

**A Historical Analysis of the Implementation of Attachment Theory into the Elementary
School Classroom**

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Abstract

Attachment theory has been developed and integrated into the classroom as a result of years of psychoanalytic theories, studies, and films aiming to evaluate the behaviors of children in relation to their parents. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical theories of attachment in children and its growth since being implemented into the classroom. Freud and Klein created two schools of thought, but ultimately Klein's theory that the mother serves as the child's first attachment figure, as well as her psychoanalytic practices, overruled Freud's works. Further researchers, such as Ainsworth through the use of the Strange Situation Experiment, Bowlby's attachment theory, and films such as Spitz's *Grief: A Peril in Infancy* and Robertson's *A Two Year Old Goes to the Hospital* built upon Klein's theories, and allowed for the implementation of attachment theory in the classroom. Boxall's nurture groups served as the pioneering intervention services used to address emotional and behavioral difficulties in children.

Keywords: Attachment Theory, Nurture Groups, Attention, Elementary School Classrooms

Contents

Chapter 1 ----- 5

 Introduction ----- 5

 Freud and Klein’s Creation of Child Psychoanalysis ----- 5

 Psychoanalysts Build Upon the Works of Freud and Klein ----- 8

 Attachment Theory Becomes Implemented in the Classroom by Teachers ----- 11

 Conclusion ----- 14

Chapter 4 ----- 15

References ----- 16

Chapter 1: A Historical Analysis of the Implementation of Attachment Theory into the Elementary School Classroom

Child psychoanalysis is a relatively new field of psychology that has made groundbreaking discoveries with origins in the work of Melanie Klein and Anna Freud in the 1920s. Much of their works set the foundation for what many teachers use in classroom environments today. Anna Freud published her first work in 1927, titled *Introduction to the Technique of Child Analysis*, and Klein's book titled *The Psychoanalysis of Children* followed shortly in 1930. Both women shared similar ideas regarding attachment in children at the beginning of their careers, but split after a disagreement regarding the practical use of child psychoanalysis. The works of A. Freud and Klein paved the way for John Bowlby to create his theory of attachment in the 1950s, which was incorporated into educational settings across the country and is used today. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the historical theories of attachment in children and its growth since being implemented into the classroom.

Freud and Klein's Creation of Child Psychoanalysis

Anna Freud and Melanie Klein are considered the creators of the field of child psychology. Both were originally trained under Sigmund Freud in adult psychoanalysis, as they felt it necessary to understand their own psychosexual thoughts in order to properly prepare for the psychoanalysis of children (Lachlan, 2007). By understanding their own psychosexual desires, they would be able to relate to the children they worked with more thoroughly and assist them as they begin the process of child psychoanalysis. The goal of child psychoanalysis according to Freud and Klein was to help children overcome anxieties and repressed feelings in order to improve their future adult lives (Lachlan, 2007). Although both psychoanalysts had a common goal, they had a public disagreement regarding the methodology for achieving this goal

and eventually the pair divulged to create two schools of thought surrounding child psychoanalysis.

According to Anna Freud, the preadolescent stage of a child's life is characterized as being one of inner turmoil as they navigate the external world around them and their internal world (Freud, 1968). From ages eleven to fourteen, children struggle with a lack of guidance; they no longer value the opinions of adults such as their parents or teachers in the formation of their personalities, but rather their peers as they begin to influence their ego (Freud, 1968). Despite this desire for acceptance, in many cases sound attachments between peers are not created yet, which can result in a child that has greedy, self-centered tendencies (Freud, 1968). The root of the outwardly selfish personality of children is not necessarily their fault, according to Freud. Freud believed it was the repressed fantasies about their parents that caused the child's personality to present as having behavioral disorders, such as neurosis (Freud, 1968). Not only that, but Freud was adamant that neurosis does not develop until the child is aged three to five years old due to the development of the superego and the Oedipal Complex (Freud, 1968). This means that a child's disruptive behavior is also a result of their parents actions, as well as the repressed fantasies a child has about their parents, and the use of psychoanalysis can reduce the frequency of neurosis symptoms (Freud, 1968; Lachlan, 2007). Freud theorized that different stages in development present different disabilities, and the effectiveness of psychoanalytic therapy as a cure varies based on the stage the child is currently in (Freud, 1968). This serves as one of the first allusions to individualized education plans, as each child will require different intervention services depending on what age they are. An eleven year old child's needs are going to vary greatly compared to the needs of a four year old, and it is imperative that we consider this in schools in order to ensure the success of children academically, socially, and emotionally.

Unlike Freud, Melanie Klein believed that regardless of gender, behavioral disorders stem from the oral phase of psychosexual development and the attachment of a child to their mother. Having experience with observing her own children, Klein believed that the superego was developed within the first year of a child's life as a result of both positive and negative experiences with their mother, particularly through feeding and the mother's breast (Klein, 1975; Lachman, 2007). The mother's breast serves as the first attachment object of a child's life (Klein, 1975). When a child has demands to be fed, they will either experience pleasure when the mother meets that need and provides her breast, or they will experience anxiety due to the lack of their needs being met (Klein, 1975). Anxiety, according to Klein, is formed through the child's fear of losing something or someone they love, and therefore the child may develop anxiety due to their fear of abandonment (Klein, 1975). Klein believed that a child's play behaviors can give psychoanalysts a window into the attachment styles of a child, and therefore used free associations to analyze the behaviors of a child's play. For example, if a child displays aggressive behaviors, such as hitting during play, Klein believed it was due to the child's attempt to seek revenge against their mother for abandoning them at a time of need (Klein, 1975). In an attempt to master their anxiety, a child will call upon its ego to make sense of the situation and reassure themselves that their object will return (Klein, 1975). Similar to Freud, Klein also believed that the mastering of anxiety varies at each stage of childhood. Both Freud and Klein had spent years refraining from commenting on each others' work, but this changed once Freud criticized Klein's method of psychoanalysis, claiming that hers presented more benefits (Donaldson, 1996). In a rebuttal, Klein accused Freud of not actually analyzing children at all, which other psychoanalysts of the time built upon as they provided deeper disputes of Freud's work (Donaldson, 1996). This led to a chasm between the friendship of Freud and Klein, and also a

greater divide of the field of child psychology with most child psychologists favoring Klein for her application of child psychoanalytic theory into therapy.

Psychoanalysts Build upon the Theories of Freud and Klein

The tension between Freud and Klein may have caused a rift in the field of child psychology, but many psychoanalysts built upon their works and provided relevant empirical research studies (Ainsworth, 1978), theories (Bowlby, 1988), and integrated practices (Boxall, 2000) to deepen our understanding of children. One psychoanalyst, John Bowlby, even felt it was absolutely necessary to remain neutral when discussing the work of Freud and Klein due to their lack of data to support their theories (Mooney, n.d.). Despite this, most studies following the publications of their works seemed to support Klein's theory more strongly, finding her attachment of all children to the mother to be more relevant (Ainsworth, 1978; Boxall, 2000; Bowlby, 1988; Klein, 1968).

Mary Ainsworth, through her Strange Situation experiment, helped provide data that built upon Klein's theory by supporting the role of attachment figures in an infant's life, and differentiating between attachment styles of children (Ainsworth, 1978). The experiment invited mothers to enter a laboratory with their infants and begin playing with them (Ainsworth, 1978). After a few minutes, a stranger would enter the room and join in with play, and eventually the mother would exit the laboratory (Ainsworth, 1978). The goal of the researchers was to evaluate the behaviors of the infants once their mother had left the room in hopes of determining how strong the emotional attachment was between mother and infant (Ainsworth, 1978). Results of the experiment separated the babies into three groups based on their behaviors when left alone with the stranger (Ainsworth, 1978). Group B and C babies were recognized as having a more positive relationship with their mothers— Group B babies seemed to cry less when their mothers

exited the room indicating that they were secure that their mother would return, whereas Group C babies displayed crying behaviors more and had a seemingly lower expectation of their mother's responsiveness and ability to address their needs (Ainsworth, 1978). Researchers noticed a major difference between the behaviors of the mothers of Group A babies. These mothers seemed to be more dismissive or annoyed by their babies discomfort than other mothers (Ainsworth, 1978). These data helped Ainsworth separate attachment styles into three categories: insecure avoidant (Group A), secure attachment (Group B), and insecure ambivalent attachment (Group C) (Ainsworth, 1978). She concluded that these attachment types were influenced by early interactions with the children's mothers (Ainsworth, 1978), thus supporting Klein's theory that mothers play a prominent role as an attachment figure in all children's lives.

Although no research regarding this topic was ever performed, Ainsworth provided future directions for psychologists to build upon her findings from the Strange Situation (Ainsworth, 1978). In her 1978 work, Ainsworth proposes that the principal attachment of infants does not necessarily need to be the child's biological mother, but rather a caretaker who accepts the role a typical mother plays in an infant's life (Ainsworth, 1978). This can include a father, babysitter, or even a sibling of a child (Ainsworth, 1978). By providing this direction for future research, it allowed John Bowlby to develop his theory of attachment.

Highly influenced by his work as an army psychiatrist during World War II, specifically a film created by Rene Spitz in 1947, as well as the works of Mary Ainsworth, John Bowlby created the theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1988). World War II resulted in many children experiencing prolonged separation from their parents, or worse, being orphaned from the detriments of violence. Rene Spitz, a psychoanalyst at the time, working alongside Katherine Wolf, developed a film to highlight the detrimental effects long periods of separation had on

children (Spitz & Wolf, 1947). All of the children in the film were recorded at the beginning of a separation period from their mother, displaying typical happy baby behaviors such as smiling and feeling comfortable around strangers, confident that their mothers would return (Spitz & Wolf, 1947). During the separation period, which ranged from a few weeks to months, the behavior of the child changed drastically, with the child showing extreme discomfort around strangers and seeming to express a depressive personality (Spitz & Wolf, 1947). An important conclusion of this film stated that children who experienced their mother's return before the age of one year old, there is a rapid rate of recovery and the baby returns to his pleasant state (Spitz & Wolf, 1947). Similar findings were highlighted in James Robertson's (1952) film titled *A Two Year Old Goes to the Hospital*. This short clip also displays the discomfort behaviors of children experiencing separation periods from their parents, this time recounting an older child who also began crying and repeatedly shouting "I want my mummy," when the nurse entered her hospital room (Robertson, 1952). The children in both of these films intrigued Bowlby, and along with the findings of Ainsworth's Strange Situation, he was able to develop the theory of attachment.

Bowlby described attachment behavior as any form of behavior that results in one person remaining in close proximity to another (Bowlby, 1988). Oftentimes a child will seek the comfort of an individual who has more experience coping with the stressors of the outside world, therefore supporting the idea that this person serves as a nurturing figure to the child in need (Bowlby, 1988). Agreeing with the findings of Ainsworth, Bowlby also believes that this attachment figure does not need to be a biological mother, but rather a person who serves as a constant in the child's life (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment behaviors stem from the child's need for *attention*, not necessarily the mother's breast for feeding as Klein had suggested (Bowlby, 1988). Attention can be provided both evidently or discreetly (Bowlby, 1988), such as when a child

seeks a hug from their caregiver, or when a child is about to endure a brave event such as trying the swing on the playground for the first time. In both scenarios, the child is looking for attention from their caregiver (which also according to Bowlby does not need to be a biological mother) in an attempt to gain security (Bowlby, 1988). Attention received by a child increases their feelings of protection, which is a natural desire of all humans and translates to other species as well (Bowlby, 1988). By nurturing the attachment bond between parent and child, it will strengthen their relationship and improve the quality of the child's life into adulthood (Bowlby, 1988).

Attachment Theory Becomes Implemented in the Classroom by Teachers

Anna Freud was one of the first psychoanalysts to acknowledge teachers as important role models in children's lives (1968), but it was not until Marjorie Boxall and Marion Bennathan created nurture groups that intervention services were implemented into schools to improve behavioral disorders of children (2000). In a seminar with Harvard students in the Graduate School of Education, Freud explained that in order for elementary school teachers to be successful, they must avoid certain scenarios, such as taking on the role of a child's mother or keeping a personal interest in their student's lives (Freud, 1968c). These scenarios may bring up feelings of competition between the child's family members as they may begin to feel jealous if the child displays a stronger attachment to their teacher than their own parent (Freud, 1968c). Displaying a stronger attachment to one student over another may result in jealousy of that child's peers, and puts that child at risk of not developing strong relationships necessary for their development (Freud, 1968c). This seminar is relevant in revealing how vital Freud's theories were in creating the contemporary classroom we see today. Teachers should therefore serve as a guide to their students, but should not overstep in serving as the primary attachment figure for children.

Almost 50 years after Freud's seminar, Boxall (2000) and Bennathan (2015) aim to build on the idea that children have attachment needs that their teachers must meet in order for them to be successful in their educational careers. Boxall believed that the reason a child may display emotional and behavioral difficulties in a classroom is because their emotional attachment needs may not be addressed by their parents at home (Boxall, 2000). This means that the child is not receiving any attention, and therefore is hindered in their development of healthy relationships between peers and adults in the outside world. An interesting point that Boxall made is that the difficulties of parents may not necessarily be from a lack of effort, rather it could be a generational deficiency in emotional support (Boxall, 2000). The parent may not have received a secure attachment from their own parent, and therefore struggle to create a healthy attachment bond with those around them, including their own children.

Bennathan brings an alternative explanation for a child's emotional/behavioral difficulties in classrooms, proposing that the behavior may be due to feeling unaccepted in the classroom in combination with the stress of a teacher (Bennathan, 2015). The Education Acts of 1988 and 1993 call for children with disabilities to be placed in the least restrictive learning environment (Bennathan, 2015), oftentimes resulting in the child remaining in a general education classroom and thus limiting the attention that child can receive from their teacher. Most general education classrooms average a ratio of thirty students to one teacher, so the child may feel the need to compete with their peers for attention and lash out behaviorally as a result of their needs not being met. Both psychoanalysts recognized this as a problem for those students in need of behavioral assistance, and created nurture groups in an attempt to address this issue.

Nurture groups, according to Boxall, provide students with a smaller ratio of students to teachers, and therefore increase the attention the participating children receive (Boxall, 2000).

Tactics such as increased eye contact and close physical proximity help bring the children's attention to the teacher's facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice (Boxall, 2000). This will result in an increase in the children's awareness of their teacher's attention in hopes of creating a stronger attachment bond and meeting the children's emotional needs. Tasks would be broken down individually based on the children's ability, resulting in different smaller targets that must be met in order to complete one complex task (Boxall, 2000). This demonstrates the stabilizing role a teacher plays in the educational careers of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. The teacher controls the situation, just as a mother would, and breaks it into separate parts in order to help the child feel satisfied with their work (Boxall, 2000). In doing so, they are creating an attachment to the child, reassuring them that they as the teacher will serve as a constant (Boxall, 2000). The teacher will remain available to aid the child and provide security that they always have them to support their educational endeavors.

The principles of nurture groups are still being implemented into modern-day classrooms, as highlighted by Verschueren (2012). As mentioned by previous psychoanalysts (Freud, 1968c; Bowlby, 1988; Boxall, 2000; Bennathan, 2015), teachers create an attachment bond with their students, but not on the same level as the child's parent(s). The child will enter a new classroom every year, resulting in an inconsistent bond between the teacher and the student (Verschueren, 2012). Although the teacher may see their prior students in the hallways, it is an entirely different dynamic compared to interacting closely with a child every day for an academic year. This emphasizes the need for a professional staff member who is able to travel consistently with the child throughout the longevity of their academic careers, such as a paraprofessional. Verschueren's work highlights the importance of individualized learning plans for students with behavioral and emotional disabilities as well as describing the influence of Bowlby's work.

The development of attachment theory has evolved from its origins by Freud and Klein from child psychoanalytic theories into behavioral interventions that are present in contemporary classrooms. A. Freud and Klein, although having similar backgrounds, chose to build off of different aspects of S. Freud's psychoanalysis of adults and separated into two opposing schools of thought. After publicly disproving each other, researchers further build upon Klein's works by developing and conducting studies to evaluate attachment theories. Ainsworth's Strange Situation helped categorize attachment styles based on the relationships between mothers and their child. Spitz and Robertson aided Bowlby in discussing the importance of attention on the creation of attachment bonds between children and their parents. Boxall and Bennathan then applied Bowlby's theory in the classroom by implementing nurture groups, a behavioral intervention program aiming to increase the amount of attention given to students who were not receiving the emotional support they needed outside of the classroom. Each one of these works has led to the development of individualized learning programs for students, all aiding the common goal of improving the quality of life and development of children into happy, successful, adults.

Chapter 4: Reflection

As cliché as it sounds, my student teaching experience was probably one of the most life changing and rewarding memories that I have from college. I was placed into a third grade integrated co-teaching (ICT) classroom, meaning that one teacher was a general education teacher and the other was a special education teacher. When I first entered the classroom, I underestimated how much work truly went into being a teacher and creating lessons that addressed the needs of all thirty students in the room. A major flaw that I had going into my placement was feeling overconfident in myself. I already had some substitute teaching experience under my belt, and had dealt with my fair share of challenging students in terms of behavior, so I truly went into the experience with a “Hey, how bad can it be?” attitude. This is not in any attempt to minimize my capabilities as an educator. I have credible sources, including principles and professors who have raved about my skills at my job. But what I failed to recognize was the amount of behind-the-scenes work that went into lesson planning and engagement and scaffolding and social emotional learning and group work and reading sciences (you get my point). It is one thing to show up and stand in the place of a teacher who is out sick, reciting every part of the day that is perfectly laid out for you in your substitute plans. But it is another entirely different breed of struggle to be the one creating the school day for your kids.

A scary realization for me was that if I, a member of the education field, am underestimating the amount of work that goes into a teacher’s classroom, then imagine how others outside of the field perceive teachers. No wonder we get paid as little as we do! On the outside our work looks like sunshine and rainbows (plus summers off...what can be better than that?!), but on the inside, the *science* of teaching is completely overlooked. There are so many

psychoanalytic theories and empirically supported strategies that go into education, so for my thesis I decided to pick one: attachment theory.

I have had my fair share of attachment theory as applied in my everyday life, but my student teaching experience really brought to light how mundane it is. My students, who I had just met in September, were crying at the thought of me leaving them after spending three months together. And I was doing the same thing at the thought of leaving them (I most likely cried more). How is it that we had created such a deep bond in such a short amount of time? Or were both parties looking to fulfill a deeper need that had not been met by any person before? Or were those needs entirely different from those of a partner or parent? These questions inspired me to pursue attachment theory as my area of interest for my thesis.

Looking into this one theory that supports the field of education has inspired me to pursue a career in exploring other methods that have created the education field we have today. If it were not for the works of Freud and Klein and Ainsworth and Spitz and Bowlby and Boxall (mostly Boxall but I am biased) and Bennathan and Robertson, I would not have even had the opportunity to pursue my career in special education, let alone a career as an educational psychologist. I guess the point I am trying to make is that although this paper has elevated my stress hormones one too many times, it really has served a higher purpose. So truly, to this paper, I would like to say thank you.

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