Learning To Trust:
Applying Attachment Theory to
the Elementary School Classroom

Marilyn Watson
Behaviorism: Blank Slate View of the Child

• Theories of learning in psychology
• Theories of classroom management in education.
John Bowlby proposed an evolutionary based theory

• Human child not a blank slate
• Evolved biological entity with adapted dispositions to seek:
  1. Connection with fellow members of its species
  2. “Safe haven” in one or more trusted adults by which it might develop into a socially competent adult
Attachment Theory

• Dramatically different implications for how to treat young children in elementary classrooms

• Particularly children who come to school not having found a “safe haven” (“secure base”) at home—that is, insecurely attached children
This talk will

• Illustrate the use of this attachment perspective by the Child Development Project
• Outline some results of its application in both high poverty and middle class schools
• Describe its application in a teacher education program
• Illustrate its use in one high poverty elementary classroom
Guiding Theory and Research

• Attachment Theory
  Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, Sroufe
• Constructivist models of learning and development
  Dewey, Piaget, Kohlberg, Rogoff, Vygotsky
• Self-determination theory
  Deci, Ryan, White
• Family socialization research
  Baumrind, Hoffman, Maccoby & Martin
Classroom Program components

• Developmental Discipline—Way to be in each child’s corner
• Collaborative learning—Way to build friendly relationships while teaching the curriculum
• Values rich literature program—Way to build empathy, interpersonal understanding and prosocial values
Developmental Discipline

- From teacher as controller enticing/making children learn
- To teacher as secure base in support of children’s learning and development
- From child as blank slate possessing only the motivation to avoid pain and to seek pleasure
- To child as possessing evolved motivation to learn, to seek adult protection and guidance, and to be part of it’s community
Developmental Discipline-Components

• Build secure, caring relationship with each student
  -Get to really know each child
  -Do nice things
  -Focus on meeting each child’s needs for
    • Autonomy,
    • Belonging, &
    • Competence
Developmental Discipline

• Avoid the use of punishment and rewards
• Stress intrinsic reasons for learning and good behavior

1. Help students see how their own desire for fairness and kindness apply to others
2. Use explanation, empathy induction, support to guide student behavior
Developmental Discipline-Components

• Adjust expectations to students’ abilities
• When control is necessary
  - Use least punitive means
  - Convey trust in and affection for child
• Apologize for mistakes
Child Development Project-1991-1995

• Implemented program in 12 schools in 6 districts, half middle class, half high poverty

• Assessed program implementation and outcomes in the 12 program and 12 matched comparison schools using blind observers and teacher and student reports
Results—Teacher Implementation

- Hugh differences in program implementation
- 5 of the 12 schools showed high levels of teacher implementation compared to their matched controls
- None of the 12 matched control schools showed high levels of teacher implementation
- Both high poverty and middle class schools were among the 5 high implementing program schools
Results—Child Outcomes

• Students in the 5 high implementing program schools scored significantly higher than students in the 5 matched control schools on many of the planned comparisons

• None of the planned comparisons were significantly higher in the 5 matched control schools
For Example:

- Positive classroom behavior & teacher-student relations
- Trust in teachers & attachment to school
- Learning motivation,
- Concern for others
- Democratic values
- Conflict resolution skills
- Less lonely
Middle School Follow Up

• Sense of community
• Academic performance
• Course engagement
• Educational aspirations
• Positive school activities
Bottom Line

In high poverty as well as middle class schools the Child Development Project approach:

• Can be successfully implemented

• Teachers can create caring classroom communities using Developmental Discipline

• Results in significant academic and social/moral growth

• Difficult to overcome Behaviorism’s hold on school culture
Asked A Current CDP Teacher, Laura Ecken

- A relatively new teacher
- Originally trained in a punitive approach to discipline
- Teaching in a high poverty elementary school
- Kept her students for two years
- Developmental Discipline presented a view of children and a way to manage the classroom that she liked and embraced
From August, 1996 through May, 1998

• Periodically video-taped Laura’s second-third grade class beginning on the first day of school
• Conducted and recorded weekly interviews with Laura
Many Problems, Interpersonal & Academic

Examples of just one student, Tralin

• Attitude and social/emotional skills
• Attitude and academic competence
By End of Year 1—What Happened?

• Students gradually became genuinely engaged in learning
• Fights, teasing, outbursts, and emotional breakdowns became less frequent
• Partner activities became smoother and more productive
• Reading improved
• Students became more accepting of Laura’s help
Year 2

- Twelve students remained
- Eight new students joined the class
- Three with learning and/or behavior problems
- Returning students began the year trusting Laura
- Laura could use returning students to help
Many Learning and Behavior Problems Surfaced Over the Year

However:

• Students more willing to seek and accept Laura’s help & guidance
• Laura was able to place more trust in her students
Summary Year Two

• Students willingly engage the learning activities
• Reading skills and partner work improved dramatically
• Students grew socially, morally, and academically
• Class became a caring, learning community
• Illustrated in the following video—Spring Book Box reading
CDP Ends, How To Keep It Alive?

• *Learning to Trust* based on Laura’s Class
• DSC conducted summer institutes for faculty in teacher education programs
• Introduced Attachment theory and Developmental Discipline
• Shared CDP materials and video tapes
• Shared working drafts of *Learning to Trust*
California State University at Sacramento

• Three faculty created a program at one center
• Abandoned their classroom management class
• Integrated aspects of Developmental Discipline into several courses across duration of the program
• Used CDP videos and Learning to Trust to provide future teachers with concrete examples of attachment theory in the classroom
Email Survey

- 117 past teacher education students
- Received 40 surveys back representing all grade levels and all 7 years

39 of the 40 surveys were strongly positive
Teaching of Values and Social/Emotional Skills

• 87% (35) very important

“Both of these are at the heart of everything we do each day.”
Relationship and community building

• 72% (29) very important

“It is critical at any grade level to establish and develop a strong classroom community. …and build trust and a safe place to learn. “
To summarize:
• CDP—Demonstrates that discipline based in attachment theory can have positive effects in high poverty as well as middle class schools
• Sacramento State Program—Shows the potential of attachment theory in teacher education
• Laura’s work—Illustrates the power of attachment theory in a difficult elementary classroom
One more question

• Can a trusting world view gained in an elementary classroom have long lasting effects?
Laura’s Students 7 Years Later

• Interviewed 9 of the 14 students still in the school district
• 5 had had learning and/or behavior problems in elementary school and 4 did not
• 7 were currently successful in school
• 2 were failing classes and in danger of dropping out
All 9 students Remember Laura’s class fondly

Surprisingly, the 2 failing students erroneously remembered Laura as conditionally caring
I remember that she was always fun and it didn’t seem like we had a real class because we was always playing games or doing something fun.

Our kids were pretty nice. Cause they knew...they knew that if we messed up she wouldn’t be the way she is. She would be strict. Go mean on us.
7 Successful Students

- Could describe particular ways in which Laura’s class positively affected them
- 3 students with initial trust problems showed remarkable awareness of the effect Laura had on their development
I loved Mrs. Ecken’s class cus we was open and honest. … You had that honesty there. She was like a mother… some kids was like struggling in homes and stuff … she was like our mother when we came to school. … And that’s what’s so special about her.
Is there anything from that class that effects who you are today?

“I learned to have self-control. I like had an attitude problem. I could just have an attitude for anything. I don’t know why, I just had an attitude. I learned to control my attitude and you know, to think before I act.”

“I definitely learned how to read. And I love reading now. I learned to have self-control. …I learned how to succeed. Like she would tell us to just go on even though you don’t think you can make it, just keep going. I’ve learned a lot from her. But I think the biggest would be reading and how to control myself.”
How she would hope someone would describe her?

“She’s sweet, caring. She has a head on her shoulders. Like she knows what she wants in life and …that’s basically it.”
Tralin has flourished. She has learned to care and to trust.

The effects in elementary school on the world views of insecurely attached children can have long term consequences.
Implications for schooling in America

- American Schools rely heavily on reward/punishment approaches to discipline
- In 2005, 5,117 preschoolers were expelled
- An attachment based approach to discipline can work for students living in poverty as well as middle class students.
- Untrusting elementary students can flourish in a classroom based in attachment theory
- This flourishing can last across several years
- Students in teacher education programs can learn and maintain an attachment based approach to teaching
Our schools massively fail children in poverty where trust and sense of community are lowest and where children have the highest rates of insecure attachment
In the Minnesota study of risk and adaptation the vast majority of subjects in their high poverty sample who completed high school could name at least one teacher whom they felt was “‘in their corner.’”
We keep changing the curriculum instead of changing how teachers view and relate to students.
It’s time

• To replace Behaviorism as the guiding theory behind school discipline

• To make the building of trust and the teaching of social, emotional, and moral competencies cornerstones of our educational system.

• That more students find more teachers “in their corner.”
It’s time for the attachment community to work with the education community to create the school conditions that will enable teachers to support the flourishing of all their students.
With Thanks to

Laura Ecken
Lynn Murphy
Peter Swartz
Vic Battistitch
Dan Solomon
Eric Schaps
Cindy Littman
Karen Benson
Lana Daley
Joy Pelton