

# Attachment disorder and the power of music

For students with attachment issues, the secondary school classroom can be a very scary place. **Gareth D Morewood** and **Rachel Wyllie** explain how they created a safe, positive learning environment for one such student, with careful planning, flexible teaching styles and a little help from a piano.

**Attachment issues may develop during childhood as a result of neglect and/or abuse from immediate caregivers and is described concisely as ‘the making and breaking of affectionate bonds.’<sup>1</sup>**

Human infants are born with an innate need to interact and communicate with other people. Infants instinctively seek out care givers primarily for the provision of shelter and affection but also for learning. If these needs are met by the care-giver, it is likely that positive attachments will form.

If carers are responsive, available and are able to meet the child's needs, this will generally result in the child feeling worthwhile, safe and capable. In the case of negative or abnormal attachments developing, this is often as a result of carers who are unresponsive, unreliable, threatening and/or dangerous. These behaviours can lead to the child feeling worthless, unsafe, weak, afraid and rejected.

Young people who experience a



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negative attachment cycle can often end up with heavily compromised social, emotional and cognitive development. It is also important to note that the nature of attachment changes during secondary school years from child-caregiver to relationships with a romantic orientation and peer relationships. In this transitional stage, more challenging behaviours such as stress-

response and aggression manifest themselves, producing a different set of educational challenges in the secondary setting.

## **Seeking security in the similar**

The notion of a 'secure base' is key to understanding the typical behaviours exhibited by children with attachment issues<sup>2</sup>. When children form a secure

base with the parent figure, it gives them the support and confidence to take risks and explore their environment. In this case, the child is safe from the unexpected because of the reliability of the presence of the

care-giver.

For children whom this is not the case however, danger is a constant. Safety is not anticipated by these children and, as a result, they are constantly on guard because of the



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possibility of danger. This often gives rise to the primitive response of 'fight/flight/freeze' and is responsible for a lot of the actions of these children, such as running away and tuning out voices in order to defend and protect themselves against negativity.

Homophily is a phenomenon which can be defined as 'the tendency of agents to associate disproportionately with those having similar traits'<sup>3</sup>. Homophily is something that has been observed as early as Aristotle. He observed that people are likely to 'love those who are like themselves'<sup>4</sup>. The propensity of individuals to select friends similar to themselves and their own personal attributes is, it is argued, based on self-control. These personal traits could be positive aspirations or indeed deviance. This notion of self-control is the main driving factor when forming friendships and relationships.

In the case of homophily in a school setting, this can be a potential

for concern, especially when put in the context of this work. Among adolescents especially, the likelihood of peer groups influencing the behaviour of the individual grows<sup>5</sup>. During observations, it was often the case that identified students associated with the same small group of peers, all of whom have their own specific SEND.

## **Meeting Adrian**

Adrian (pseudonym) lived in an abusive family environment in which it is suspected he suffered early life trauma. This early trauma has resulted in disordered attachment. The attachment issues manifest themselves as, among other things, a lack of emotional control and an inability to sustain relationships with peers. Adrian experiences an inability to cope with change and/or loss and as a result, requires a constant programme of support from the school.

Adrian is now a looked after child

and is placed with a very supportive foster carer. However, there is still contact throughout the year with his birth mother and father. The impact of this can leave Adrian unsettled in school and the Curriculum Support Faculty work closely with Adrian's teachers and support staff as part of a whole-school approach in order to reduce additional risks associated at these times.

Adrian does not operate at a level commensurate with his chronological age on either an academic or social and emotional level, but rather five or six years below this. In terms of behaviour, this can mean that Adrian reacts with tears of frustration if things do not go as he intended. Consequently, tactics involving a lot of praise and positive behaviour systems, similar to those used with younger children, may also be employed successfully.

Adrian has limited control over emotions (and anxieties) and can therefore be fairly opposed to

changes in routine. He has two designated Teaching Assistants (who share his support) to assist with these changes in routine, prepare for new challenges and to also liaise with staff in order to support wider participation and development needs. This is part of a clear whole-school approach to support through the Curriculum Support Faculty.

Adrian has a very short concentration span and subsequently, can experience issues with focus throughout a one hour lesson. A combination of academic, social and emotional difficulties, behavioural issues associated with negative attachment and this limited concentration span can result in an inconsistent approach to learning and can mean that Adrian may have an excellent lesson followed by a very poor lesson.

Adrian is an incredibly creative and highly imaginative student and his willingness to share ideas and opinions in class is a very positive



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characteristic. However, Adrian has a limited understanding of appropriate

classroom behaviour and conventions, which can result in negative

attachments being re-enforced.

Adrian is always keen to please adults and is very needy of adult attention. This can mean that he tries to attract a teacher's attention in ways that are distracting and irritating to both students and staff, and inappropriate in a classroom setting, especially at secondary level.

Adrian has limited social awareness as a result of difficulty in interpreting visual clues from peers and staff. As such, he experiences difficulty in engaging in appropriate conversations. If a conversation is initiated, Adrian often works at getting a point of view across before engaging in the dialogue.

Adrian's attachment needs have resulted in some significant behavioural and learning difficulties, but also in a compromised ability to establish positive attachments and relationships with peers in the school setting. He struggles to interpret any social clues and subsequently spends time irritating and annoying his peers, thus alienating himself from them.

This means that he can spend a lot of social time on his own. It is at these times that Adrian seeks out adults for interaction. In keeping with the traits of a much younger child, Adrian has historically played 'hide and seek' with adults in the corridors around school and enjoys making the students in his peer group jump when he surprises them.

Developing support and a deeper understanding of specific needs led to this work being undertaken during the placement of the second author at Priestnall School. Coupled with a personalised target report which is reviewed regularly with Adrian, his carers, Pastoral Staff and the SENCo (first author), this bespoke provision enabled a significantly increased level of positive attachment during the school day.

## **Identifying possible strategies**

It had been identified that Adrian could calm down following negative



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situations by playing the keyboard. Adrian's passion for music and desire to contribute in music lessons had also been noted as a particular strength.

During discussions between the authors, consideration was given to the possibility of devising a rewards system whereby good behaviour was acknowledged with a weekly one-to-one piano lesson during registration (25mins). These were subsequently increased to twice weekly, not as a reward but as part of Adrian's provision, in response to research which suggested that children with attachment issues 'face difficulties in accepting "not knowing", which can create overwhelming feelings of fear and humiliation.'<sup>6</sup> Instead, the music lessons were viewed as an integral part of the provision to encourage positive attachments and avoid the notion of homophily - 'individuals with similar attributes [who] tend to "end up together."'

We also hoped to create

an environment for personal achievement in mainstream lessons. Adrian was also in one of the second author's mainstream classes which enabled the development of practice and resultant strategies for inclusion in class lessons. King and Newnham note that any classroom or school based strategies or interventions to support students with attachment issues should facilitate the on-going development of 'basic trust', thereby creating a safe learning environment<sup>7</sup>. It was on this basis that planning for lessons developed.

## **Adrian's piano lessons**

Piano lessons with Adrian commenced before mainstream lessons. Therefore, as Adrian's piano teacher before his classroom teacher, the second author was able to develop a positive relationship – this was frequently referred to by Adrian to his peers. Through the one-to-one sessions, a positive attachment began to develop whereby Adrian enjoyed

the positive attention demonstrated – especially through the interest in his piano playing. Ultimately, the aim was for this trust to include the 'outward focused capacity to regard other people as reliable,' as recommended by King and Newnham.

Prior to teaching Adrian's mainstream class, consideration as to how this individual relationship

would impact the classroom situation was required. It was also important to prepare Adrian for a change in classroom teacher and help him cope with this transition. Relational permanence of teachers is thought to positively affect students with attachment needs, hence the importance of the introduction phase. Adrian knew that the second



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author was someone who could be relied upon and had a sense of environmental security, which is also key to his emotional development.

However, there was awareness that children with attachment issues can develop strategies to control resources as a result of an early need to organise their own safety<sup>8</sup>. Potential tensions between the role as a resource for learning the piano and as a classroom teacher could unsettle Adrian, leading to more challenging lessons. However, with careful planning and support, the outcome was more positive and Adrian was happy to come to lessons and engaged extremely positively. Even though these lessons were not challenge free, the starting point from which Adrian engaged was a secure one.

## **Adrian's mainstream lessons**

Early on, it was noted that Adrian would often come into the

classroom at the beginning of a lesson to say hello and immediately attempt to play the keyboard. From preliminary reading, it was thought that this may be related to resource control or a need to please. It was however, important to uphold the same expectations for every student and therefore Adrian was asked to join the line outside the classroom with his peers. This was often met with some resistance, as is common for children with attachment issues.

After further research, it was recognised that Adrian's behaviour could be linked to what Bombèr refers to as 'scanning'<sup>9</sup>. She suggests it is necessary to allow time for the student to assess their surroundings for any potential danger before feeling safe in the new context. She also notes that any attempt to move on from this stage too quickly is counterproductive. Given this research and Adrian's consistent behaviour in this matter, it was ensured that the second

author spent a few moments at the beginning of lessons allowing Adrian to come in and talk. However, it was still important to try and ensure clear and explicit expectations for all students to promote fairness, and so a balance had to be reached in terms of allowing enough time for Adrian to establish a feeling of safety before the lesson began.

## **Strategies for inclusion**

As previously mentioned, children with attachment issues often have difficulty regulating their emotions as these tools haven't developed in early childhood. It therefore follows that if Adrian experienced difficulties in previous lessons that day, resulting anxieties may be brought into the lesson. Discussions between teachers and TAs are essential in understanding the student and identifying appropriate strategies. These discussions took place before the

lesson began, which meant issues or concerns that had arisen during the day could inform planning and allow for adaptation of teaching as required. This strategy could be adopted with any student who receives additional adult support, not just for those with attachment difficulties.

It was also important to provide regular times during the lesson where Adrian could succeed. When the class had begun the initial task, Adrian was spoken to individually and set small tasks which he could achieve in order to provide frequent opportunities for praise. Adrian often struggles to maintain concentration and so by staggering the verbal instructions and scaffolding the task, there was a reduction in the pressure of having to remember all the instructions from the beginning of the lesson.

A difficulty which arose from this approach however, was Adrian's need for immediate attention when

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he had achieved the next step. In his piano lessons, this was obviously not an issue, but it became a challenge in the classroom situation with 30 other students also seeking attention and support at various times. In these instances, a generally successful approach was to tell Adrian which groups were going to be seen before him.

Bombèr further suggests that children with attachment issues respond best to visual, tactile and kinaesthetic approaches and initially this was confirmed by observations. However, after working with Adrian for a few weeks, it was noted that he did not learn *music* in this way. In teaching the music for the ground bass parts, it was discovered that although he watched where the fingers moved to on the keyboard (visual learning), he mostly listened to the melody and then was able to pick it out on the keyboard through trial and error (auditory). Subsequently, an integrated auditory

learning approach developed into the modelling of the task at the beginning of the lesson and also during the lesson while circulating the classroom.

One of the three main principles of inclusion is overcoming potential barriers for assessment<sup>10</sup>. It was noted early on that assessment was going to be an issue with Adrian.

Despite his desire to please adults, he was not in a position to feel safe and comfortable offering his work for assessment as a performance, as this wasn't something he did frequently.

With Adrian, it was realised that there was a need to be innovative. Instead of 'forcing' an official assessment on him – which could produce additional anxiety – assessments were built into the class work and piano lessons. In the safe and secure environment of the school's Nurture Room, there was an opportunity to informally assess Adrian's work and progress during

the half term and mark his work against level descriptors. Obviously this is not practical in every case, but building in an alternate and less stressful form of assessment is a reasonable adjustment to ensure an inclusive approach to learning and assessment – particularly so in Adrian's case.

## **The inclusivity of music**

'Music can change the way children feel, think and act. . . Music enables children to define themselves in relation to others, their friends, colleagues, social networks and to the cultures in which they live . . . The teaching of music deepens and extends everyday experiences, providing new opportunities and forging important links between the home, the school and the outside world.'<sup>11</sup>

In this sense then, music is intrinsically inclusive. It provides different routes into topics for each student and allows them to

establish themselves in a completely individual sense. To further the second author's development as a music teacher, this research has highlighted the need to ensure the content of lessons is relevant – that it establishes links between the classroom and outside world and considers the individual needs of the students.

To this end music, in relation to children with attachment disorder, can be incredibly beneficial, as they may otherwise experience limited routes for expression. During a conversation with Adrian, he said he enjoyed 'anything creative'. Approaching music in a way which encourages creativity helps to provide a sense of importance and identity within the subject and reinforces the message that each student has something valuable to offer.

Although this article has focused primarily on ways in which the school could support and include

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Adrian in relation to his specific needs and interests, the strategies we employed also benefitted other students, and I hope that our research and observations will inform a wider audience about the need to provide a personalised curriculum for some of our more disabled young people. Specific strategies such as the one-to-one piano lessons would of course be impractical with a whole cohort of students, nevertheless strategies such as multi-sensory resources, scaffolding tasks and continuous praise in order to promote positive attachments and focus learning were beneficial for the majority.

Hopefully, we have also highlighted the importance of dialogue and how the relationship between a student and teacher – even before the lesson has started – can be built into providing an inclusive learning experience. From our dialogue with Adrian, we developed an increased

understanding about his specific disability, which supported the developing pedagogy – an important part of quality-first teaching and a basis from which all teachers develop their ‘tools of the trade’. We believe that this should be part of training for all, and is vital as Initial Teacher Training evolves in order to provide the next generation of teachers with appropriate skills to meet a 21<sup>st</sup> century population.

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