



Cultivating Connection

How adopting a whole school approach to attachment aware and trauma-informed practices can transform school environments

Research into RNCSEF's programme to promote understanding of attachment aware and trauma-informed practices in boarding and independent day schools

Foreword

For nearly 200 years, Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) has unlocked access to holistic care and education in the UK's boarding and independent day schools. From its origins as a 19th century orphanage, RNCSF now works through partnerships with more than 200 boarding and independent schools to enable nearly 500 children each year to access the care, stability and holistic education that they provide.

We are proud to be the delivery partner of the Department for Education's Broadening Educational Pathways (BEP) scheme, which provides local authorities with the knowledge and insights of how to access free, or heavily subsidised, places available in many schools' bursary award schemes. As this scheme has grown, it has evolved to shape commissioning practices where local authorities consider boarding as an alternative to residential care or as a way to preserve kinship and foster placements.

When we embarked on the design of the scheme, our aim was always not only to ensure that hundreds of individual children could be supported to thrive, but also that in so doing the schools involved would grow in their own knowledge and experience of how to encourage this for all pupils.

The attachment aware, trauma-informed practice project, the study findings of which are detailed in this report, was a central element of this best practice building intent. Over a two year period, it has allowed us to capture the learnings and embed these in our approaches to supporting schools working with vulnerable children. It has provided evidence of the practices that work which we will use in our continued campaign to secure priority access for care experienced children to the right school for them—whether boarding or day, independent or state.



Ali Henderson
CEO



Nick Owen
Chair



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Introduction

School can be a place where stability, care, and trusting relationships help children to thrive. For care-experienced children, schools where there is a wide understanding of attachment aware, trauma-informed approaches foster safety, trust, and emotional regulation – the critical foundations if young people are going to secure positive futures and overcome adverse early years experiences.

We have always been passionate about ensuring that supportive school environments are available for all care-experienced children. When we were awarded the Department for Education contract to explore how to leverage the expertise available in the boarding and independent schools' sector to support the long term outcomes of children in care, we knew that this provided an opportunity to work in partnership to determine common themes in what makes many of those schools such positive environments for care-experienced children.

Delivery of the Department for Education supported Broadening Educational Pathways (BEP) scheme is done through partnerships with more than 200 schools, each of whom commits to RNCSF's accreditation standard. The standard focuses on ensuring that schools can evidence that their pastoral care, holistic educational offering and particular school culture and

environment can nurture vulnerable children to thrive. This has allowed us to capture learnings about both the experiences of the young people, as well as the perspectives of their teachers and school leaders, that might inform the wider sharing of best practice.

Through a partnership with the University of Oxford Rees Centre and Anewarc (a network of senior leaders, trainers and academics with extensive experience of supporting and leading the development of attachment aware practices) we focused on the environments created in eight RNCSF partner accredited schools. What has emerged are clear learnings and a blueprint for attachment aware, trauma-informed practice that we hope can be used widely. We hope you enjoy reading the findings.

Our thanks to the team of researchers, educationalists and trainers from the Rees Centre, Anewarc and the schools' involved.



Leah Morgan
Director of Programmes

Broadening Educational Pathways: How the scheme works in practice



The support from within my school has provided me with valuable advice regarding my future aspirations and supported me to grow and develop into a more mature person and exposed me to young people from diverse backgrounds. With the wider RNCSF community behind me I have always had the feeling that "I am not alone" in this journey.

Care-experienced year 12
SpringBoarder

Care-Experienced and
Vulnerable Children



Broadening Educational Pathways

Children with significant experience of social care

Children who have faced significant early years trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

They include:

- Young people in care
- Young people previously in care
- Young people on the edge of care
- Young carers

We work with community groups, local authorities and referring schools to identify children for whom a state boarding or independent school might provide the environment they most need.

We ensure the young people remain connected - to our ongoing support, and to each other - through our growing community of alumni.

We provide ongoing support - for schools, for young people, their families and the teams around them - to give the placement the best chance of success.

We work with children and their parents or carers to explore the young person's ambitions and needs, the options available, and which school might suit them best

We work with state boarding and independent schools to recommend young people for those schools to consider for their fully-funded bursary placements, based on careful assessment of young people's needs and interests and our knowledge of individual school environments.

We work with schools, teams around children, and community partners to support the young person's transition to the new school. Partners provide practical and emotional support, mentoring and peer groups with other SpringBoarders, to prepare the young person for their new environment

Highlights from the last 5 years

250+

More than 250 children with significant experience of social care

supported to secure a new boarding or independent day school place

£2.75M

£2.75 M projected saving to HM Treasury¹

associated with the reduction in social care costs, and likely gain in potential lifetime earnings (and savings in associated welfare payments and public services) of every 100 vulnerable children able to attend a state boarding or independent school

4x

4 x more likely to achieve five good GCSEs including English and Maths¹

A matched control group study demonstrated that care-experienced children supported through the scheme to attend a boarding school were FOUR TIMES more likely to secure five good GCSEs (grades 9-5) including English and Maths

200+

Schools committed to BEP Scheme

more than 200 schools signed up to a 'pledge of priority access' for care-experienced children to their fee assistance (sometimes called 'transformational bursary') award schemes

5+

5+ months of progress¹

children in care and vulnerable children in school placements gained the equivalent of +5 months of progress (Attainment 8) (+3 months GCSE Maths and +7 months GCSE English), when compared to pupils sharing similar characteristics

Noting the positive results thus far of the BEP scheme, the 2022 Independent Review into Children's Social Care recommended that the Government should:

"increase the number of children in care benefitting from a place at a state boarding or independent school... and create a new wave of state boarding capacity led by the best existing schools".

The Government, in their Social Care Reform implementation strategy and consultation response agreed - stating the ambition to:

"extend the Broadening Educational Pathways Programme to increase the number of children in care in independent and state boarding schools (and) use the evidence generated from this to inform long-term ambitions for this programme."

¹ University of Nottingham (2023). An Independent Evaluation of the Outcomes For Looked After and Vulnerable Children Attending Boarding Schools. https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/_files/ugd/9d6b54_af19c759b4f34816b1921d4316753cb3.pdf

Attachment aware and trauma-informed practice

Why is it needed?

The evidence for why attachment aware and trauma-informed practice is needed across all schools.



Attachment aware and trauma-informed practice offers schools a powerful tool kit for understanding and responding to the emotional and developmental needs of pupils. By prioritising relationships, emotional safety, and an understanding of how trauma and attachment shape behaviour, schools can create environments where children feel secure, valued, and ready to learn. Evidence demonstrates¹ that these approaches improve behaviour, wellbeing, staff confidence, and overall school culture.

Attachment aware practice

Attachment aware practice is grounded in attachment theory, which maintains that the relationships and bond offered to infants during early development (often by their primary care-givers) can influence a child's ability to form attachments with adults and peers later on in life, shaping their self-regulation, sense of safety, and therefore their capacity to learn. In educational settings, being "attachment-aware" means recognising that many pupils—particularly those who have experienced instability in early life, neglect, or separation—may struggle with trust, relationships, and self-regulation. Key features are:

- Understanding how insecure or disrupted attachment can manifest as challenging behaviour, withdrawal, or difficulties with concentration.
- Prioritising consistent positive relationships between staff and pupils.
- Using predictable routines and relational approaches to support emotional safety.
- Adjusting expectations and responses to behaviour through a lens of unmet needs rather than deliberate defiance.

Trauma-informed practice

Trauma-informed practice recognises the widespread impact of trauma—including abuse, neglect, domestic violence, loss, and chronic stress—on children's development, behaviour, and learning. Trauma can affect the brain's stress response systems, making it harder for pupils to regulate emotions, form relationships, and engage academically. Key features are:

- Understanding how trauma affects behaviour, cognition, and relationships.
- Responding to behaviour with curiosity ("What has happened to you?") rather than blame ("What have you done?").
- Creating safe, predictable environments that reduce triggers and support regulation.
- Building strong, trusting relationships with pupils.
- Supporting staff to recognise signs of trauma and respond without escalating stress.
- Avoiding punitive approaches that may re-traumatise or reinforce fear.

Benefits

A large-scale study¹ of attachment aware and trauma-informed practice in over 300 schools across 26 local authorities showed that there was an overall positive effect on pupils and staff. School staff and programme leaders involved in attachment aware and trauma-informed school programmes have previously reported that development of relational practices, through raising awareness and training, can be beneficial for all pupils, regardless of their prior experiences². Attachment aware and trauma-informed practice has also been shown to improve staff wellbeing in schools¹, improve academic outcomes³ and reduce exclusions⁴.



Better academic outcomes



Improved behaviour



More positive staff-pupil relationships



More positive pupil-pupil relationships



Better emotional regulation



Reductions in exclusions

¹ Hyde-Dryden, G., Brown, A., Trivedi, H., Tah, P., Sebba, J., and Harrison, N. (2022). Working paper 6: Attachment and trauma awareness training: analysis of staff interviews and pupil focus groups in 26 case study schools. Oxford: Rees Centre.
² Trivedi, H., & Harrison, N. (2022). Attachment aware and trauma-informed schools programmes: positive practice examples from local authorities. Oxford: Rees Centre.
³ Rose, J., McGuire-Snieckus, R., Gilbert, L. and McInnes, K. (2019) Impact Evaluation Report Attachment Aware Schools Pilot Project Phase 1 Bath and North East Somerset Virtual School. Bath Spa University [or Bath Spa University].
⁴ Butler, Laura & Sultana, Anjam. (2025). Trauma informed and attachment aware practice in schools: A systematic literature review of school staff experiences. Educational and Child Psychology. 42. 90-108.

AATI Programme Outline:

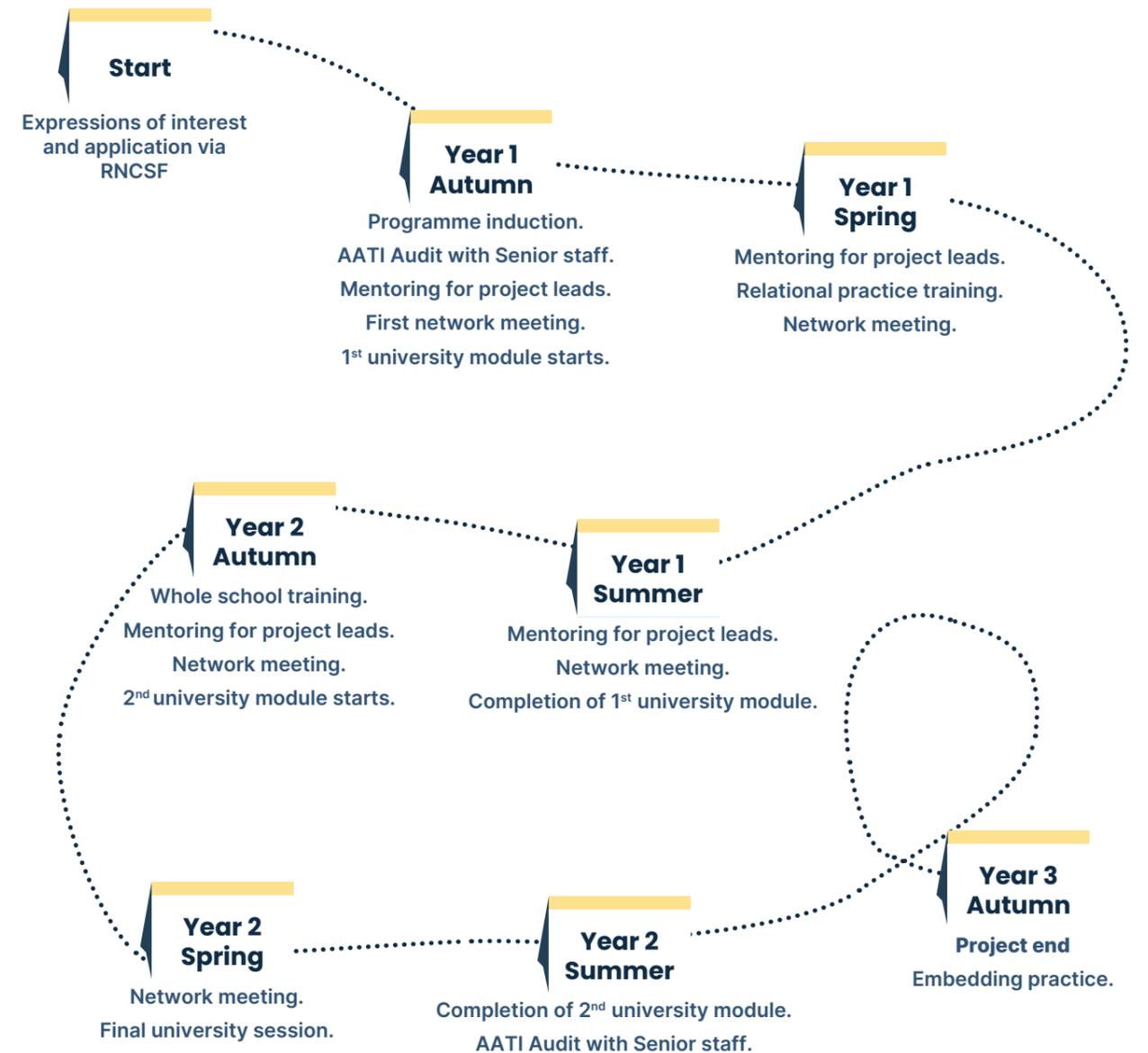
Attachment aware and trauma-informed programme

Adopting a whole-school approach to attachment aware and trauma-informed practice – a structured 18 month programme.



Sample timeline

Timeline, and start date, can be adapted to suit individual school needs within each cohort

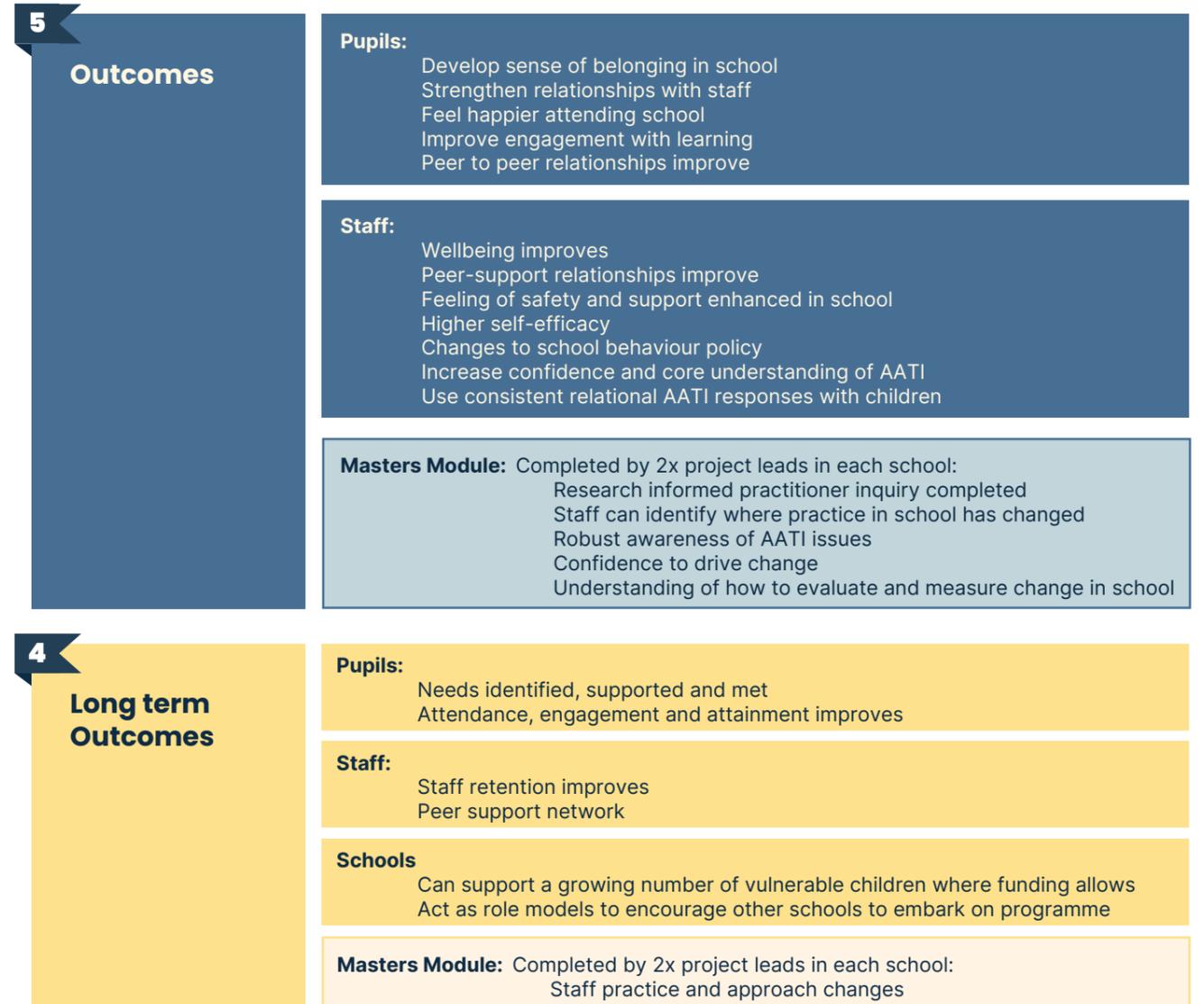
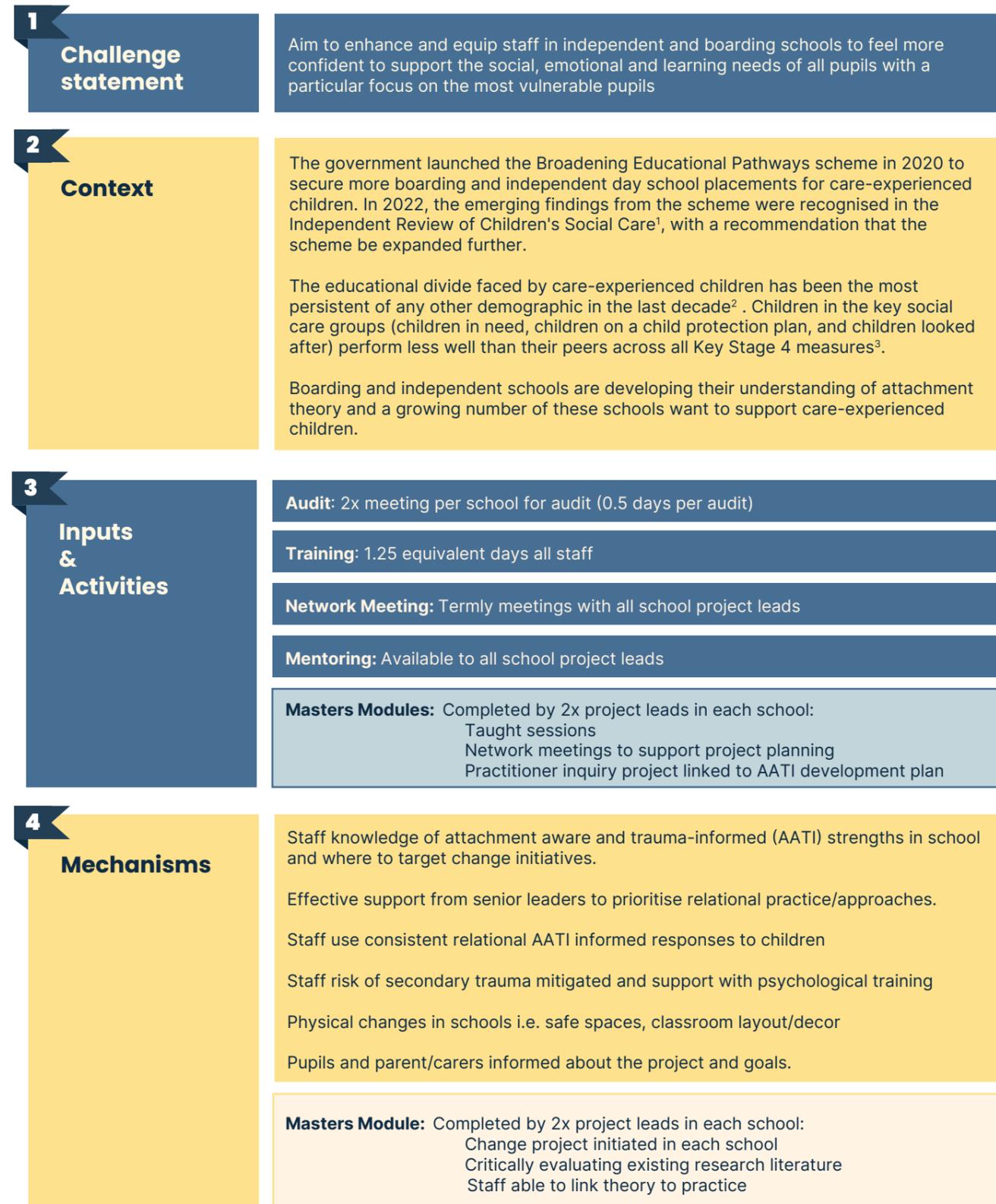


It's not a quick fix, but the cultural shift is worth every step. Invest in staff training, commit to consistency, and be patient—the impact on pupils' wellbeing and learning will be profound.

Ceri Jones
Headmaster
Caterham School

AATI Theory of Change

A Theory of Change methodology was used as the basis for an exploratory study of the initiative.



1 MacAllister, J. (2022) The Independent Review into children's social care final report (accessed 30/01/26). https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

2 Berridge, D et al. (2020) CHILDREN IN NEED AND CHILDREN IN CARE: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND PROGRESS <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/policybristol/briefings-and-reports-pdfs/Final%20Report%20Nuffield.pdf>

3 Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/f8dc39f5-d5d8-49c1-0366-08de61792ac0>



The AATI programme demonstrates clear potential to strengthen schools' capacity to create relationally aware and emotionally literate environments. The multi-stranded programme, incorporating self-assessment audits, training, reassessment of progress and action research along with lead staff supervision, appears to have supported individual and organisational learning within participating schools. The collective efficacy of the staff was seen to improve after taking part in the programme.

**Rees Centre
 University of Oxford
 Full report found on page 15**



Impact on schools

Eight schools embarked on the programme. They represent a mixture of selective and non-selective, state and independent, and those offering both full and flexible boarding placements as well as only day placements. Each began the programme with an in-depth audit of current practice.

The findings of the audit drove the identified development areas. Across the eight schools these varied, and included:

- strategies to encourage co-regulation and dysregulation
- staff supervision and reflective practice
- changes to behavioural policies and practices

The data in this section has been analysed by RNCSF and report the proportion of leaders who indicated the increase in their confidence and perception of these areas.

Summary of key findings

An exploratory study of RNCSF's attachment aware and trauma-informed (AATI) programme was undertaken by Helen Trivedi at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford. The full report detailing the methodology used to inform these findings is provided on pages 15 - 27.

The study findings highlights four key areas where participating schools saw positive impacts

- Pupil Provision
- Attitudes and alignment
- Consistency and commitment
- Staff Supervision

Pupil Provision

The main driver for schools in joining the programme was to strengthen their capacity to meet increasingly complex pupil needs. Upskilling staff in AATI approaches led to tangible shifts in practice. Changes focused on improving pupil well-being, engagement, and inclusion. The study found evidence that the training of staff had resulted in meaningful adjustments in day-to-day provision.

Attitudes and alignment

Most schools felt that AATI aligned well with their existing culture and systems, creating favourable conditions for organisational change. Although around half noted that some staff held traditional disciplinary mindsets that could hinder implementation, senior leaders believed that the majority were willing to adopt new approaches and could positively influence others. The study findings highlight that cultural change is gradual and depends on sustained leadership, increased staff awareness, and consistent practice.

Consistency and commitment

Schools viewed the shift toward AATI practice as an ongoing process, with many committing to further training to build greater consistency. Senior leaders played a central role in driving organisational change by modelling relational practice, shaping strategic priorities, and supporting policy reform. Schools demonstrated strong commitment by revising behaviour policies, embedding AATI within structures, and integrating emotional, relational, and trauma-informed content into the curriculum. In some cases, this signalled movement beyond surface-level adoption toward deeper structural embedding.

Staff Supervision

Participation in the programme prompted schools to reflect on and enhance their supervision structures. Strengthened supervision was seen as a way to support staff well-being, reflective practice, and professional collaboration—key enablers of trauma-informed and relational approaches.



For us as a school, perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this programme was the collective united response it engaged in our staff body. The training opened up conversations and questions and encouraged staff to be more curious about their students and their presenting behaviours; further uniting pastoral and academic teams under a common goal of student wellbeing.

Krystle Flack
Cranleigh School

Connect before correct:

Co-regulation and dysregulation strategies

All eight of the schools involved in the programme noted an increase in the complexity of behaviours amongst the pupils in their school, including a growing number of children with diagnosed specialist educational needs and social, emotional and mental health difficulties. They also reported that, although specialist staff were well trained to meet the needs of children and many teachers are able to respond to needs due to their relational approaches, it had rarely been an express strategy to provide all staff with co-regulation and dysregulation strategies.

How "Emotion Coaching" approaches can help support schools

All of the participating schools undertook whole-school "Emotion Coaching" training. Some schools decided to buy in more of this training in addition to the programme offer.

Emotion coaching involves validating a child's emotional state, setting limits on inappropriate behaviour, and guiding them toward better, more effective responses, promoting emotional intelligence and self-regulation. By upskilling all staff (teaching, classroom support, administrative staff, etc.) colleagues felt equipped with the techniques to "connect before correct" – to first regulate their response to the behaviour, to then support the child in question to regulate, avoiding escalation processes, better enabling learning and reducing reliance on duty staff.



Schools reported a 17% improvement in how they support individual pupils



Schools reported a 12% improvement in their school's culture of belonging and safety

All behaviour is communication:

Transforming behaviour policies

Many of the participating schools' behaviour policies focussed on rewards, sanction and consequences. As part of the programme all schools agreed reviewing their behaviour policies would form part of their AATI school development plans, ensuring they prioritised maintaining high expectations whilst simultaneously seeing all behaviour as a form of communication and responding to that appropriately. It was important for participating schools to build momentum and support for AATI approaches amongst staff prior to reviewing and implementing a new behaviour policy, and this was either implemented during the programme, or following the final audit.

Trauma-informed behavioural management strategies

A school transformed their behaviour policy to reflect their commitment to a positive, consistent and trauma-informed approach to behaviour. Within which, the school emphasises: respect, responsibility and kindness; attachment aware and trauma-informed practice; strong pastoral care; clear standards and expectations; zero tolerance for bullying, discrimination or harassment; celebration of positive behaviour through a wide range of rewards; fair, proportionate and contextual responses to poor behaviour; using restorative approaches wherever appropriate; a graduated system of sanctions, ranging from reminders and restorative conversations to detentions, formal warnings and, only in the most serious cases, exclusion.

Overall the policy aims to create a safe and respectful environment, where pupils develop self regulation, empathy and confidence, supported by consistent adult guidance rooted in AATI approaches.



Schools reported a 25% improvement in the impact of AATI approaches that enable learning



A 10% improvement in the impact of AATI approaches on behaviour was reported by schools



Staff are using co-regulation and dysregulation strategies and techniques to de-escalate behaviour rather than issue sanctions from the outset. This again enables more positive, supportive, and trusting relationships between pupils and staff. This also promotes staff feeling empowered to work together as a team when managing behaviour or support a young person if they have made poor decisions.

Natassja Milton
Forest School



There is a definite feel that behaviour has improved from the children, and that as a result staff are happier and more relaxed. Numbers of hours pupils have spent in detention or 'reflection' time has reduced, and exclusions similarly have noticed a sharp decline. The staff who consistently built relationships with their pupils were rewarded with pupils who wanted to do their very best for them.

Pete Maidment
Lord Wandsworth College

Supporting Staff:

Staff supervision and reflective practice

Each of the eight participating schools were identified as having gaps in the use of reflective practices and supervision to support teaching staff. The baseline audits shared the motivation amongst a wide group of classroom based staff to become less reliant on the pastoral or senior staff to manage behavioural concerns. But that their ability to do so was hampered by their lack of confidence that their approaches would be supported.

Staff support provision was identified as a key enabler to building confidence amongst teachers in how to respond effectively to behavioural issues within classroom settings. Staff support provision varied from access to occupational health assistance, school-based counsellors, and in some schools a formalised clinical supervision approach available for senior leaders. All schools wished they could widen this to a larger staff cohort, but acknowledged cost as the primary factor as to why this was difficult to achieve.

Bringing reflective practices into daily use

One of the pilot schools embedded the principles of AATI practice in the work that they were doing to promote an open and transparent culture of staff self-reporting, and the processes to manage Low-Level Concerns. Members of staff greatly appreciated the reflective space that the application of AATI practice created and felt able to consider, develop and improve their practice. Having submitted the self-report form, many members of staff reflected upon their practice and identified what they could have done differently. Every response received a positive reply from a member of senior leadership team within 24 hours with the offer of a supportive conversation which was appreciated by colleagues. As a result, members of staff seeking support via the self-reporting mechanism increased while the number of low-level concerns raised significantly decreased, especially related to behaviour management situations.



A 30% improvement in staff confidence to deliver AATI approaches following whole school training was reported by schools



Upon reflection, I was able to see that raising my voice and shouting when the young person was dysregulated directly resulted in escalation of the situation. It was helpful to talk it through with our safeguarding senior lead and to remember key principles of our AATI training, e.g. volume, tone, proximity and height. Most importantly, to work hard to establish co-regulation with the young person to promote their ability to self-regulate

Jeff Kayne
Forest School

Denstone College

Denstone College, in Staffordshire, has a long history of working with RNCSF and directly with local authorities to support vulnerable children from across the UK in both its' boarding and day student roll.

What motivated your school to join the AATI programme?

We strive to create a school environment where every child feels safe, valued, and understood. We recognised that many of our pupils carry experiences of trauma or attachment difficulties (even when they're not very obvious), and we knew that traditional behaviour approaches weren't always meeting their needs. Joining the AATI programme gave us the framework and expertise to embed compassion, consistency, and relational practice across our whole school community.

How has the programme influenced your school's approach to behaviour management and inclusion?

The programme has shifted our perspective from "managing behaviour" to "understanding need." Staff now see behaviour as communication, and our responses are rooted in empathy, co-regulation, and restorative practice. This has made our school more inclusive, ensuring that pupils who previously struggled to feel part of the community are now supported to thrive.

What improvements have you noticed in staff confidence, collaboration, or consistency of practice?

Staff feel more confident in responding to challenging situations because they share a common language and toolkit. Collaboration has strengthened across year groups and departments, with colleagues supporting one another and modelling consistent approaches. This consistency has created a calmer, more predictable environment for pupils and staff alike.

Have you seen any changes in pupil outcomes (e.g. attendance, sense of belonging, academic engagement)?

Yes, we've seen noticeable improvements. The school is calmer, our sanctions policy has been hardly touched, and pupils report feeling a stronger sense of belonging. The few children who previously disengaged from learning are now participating more fully, showing greater resilience and academic progress.

What has been the most rewarding aspect of this journey for your school community?

The most rewarding aspect has been witnessing the transformation in relationships—between staff and pupils, and among pupils themselves. Seeing children feel safe enough to express themselves, build trust, and re-engage with learning has been incredibly powerful. It has reaffirmed our belief that relationships are the foundation of education. It has given staff back the autonomy they deserve.

If you could describe the programme's impact in one sentence, what would it be?

The AATI programme has transformed our school into a safe, compassionate, and inclusive community where every child can flourish.

Lotte Tulloch
Head
Denstone College





Rees Centre Report

Helen Trivedi

Attachment aware and trauma-informed practice programme in independent and boarding schools

Summary

This was an exploratory study of the implementation of an attachment aware and trauma-informed (AATI) programme for independent and boarding schools, who are part of the Royal National Children's Springboard Foundation. The aims were to explore:

1. What practice changes across schools were reported since taking part in the AATI programme?
2. What factors can be identified that potentially contribute to implementation?

An initial Theory of Change was co-developed for the programme and existing programme documents collected from eight participating schools were analysed along with questionnaire data exploring self-efficacy and collective efficacy from school staff. Qualitative findings from programme documents were grouped into common themes: pupil provision; attitudes and alignment; consistency and commitment; and staff supervision. The questionnaire data were analysed for scores of self-efficacy and collective efficacy at two time points, using a subsample analysis approach (see appendix I).

- The data indicate that multiple Theory of Change mechanisms are operating across participating schools, having in this study only explored a subset of possible mechanisms.

Key Findings

Pupil provision

- Schools motivation to join the programme was primarily to strengthen their capacity to meet pupils' growing needs by upskilling staff – a key aspect of the Theory of Change was to increase staff knowledge of AATI approaches.
- This led to a range of practice changes or additional provision for pupils, aimed at enhancing pupil well-being, engagement, and inclusion.

Attitudes and alignment

- The majority of schools found the AATI approach aligned with existing culture and systems, which can support organisational change.
- Half of the participating schools suggested that the existing "mindset" of some staff may inhibit implementation of new practice. However, senior leaders expressed the belief that those demonstrating an intrinsic willingness were in the majority, and that majority could offset the influence of the few who were unwilling.
- Nonetheless, the persistence of traditional disciplinary mindsets among some staff indicates that cultural change requires sustained leadership and reinforcement over time (Stoll, 2000, 1998). Both of which relate to the identified Theory of Change mechanisms of improving staff awareness, consistency of practice and senior leaders' commitment and support of the approaches.

Supervision

- Participation in the programme prompted schools to reflect on and strengthen their staff supervision practices to better support well-being and professional collaboration.

Consistency and commitment

- Change and development of practice towards becoming more AATI, was seen as a journey for schools. Schools striving for greater consistency and embedding of the new practice were committed to future training.
- The senior leadership team emerged as a driver for organisational change, with an emphasis on role modelling the practice, in addition to supporting policy changes and future training.
- The role of the senior leaders was crucial, not only in shaping strategic priorities and policy reform but also in modelling relational practice. This finding is congruent with the well-established view that leadership commitment is essential for meaningful and lasting cultural change in educational settings. In the initial Theory of Change effective support of senior leaders was expected to be a core mechanism for the implementation of the programme.
- Schools demonstrated strong leadership and policy commitment to AATI, revising behaviour policies and embedding the approach within school structures and leadership.
- AATI was integrated into the curriculum through direct teaching on emotional and relational skills and trauma-informed planning of sensitive content.
- The integration of AATI principles into curriculum design and behaviour management approaches, in some schools, indicated movement beyond a surface-level adoption towards a desire for a deeper structural embedding.
- In the initial Theory of Change for this programme outcomes like policy changes and curriculum for pupils, where anticipated to result where schools made commitment to embed the approach more strategically. These examples indicate integration of the approach and implementing organisational change.

Quantitative findings

- The findings from the questionnaire analysis indicate a promising shift in collective efficacy among school staff, aligning with several key mechanisms identified in the Theory of Change.
- The Theory of Change posits that enhancing staff understanding and confidence as a whole school and improving consistency of practice are likely mechanisms to support improved self-efficacy, staff well-being, pupil well-being and eventually academic outcomes could be positively influenced.
- This exploratory study provides evidence to suggest collective efficacy should be added to the Theory of Change for this and other similar programmes, especially as the whole-school staff training element is focussed on driving consistency of practice and building collective culture and cohesion of practice.

Overall

- The findings suggest that the Theory of Change initially developed for this programme accurately identified mechanisms that should drive towards intended outcomes, however it is likely that collective efficacy could be important to add to the Theory of Change for programmes intending to achieve organisational wide changes in practice and culture.

Introduction

Royal National Children's Springboard Foundation (RNCSF) works to support local authorities and charities working with vulnerable children to identify potential opportunities for school placements in boarding or independent day schools. Since 2020, RNCSF has been the delivery partner for the Department of Education for the "Broadening Educational Pathways" scheme, specifically for children in care and those with a social worker. This scheme aims to provide those children with the opportunity to attend independent schools, with a view to improving educational experiences, opportunities and stability at home. An important aspect of the scheme is the support provided to schools and the children to enhance their school experience, ensuring pastoral care is available, excellence in teaching, and there is the appropriate financial commitment from participating schools.

Many pupils with a social worker are likely to have experienced adversity and trauma. Research indicates that these experiences can continue to have a lifelong impact on individuals (O'Higgins et al., 2017). The lasting impact of adversity can increase a child's likelihood of anxiety, a lack of sense of belonging, poor mental health, and reduced well-being (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). However, many young people go on to achieve academically and experience positive life outcomes (Feinstein et al., 2025; Harrison, 2020). Some children achieve because of the support they have received from various services, while others achieve despite the lack of support they received. There are various protective factors which have been found to reduce the impact of earlier adversity on life outcomes (Buchanan et al., 2023). Protective factors largely fall into three domains: personality and individual disposition, education and academic ability, and social support, including caregiver and wider support from trusted adults or peers (Buchanan et al., 2023).

Schools are places where children have an opportunity to form positive, supportive relationships with adults, which act as a protective factor and have a role in ameliorating the impact of trauma (Buchanan et al., 2023; Herrenkohl et al., 2019). However, staff are often ill-equipped and overwhelmed about the role they have in supporting pupils' emotional needs (Alisic et al., 2012;

Andrews et al., 2014). There has been a growing movement across schools to support staff with this role, by providing whole-school staff training to develop trauma-informed and attachment aware practice and school environments (Bademci et al., 2020; Brunzell et al., 2016; Crosby et al., 2019; Dingwall & Sebba, 2018; Dorado et al., 2016; Fancourt, 2019; Trivedi & Harrison, 2022).

Training is effective when it targets the development of skills, confidence and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the sense of belief and confidence a person has in their ability to execute their role well (Bandura, 1977). Following training to enhance skills in a specific area, for example, understanding the impact of trauma, recovery and the importance of relationships and how they are formed, it would be expected that self-efficacy in that area would be improved.

Collective efficacy is about a group's shared belief in its combined ability to deliver the function that the collective holds. In a school, this would be a judgement about the ability of a staff group to support pupils' engagement and successful outcomes in school (Goddard et al., 2004). Collective efficacy has been found to influence teacher self-efficacy, job-related stress and be related to pupils' outcomes (Goddard et al., 2000, 2004; Klassen, 2010). This is why collective efficacy is an important concept to consider alongside self-efficacy in the current project.

This report presents the findings from a small-scale exploratory study of RNCSF's attachment aware and trauma-informed (AATI) training programme involving eight independent schools. Existing programme materials and documents, predominantly generated by RNCSF programme leaders collecting the feedback and perceptions from schools' senior leadership team, were analysed alongside a measure of school staff self-efficacy and collective efficacy. There were two research questions:

1. What practice changes across schools were reported since taking part in the AATI programme?
2. What factors can be identified that potentially contribute to implementation?

The attachment aware and trauma-informed programme project

The RNCSF's AATI programme incorporated multiple components designed to build capacity and embed sustainable practice within schools.

- At the outset of the programme, school senior leaders completed an audit tool, providing a baseline to self-evaluate progress in introducing and embedding AATI practice. This was then intended to be updated at the end of the period of training.
- Each school received whole-school staff training normally delivered by an external training provider, 1.25 days split over at least two sessions, throughout one academic year, funded by the schools from INSET budgets.
- Network events were organised for two school programme leaders from each school to attend to facilitate collaboration and the sharing of practice between settings.
- Two lead staff members were invited to complete a Master's-level module, including an action research project conducted within their school context. This was funded by schools from their continuing professional development (CPD) budgets.
- Schools were requested to provide reflective supervision for their two lead staff members, ensuring structured opportunities for professional reflection.

The study

This exploratory study aims to understand what practice changes across schools are described since the implementation of the AATI programme and, using a Theory of Change, explore mechanisms for the implementation of the AATI programme that can be identified in the data. The Theory of Change was co-development and identified activities, mechanisms and potential outcomes. This study consists of analysing documents that were created as part of participation in the programme, and one additional data request in the form of a school-staff questionnaire, to explore a subset of the Theory of Change mechanisms and outcomes. The questionnaire measured staff self-efficacy and collective efficacy before and after the training was completed in schools. This study is not a summative evaluation; the design does not allow conclusions to be made about whether any outcomes observed are attributable to the delivery of the programme. For example, there was no control group in this study, so the results cannot be interpreted as having a direct cause-and-effect relationship.

Theory of change

At the outset of the AATI study, a programme-level theory of change workshop was convened, led by the author and involving RNCSF lead and programme partners¹. The workshop aimed to establish a shared framework for the AATI programme by developing a context and challenge statement about the problem to be addressed and systematically clarifying four key domains and how these are connected, at least in theory. The four domains are: activities, mechanisms, short-term, and longer-term outcomes.

The programme structure and activities had largely been defined prior to the Theory of Change workshop, including a school audit, whole-school training, network meetings, a Master's-level module to facilitate action research, and a request for schools to provide reflective supervision for staff leading the project and undertaking the module. During the Theory of Change workshop, participants collaboratively identified and distinguished between shorter-term and longer-term intended outcomes and how they might be measured and, examined the mechanisms through which proposed outcomes were expected to be achieved. Following the initial session, the draft Theory of Change was refined through two further rounds of feedback and discussion with programme partners via email and online meetings. This Theory of Change is presented on page 7.

The author and programme team then worked to identify what data were available through schools' participation in the programme, and what new data could be requested. Self-efficacy was selected from the Theory of Change as a measurable construct among staff because tools already existed, and these were relatively easy to administer and should not take long for participants to complete. During the exploration of appropriate measurement tools, collective efficacy also emerged as an important, related concept that could be assessed alongside individual self-efficacy. This measure was therefore added, although it did not appear in the original co-developed Theory of Change. Using the programme documents for data analysis, it was also expected to be able to identify implementation mechanisms that would, in theory, contribute to the intended outcomes. For example, the school audits asked about consistency of practice across the staff body, and the role of senior leaders to demonstrate commitment to the approaches. Both of which were identified in the Theory of Change as mechanisms that should support implementation and drive towards achieving the intended outcomes. This made it possible to use the programme documents to extract data for this exploratory study (see Data Sources).

Participating schools

RNCSF's "Broadening Educational Pathways Programme" is specifically for children who have had a social worker, or who are care experienced. Currently 120 schools have children placed with them through this dedicated programme. RNCSF invited these 120 schools, and the remaining 98 schools in their wider network, to complete an application form to express interest in participating in the AATI programme, which resulted in eight schools starting the programme between September 2023 and January 2024. Seven of the eight schools were boarding schools; one of those was a state boarding school, the remaining school was an independent day school. Two members of staff (at least one on the senior leadership team) became the schools' project leads and were the key liaison points for the programme in their school. These lead staff members also attended the networking events and completed the Master's module. The eight schools varied in pupil size (approximately 670-1400) and staff size (approximately 120 to 400), and in geographic spread from the Midlands to the Southern regions of England. The final programme activities were completed in schools by April 2025

¹Including an external training provider, an education consultant, and a lecturer for the Master's module from the University of Chester



Data sources

The study drew on a range of existing data sources that were created through participation in the training programme, which were:

- Application form, completed by senior leaders and submitted to RNCSF
- Audit of current school practice, completed by senior leaders at two time points
- Training evaluation form, completed by senior leaders or school lead staff
- Master's-level module coursework, completed by two school lead staff

The availability of the data are shown in Table 1, below. The primary reason for these documents being generated was for use in the programme, with their use for the study being secondary. This approach was intended to reduce research burden upon the participating schools. Narrative accounts from application forms provided insight into schools' motivations and intentions for participation, while completion of the audit tool generated structured evidence of existing provision and areas identified for development. Data were also obtained from training evaluation forms, which included questions (e.g., "How have your colleagues responded to the previous session(s)?", "Which barriers or challenges do you believe could act as brakes on the achievement of your objectives?") that members of the senior leadership team, or school leads, completed. Master's-level module submissions, completed by two staff members in seven of the participating schools,

provided further information about implementation. To minimise the burden of data collection on schools, the study prioritised the use of existing data wherever possible, with only one additional data-collection request. This took the form of a questionnaire designed to measure staff self-efficacy and collective efficacy in applying AATI approaches, selected because the training was expected to have a direct effect on staff knowledge and practice in this area. Self-efficacy is domain and role-dependent, so scales should be developed to reflect appropriate contextual factors (Bandura et al., 2006). Staff self-efficacy towards the inclusion of pupils who have attachment and trauma needs was measured using an adapted version of the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) following adaptation by Cronin (2021). This measure includes questions about classroom management, engagement of pupils, and instructional strategies. To measure collective efficacy, the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Goddard, 2002) was adapted following Cronin (2021). This tool is designed to derive a school-level result, since it asks individual staff views about the staff body as a whole. The tool covers community factors, ability and motivation of students (task analysis), and view of staff skill/ability for group-teaching competence. Both tools were amended to ask participants' views on their ability to complete particular tasks for children with experience of trauma and unmet attachment needs.

At the time of the study, schools were not systematically collecting data on pupil or staff well-being; as a result, such measures were not included in the analysis.

Data source	Number of schools completed	Time period
Application form	8 ¹	Jun-Jul 2023
Audit Time 1	8	Sep 2023-Jan 2024
Training feedback	6	Jun 2024-Jul 2025
Audit Time 2	7	Feb 2025-Jun 2025
Master's Module Action research submission (or alternative ²)	8	Jun 2025
Time 1 Questionnaire (pre-training for schools ³)	6 ⁴	Nov 2023-Jun 2024
Time 2 Questionnaire (post-training)	4	Jun 2025

¹ One of these eight forms had no additional contextual data added.

² One school did not complete the module; they submitted a synopsis of practice implementation at their school, which was included in the thematic analysis.

³ Two of the schools began their questionnaire Time 1 completion after the start of their training, but before the end of the training programme.

⁴ See Appendix I for an explanation of responses included in the analysis and response rates

Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data included application forms, initial audit results, training feedback, follow-up audits, and Master's module submissions. For each school, all data items were analysed chronologically, starting with the application form, audit 1, training feedback, audit 2, then the Master's module submissions. This allowed an overall picture of that school to be developed. Data were organised in Excel, with each row representing a data source and columns capturing codes or themes inductively identified within the data alongside six columns that were pre-labelled based on the audit tool. A hybrid analysis approach was used, combining Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Framework Analysis (Ritchie et al., 2013). Following this, themes for each school were summarised in a Word document using bullet points. Themes across schools were then compared to identify similarities and patterns. This process enabled the grouping of findings across schools into core areas of commonality, which were subsequently organised into four main themes: pupil provision; attitudes and alignment; consistency and commitment; and staff supervision.

Quantitative data analysis

RNCSF used Microsoft Forms to create the online questionnaire and distributed its weblink to school contacts for data collection. The tool included an adapted measure of self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) and collective efficacy (Goddard, 2002) (for more information about the questionnaire tool, see Appendix I). All schools were asked to complete the Time 1 questionnaire. Typically, this was completed before the training started, or at least before the final training session¹. Only

¹ one school's only response to the questionnaire occurred after the final training session and was treated as Time 2 data

those schools with responses in Time 1 were invited to respond in Time 2; these data were collected between 13 and 18 months apart, and Time 2 data was collected on average, within 4.5 months of the completed training.

It was intended to analyse participants' responses to the questionnaires over the two timepoints by asking them to enter a code using initials and part of their date of birth, which would have been used to link individuals' responses. However, this question was not consistently completed by respondents, so a matched sample analysis was not possible at the individual level. The main contact for the AATI programme managed the distribution of the staff questionnaires in their schools. This staff member was asked to distribute the link to all staff with a cover email which invited people to complete the questionnaire, explained how the data collection was being conducted ethically, and that participation was not mandatory. This information was confirmed by respondents at the start of the questionnaire with a consent check box, which obtained respondents' consent before presenting the questionnaire. We do not know whether all school contacts distributed the questionnaire link as requested. If all staff in all schools were invited to complete the questionnaire, the response rate was 14.5% at Time 1. At Time 2, there was a marked drop in the number of responses received, which resulted in a response rate of 6.4%. This is thought to be due to time constraints for schools at the end of the academic year.

The questionnaire data were available as an automatic download from Forms into an Excel spreadsheet. This data was formatted and imported into SPSS v30, a software package for statistical analysis. For more information about how the data were prepared for analysis, see Appendix I.



Findings

Qualitative findings

Pupil provision

Schools engaged with the programme primarily to strengthen their capacity to meet pupils' growing needs by upskilling staff. This led to a range of practice changes or additional provision for pupils, aimed at enhancing pupil well-being, engagement, and inclusion. A primary motivation cited by schools for engaging with the programme was the improvement of provision and services for pupils. The anticipated upskilling of all staff through training was viewed, by many, as central to enhancing schools' capacity to respond effectively to pupils' needs, and was reported in three schools to support staff to feel empowered in their practice and skills. In certain instances, school leaders recognised there had been an escalation in pupil needs as a cohort over recent years, highlighting the importance of developing targeted knowledge through staff training.

Since joining the programme, a range of initiatives were reported, in the second audit and training evaluation forms, to have been introduced across participating schools with the intention to enhance both pupil well-being and engagement. These included the implementation of well-being check-in surveys, the establishment of clear mental health and well-being policies, and modifications to physical spaces to support pupils' self-regulation. Changes like these were identified during the development of the Theory of Change as mechanisms to support and drive practice towards AATI approaches, which in turn were theorised to support achieving the desired outcomes for AATI practice.

Alongside these developments, senior leaders also reported intentions to apply knowledge acquired during the training to facilitate smoother pupil transitions both into and within school, and to build staff capacity for fostering positive relationships. Further school-level actions included introducing additional tutoring time, establishing a key adult for pupils in one school, and re-establishing or planning to strengthen pupil councils in two schools, indicating a broader commitment to pupil voice.

In addition to the Theory of Change mechanisms, some data were available regarding a small number of outcomes identified in the Theory of Change. One of these was reported as part of an action research project implemented by a school, which described an increased sense of belonging and greater effort in lessons after staff applied the principles of the training programme in their classroom practice.

Attitudes and alignment

Existing 'fit'

- The majority of schools found the AATI approach aligned with existing culture and systems, which can support organisational change.

Most of the schools explicitly indicated that they had an existing alignment with AATI approaches more broadly. Stating that they had completed previous work in raising awareness around mental health, either by doing mental health first aid training, or in one case, having had a mental health and well-being focus for more than five years. An-

other school emphasised how, for several years, it had focused on providing education for children who had experienced loss. Identifying how new approaches align with the current culture and system might aid the efforts of leadership in schools to adopt new practices – finding alignment and 'fit' with existing culture in the system can facilitate the creation of change in organisations (Ghate, 2016).

Staff buy-in

- Half of the participating schools suggested that the existing "mindset" of some staff may inhibit implementation of new practice. However, senior leaders expressed the belief that those demonstrating an intrinsic willingness were in the majority, and that majority could offset the influence of the few who were unwilling.

This theme arose when schools reported risks and potential barriers to implementing the approach, in the audit tools, application form, and training evaluation forms. Specifically, half of the participating schools suggested that the existing "mindset" of some staff may inhibit their take-up, agreement and subsequent practice change. This was illustrated in two ways: 1) where in some schools the senior leaders reported how some staff viewed this sort of relational work as something pastoral staff do, rather than every staff member, and 2) discipline approaches that have rigid sanctions and consequences may at times be preferred by some staff, reassuring them about what sanctions they can implement when misbehaviour of pupils is experienced. These schools acknowledged that achieving complete staff buy-in was unrealistic; however, they expressed optimism that those who demonstrated an intrinsic willingness were in the majority, and that majority could offset the influence of the few who were unwilling.

Consistency and commitment

Training and development journey

- Change and development of practice towards becoming more AATI, was seen as a journey for schools. Schools striving for greater consistency and embedding of the new practice were committed to future training.
- The senior leadership team emerged as a driver for organisational change, with an emphasis on role modelling the practice, in addition to supporting policy changes and future training.

Training was seen as a route to achieving school-wide, consistent practice, which was a mechanism identified through the Theory of Change framework, to support embedding the AATI approach. Most of the schools highlighted that there were currently "pockets" of good practice across the school, and with training, the hope was to extend this good practice to the wider staff body. Many schools' leaders perceived the training as a catalyst for changing practice in their school. School leaders also indicated they had plans and structures in place to continue building staff knowledge in this area. Half of the schools reported amending their staff recruitment and induction processes to include AATI awareness and training. This ensured new staff would be aware of the underpinning knowledge base of the approaches and policy in the school.

One of the action research projects, as part of the Master's module submission, reported that a group of staff who received additional training described feeling more confident in using the approach. This connects to one of the mechanisms for change, based on increasing the knowledge and confidence of staff in the AATI knowledge base.

The data show that for school staff, becoming more AATI was a journey. Staff in some of the schools referred to being at the beginning of the change journey, recognising that organisational "change takes time". This was demonstrated by their commitment to providing further training using CPD time, and through revising or planning to revise policies and including the approach in publicity materials.

Senior leaders encouraged colleagues to use their training in practice in multiple ways. Staff in several schools described members of senior leadership team role modelling practice, and emphasised that a connected, joined-up way of working among senior leaders helped embed the new process. This was also illustrated by a concern raised in one school that the successful embedding of the approach might be hindered unless the senior leaders engaged in more active role modelling rather than merely paying "lip service" to the approach. Given that these responses were collected from the senior leadership team members themselves, this suggests that the team is aware of the significant influence leadership holds in driving practice change. Moreover, by articulating this concern explicitly, they may be seeking to strengthen their own commitment by holding themselves to account to show commitment going forward. The Theory of Change identified the role of the senior leadership team as a key mechanism for achieving outcomes. Regular and coherent messaging and role modelling from the senior leadership team regarding the AATI approach in schools were considered crucial for driving positive practice change toward AATI implementation.

Other significant concerns identified were the issues of time, capacity, and prioritisation. Schools operate within a context of competing demands and external pressures, particularly from bodies such as Ofsted or the independent schools inspectorate, and from parents and carers. Maintaining commitment to the AATI programme, ensuring it remained a priority within the senior leadership team, and providing opportunities for staff to revisit the work were all regarded as essential, yet also recognised as potential sources of strain. Schools demonstrated an awareness of these challenges, with many developing plans, typically around future training and amendment of school policies, to mitigate their impact

Changes to structures and policies

- Schools demonstrated strong leadership and policy commitment to AATI, revising behaviour policies and embedding the approach within school structures and leadership.
- AATI was integrated into the curriculum through direct teaching on emotional and relational skills and trauma-informed planning of sensitive content.

Commitment to AATI practice was illustrated by schools in several ways: many explicitly stated that the senior leadership team were committed to the approach, and had, or would, put in structures to support ongoing work toward AATI practice. One school added an existing member of staff to the senior leadership team to support the embedding of the approach. Commitment was demonstrated in how half of the schools stated explicitly they had revised their behaviour and sanctions policies, and a further three stated they had planned work to amend their policies to better align with the AATI approach. Two schools explained they still implemented sanctions for poor behaviour but supported pupils to reflect on their actions and reasons for their behaviour. As one school put it, they now used an AATI "lens" for their practice.

The integration of AATI into the curriculum was described in two main ways. First, schools reported delivering direct teaching to their pupils on various social-emotional mental health topics, for example, emotional regulation, stress and its physiological effects, or positive relationship-building. For many schools, this content aligned closely with existing PSHE provision. Second, staff applied their learning to curriculum delivery, proactively planning for sensitive topics or texts and informing pupils, parents and carers in advance, particularly where material might include potential trauma triggers. One school reported that this anticipatory approach contributed to a smoother examination season compared to previous years.

Staff Supervision

- Participation in the programme prompted schools to reflect on and strengthen their staff supervision practices to better support well-being and professional collaboration.

Most of the schools already had supervision or counselling provision for staff at the time they joined the programme. Following the training, a few schools described that they had reviewed the use of supervision for staff or refocused and expanded the provision for more staff with particular roles, with some schools considering making it more widely available to staff. One school described how peer-supervision had organically emerged since completing the training and saw this as a strength of the peer-to-peer support now more widely practised across the school.

One school, as part of their action research project, reviewed the interests and preferences of staff for supervision and initiated a new supervision approach for staff working in safeguarding and boarding roles. Though this was identified in the Theory of Change as a mechanism for AATI implementation, by avoiding secondary trauma of staff, no data was available to report on this specific aspect of supervision; however, it is promising that supervision occurred and was given attention in the majority of participating schools. No comment can be made about schools who did not complete supervision as the programme had intended, due to not being available in the data.

Questionnaire findings

Five schools were included in the questionnaire analysis. At Time 1, 279 staff responded from four schools (13.4–27.9% response rate across schools, $M=23.1\%$), while at Time 2, responses were received from four schools (one school at Time 1 did not submit data for Time 2, another school only provided data for Time 2), totalling 122 staff (8.5–10.8% response rate across schools, $M=9.6\%$). The lower Time 2 response rate was attributed to competing priorities and limited staff availability at the end of the school term. Across both time points, most respondents were teachers with over ten years of experience, indicating a largely experienced workforce (see Tables 2 and 3 in Appendix I) that responded to the questionnaire. The two samples were broadly comparable across these demographic factors.

It was not possible to compare individual scores between Time 1 and Time 2; however, a grouping strategy was applied to convert the data so that an analysis between Time 1 and Time 2 could be conducted (see Appendix I, “Grouped data analysis”).

The difference in the mean score for collective efficacy at Time 2 ($Mean=3.77, SD=0.37$) was statistically significantly higher than the average score at Time 1 ($Mean=3.56, SD=0.20$). This indicates an improved perception among the staff for their collective function to support children with trauma experiences and unmet attachment needs.

There was a slightly higher mean score at Time 2 ($Mean=3.69, SD=0.81$) than at Time 1 ($Mean=3.48, SD=0.34$), however the mean scores for self-efficacy between time points did not differ significantly meaning we cannot conclude whether the difference is apparent by chance or a real change.

Caution should be exercised while interpreting the meaning of these results, given the approach used to create the matched groups. However, it is reasonable to argue that participation in the AATI programme was likely able to support staff to feel more confident in their collective skill as a school group when supporting pupils with experiences of trauma and unmet attachment needs. To determine whether this intervention has a causal impact, a study design that enables cause-and-effect inferences to be drawn (e.g. RCT or quasi-experimental design) is necessary. Though data from this study is suggestive of a promising effect, further exploration is warranted.

Discussion

The AATI programme demonstrates clear potential to strengthen schools’ capacity to create relationally aware and emotionally literate environments. The multi-stranded programme, incorporating self-assessment audits, training, reassessment of progress and action research along with lead staff supervision, appears to have supported individual and organisational learning within participating schools. The collective efficacy of the staff was seen to improve after taking part in the programme. This is particularly promising, as the programme was designed as a whole-school intervention aimed at developing consistent practices among staff, while also upskilling and influencing staff culture across the entire school.

Findings indicated that schools primarily engaged with the programme to enhance pupil provision through the upskilling of their staff. The initiatives schools reported employing ranged from well-being surveys and policy reform to redesigned physical spaces, illustrating a systemic shift toward creating environments that recognise and respond to pupils’ emotional needs. This emphasis on staff professional development highlights a growing recognition that sustainable improvements in pupil outcomes depend on parallel investment in staff knowledge, confidence, and reflective capacity as identified in the Theory of Change workshop at the outset of this study. Future research about programme implementation should further explore this mechanism.

The role of the senior leadership team was crucial, not only in shaping strategic priorities and policy reform but also in modelling relational practice. This finding is congruent with the well-established view that leadership commitment is essential for meaningful and lasting cultural change in educational settings (Mincu, 2022; Stoll, 2000, 1998). Additionally, schools reported that they had incorporated AATI approaches into their CPD, staff recruitment, and were motivated by a desire for consistency of practice by all staff. This demonstrates senior leaders had a commitment to the approach and an understanding that embedding new practices is an ongoing process. The perceptions of staff, shown in the data, indicated that schools viewed their progress towards AATI practice as a continuous development journey rather than a single achievement. This experience of a development journey aligns with models of organisational change (Ghate, 2016; Mincu, 2022; Stoll, 2000, 1998). As theorised in the initial Theory of Change effective support of senior leaders was expected to be a core mechanism for the implementation of the programme. The current data did report senior leaders’ support present but, to fully measure the effectiveness of this support, future research might explore in depth the role and actions of senior leaders to better understand how to most effectively support programme implementation

The perceived alignment between AATI principles and schools’ existing values was seen to facilitate adoption and reduce resistance to change, highlighting the importance of compatibility between new frameworks and established practices when implementing whole-school interventions (Avery et al., 2021; Watson & Astor, 2025). Nonetheless, the persistence of traditional disciplinary mindsets among some staff indicates that cultural change requires sustained leadership and reinforcement over time (Stoll, 2000, 1998). Both of which relate to the identified Theory of Change mechanisms of improving staff awareness, consistency of practice and senior leaders’ commitment and support of the approaches.

The programme also appears to have motivated schools to critically reflect on staff supervision and support structures, demonstrating that attention to staff well-being is an important aspect of embedding AATI approaches – as was theorised in the Theory of Change. It was thought that supporting staff with reflective supervision should assist in protecting staff from secondary trauma, and improve their reflection on their own practice, and therefore support practice change towards an AATI approach. Schools that expanded or restructured supervision perceived enhanced peer collaboration and reflective dialogue. Future research should more strategically and rigorously investigate reflective supervision practices in school wide AATI programmes, exploring different models of supervision and staff experience.

The integration of AATI principles into curriculum design and behaviour management approaches, in some schools, indicated movement beyond a surface-level adoption towards a desire for a deeper structural embedding. In the initial Theory of Change for this programme outcomes like policy changes and curriculum for pupils, where anticipated to result where schools made commitment to embed the approach more strategically. These examples indicate integration of the approach and implementing organisational change.

The findings from the questionnaire analysis indicate a promising shift in collective efficacy among school staff, aligning with several key mechanisms identified in the Theory of Change. The statistically significant improvement in collective efficacy at Time 2 suggests that, the AATI programme may have strengthened shared confidence and collaboration in addressing pupils’ trauma and attachment-related needs across schools. This growth likely reflects the cumulative effect of mechanisms such as improved staff knowledge and awareness and sustained senior leaders’ commitment, which underpins a culture of collective responsibility and reinforcement of new practices. Although self-efficacy scores showed no statistically significant change, this warrants further investigation due to the limitations of the analysis possible with the current data. The observed collective gains could also be indicative of increased organisational cohesion, as the Theory of Change posits that enhancing staff understanding and confidence as a whole school and improving consistency of practice are likely mechanisms

to support improved self-efficacy, staff well-being, pupil well-being and eventually academic outcomes could be positively influenced. This exploratory study provides evidence to suggest collective efficacy should be added to the Theory of Change for this and other similar programmes, especially as the whole-school staff training element is focussed on driving consistency of practice and building collective culture and cohesion of practice.

The data indicate that multiple Theory of Change mechanisms are operating across participating schools, having in this study only explored a subset of possible mechanisms. However, this does signal positive progress towards the intended outcomes of AATI implementation. The introduction of well-being initiatives, revised policies, and adapted physical environments reflect the embedding of Theory of Change mechanisms that were theorised to connect enhanced staff capacity with improved pupil well-being and engagement. The continued emphasis on training as a means of achieving consistent practice indicates that knowledge and confidence-building, core Theory of Change drivers, are beginning to be seen. Leadership commitment further reinforces these mechanisms, with senior leaders identified as key agents of change who model practice and sustain coherence through policy and communication. The alignment of AATI principles with existing school culture and systems, alongside reflective developments in supervision and support structures, suggests that implementation was contextually grounded and along the lines of the co-developed Theory of Change. Emerging evidence of increased pupil belonging and engagement provides early validation of the Theory of Change’s underlying rationale that strengthening staff knowledge, confidence, and relational practice should enhance schools’ capacity to meet pupils’ needs and foster inclusive, trauma-informed environments.

Conclusion

Overall, the AATI programme was reported to function as a catalyst for change in both practice and policy in schools. Its influence was reported to extend beyond discrete training events, fostering a shared language and framework through which schools might address complex pupil needs more holistically. The findings suggest that the Theory of Change initially developed for this programme accurately identified mechanisms that should drive towards intended outcomes, however it is likely that collective efficacy could be important to add to the Theory of Change for programmes intending to achieve organisational wide changes in practice and culture. For attachment aware and trauma-informed practice to take root systemically, interventions must simultaneously attend to leadership engagement, staff development, supervision, and policy alignment, ensuring that relational principles are both modelled and operationalised across the whole-school system.

Appendix I

Questionnaire data preparation and analysis

Tool design and use

Staff self-efficacy towards the inclusion of pupils who have experienced trauma and have unmet attachment needs was measured using an adapted version of the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschanen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), following the adaptation by Cronin (2021). This measure includes questions about classroom management, engagement of pupils, and instructional strategies. The measure contains 12 items with a 5-point scale, ranging from 'Nothing' (value, 0) to 'a great deal' (value 5). A mean score across the 12 items was calculated for respondents. A higher score indicates a more positive self-efficacy.

The questionnaire was designed to be distributed to all school staff, including those who did not work in classroom-based roles, so we offered staff the option to indicate they did not have a classroom-based role in response to the questionnaire. Another of the questions specifically related to contact with the families of pupils, again, some staff roles would not require any contact with families. For both types of questions on the questionnaire, when respondents indicated not applicable, these were marked in the data set as such, so they did not influence the overall average scores for staff sense of self-efficacy.

The questionnaire also included a scale to measure collective efficacy (Goddard, 2002), similar to Cronin (2021). This tool is designed to derive a school-level result, since it is asking individual staff views about the staff body as a whole. The tool covers community factors, ability and motivation of students (task analysis), and view of staff skill/ability for group-teaching competence. The measure includes 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale, with values from 1-5, ranging from 'strongly disagree' (value 0) to 'strongly agree' (value 5). There are six negatively worded items, which require reverse scoring to find the average collective efficacy score. A mean score is generated based on the total scores. A higher score indicates a more positive view of collective efficacy. An overall average for the school can be calculated, where there is a minimum of 5 responses received (Goddard, 2002).

Data preparation

Six schools submitted responses at Time 1; two had fewer than five responses, so they were removed from all analyses (Goddard, 2002). After removing schools with low response numbers, there were no missing data across the questionnaire. There were four schools who submitted data in Time 2. One school at Time 1 did not submit data for Time 2, another school only provided data for Time 2 and was not present in the Time 1 sample. There was also sample attrition between Time 1 questionnaire and Time 2, with fewer respondents submitting data in Time 2 than had in Time 1.

1 One school was only represented in the Time 2 data collection.

2 $X^2 = 4.95$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.422$

3 $X^2 = 3.90$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.420$

4 $X^2 = 9.63$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.087$

5 $X^2 = 4.12$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.39$

About the questionnaire sample

Five schools formed the final questionnaire analysis sample. At Time 1, responses came from four schools¹ the response numbers per school ranged from 46 to 106, with a total participation of 279 staff at Time 1. At Time 2, responses came from four schools, ranging from 27 to 37, and 122 staff took part. Response rates were calculated using total school staff numbers provided in the application form, ranging from 13.4% to 27.9% at Time 1 (Mean response rate= 23.1%). At Time 2, the response rate dropped, ranging from 8.5-10.8% (Mean response rate= 9.6%). The reason for the reduced response rate at Time 2 was understood to be driven by competing priorities and pressure on staff time at the end of the school term, when the second questionnaire request was made to schools. There were responses from three schools in both Time 1 and Time 2 collections, but it is not possible to match the individual staff scores in these schools. At both time points, most respondents were teachers, though smaller numbers of middle and senior leaders, and those in non-teaching roles also participated. Most participants had more than ten years of experience in education, suggesting an experienced workforce. See further detail in Tables 2 and 3, which summarise response frequencies and participant demographics by job role and duration working in education for Time 1 and Time 2.

There were no significant differences between respondents at Time 1 and Time 2 in terms of job role², or years of experience in education³. This indicates that the two samples were broadly comparable across these demographic factors. Such similarity is important when examining constructs like self-efficacy and collective efficacy, as greater professional experience might reasonably be associated with higher scores on these measures. Therefore, any observed differences between Time 1 and Time 2 are unlikely to be due to differences between the samples in these particular demographics.

Pre and Post questionnaire sub-sample analysis

Three schools in the Time 1 sample were also present in the Time 2 sample. For these three schools, responses ranged from 46 to 106 in Time 1, with the total number of responses being 217. At Time 2, the number of responses for these three schools varied from 27 to 37, response rate ranged from 8.5%-10.8% with a total number of responses from 93 staff. For this pre-post sub-sample, there was no difference in Time 1 ($n=217$) and Time 2 ($n=93$) samples for the job role⁴ and working duration⁵ of the respondents. This indicates that in this sub-sample, a similar profile of respondents was included in Time 1 and Time 2, regarding the job roles they held and the length of time they had worked in education. Therefore, any observed differences between Time 1 and Time 2 in this sub-sample are unlikely to be due to differences between the samples in these particular demographics.

Questionnaire results were compared across the two time points for these three schools to examine possible changes in overall scores for collective efficacy and self-efficacy. Because individual respondents could not be matched across time points and the number of participating schools was small, no tests for statistical significance were conducted on the individual Time 1 and Time 2 responses. Collective efficacy data were available from three of the same schools at Time 1 ($N=217$, $Mean=3.48$, $SD=0.33$) and Time 2 ($N=93$, $Mean=3.62$, $SD=0.35$). The same three schools provided data on the self-efficacy measure at Time 1 ($N=217$, $Mean=3.5$, $SD=0.62$) and at Time 2 ($N=93$, $Mean=3.62$, $SD=0.35$). Overall, the average total score at Time 2 for collective efficacy and self-efficacy appeared slightly higher compared with Time 1, indicating a modest improvement in responses over time.

Grouped data analysis

For analysis, individual responses were aggregated into groups within each school based on respondents' job roles and years of experience in education. A mean score for each group was calculated and used as a single data point. These group-level scores from Time 1 and Time 2 were then (imperfectly) matched to examine changes over time. This resulted in a matched-grouped sample of 28 for collective efficacy and self-efficacy. The normal distribution test for a related t-test was satisfactory for analysis.

The mean score for collective efficacy at Time 1 ($Mean=3.56$, $SD=0.20$) and Time 2 ($Mean=3.77$, $SD=0.37$) did differ significantly ($t=-2.76$, $DF= 27$, $p=0.01$). The difference is such that at Time 2 the average score for collective efficacy was higher than the average score at Time 1. This indicates an improved perception among the staff for their collective function to support children with trauma experiences and unmet attachment needs. The mean score for self-efficacy at Time 1 ($Mean=3.48$, $SD=0.34$) and Time 2 ($Mean=3.69$, $SD=0.81$) did not differ significantly ($t=-1.77$, $DF=27$, $p=0.08$). The difference is not significant; however, there was a slightly higher mean score at Time 2 than at Time 1. Caution should be exercised while interpreting the meaning of these results, given the group matching approach used to create the matched sample. However, it is reasonable to suggest that in general terms it is likely that participation in the AATI programme was able to support staff to feel more confident in their collective skill as a school group when supporting pupils with experiences of trauma and unmet attachment needs, however more data is required to determine whether this has an impact on individual self-efficacy – though these data indicate a trend towards promising outcomes. A different study design is required to establish if there is a direct cause-and-effect, by using a randomised control trial or quasi-experimental design.

Table 2 Questionnaire respondents' job role, Time 1 and Time 2

Job Title	Time 1		Time 2	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Teacher	137	49.1	56	45.9
Middle manager, e.g. Head of department, head of year/key stage	58	20.8	33	27.0
Pastoral/welfare support role	33	11.8	9	7.4
Other non-teaching role, e.g. Business administration, site services staff, catering staff	18	6.5	12	9.8
Member of the senior leadership team	21	7.5	7	5.7
Teaching assistant	12	4.3	5	4.1
Total	279	100	122	100

Table 3 Questionnaire respondents' duration working in education, Time 1 and Time 2

Duration of time working in education	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Up to 12 months	14	5.0	8	6.6
More than 1 year, up to 3 years	19	6.8	14	11.5
More than 3 years, up to 5 years	25	9.0	7	5.7
More than 5 years, up to 10 years	42	15.1	19	15.6
More than 10 years	179	64.2	74	60.7
Total	279	100	122	100

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Delivery and research partners

With thanks to the following organisations in their support to deliver the AATI programme.



Get involved

If you would like to discuss the RNCSF AATI project, or take part, please get in contact with RNCSF via email:

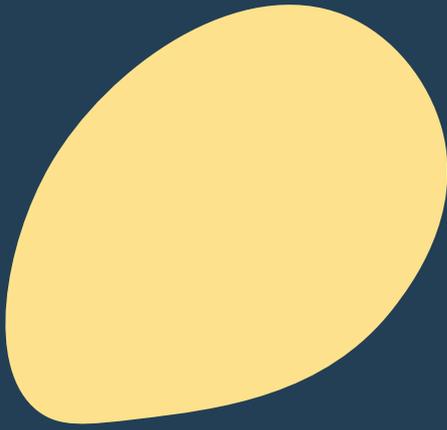
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The AATI programme can be tailored to each individual school or group of schools to meet individual needs.



The school is calmer, our sanctions policy has been hardly touched, and pupils report feeling a stronger sense of belonging.

Lotte Tulloch
Head
Denstone College



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