

Gunning, C. and Lofthouse, R. A Manifesto for Attuned Teaching in McGovern, W., Gillespie, A. and Woodhouse, H. (eds) (2022) "Understanding Safeguarding for Children and their Educational Experiences: a guide for Students, ECTs and School Support Staff". Croydon: Emerald Publishing. (Emerald Points Short Series due in June 2022)

## **A MANIFESTO FOR ATTUNED TEACHING**

**Cathy Gunning, Rachel Lofthouse**

### **Author/s Biography/ies:**

Cathy is an education coach, consultant and aspiring therapeutic, attuned mum. Her extensive work in education has focused on primary specialising in early education and care from birth to five. Her teaching and leadership roles include being a teacher, day nursery teacher manager, local authority adviser, headteacher, children's centre leader, and early years leader. She is passionate about advocating for children who need to be known - and who may not be heard or seen: those that are considered 'vulnerable' or who would benefit from teaching and learning through an 'attuned pedagogy'.

Rachel is Professor of Teacher Education at Leeds Beckett University and founder of CollectivED The Centre for Coaching, Mentoring and Professional Learning. She has worked in education for 30 years and has maintained a keen interest in understanding and enabling professional learning at all career stages and across education sectors. She has a specific research expertise in mentoring and coaching and has regularly published in this area for 20 years. Rachel collaborates in European projects with a focus on professional learning for inclusive education.

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**ABSTRACT:**

Our focus in this chapter is how we can adopt an *attuned teaching* approach and why this would be supportive of all children and young people. We explore its significance for children who may have experienced trauma through loss of, or separation from, birth family or other significant life experience causing vulnerability. We have chosen to write as if we are in a shared space with you, perhaps you can imagine a conversation in the staffroom. We are hoping our experiences and knowledge help you to reflect and provide you with ideas of how to develop your professional practice and to gain confidence.

**KEYWORDS:**

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. attuned teaching
2. trauma informed
3. vulnerable
4. attuned pedagogy
5. labels
6. additional needs

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## **Introduction**

*A child arrives through the door of your classroom. The child is thin, pale and has a serious expression, with a furrowed brow. An adult pushes the child into the room and walks out, shutting the door behind them. The child stares as I approach. We stand opposite each other for a short while, perhaps waiting for one of us to speak, or waiting to see if it is safe to move. I invite the child into a space and offer them to sit down. They look at me searchingly, sit and look down. The classroom becomes noisier and I return my attention to the class.*

This scenario represents many experiences we have had and worked with over many years. The entry of an 'unknown' child transitioning into a new room or setting, from somewhere before, leaving their main carer or an adult, and being put in an educational environment not knowing anything or anyone. It may not happen just like this, but it happens similarly and often in many guises as children mask and 'camouflage' their fear or nervousness or anxiety in beginning somewhere new in education.

## **Rationale**

We start with this because of where we are in both our personal and professional lives as leaders, teachers, and parents of adopted children. In this context, we believe that there are fundamental points of tension in how schools operate and the needs children like ours have. We also know that the approach given to support our children will also benefit many other children in schools who need to feel known, be treated with care and compassion, be understood, securely transitioned and settled, and with a predictable, safe environment given their early experiences.

A stance underpinned by compassion and nurture can be contradicted and superseded by the pressure of curriculum, the demand on children to acquire and demonstrate knowledge and pressures on schools to meet the performance agenda. In this context it can be easy to forget that connection, empathy, play, and understanding are all factors that develop trust, form relationships and enable wellbeing and safety. It is wellbeing and safety that reduces vulnerability in the present, and without this their future vulnerabilities are likely to increase.

We are here to encourage you that you have the capacity to make the difference - you set the tone, you build community through relationships and professional love. Our professional challenge to you is to work to improve the education climate and conditions enabling all children, including those affected by trauma, abuse, attachment or loss to feel loved professionally and be supported to learn to reach their potential through education and beyond.

## **Opening up a learning conversation**

What and how we are writing matters to us. We are writing based on our identities as teachers, leaders, parents and researchers are complexly interwoven. We have very different contexts, homes and education backgrounds but we also have much in common. We have both worked in education for over 30 years. Our current roles focus on teacher education, mentoring, coaching, and supporting the learning and practice development of new and more experienced teachers and leaders in schools. We value the knowledge and experience of those we work with at all career

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stages, who bring a shared interest in learning and children, and often have prior and current expertise as parents and professionals.

We have both adopted our children. There are and were times when we as parents have been left bewildered by how our children's lives unfolded and how best to respond and to support them. Our children's teachers will have felt the same uncertainty. Fortunately, the knowledge of trauma and attachment is growing and becoming more readily available to teachers and other professionals. We write this chapter to encourage you to engage with that knowledge base because for many children and families trauma is threaded through life experiences including pre-birth, with birth family and as looked after and previously looked after children. This inevitably influences the way they engage with and develop relationships with others, including teachers and peers. Their complex life stories and early experiences may result in being identified as vulnerable or having additional needs, but their ways of being in the world are shaped as a response to trauma.

Our roles and experiences have led us to develop a proposition that a model of *attuned teaching* is of value to all learners, and as such is of value to all teachers. We see attuned teaching as our 'way of being'. We are advocates for the inclusion, understanding and acceptance of difference, individuality, and uniqueness of all children and young people. We hope that this chapter persuades you that this enhanced understanding provides valuable, usable knowledge for transformative practice to enhance children's lives. Our advocacy of attuned teaching is built on our understanding of the dilemmas that children, young people, their family members and connected professionals (including teachers) can experience through their education and learning journey.

### **Dilemmas and labels**

Children and young people in schools sometimes come with labels or assumptions related to particular learning or behavioural needs. We invite you to consider how you may be presented with a catalogue of information and knowledge and history about a child, including titles, labels, assessments and diagnoses. We wonder to what extent labels are going to help you. Will you make assumptions based on what you already know, or have experienced or not experienced before? In the opening section of this collection Leighton (2022) has identified that labelling disadvantages both the labeller and those being labelled. With a label you might start to access additional information and have professional conversations about the child. You can find out how things have helped in the past, with other children with those same labels.

We also wonder if the labels, diagnoses and reports might overwhelm you, produce anxiety or lead you to make assumptions. Do they make you question whether you can teach this child, and meet their needs; do you wonder if the child is suited to mainstream and your class? Do you struggle to know where to start? Perhaps the diagnoses and assessments all intersect to make a complicated scenario, and obscure the individual child?

This then creates potential dilemmas:

- Do we see the child first or the assessments first?
- How do we move forward?

Teaching is complex and ridden with dilemmas like this. It is normal to experience them, and they do not define you as being in deficit. We can assure you that acknowledging dilemmas is a first step to learning how to address them.

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There is a trend in some schools to dispute seeing the child through the labels, and some school policies are built on the assumption that only tight boundaries, compliance models of behaviour management and zero tolerance work. We suggest that you might want to be alert to these, although we recognise that it is unlikely that you can work against school policy. We advise that you can identify aspects or models of practice which you want to ask about or research further into.

### **Our Manifesto for Attuned Teaching - four tenets**

We want to offer you an alternative, additional perspective, which is equally valid and we would argue both respectful and relational in the best interests of the child and family, mental health and wellbeing of all. We propose that attuned teaching is based on four key tenets, shortened to A-B-C-D. These relate to developing an anti-bias stance, building relationships, creating safe environments and continuing to develop your own learning. Our manifesto for attuned teaching is outlined in Figure 1. We hope that they help you to understand attuned teaching as a way of being.

**A**

#### **Adopt an anti-bias stance**

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- Every child is unique. Every child is important and has the right to full time education. We challenge performative policies that lead to some children being considered inconvenient in some schools. Our policies, language and practices need to nurture all learners rather than discriminate against or punish some. By adopting an anti-bias stance we commit to keeping inclusion and social justice at the heart of education.

**B**

#### **Build relationships which make a difference**

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- Every child needs to feel welcome and be known in their school community. We build trust with children through our actions. Relationships are not neutral. The classroom is not a battleground so let's stop talking about enforcing behaviour and discipline. By putting relationships first we value each child in their own right and we create opportunities for learners to be both vulnerable and bold.

**C**

#### **Create safe enabling environments**

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- Every child can flourish when they feel safe, and every child can learn. We share the responsibility to create affirming, appreciative and enabling school environments. Practices which isolate or shame children or families have no place in education. By focusing on equity, being empathetic and practicing co-regulation we create successful learning environments for all.

**D**

#### **Deepen our understanding over time**

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- Every child deserves teachers who keep learning. Understanding of trauma, vulnerability and attachment continues to evolve, and it is not legitimate to assume our practices should be static. We respect, learn from and contribute to the expertise of fellow teachers and other professionals. By working collaboratively and with curiosity we co-create knowledge for practice to become highly effective inclusive teachers.

**Figure 1. A manifesto for attuned teaching**

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## **Putting attuned teaching into practice**

We will now elaborate each tenet and provide reflective questions to help you develop your thinking about attuned teaching. We hope that the way we have structured this will support your thinking and reflection by offering you some space and time to reflect. The questions may help you to frame a conversation with your mentor or enable you to use them in your reflections to develop your practice in attuned teaching. You may want to ask for feedback or to be observed in an aspect to support your teaching. We are framing these as questions as a tool for action, to take into your context.

### **A: Adopt an anti-bias stance**

This is your starting point and particularly relevant for teaching in this world now. Some questions you can reflect on are:

- What tools can I use to audit my learning spaces to check they are anti-bias, fully inclusive and representative of the children in my class?
- In what ways do I include and embrace the child's family and share information? Are these effective?
- How do I measure if wellbeing is impacting the learning of the children?
- What more information do I need about the child in order to teach effectively?

*Cathy reflects that 'Outside of diagnoses, assessments, theories, special educational needs, experiences, my child is their whole individual unique self. I celebrate them as they are. Labels do not define.'*

*Rachel reflects that 'It is reasonable to feel most comfortable with children who behave in ways we find predictable or define as 'normal', but we must recognise that the natural response to trauma will often result in behaviours we find disconcerting. An anti-bias stance includes appreciating this and maintaining an inclusive stance.'*

### **B: Build Relationships**

Our first response as humans when we are born is connection - we look for that from a caregiver. This is where attachment and relationship start and are built. The first three years of life are critical and birth to five is the most rapid time for brain development and neuroplasticity. Being known, being contained, being held in mind all make a difference to a vulnerable looked after or previously looked after child, as well as many others too. Some questions you could reflect on:

- How do I know this individual child and help them to 'feel known' and be 'held in mind'?
- What easy action could I take to improve and build the relationship?
- Am I building trust directly, or indirectly, through my teaching practice?
- Does this child know about me and that I will keep them safe?

*Cathy reflects 'I have experienced this myself with the warmth and love expressed towards me and my child. I appreciate the celebration when my child achieves small milestones because I know how much love, care and support this has taken from trusted people. I am grateful for this encouragement particularly when I have been up all night, or read a story through a handstand performance. I could not do this alone.'*

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*Rachel reflects that 'Adolescence adds complications which can affect relationship building, tempers can get frayed, and individuality is sought. But teenagers still seek connection, which can itself make them vulnerable.'*

### **C: Create safe, enabling environments**

Being inclusive (see also Augius-Ferrante 2022 chapter in same book), accepting, anti-bias, anti-racist, builds relationships and creates compassionate, empathic enabling environments - in which children feel safe to learn. There is minimal stress, minimal threat, demand and fear. The children feel accepted, safe to learn and trusted to learn because they are held in mind, know the adult, now under threat. They can be present in their 'learning and receptive' mode rather than stress and threat mode which often causes fight and flight, freeze or fear. Surely, we cannot teach a child if they feel unsafe or unknown. You could take time here to reflect on these questions:

- How is my teaching and learning space safe?
- How do I remain calm, safe and predictable moment to moment?
- How do I support the regulation or provide co-regulation for those vulnerable children who need it?

*Cathy reflects 'The usual, often unpredictable school day and pattern of life can be so scary for adopted, looked after and previously looked after children. Which teacher is next, who is serving lunch, where is PE, how do I find my way back to class? This can result in confusion, disorientation and dysregulation for vulnerable children. Having adults who understand this perspective is a gift that minimises anxiety and promotes trust and safety.'*

*Rachel reflects: 'Some aspects of the curriculum can be triggers. Teaching about drugs and genetics, celebrating Mothers' Day or working on family trees.'*

### **D: Deepen your understanding over time**

None of the A-B-C-D will be a quick fix. Attuned Teaching develops over time. We have developed ours over our whole career and are still journeying this. Our manifesto is our advice drawn from lived personal and professional experience. It will start you off in this attuned teaching journey that is inclusive, trauma informed, therapeutic and relational.

We know that we develop the art of teaching over time, and that our learning journey is built upon year after year. As teachers and learners ourselves, we have coaching and networks that strengthen, challenge, support and stretch us. All teachers benefit from this.

Some questions you could reflect on are:

1. What support networks are available to you?
2. Who do you turn to for respectful, appropriate, permitted professional challenge?
3. Can you work with a coach or mentor who can provide you with personalised support and opportunities for learning?
4. How are you still learning, reflecting, reading, and deepening your thinking around teaching and inclusion?

*Cathy reflects 'I hope that over time, as we refine and develop our practice and help others to do so, that neurodiverse and vulnerable children who may have additional, special and extra attuned needs will be seen as unique individuals who thrive from love and care and Attuned Teaching. This is the A-B-C-D of an Attuned Teacher.'*

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*Rachel reflects 'Developing inclusive practice, being trauma informed and attachment aware enables attuned teaching. Over twenty years as a teacher educator I have watched thousands of new teachers enter schools and have worked with hundreds of qualified teachers. I want to be able to say to you all, "you will always be supported to learn", "your opportunities for development will be formative", "your practices as a teacher, and hopefully a leader, will become more sophisticated over time", "what challenges you now will become your sources of wisdom later" and "as a professional you will be enabled to meet the needs of all learners, because that is what we are there to do".'*

We are both hopeful that your contexts enable you to journey in this, forming complex interwoven understanding and practice wisdom that transforms education.

## Reflections

We would like to return to the child at the start of our chapter. Cathy reflects here on how she would acknowledge the child's vulnerabilities by applying the attuned teaching tenets.

The child arrives through the door of your classroom. The child is thin, pale and has a serious expression, with a furrowed brow.

*She could be a refugee who has experienced a hugely complex and traumatic journey to get here. She could be an adopted girl who has been in foster care since the age of two. She is nervous, scared, alone and does not know who she can trust.*

An adult pushes the child into the room and walks out, shutting the door behind them. *The Designated Teacher has met with the foster carer and brings her into the room and has to rush off to a meeting. The child did not sleep very well last night because she was missing her brother who has gone to live somewhere else.*

The child stares as I approach. We stand opposite each other for a short while, perhaps waiting for one of us to speak, or waiting to see if it is safe to move.

*I make sure that the other children can get on with an activity, and that another adult can supervise while I step away. I would approach slowly, gently and with a smile. I would make myself small, crouching or sitting so that she is bigger than I am. I would try to be unthreatening. I will find out what her favourite toy is, and whether she can bring in something from home next time that could be a 'transitional object' and something that connects her life between home and school. She may be frozen with fear or watching and waiting to see if I (the new adult) am safe or unpredictable.*

I invite the child into a space and offer them to sit down. They look at me searchingly, sit and look down.

*I invite her to sit by tapping the cushion next to me and show her my box of resources. I smile, speak calm words to her and say hello. I try to have a soft and open approach. I wait for her to make a move or relax her body and sit down. I don't put too much pressure or expectation on her. She is wary of strange adults and especially those who wear different clothes to her. She can smell some perfume that reminds her of someone. I am aware that her senses and hypervigilance might be working overtime and give her space to get used to me and the space. I suspect that she is feeling very flighty and stressed inside. I want her to know and feel that she is safe.*

The classroom becomes noisier and I return my attention to the class.

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*I communicate to her that I will go back to the other children, and that it is ok to stay there, if she would like, and I will come back to her in a little while. I reassure her that she can look in the box and see what there is to look at or play with. I ask the other adult in the room to keep an eye on her, but not to go over just yet.*

The child we describe could be like any vulnerable, looked after and previously looked after child we have met over our years of teaching. Their needs may relate to attachment, safety, consistency, permanence, early development, trauma, loss and grief. These additional needs can be met through our A-B-C-D manifesto as a way of being for teachers and other professionals working in education and care. Promoting attuned pedagogic practices embodies a way of being that supersedes other formalities of teaching and learning. It is meeting the child where they are at.

### **Conclusion: keep learning**

Many of us in the teaching profession carry a passion for a more inclusive, relationally informed and sustainable future in schools. This is a conversation we must have in school staff rooms and beyond. Finding space and time to reflect and colleagues with whom you can share your concerns and dilemmas is essential. Often informal sharing in squeezed moments can be significantly empowering and insightful. Try to make it part of your practice to seek others out, share, gather and connect. It is by connecting and collaborating with other professionals that you can make a collective difference to both your own and others' teaching and learning. It can be a challenge to remain optimistic about the difference you can make, but working together with others can create a sense of collective efficacy which positively impacts on our capacity to change outcomes. We want teachers to be confident that all young people leaving school do so with their self-esteem intact, their talents acknowledged, their ability to empathise strengthened and their self-determination enhanced. We want these to be outcomes for teachers too. As such we advocate attuned teaching: a nurturing, attachment focused and relational, connective pedagogy.

We are still learning and appreciate the expertise and resources offered by individuals and organisations working in this field. We encourage you to keep learning and developing too. As an outline framework The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provide quality statements for children's attachment that includes expectations for the education, because it recognises that 'children and young people with attachment difficulties can have stress, fears and insecurities that impact on their experience of school, peer relationships and learning' (NICE, 2021, p. 15). What this might require at a practical level is illustrated by an excellent explanation from Emily Berger (2019) at Monash University who describes the importance of belonging, engagement, emotional awareness, and self-esteem for creating trauma-informed schools.

There are a number of accessible books that you might find helpful. For example, if you wish to learn more about attachment and attachment disorder then we recommend the introductory book by Colby Pearce (2017). We know that positively supporting children's behaviour is often a challenge for new teachers, and we recommend Paul Dix's book (2017) in which he describes authentic, relational and appreciative approaches. We also often refer to Beacon House web-based resources, which include guidance on trauma and attachment in the classroom.

When accessing specialist materials it is worth reflecting on how they offer specific but also generalisable advice. For example, information related to looked after children will be relevant to many others who have not left birth families but who are nevertheless vulnerable. We are also aware that the pandemic has added further complexities and challenges and that teachers already recognise a variety of impacts on children and young people. Once again materials produced prior to the pandemic will still have

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relevance. We know from our experience that becoming familiar with principles allied with attuned pedagogy has strengthened our teaching and capacity to support others. We hope that you also find satisfaction in knowing that you can make a positive difference. This is an affirming experience and helps you to be successful and happy in your role.

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