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## Attachment Theory in Inclusive Education

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## Attachment Theory in Inclusive Education

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I am researching how best to observe and determine if high functioning students with autism are engaged in a music class in a Singaporean primary school and have found that attachment theory can be an important observational tool. Attachment theory grew from John Bowlby's understanding of Darwin's theory of evolution. Bowlby's research led him to understand that attachment is a means to aid infants' survival rate (Bowlby, 1988, p.29). This means that the child will look to their primary caregiver for a secure base to return to when a threat is felt to be nearby. The same caregiver will also provide the sense of security for the child to explore unfamiliar surroundings. One of the hallmarks of providing the sense of security is if the caregiver is sensitive to the signals given by the child and vice-versa. This was further amplified by Mary Ainsworth, an assistant to Bowlby's research.

Ainsworth (1970), in her research into attachment theory, posits that sensitivity is exemplified by the following: the caregiver is observant and is cognisant of the infant's signals; the caregiver accurately decodes these signals and responds promptly and appropriately to the infant's behaviour. Sensitivity, as described by Ainsworth, is one of the key factors in attachment theory, as it can help predict whether a child is securely attached to his or her main caregiver.

My research aims to discover how to engage students with autism (ASD) with music in meaningful ways. Granot (2016) has shown that when students with special needs have secure relationships with their teachers they show enhanced learning proficiencies as well as a reduction in problematic behaviours. Research has also shown that music can play an important part in moderating attachment in dyadic<sup>67</sup> relationships. Cross (2021) is of the opinion that music has the ability to enable 'dyadic and group bonding' through the use of music. Other research has shown that activities pertaining to music and movement activities can help the primary caregiver and child form a more secure bond through interacting in songs, games and movement (Vlismas et al., 2013). These research findings indicate that a fundamental factor in being a sensitive educator is to be mindful and perceptive of students' concerns, opinions, and viewpoints (Ng et al., 2021).

One of the hallmarks of Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy is the process of exploration (Hartmann, 2021; Kotzian, 2018; Shamrock, 1997). To align this particular trait of the Schulwerk with Attachment Theory, I argue that knowledge of a secure base in Attachment Theory, is similar to the importance in the Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy of awareness of a safe place within the class, and the non-judgemental attitude of the teacher. This awareness allows students to try out ideas and new sounds, ideas that may look initially nonsensical, but eventually, through

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<sup>67</sup> A dyad is "composed of two people who relate to each other (e.g., romantic partners, two friends, parent-child, or patient-therapist dyads). Interactions between the dyad's members and/or their characteristics (e.g., personality traits) are called *dyadic*" (Brauer & Proyer, 2019 pp.1-5).

refinement and reworking, prove to be a musical and effective solution to the task that the teacher might have set. Students are able to do this individually, in pairs or in small groups. Movement, a cornerstone of the Orff-Schulwerk philosophy, is another area in which a student needs to feel safe to try out ideas. One has to be secure to move through space, to try extending and contracting body parts, or just to be still. The idea of not moving but getting ready for the next moment is a concept that modern day children may not be used to in a frenetic modern-day lifestyle. Trust in the teacher is an essential quality to enable a music and movement class to be successful on many levels. Embodied cognition, where learning is done in a multi-sensory manner, is best achieved when an individual is in a relaxed mode, free to explore, not afraid to try out new experiences and ideas (Abril, 2011; Coogan, 2012; Sievers et al., 2013; Staveley, 2020).

Attachment theory works in tandem with other theories to explain a student's success in school. Williford et al. (2016) are of the opinion that both teacher-child and parent-child relationships should be secure, and this security will impact the future accomplishment in academic lessons, which is echoed in Riley's research on teacher-student relationships (Riley, 2011). These researchers attribute such accomplishment to various factors, including *school readiness*, which is a set of skills that students hopefully have as they start on their academic journey; *attachment theory* as mentioned earlier in this paper; and *developmental system theory*. This last theory posits that an individual has many relationships, all occurring in an environment that has many levels. For example, it might start from the individual, leading to the immediate family, followed by the classroom and then the community at large. It might even extend to the government. One must note that changes do not flow unidirectionally. Any alteration at any level will have a trickle effect in all areas of the system. This holds many implications as, if there is any change in any level, it holds ramifications for other levels as well. Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory (Thomas et al, 2019, Guy-Evans, 2020) is as important in the study of special needs as attachment theory.

In inclusive education, there is a dichotomy to overcome as described by Ng et al. (2021). In mainstream schools, educators place priority on nurturing students' intrinsic processes such as motivation, and on fostering their thinking processes. In working primarily with students with special needs, teachers' goals are to boost their students' focus and engagement in their lesson activities. Therefore, one must incorporate *both* in an inclusive classroom where mainstream students and students with special needs are increasingly found to be learning together.

Riley (2011) further writes that it is imperative that teachers are made aware of the different pathways to foster relationships. Educators need to be aware of the many reasons and modes of both their work in reaching out to students and how best to support the latter's endeavours. For us in Singapore this holds importance for the local education scene as the Singaporean government is advocating 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Competencies. A self-directed learner displaying communication and collaborative skills demonstrating critical and inventive thinking is the ideal which the Singaporean government hopes to instil in every learner (MOE, 2022).

This can be seen in the music classroom where creative, exploratory, and improvisatory processes are enacted in both musical and movement activities.

The implication is that more research needs to be done specifically on the importance of attachment between the teacher and students, amongst the students and even the school and its students. To date, attachment theory has been in the domain of developmental psychology. If policy makers introduce knowledge and understanding of attachment theory to pre-service teachers, it would increase their knowledge about interpersonal work, as well as increase the awareness of the processes of child development. This would be the start of effective classroom management for budding teachers.

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