The Learning Triangle
How relationships affect learning

▲ From the material presented, it has been argued that social and emotional experiences affect behaviour in school, and can have specific implications for learning.

▲ Common sense and research both tell us that early experiences of relationships and life events affect our responses, expectations and predisposition to experiences in later life. This also applies to learning.

▲ Attachment Theory and subsequent research tells us the nature of a close and significant relationship in early infancy is a crucial factor in shaping pupil response to learning.

At this point, it is useful to transform the Attachment framework of interpersonal interactions into a model which relates attachment to learning. Research indicates that the pupil of a secure attachment is able to relate to the teacher as well as to others, and finds the world outside the primary relationship worth exploring. The educational experience involves a capacity to relate to the teacher and the presence of the educational task, which implies challenge and the uncertainty of 'not knowing

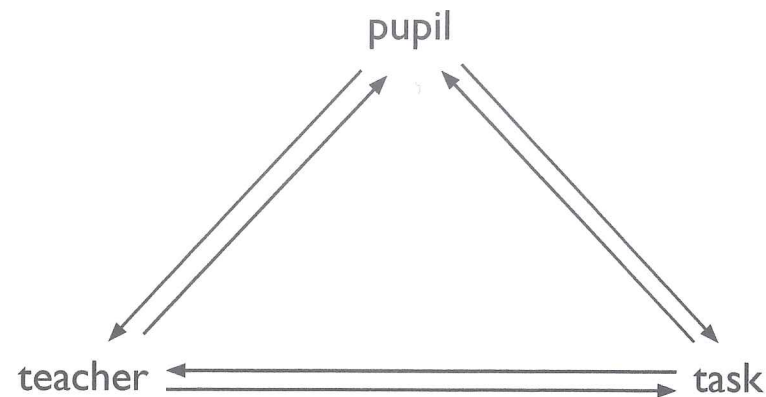'something'. In the learning situation, relationships, tolerance of uncertainty and the task are related.

Fig. 7 The Learning Triangle

Beginnings of learning

From an Attachment perspective, the infant's primary experience is in a one-to-one interaction with the significant carer, involving intimate and mutually-involving activities which ensure a reliable bonding. In a short while, it becomes possible for the infant to disengage from this interaction to become interested in objects and activities often introduced by mother or others. This shift of focus takes place in the space between infant and carer where the infant can experience disengagement from the carer without actual separation (Winnicott 1964, p146).

The infant will watch objects held in front of it and reach for them. As mobility increases, the infant will lean towards objects and actively try to make contact with them. He or she will then begin to explore the objects of interest, usually with his or her mouth at first, and then through sight, sound, movement and touching, all of which cause further interest-provoking things to happen. The infant has begun to explore objects in the immediate world within the secure base of the primary attachment relationship, with the experience that the exploration enhances and excites further interest.

This exploration may be accompanied by uncertainty, and perhaps even fear as the unexpected happens. The capacity of the mother to reassure, and to encourage exploration to continue, enables the infant to experience his or her uncertainty being understood and transformed into appropriate responses which 'contain' the anxiety and put feelings into words (Bion 1967). The words then become a source of reassurance and can support exploration from a greater and greater distance. As confidence in the secure base becomes an internalized process, then exploration and experience in the wider world is possible. Experience builds up a repertoire of 'knowledge' about what happens. The satisfaction of this interest leads to additional curiosity and exploration, and the pattern of engaging with and finding out is laid down. This is often supported by interactions with others, but is usually initially promoted by mother.

Play and learning

In this sense, engagement with objects in the outside world begins with play in the presence of a reliable trusted person. The capacity to engage with external objects with curiosity and creativity is the source of the capacity to engage in learning. Such engagement can include playing with object or materials to explore their potential, playing with something unknown until it is understood, making up a situation to see what might happen, listening to others to understand what they might mean, listening to a story to find out what happens. In each of these situations, it is necessary to tolerate the frustration and uncertainty of *not knowing* until something becomes understood. This reflects the early availability of the 'secure base' as a source of 'containment' of anxiety during exploration. As the known increases, so the pupil experiences knowledge and agency as his/her own – a mind of one's own. This is the experience that the pupil brings to the educational task and the nature of this experience is likely to affect engagement.

The uncertainty of not knowing

For some pupils, this experience of a 'containing mind' which reassures and supports and moderates right brain affect with words and assurance, is relatively absent. Uncertainty can be felt as overwhelming anxiety, and tolerating the uncertainty of not knowing becomes an unbearable threat.

Uncertainty about what comes next

Ten year old Carol began to read 'Amos and Boris' (Steig 1971). It is a story about a whale and a mouse. The mouse, Amos, becomes dependent on Boris the whale to save his life at sea. Then Boris the whale becomes dependent on Amos the mouse, to save his life when he is stranded on land. They then have to say goodbye and leave each other knowing they will never meet again. It is a story about attachment, containment, separation and loss.

Carol listened to the page read by the therapist then read her page. She scanned the page with eyes darting about. She flicked the pages forwards to quickly scan the next pictures to get a clue about what was coming next. Her reading reflected this. As she glanced at the pages, she quickly guessed the meaning of words and stumbled through sentences in an incoherent manner, sticking words together with little sense of meaning. It was as if Carol's uncertainty about what might happen next undermined her capacity to think about what was happening now.

Her class teacher commented that she seemed to understand something one minute, and then appeared to have forgotten what she had just known. I wondered if Carol could bear to remain focused on one thing, because the uncertainty about what was coming next was too alarming.

Carol's family had experienced a series of losses over the years causing distress to and pre-occupying her mother. Significant deaths were unresolved. Perhaps Carol had experienced interrupted attention and uncertainty about her mother's emotional presence and availability. Carol's approach to learning may have reflected an experience of an attachment figure who was not consistently available to contain her anxiety when it was aroused, and she did not seem able to permit reliance on the teacher to support her and understand her uncertainty.

The example above stands in contrast to the experience of reading the same story with relatively securely attached children. Such children await the next page with excitement. They nestle closer to the adult at exciting moments, reassured by contact whilst waiting to find out what happens next, confident perhaps that their worries will be understood, their anxiety about uncertainty will be contained. They can bear to talk and think about what might happen next without being overwhelmed by the uncertainty of not knowing. They reflect an experience of contained anxiety and a capacity to continue thinking in the face of uncertainty – an expression of resilience.

The Learning task

In the classroom, the educational task is a critical part of the learning experience and is the location of this activity and process. The teacher sets up the educational task and engages the pupil in finding out about something as yet unknown or not understood. The teacher's skill lies in knowing how to make this knowledge and experience available to pupils whilst engaging their capacities to be curious and to want to find out. The task is located in the transitional space between the teacher and the external world – the classroom. Engaging with the task involves trusting

the teacher to support uncertainty and to resolve confusion, within a safe place. The teacher and the classroom come to represent the educational Secure Base.

For a child with a secure attachment experience of sensitive, reliable and trusted adults, the teacher becomes imbued with the expectation that s/he will be helpful and available. Frustrations experienced in the task will be tolerable, and the knowledge gained will be of interest and value. The pupil can turn to the teacher when uncertain and be reassured enough to continue the engagement with the task with increasing independence and autonomy. This pattern of behaviour implies a Secure Attachment experience. The learning triangle for a securely attached child would thus be balanced between the needs of the pupil, the presence of the teacher and the demands of the task. The teacher's sensitivity and skill will usually mean that the task is sufficiently do-able and sufficiently challenging to excite engagement and interest with some but not overwhelming anxiety, resulting in the satisfactory outcome of knowing something that was not known before.

The outcome for the pupil is a sense of efficacy and self-worth, and a capacity to feel able to endure frustration, challenge and uncertainty; in particular, the ability to develop a mind of his/her own – a sense of personal agency. A significant outcome of successful engagement with the educational task is thus enhanced resilience.

In this way the pupil, the teacher and the task are related, as the three participants in the learning process. I describe these relationships as the 'Learning Triangle' which is charged with the potential for emotional and cognitive resilience.

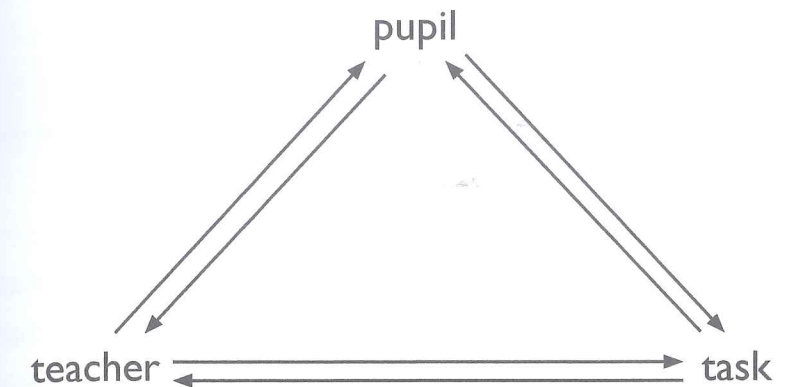## The Learning Triangle of the Securely Attached Pupil

Fig. 8 Learning Triangle: Secure Attachment

For the young pupil of a secure enough attachment, the balance of this relationship reflects a fluid dynamic between engagement and support with the teacher, and involvement in the task. As the child gets older, the presence of the teacher remains but reliance and support diminishes, so that in later school years, pupils can be more self reliant and independent of the teacher, and 'learn for themselves'. This also reflects the pupils' growing emotional and social development, and transition into the adult world.

Insecure attachment patterns introduced earlier (Chapter 3) and explored more fully in later chapters, indicate a distorted version of the Learning Triangle. This reflects a different expectation of the teacher and response to the task, imbued by the pupil with their own Attachment experience.

School as a Secure Base

There is thus the potential to replicate 'secure' experience in the practices and responses of a school. A whole school staff, head, govenors, SENCo, teachers and all support staff, who are united in promoting the well-being of all pupils, provide a framework in which the pupil can experience a reliable and secure base. Within this, the

teacher's sensitivity to the pupil's uncertainty and a task which facilitates interest and engagement can enhance the pupil's positive sense of self.

School as an insecure base

As has been stated, the pressure on schools and on teachers to focus on measurement and comparisons of performance can obscure the emotional and interpersonal experience at the heart of teaching and learning. Teachers can become preoccupied by performance and content, which can inhibit their capacity to focus on the emotional experience of learning. This can have a negative effect on school experience for pupils who may have experienced an adverse early relationship in which their needs may have been overlooked because of parental preoccupations or external pressures.

School systems can thus replicate insecurity when the focus of their intentions ignores the emotional experience of pupils. In such a climate, disaffected peer groups can grow which collude in denying the importance of learning – 'where it is not cool to be clever' (Phillips, The Guardian, London 7th March 2005).

I recall my own experience of being a pupil in a primary classroom in the far-off days of the early 1950s. The poorest performing pupils sat in the 'low row'. The class was preparing for the 11+ examination for selection for the available places in the local grammar school. The pupils in the 'low row' struggled. One girl could not read and sat dumbly through most lessons with occasional reading help from a girl in the 'top row'. One boy wet himself regularly and sat in smelly embarrassment. One boy wrote backwards and always seemed bewildered. Others also struggled and experienced the humiliation of the teacher deriding their capacity to keep up

and to understand the lessons. In the assembly where the 11+ results were read out in front of the whole school, the pupils from the 'low row' sat quietly accepting their fate of limited opportunities whilst others more fortunate and more able to learn were singled out to perform and shine elsewhere.

This rather archaic example, from days of much greater repression of feelings and reactions, makes the point that systems which identify academic success as the only hallmark of educational success are potentially very damaging. Times have certainly changed and there is a far greater equality of opportunity implied in current practice. However, the hysteria produced by starred A level results can feel very disheartening to vulnerable pupils whose academic needs and capacities are not recognised with the same degree of respect and interest. Schools identified publicly as 'failing' can be discouraging to those who have little choice in where they attend. Humiliation can be a trigger for powerful defensive behaviours, involving anger and disaffection.

Within an educational climate in which there is a preoccupation about performance, achievement and league tables, this can be experienced as less concern for the emotional well-being of pupils, and can replicate insecure attachment experiences.

Fathers and learning

The triangular nature of the learning relationship implies that the child can tolerate an intrusion into the primary relationship between child and 'mother' related here to the pupil's capacity to tolerate the presence of the educational task. It is a Freudian concept that the child needs to learn to bear the presence of 'another' in the primary dyad (of mother and child); this is the intrusion/inclusion of 'father'. Freud (1989) describes the primitive conflict as the child negotiates this readjustment of his 'ownership' of mother (the so-called Oedipal conflict). In this sense, the pupil's

response to engagement in the outside world of infant and mother may reflect the quality of resolution of this challenge. Beaumont identifies the paternal significance of the learning task and quotes Britton et al (1989) '… until he (the child) can tolerate the position of 'being a witness (to his parents' relationship) and not a participant, he is going to remain inextricably merged with his mother' (Beaumont 1991, p.262).

This psychoanalytic perspective suggests that relationships with fathers can play a significant role in the child's developing capacity to engage with the outside world.

Steele (2002) writes, 'reports from longitudinal studies of mothers, fathers and their children point to inner world emotional lessons 'taught' by mother and more outer world social lessons 'taught' by father'. Other research also associates paternal influence with 'outer world experiences' (Suess et al 1992 and Verschueren & Marcoen (1999). Karen (1998) describes the importance of the relationship between boys and fathers; 'both the quality of the father's life and the quality of his relationship with his son will deeply affect the developing boy's sense of self and possibilities' (p.199). In a controversial comment made in The Guardian (London, 7th May 2005), Trevor Phillips (Commission for Racial Equality) challenged black fathers to participate more in their children's education linking this to the relatively poor performance of black boys in terms of GCSE results.

An extension of this notion is the comparison of the educational task with its paternal association to the social context and the capacity to be employed in work in the outside world. Freud (1989) proposed the view that mature mental health is reflected by the capacity to love and to work; to engage in relationships and in the social and economic aspects of living in society. It is proposed here that the successful involvement and engagement of 'father' in early emotional experience may be a factor which facilitates engagement in the learning task, and so makes a significant contribution to social inclusion. This comment could be applied to all parental relationships and perhaps encourage absent fathers to recognise their importance. This may have implications for the many children who live in single parent families who
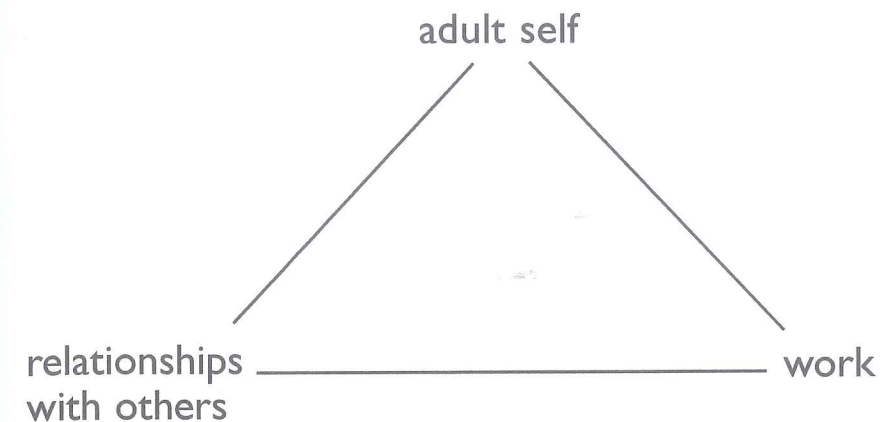

Fig. 9 The Learning Triangle in the social context

also make up half of the families living in poverty. (Financial Times 23rd April 2005)

The Learning Triangle described earlier could thus be used to define later experience in the social context (Figure 9). In this way it is possible to think of engagement in learning, in the educational task, as a precursor to engagement in work and social life. The capacity to access opportunity in terms of later social inclusion may have its roots in the same experiences which can inhibit learning – Attachment relationships.

Summary

For children of insecure attachment experience, adversity can be meliorated by relationships with other significant carers. Fathers, siblings, grandparents, relatives and friends can offer more positive experiences which will enhance esteem and resilience. In this way, the political climate and community also contribute to the overall well-being of children.

However, schools in particular are a potent source of emotional

well-being and resilience (DfES 2004). Children attend schools for a very long period of their lives, and within it they experience long term relationships with adults. This offers the potential for children to experience themselves more positively, and to experience learning. From this, they gain a sense of agency and involvement in the context of a social group, a rehearsal for later life.

- For many children, school is the access route to achievement and can compensate to some degree for absences in early experiences which inhibit development and learning. It is thus useful to reflect upon the possibilities of enhancing the capacity of School as a Secure Base, and this follows in Chapter 8.

- For the pupil of an insecure early attachment the balance in the relationship between pupil, teacher and the task can be disturbed by experiences which affect the expectations of the teacher and engagement with the task/external world. This is related here to the nature and quality of the early attachment relationship and to anxious attachment behaviour.

- The implications of insecure attachment experience will now be examined in detail and related to a pupil's response to learning in terms of relationships with the teacher and responses to the learning task. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 will closely examine the range of attachment patterns which can arise in infancy, and relate this to the nature of engagement in learning.

Linking attachment and learning

As described in Chapter 3 and discussed in relation to learning in Chapter 4, experiences of relationships in infancy can affect expectations and responses in later life. An understanding of the nature of early experience will help to deepen our understanding of the meaning of children's behaviour in school and indicate what kind of response and intervention may be effective. Some children will have been seriously affected by problematic early relationships, and their behaviour will clearly demonstrate their difficulties in particular ways. Others may have experienced other significant relationships which have helped to ameliorate earlier adversity, and their behaviour may be of less concern. There is thus a continuum of responses, and pupils with similar early experiences of attachment may be of greater or lesser concern by the time they enter school. The pattern of response to adults and to learning is likely to demonstrate characteristics reflecting early Attachment experience.

In the following chapters, Attachment behaviour patterns will be presented and described in some detail in terms of:

- ▲ **Characteristics of the Attachment pattern**s
- ▲ **How the child might feel** and experience him/herself in relation to others
- ▲ **Examples from practice**
- ▲ **Implications for learning** described in the **Learning Profile** and **Learning Triangle.** These summarise the responses of pupils associated with a particular Attachment pattern
- ▲ **Interventions** which may assist practice