



Theoretical article

A THEORETICAL REVIEW OF ATTACHMENT PATTERNS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT RESEARCH AND TRENDS IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

According to attachment theory, caregivers are crucial in fostering an infant's intrinsic need to create strong emotional connections. The establishment of these connections in turn promotes the infant's development of cognition, reinforces resilience, and paves the way for a variety of prospective successes. Studies have shown that attachment styles play a significant part in determining how effectively children and adolescents perform academically and develop on the psychosocial spectrum. According to empirical data, there is a significant link between safe attachment and successful academic results, which involves the development of cognitive abilities, task efficiency, and resilience. A theoretical review is therefore attempted in order to highlight the various aspects in the relationship between attachment patterns and academic performance. Future research implications are also discussed.

Key words: attachment theory, academic achievement, school psychology

In the field of Psychology, School Psychology is emerging as a core practice dedicated to the holistic well-being of children, young people, families and the complex mosaic of the educational process. School psychologists assume a multidimensional role, capable of intervening at both individual and systemic levels. They diligently design, implement, and evaluate programs designed to cultivate positive learning environments for diverse young minds, ensuring equal access to effective educational and psychological services that promote strong development (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Central to the pursuit of a prosperous future for children, an ambition shared by carers and teachers alike, is the complex maze of factors surrounding academic success. The profound impact of academic achievement is highlighted by the belief of most parents that increased school performance increases the prospects for success. In this field of educational psychology, school psychologists have embarked on an effort to decipher the subtleties of the dynamics of academic success (Wang, 2022). Beyond innate characteristics, empirical evidence has revealed the crucial role of noncognitive factors, like motivation and social-emotional skills, which account for nearly 70% of academic achievement (Binder et al., 1970).

School psychologists, with the intention of improving pedagogical outcomes, have started to incorporate a variety of theories into their intervention strategies to elevate students' academic performance. One such theory that originated in the family sphere and has potential in educational

practice is attachment theory. This theoretical framework, rooted in the exploration of parent-child attachment, argues that differences in students' academic performance can be explained through the prism of distinct attachment experiences with parents or teachers. Previous research has already illuminated a positive association between secure attachment and academic excellence (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004).

In light of these fundamental concepts, this theoretical review will attempt to identify the threads connecting attachment theory and academic performance, with the aim of identifying gaps in the literature that suggest the way forward for new research.

Basic concepts of attachment theory

At the heart of attachment theory lies Bowlby's groundbreaking work, which captures the genesis of the complex bonds that form between infants and their primary caregivers (Moss & St-Laurent, 2001). This foundational theory outlines the profound importance of caregivers, often the mother, in nurturing the infant's innate drive to form deep emotional bonds. Evidenced by behaviors such as sucking and crying, infants instinctively elicit caring responses from caregivers, thus beginning the process of attachment formation. This complex pattern of attachment, called the internal working model, weaves a mosaic of self-perception and dependence on others for needed care and attention. The cultivation of this internal model, in turn, fosters cognitive development, equips children with coping mechanisms to deal with challenges, and sets the stage for myriad future achievements.

Attachment theory, while serving as a powerful framework for understanding the complex interplay of parent-child dynamics, also sheds light on the possible implications of ambivalent attachment. This particular style of attachment, rooted in patterns of inconsistent responsiveness by caregivers, creates fertile ground for the cultivation of chronic anxiety. The pervasive fear of abandonment, an enduring feature of ambivalent attachment, promotes a coping strategy characterized by constant vigilance. This strategy, identified in childhood and persisting into adulthood, is creating the prerequisites for anxiety disorders (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004).

As we navigate this exploration of the dimensions of attachment theory, it becomes increasingly apparent that the complex outlines of attachment profoundly affect children's exploration, risk-taking and engagement with their environment. In essence, avoidance and hypervigilance, principles of ambivalent attachment, resonate as key symptoms that are found in various childhood anxiety disorders (Riley, 2010).

The relationship between attachment patterns and academic performance

A comprehensive review of the existing literature on attachment and academic achievement highlights the significant importance of early attachment styles with primary caregivers in predicting adolescents' academic achievement. In particular, a distinct association between secure attachment and academic performance emerges. Furthermore, the synthesis of the reviewed research highlights that responsive and engaging parenting is strongly associated with children's cognitive development, task performance and resilience (Kerns, 2008). In addition, a remarkable continuity from early development to adolescence becomes apparent, meaning that secure attachment during the formative years increases later academic competence and behavior (Jacobsen & Hoffman, 1997). This supports the hypothesis that individuals who experienced secure attachment in childhood exhibit superior academic, domestic, and behavioral abilities compared to their counterparts with insecure attachment. In a study conducted in public secondary schools located in Nairobi, Khasakhala et al.

(2012) concluded that maternal rejection, paternal sub-protective behaviors and the absence of emotional bonding exhibited by parents are significantly associated with maladaptive behaviors among adolescents. This claim was supported by previous research suggesting that individuals growing up in such contexts are prone to developmental health complications (Leinonen et al., 2003).

The discussion around parent-adolescent relationships has sparked scientific debate, with some arguing that parental influence is insignificant in the lives of adolescents. However, a body of empirical evidence contradicts this notion, highlighting the profound impact that parents can have on adolescents' lives (Moretti & Peled, 2004). Empirical studies grounded in evidence emphasize the presence of a distinct association between secure attachment and school achievement, including task performance and resilience (Kerns, 2008). In particular, a greater likelihood of an association between secure attachment and increased academic performance among elementary school children emerges. For example, maternal responsiveness and warmth have been found to influence math and reading ability in third grade (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2008).

An Israeli study illustrated the perception of children with a secure connection by their teachers as socially and cognitively competent. Their peers had the same perception (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). Recent studies further illuminate the broad implications of social intimacy, indicating increased performance in various areas of an individual's life (Kraus et al., 2010). A convergence of research supports the fundamental link between early life attachment and the preparatory aspects of schooling, in parallel with subsequent academic achievement (Commodari, 2013).

In a comprehensive study conducted by Moullin et al. (2014), strong evidence emerged demonstrating the profound impact of the emotional bonds formed between children and their caregivers on the educational process. The study, which involved a wide range of countries and was based on an extensive analysis of over one hundred studies, highlighted the critical importance of attachment theory in the field of child development. The findings emphasized the negative implications associated with insecure attachment, including tendencies for aggression, problem behaviors, school dropout, and increased risk of future unemployment.

Based on the principles of attachment theory, Kariuki et al. (2015) demonstrated the critical importance of parental engagement which includes love, support, and acceptance, in mitigating problem behaviors among adolescents. These findings are replicated by Mugambi and Gitonga (2015), who, when examining adolescents in private secondary schools in Westlands, identified several risk factors including parental miscommunication, traumatic experiences, unhealthy parental relationships, peer influence, academic challenges, pessimism, negative childhood memories and addictive behaviors. This confirms the claims of Khasakhala et al. (2012), who observed a significant prevalence of major depressive disorders among adolescents in secondary schools, further linking these conditions to maladaptive parenting practices.

The complex relationship between children's educational performance and their attachment to parents is further documented, with secure attachment emerging as a predictor of academic achievement. This is evidenced by findings showing that preschool children who exhibit insecure attachment have shorter attention span and poorer cognitive skills in contrast to their peers with secure attachment (Moss & St. Laurent, 2001).

Toth and Cicchetti's (1996) study delved into the complex interplay between mother-child relations, abuse and school functioning. The research hypothesized that a secure maternal bond would enhance competent school performance, while an insecure bond would potentially result in offending behavior and impaired functioning. Results revealed that non-abused children with secure maternal attachment exhibited the highest levels of school functioning, which included attendance,

scores on standardized achievement tests, disciplinary incidents, academic achievement, and placement in age-appropriate classrooms. In contrast, abused children who exhibited insecure maternal attachment showed the lowest levels of school functioning, characterized by an increased risk of academic failure and school dropout. This study highlights the pivotal role that secure mother-child attachment assumes in determining academic achievement during both formative and later life stages. However, notable limitations relate to the study's age-group focus and exclusive emphasis on mother-child relationships, which justifies the present study's broader exploration of the multiple influences of different caregivers/parents on academic achievement.

In the field of achievement motivation and academic performance, Jenaabadi and Rigi (2014) investigated the complex relationship between attachment style and mathematics achievement among high school students in the Khash region of Iran. Their study revealed a positive association between secure attachment style and mathematics achievement, while revealing negative associations between mathematics achievement and insecure attachment style. The results further indicated a suboptimal level of achievement motivation among female students. An additional research attempt, conducted by Saadat et al. (2016), explored the complex interaction between resilience, attachment style and academic achievement. This research revealed a significant positive correlation between secure attachment and academic success, while revealing inverse associations with avoidant and anxious-insecure attachment styles. The study's distinct emphasis on resilience as an integral aspect within attachment theory is a unique feature.

Implications for future research

Despite the considerable body of research examining the association between attachment patterns, academic performance and certain psychosocial variables, a notable gap remains in the literature, particularly in the context of Greek secondary school students. While previous research has examined the importance of attachment patterns and their impact on academic performance, a comprehensive investigation of the interaction between attachment patterns, school anxiety and academic achievement in the context of Greek secondary education remains notably absent. Moreover, existing studies often include university-level groups, potentially attributing different dynamics than those evident in secondary school students. Therefore, a study is proposed that will bridge this gap by delving into the delicate relationship between attachment patterns, school anxiety and academic achievement among secondary school students in Greece. By unraveling the interweaving threads of these structures within the specific socio-cultural context of Greece, research can attempt to enrich our understanding of how these factors interact and influence students' educational efforts, potentially paving the way for more targeted interventions and support mechanisms adjusted to the unique needs of this demographic group.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the literature review reveals the crucial role of attachment patterns in shaping various aspects of academic achievement and psychosocial development of children and adolescents. Empirical evidence indicates a strong relationship between secure attachment and positive school outcomes, including cognitive progress, task performance and resilience. In addition, studies have illuminated the impact of parental responsiveness and engagement on children's cognitive development and overall school performance. However, a distinct gap in the current body of knowledge is emerging, particularly in the Greek secondary school context. Existing research has focused on university-level groups and has not yet thoroughly explored the complex interplay

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between attachment patterns and academic achievement in the field of Greek secondary school students. For that reason, a study is proposed that will aim to fill this gap by uncovering the subtleties of the relationships in this particular sociocultural context, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the complex dynamics that shape students' school performance and potentially informing individualized interventions for optimizing academic success and psychological well-being.

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