also funded Prof. Schofield, an esteemed expert in attachment theory based at the University of East Anglia (UEA) (see Schofield and Beek 2016; 2018), to create and pilot on-line training materials for use in schools. These are now internationally available for free from the UEA website < <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/secure-base-model/secure-base-in-schools> > .

#### *Action research:*

In 2017, the ATT commissioned the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford to undertake an action research project. The project, costing £750,000 concluded in June 2022. The research was hampered by the pandemic and complexities associated with training school staff on attachment theory were acknowledged in the research conclusions. Overall, however, the findings were supportive of the hypothesis that training school staff members on attachment theory could have benefits for the children and the school in general. For example, key findings reported in Working Paper 6 include:

- Schools working within an attachment and trauma aware ethos reported positive impacts for pupils and staff
- Staff felt they had benefitted from training, either by acquiring new knowledge or reinforcing existing knowledge
- This knowledge catalysed changes in staff confidence, everyday practices and school policies – these led to improvements in pupils' engagement and learning

See < <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Timpson-working-paper-6.pdf> >.

The Advisory Group for this project was chaired by Sir John and Prof. Harlow. Given the aim of influencing initial teacher training and the auditing of schools, representatives of Ofsted and the Department for Education were invited members of the Group. The project was completed on time and within budget.

In June 2022 the key findings of the research were presented at a stakeholder event at the Inn Holder's Hall in London. The event was chaired by Prof. Elizabeth Harlow and Sir John made an introductory presentation. Stakeholders attending the event (approximately 70 in number) were leaders representing relevant professional groups and national organisations (such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services; Virtual School Headteachers; Educational Psychologists; Adoption UK etc.). Whilst the key findings of the research project are available by means of the working papers published on the Rees Centre website < <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/> >, the Rees team are aiming to publish academic papers and launch a concluding document (at an appropriate time) that will influence UK-based civil servants and MPs.

## Impact by raising awareness and taking action

### *Creating change through the consumption of awareness raising artefacts*

Awareness is raised (thus impact occurs) when the above recording, publications, webinars and presentations are 'consumed' by professionals, parents, carers and children. *Headteacher Update* is sent to 25,000 primary schools in the UK. In addition, the two articles published by Prof. Harlow in this outlet had been viewed on-line a total of 7,755 times by 2020. This total is very likely to have increased since then. In 2020, 9,682 of Sir John's accessible books had been distributed. Again, this total is very likely to have been increased substantially since that time. Written feedback gathered by the ATT administrator confirms that these accessible books are provided in training events and have been made available in: staff rooms (Cambs and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust; Manchester Secondary Pupil Referral Unit); to children (Manchester Pupil Referral Unit); parents/carers in reception waiting area (Stockport); school staff (Leeds City Council; Southampton City Council); carers via social workers (Stockport); nurseries (Stockport); potential foster carers and adopter (charity based in Leith); looked after children and foster carers (The Children's Family Trust, Yorkshire Office); family support workers (Carshalton); Designated Safeguarding Leads (Nottingham City Council).

### *Creating change in schools by means of the ARC:*

ARC (as described above) is a member organisation which facilitates schools to implement 'attachment and trauma aware practice' (see the charity's website < <https://the-arc.org.uk/> >). This is enabled by means of resources and guidance available on the website and circulated via newsletters, regional workshops, and an annual conference. For example, an audit tool has been created which a school can use to assess its own performance in relation to good practice (see below). Each year, over the course of the LALACS initiative, an ATT prize was awarded to a primary school, a secondary school, a special school and a college of Further Education assessed as demonstrating the best 'attachment aware'

practice. The prize is presented by a representative of the ATT (usually Sir John) at the annual ARC conference.

According to the ARC website, by December 2022, there were more than 500 members of ARC and more than 200 schools that were actively engaged with the organisation. The leaders of ARC, representatives of the National Association of Virtual School Heads, and other stakeholders, have campaigned to include content on child development (in particular attachment theory) in initial teacher training. The campaign group have written a 'Call to Action' document and a related video has also been produced. The document and video are available on the ARC website < <https://the-arc.org.uk/calltoaction> >. The 'Call to Action' was launched in June 2022 in the Houses of Parliament, following an invitation by Edward Timpson MP. Together with stakeholders Sir John and Prof. Harlow attended this event.

### *Creating change by educating and training on the application of attachment theory in school*

This has been facilitated by the ATT directly and indirectly. Organisations supported by the ATT have delivered training into schools across England. As a result of piloting the on-line training materials created by the UEA which were funded by the ATT, Norfolk County Council has commissioned training from the UEA. Continuing professional development training on children's attachment and trauma had been delivered by the Faculty of Education and Children's Services at the University of Chester. By 2020 there had been 980 participants. In addition, this Faculty has developed a related post-graduate course in attachment, trauma and mental health ( see < <https://www1.chester.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/attachment-trauma-and-mental-health-children-young-people-and-adults> >.

The action research project at the Rees Centre has given rise to training on attachment theory in over 300 schools. These schools are located in: Birmingham; Coventry; Devon; Dorset; Gloucestershire; Hampshire; Hertfordshire; Isle of White; Kent; Kirklees; North Yorkshire; Oxfordshire; Rochdale; Southampton; Shropshire; St Helens; Stockport; Stockton; Sutton; Torbay; Trafford; Warwickshire; and West Sussex.

### *Creating change in two urban regions: the case studies of Leeds and Manchester*

Using 'Touchbase' < <https://touchbase.org.uk/> >, one of the organisations promoted by the ATT, Leeds City Council has rolled out training on attachment theory across the authority. Forty schools were enrolled as members of the ARC and Sir John's books were being distributed. These practices were part of an overarching ambition to make Leeds a 'child friendly' city. It has been argued by the VSH of Leeds City Council and the then Chair of the National Association of Virtual School Headteachers, that attachment theory and relationship-based approaches have begun to influence children's services across England.

Resources from Sir John and the ATT were made available to the VSH in Greater Manchester in order that schools might become 'attachment aware' and change implemented accordingly. These resources included: membership of ARC; use of the audit tool described above; a budget for the purchase of books; copies of Sir John's accessible books; a budget for training on attachment theory; and participation in a regional conference. Whilst noting that attachment theory was only one influence, four headteachers described the ways in which their schools had changed for the better (see Harlow 2020 <

<https://www.headteacher-update.com/best-practice-article/attachment-theory-and-childrens-learning-in-school-trauma-sen-pastoral-education-timpson-1/227496/> >). Changes occurred in relation to: mission statements, values and school culture; policies and procedures; knowledge skills and the abilities of staff; the roles and tasks of staff. For example, there has been a shift away from a policy of behaviour modification to relationship-based engagement: instead of punishing unwanted behaviours, effort was made to understand and respond to the child's underlying emotions. In addition to engaging with parents, children are listened to and all measures are considered in light of the question 'what would this feel like for a child?' Overall, there has been an effort to create a school environment that is calm and predictable, hence the potential for anxiety is reduced. Individual support for pupils has been provided and the emphasis has been on the creation of a respectful environment for all.

### *Creating change: some examples from practitioners*

Written feedback to the ATT administrator also confirms that change has taken place in schools:

**Virtual School Headteacher, Midlands, England:** *Through the Alex Timpson Trust we will be rolling out whole school training and network meetings for schools to look at practical strategies to support teachers. (...) We look after them so they can look after our children.*

**Virtual School Headteacher, South, England:** *[Following training staff] realised that it is not just about looked after children and it has really made them think about the importance of relationship-based learning.*

**Headteacher, North, England:** *We have trained all our staff on attachment and have now put in place targeted interventions for our vulnerable children.*

**Deputy Headteacher, South, England:** *We are at the beginning of our journey to become attachment aware but are very committed to continue along the way. All our staff, not just the teachers have received attachment awareness training (...) We employ a TA who has a focus on Social, Emotional and Mental Health and from April 2019 we will be employing a 1:1 teacher to work with our most vulnerable students. This will include the CLA [Children Looked After], the children adopted from care, care leavers and those on a special guardianship order. (...) It is too soon to measure the impact on our young people but the staff are really onboard.*

### Conclusion

Education in schools has been impacted by the LALACS initiative or as it was later known 'Attachment and Trauma Awareness in School' project. This has resulted from an increased awareness of the emotional needs of children as explained by attachment theory. Raised awareness has contributed to changes in school culture, policies, procedures, staff skill, roles and tasks. Awareness raising has occurred in England, Wales and Scotland by means of action research and events as well as the creation and circulation of informational artefacts. This activity has been facilitated by local authorities, third sector organisations and Universities, which in turn have also been impacted by the initiative. Individuals impacted include: representatives of Ofsted; academics; school leaders; other school staff members; educational psychologists, health care professionals; social workers, nursery staff; parents, foster carers, care experienced adults, adoptive parents and children. In short, acting upon the principles of attachment theory, encourages a relationship-based approach to school management (a psychosocial rather than behaviourist psychological perspective). The

positive application of this approach has the potential to reduce anxieties amongst the school population. There is evidence to suggest that a calmer, more supportive environment, children are more able to benefit from their educational opportunities. Whilst the pandemic re-shaped the later phase of the project (both helping and hindering) it became an important contributor to a shift in thinking about the management and practice within schools. Whilst this is clearly the case in England, Scotland and Wales, web-based and academic outputs influence international conversations which will be talking place now and over the coming years.

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