



## **AfC Virtual School Attachment Aware Schools Award 2020-2021**

### **Cohort 1 Evaluation**

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### **Overview**

**Participants:** The Attachment Aware Schools Award (AASA) welcomed 42 schools from across Richmond, Kingston, Windsor and Maidenhead in its first year. These included schools spanning all key stages from early years to post 16, alongside specialist provisions and schools in both operational areas.

**Structure of the Attachment Aware Schools Award:** AfC Virtual School's bespoke Attachment Aware Schools Award Programme is a year long period of study which includes regular Designated Teacher training sessions; termly coaching sessions and whole school training in Emotion Coaching, Attachment and Trauma. Schools are asked to conduct an Attachment Audit and from this identify a whole school change project to complete across the academic year. These projects are shared at a graduation celebration at the end of the year where schools were awarded Attachment Aware Schools Plaques.

**Scope and breadth of topics/projects:** Research nationally indicates that AASA projects often fall across 5 main areas; Policy and school systems; Transforming the environment; Staff and pedagogical development; Pupils; Parents/carers and our cohort was no exception. The majority of projects were multi-faceted with whole school change and impact spanning multiple areas. The following section provides a snapshot of a range of whole school change projects in each area.

#### **1. Policy and school systems**

A large proportion of schools had at least one element of their AASA project which focused on developing **policy and school systems**, including developing whole school understanding, language and culture around attachment aware and trauma informed approaches. For many, this also involved developing behavioural policies, moving from a behaviourist model to a relational model. Additional training to all DTs on this topic was provided through a Designated Teacher forum. Below are some quotes regarding the impact of projects focussing in this area:

*"[We are most proud of] our collaborative approach! Everyone is welcome and everyone involved from the children, to the parents, to a working party of foster/adopted families, to all staff and governors. I have felt very proud at the way the staff have responded to this project. Also very proud of how this piece of work has grown exponentially, influencing all aspects of school life. We're not just updating our behaviour policy, we are changing how we see things"*

Headteacher - Primary School

*'By the end of July 2021 we will have embedded our first school policy on supporting and understanding Looked After Children & Previously Looked After Children'.*

Infant School

*"The main aims of our project were to introduce a relationship based behaviour policy and accompanying strategies. This is now deployed across the school for those children for whom a behaviourist approach is detrimental or ineffective, possibly due to a trauma or care experienced background"*

Some schools made adaptations to their whole school curriculum and teaching approaches.

*"We are very proud that all staff have engaged with the project and there has been a change in staff perception towards children with attachment needs. Staff have updated their medium term plans with an attachment friendly focus in all curriculum areas. The Behaviour Policy has been updated to reflect an attachment friendly focus and has been shared and approved by the Governing Body and staff.*

*"The weekly GRAND learner lessons have helped children to focus on the key learning skills needed now that they have settled back into class after lockdown. They are actively trying to show these skills and it has helped them to focus back on their learning rather than the other things going on in the world"*



## **2. Transforming the environment**

A number of schools transformed elements of their school environment as part of their AASA project. Further training and research was provided by AfC Virtual School in developing therapeutic spaces for care experienced children. Below are a selection of quotes highlighting the impact of creating safe, therapeutic spaces in schools.

*"The Bluebell room is a safe space for my Drawing & Talking groups. It has great resources on the walls to help children think about their emotions. It's a space where children can freely express themselves"*

Teaching Assistant, Primary School

*"It helps me because there is more room and it's much nicer to sit on the soft carpet rather than the old, hard carpet. It makes me feel relaxed and I can get my feelings out"*

A child's comments after experiencing drama therapy

An example of the change to a space as part of a schools AASA project



Pre AASA



POST AASA

*'Children are keen to go there, it doesn't feel like a classroom and children relax. Their body language changes completely and in social thinking groups they began to talk more and become more conversational. Children have begun to ask to go there for various reasons. Adults in school also use the space at lunchtime if they want a bit of time to think and regroup.'*

*"When I get in trouble, I get angry and defensive. I use the Reef. It is a calm space. I fiddle with toys and put a 5 minute timer on. I like to talk to teachers in there"*

Year 4 child accessing the new therapeutic space In a primary school

As well as spaces outside of the classroom, schools also focussed on making their classrooms attachment and trauma aware. For example, a Junior school created 'regulation stations' and 'calm corners' in every classroom, alongside the development of a new nurture room. As a result, they noted that *'Staff have become more tolerant, curious and skilled at supporting pupil emotions'*, and *'pupils have become more reflective in thinking about situations that have caused upset'*.

### **3. Staff and pedagogical development**

The majority of the school's whole school change projects included developing elements of staff and pedagogical development. Examples of core aims underpinning these projects included *'developing a consistent approach to supporting children's emotional regulation'*, *'growing a culture of attachment informed communication and language across the school'*, *'developing a deep whole school understanding of attachment and trauma, and a culture that is sensitive to and reflective of this'* and *'developing the key adult role'*.

Examples of impact include:

*'The staff teams, including the teaching and support staff are now better equipped and enabled to take on the responsibility of a key role in the classroom. The support staff are now empowered to focus on emotional literacy, trauma and attachment awareness and*

associated effects on the child. The training given to staff has further assisted them to know how to support the children to deal with associated issues relating to trauma and attachment, as well as know how to support themselves, so that they do not become victims of vicarious trauma’.

Designated Teacher, Special School for Children with physical, profound or complex learning difficulties and disabilities, ages 2 - 19.

‘Staff have a better understanding on how to deal with incidents with all children, not just our most vulnerable. Behaviour incidents are now being dealt with differently, still in line with our school ‘behavioural blueprint’ but all staff are actively thinking about what the children are trying to communicate through their behaviour. Children’s behavioural incidents seem to have decreased and children seem more empowered’.

Designated Teacher, Junior School

There is complete continuity in the way that children are responded to across the teams and school and this is resulting in children feeling safe and secure in an environment that provides consistency.

Designated Teacher, Junior School

#### 4. Pupils

Whilst the impact on pupils was a focus for all schools, two participating provisions had a more direct focus on the experience of pupils in their schools.

A Junior school used a tool called sociograms to identify “rejected” children that were at risk of peer exclusion and used research and knowledge about the importance of relationships gained through the award to improve their social standing by creating ‘staff champions’ for these children. At the end of the academic year, it was noted that children identified as ‘rejected’ at the start of the year, were ‘becoming more confident, open, happy and engaged in their learning’, were more involved in school clubs and there were greater levels of parental engagement with school.

A college on the programme reflected on past difficulties experienced by care experienced young people during their transition to college and planned a series of transition sessions for vulnerable students, including those who are care experienced over the summer period. The young people were able to visit the college in person, have a tour of the site, meet key support staff, ask questions and have an emotional wellbeing workshop from the Mental Health Trailblazer Worker to develop skills to manage the transition.



**Transition Day Sessions**  
Supporting the journey from school to college

- Sessions approach the
- Visit the college building in person and have a tour
- Meet support staff
- Ask questions

**Do you come under one of the following groups?**

- Care experienced (either a looked after young person or a care leaver)
- Homeless or a rough sleeper
- Mental health vulnerability
- Anxiety
- Alternative education and (traveling pupil, informal unit, home schooled, out of school etc)
- Young carers

Please note the transition session is only available to students in the above groups

**Book a Transition Day session to help build your confidence with college! Scan the code or follow the link:**



<https://bit.ly/3cRTWpA>

For further details, email [TheAdviceHub@rut.ac.uk](mailto:TheAdviceHub@rut.ac.uk)

## **5. Parents/carers**

Some schools change projects focused on directly supporting parents, for example, at a Federation of nursery schools, a parent and carers guide to brain development and behaviour was produced, which was based on attachment aware principles. The impact was noted as *'increased confidence in which staff can advise parents using brain development /attachment theory/effect of trauma to explain children's behaviour and positive strategies that will help support their development'*.

### **Feedback from parents and carers on their schools attachment aware approaches**

*"I would like to highly commend the school for your support and care in dealing with my adopted daughter who has complex attachment and developmental trauma. The school has gone above and beyond in providing a safe, healing space within the school for her and developing safe, attachment-aware relationships with teaching and support staff. She loves school thanks to your care and understanding"*

Parent at Primary School, June 2021

*'Staff understanding of attachment theory has meant that they've worked hard to make school a secure base for X and X can now move much more easily from me to the teacher and back. I do not think we would be in the position we are now without this. The sensitivity and responsiveness to X's needs shown by members of staff at X school has been quite exceptional.'*

Foster Parent, Primary aged child

### **Feedback from children and young people**

*"I feel safe in school because the teachers care. I love my special time with Mrs X. The teachers make me happy and look after me"*

Year 2 previously looked after child

*"On a tricky day I get really mad. The teachers have helped me calm down with relaxing things that I like. It makes me feel good at school and it's OK in the classroom. I get to feel kindness in my body and I hope other children realise how teachers can help to keep us calm"*

Year 3 child, Primary School

*"Being involved in creating my student profile has helped me so much as I know staff are listening and aware of the strategies that help me feel safe in school. It has made a real difference to me"*

Young person, Secondary School

## Whole school training

Each participating school received two 1 hour 30 minute training sessions delivered in collaboration with their AASA coach. The focus of these whole school trainings were:

1. An introduction to attachment and developmental trauma
2. An introduction to emotion coaching.

Schools were encouraged to ensure whole school attendance, including inviting school governors, support staff and office based staff.

Out of 696 responses from school staff following the whole school training

- 92% agreed or strongly agreed that it will directly impact their practice.
- 93% agreed or strongly agreed that it will contribute to whole school practice and development

The below quotes provide an overview regarding the impact of the training across the wider school.

*“The impact the project is having around school is fantastic. I have noticed a real change in the language used by staff during lessons after the Emotion Coaching INSET”*

Designated Teacher - Secondary School

*“I have found it so helpful to use the 3 R’s as mentioned in the training and to remember that underpinning that is the need to build trust. In practice, I have found this takes time and absolute commitment but it’s worth it”*

Class Teacher, Junior school

*“The training over the year has been an eye opener and changed our attitudes to dealing with learners that may find attachments difficult. Personally I know that my words have changed, and calming a child is of importance before trying to show them where the learning curve is”*

Designated Teacher, Primary School

*“I have heard the CALM scripts being used around the school and classrooms seem calmer. Also, those children accessing the new therapy spaces have found them a more positive experience as a safe space away from the classroom”*

Designated Teacher - Primary School

*“Emotion Coaching has become an embedded part of our dialogue with the students with staff more regularly and consciously using it. It is early days but it feels like students are slowly starting to normalise talk around emotions and appreciate that all emotions are ‘okay’ and valid” and “Students are starting to be kinder to themselves and their emotions!!”*

Designated Teacher - Secondary alternative provision

*“We’ve reduced the number of behaviour watch reports as a result of training*

Designated Teacher - Upper School

The below quotes provide examples of changes to teaching approaches and developments

in staff thinking about the behaviour they see following engagement in the AASA.

*"[I am] more mindful of a child in my class, when they are avoiding tasks and understanding that it's because they don't feel safe yet, so I need to make them feel safe in taking that risk"*

Class Teacher, Primary School

*"Behind a giggle there might be a trauma"*

Extended day practitioner, Nursery

*"Children are not giving us a hard time, they are having a hard time. They need us to help"*

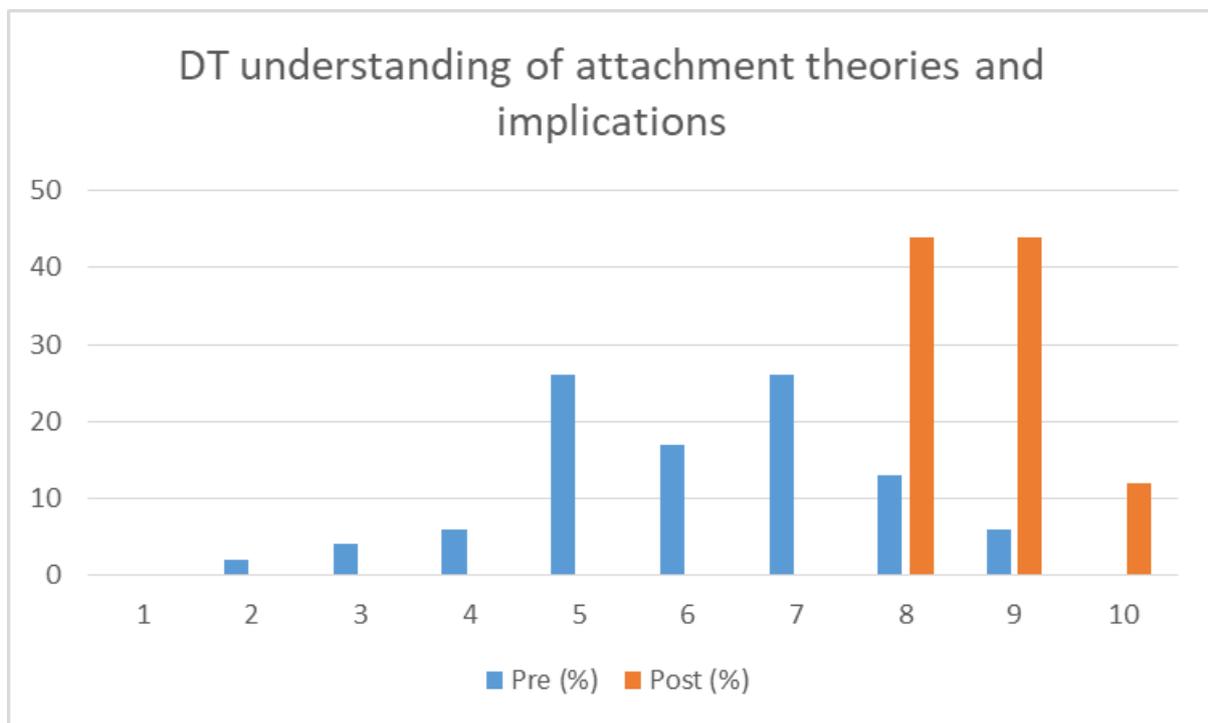
SEN practitioner, Nursery

## AASA Impact Data

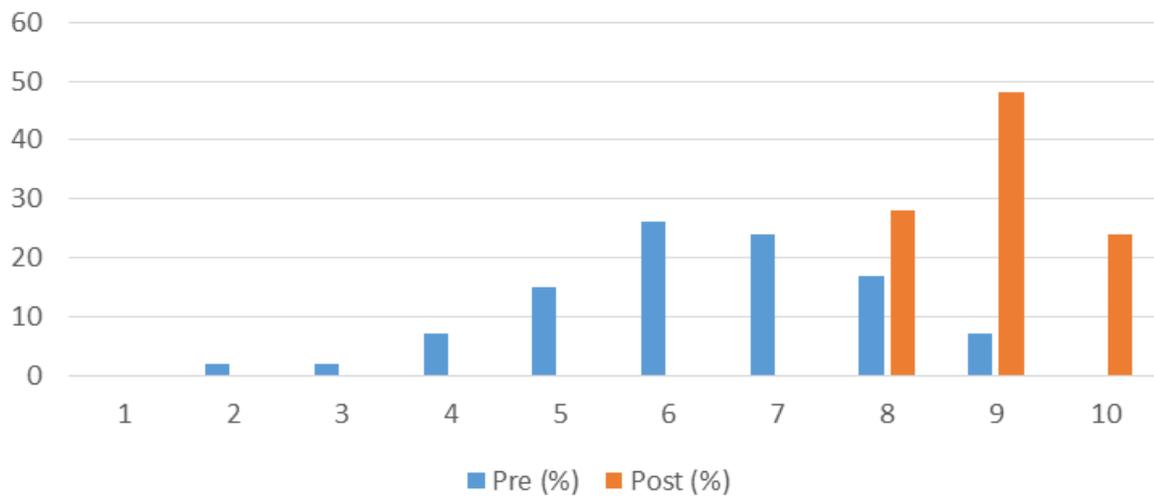
### Designated Teacher pre and post quantitative data

#### *Designated Teacher knowledge, understanding and confidence.*

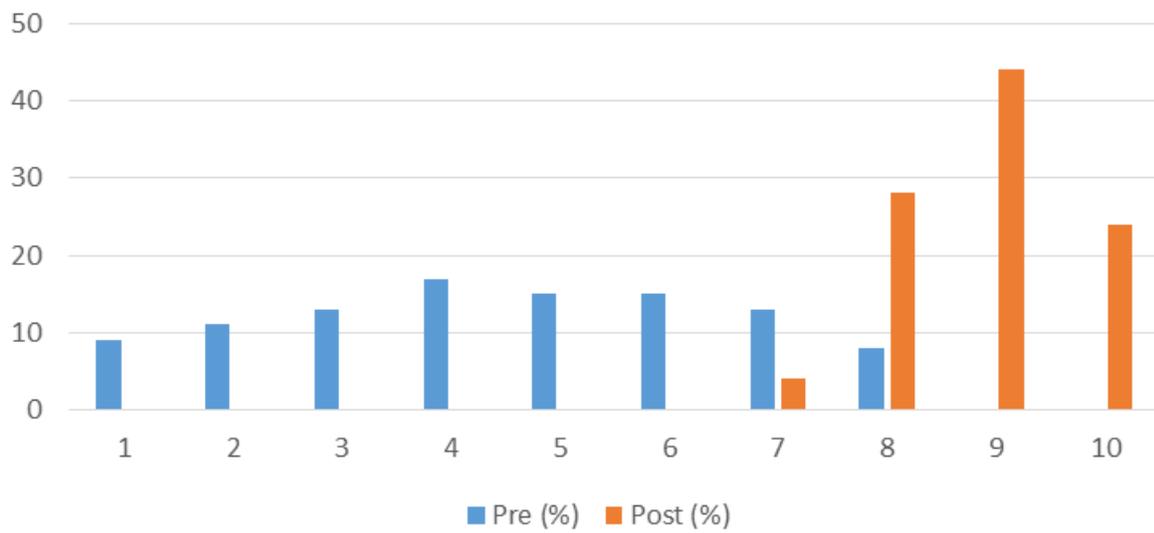
There has been a measurable impact in Designated Teacher self-reported confidence, knowledge and understanding in relation to a range of relevant areas to their practice supporting care experienced children and young people. For all of the below graphs, as a general guide, DT's were asked to rate between 1 - 4 if these theories, approaches and ideas were quite new to them. Rate between 5 - 7 if they have a reasonable level of knowledge or are putting into practice strategies as a result. Rate between 8 - 10 if they are actively and confidently applying this to their practice. A significant shift in knowledge and understanding, towards 'actively and confidently applying to practice' was identified between pre and post evaluation measures. Due to the different number of respondents pre (45) and post (25), data is presented in percentages of respondents.



## DT understanding of developmental trauma theories and implications

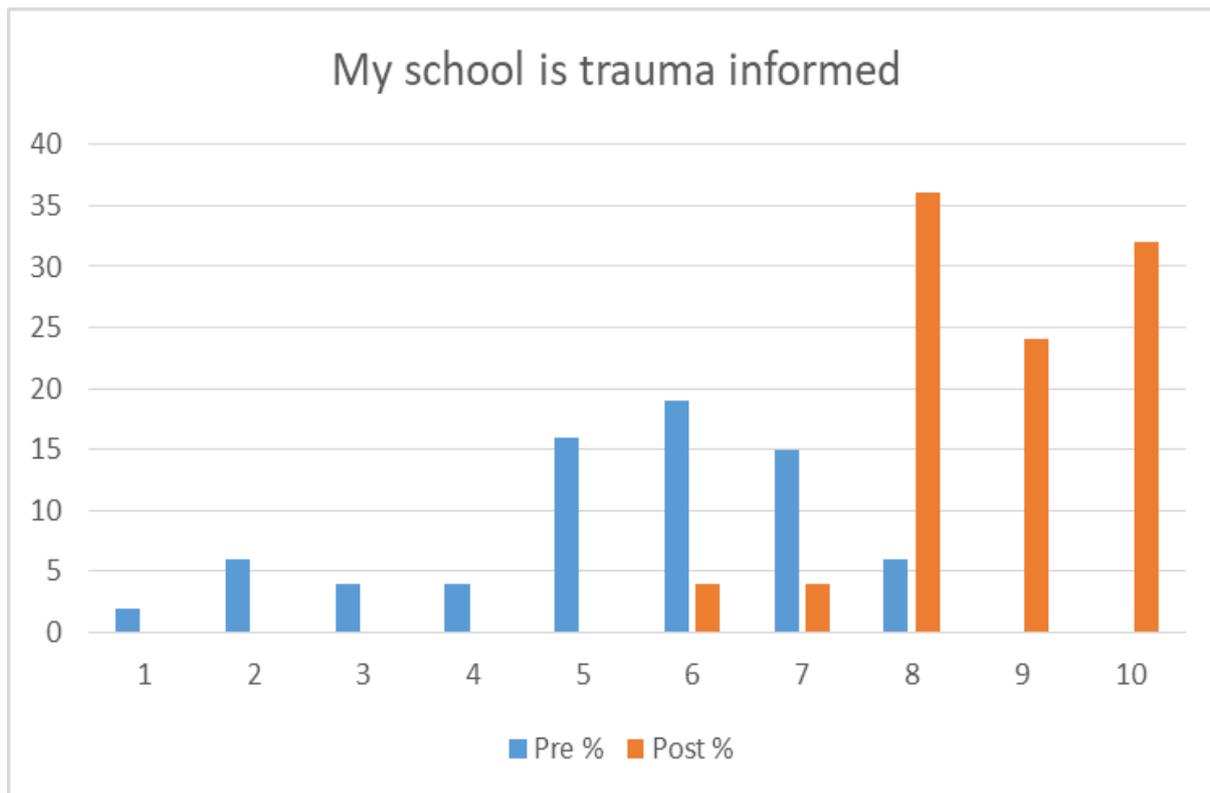
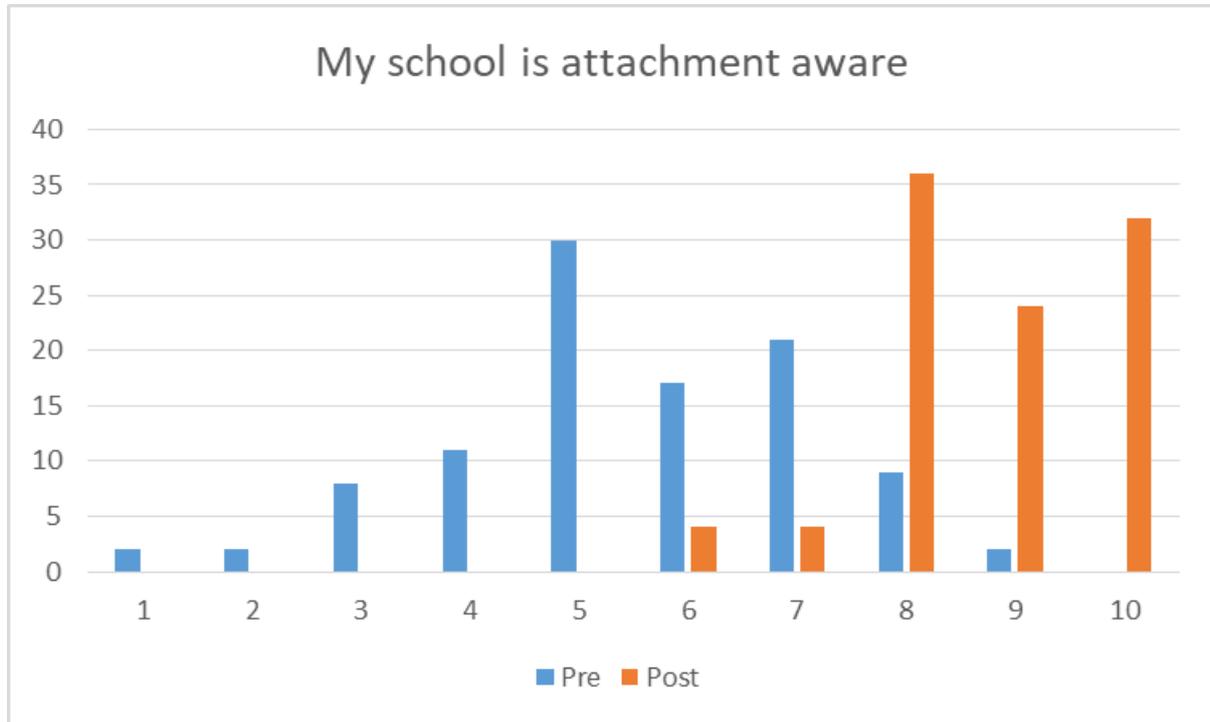


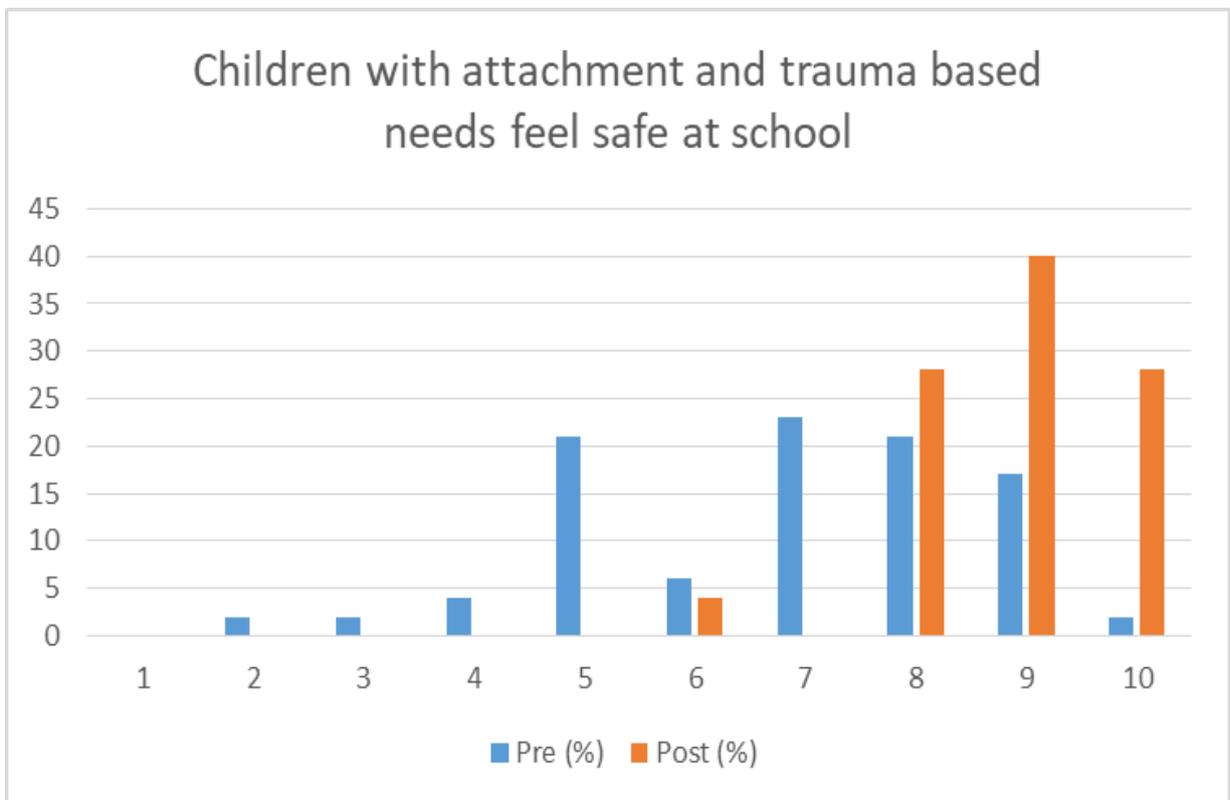
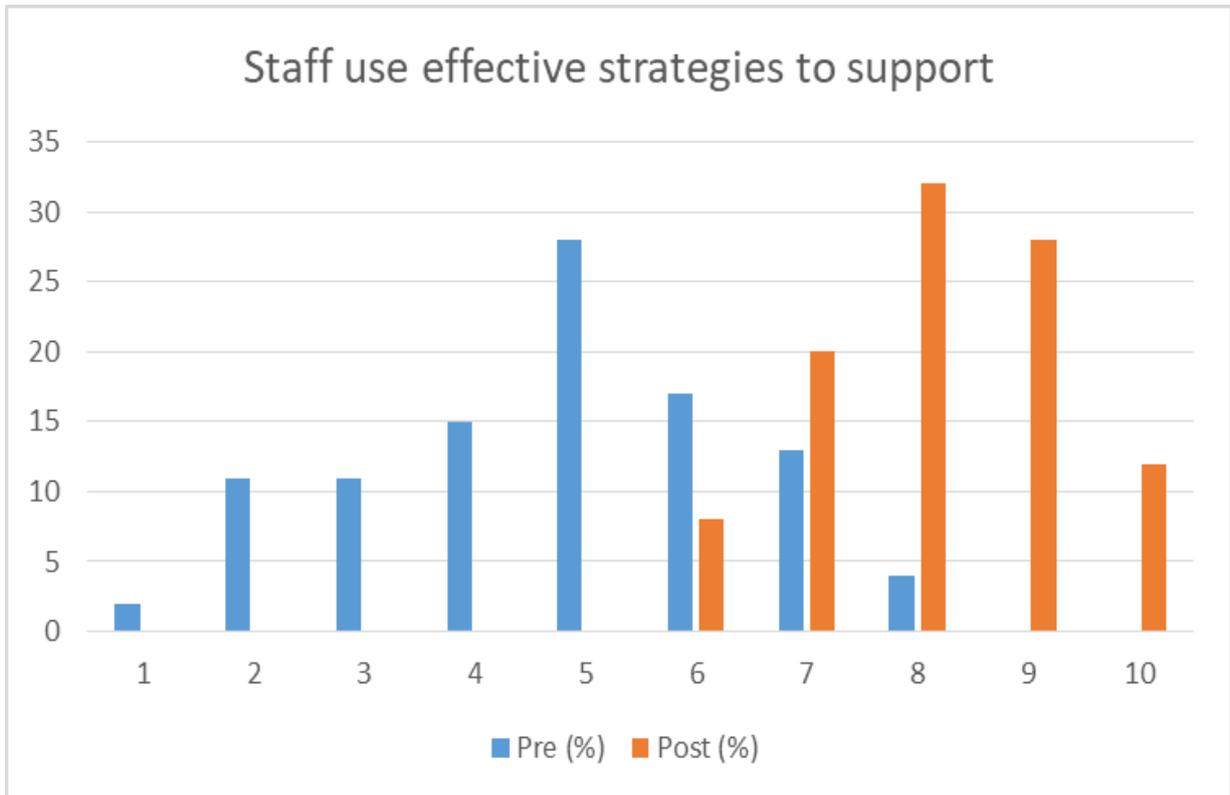
## DT understanding of emotion coaching and how and when to use it

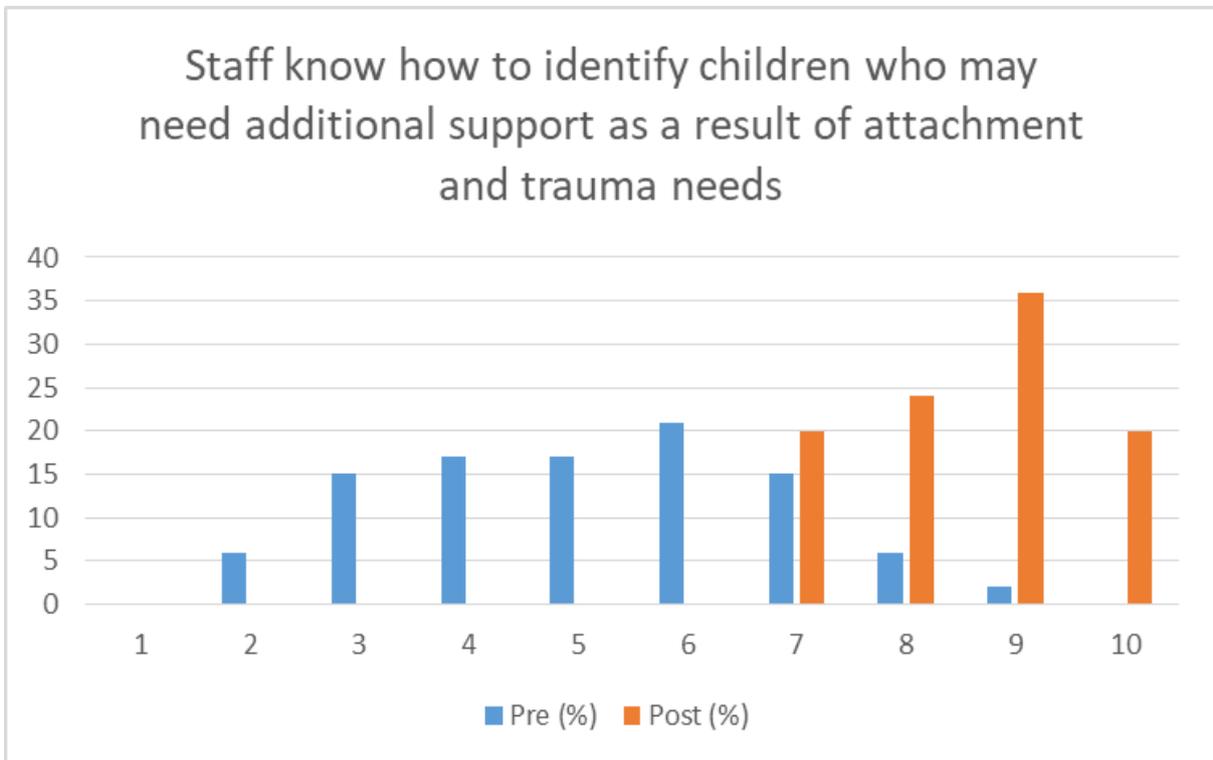
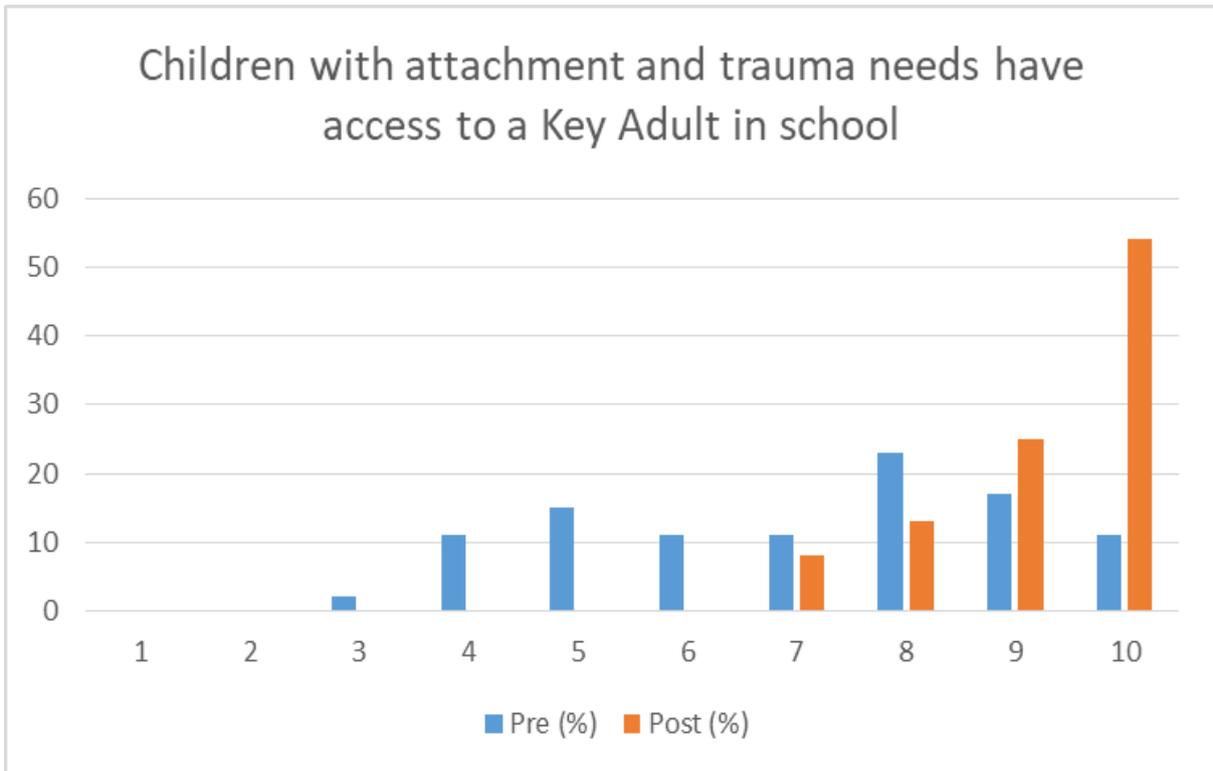


### Whole school change

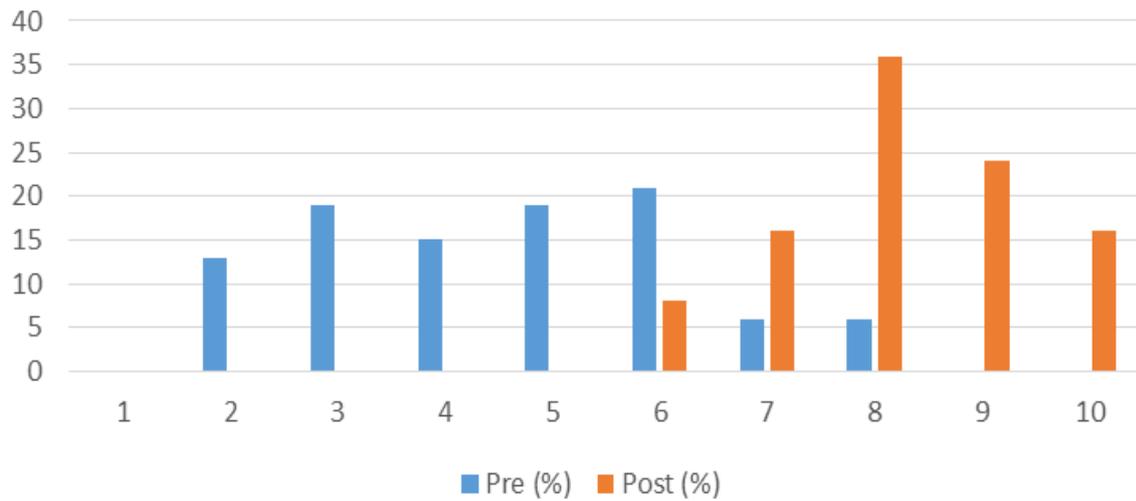
Comparison of pre and post project evaluation indicated a significant positive response in relation to the following statements, where 1 represents strongly disagree and 10 represents strongly agree, showing a significant shift in designated teacher perceptions regarding attachment and trauma informed practice in their schools.



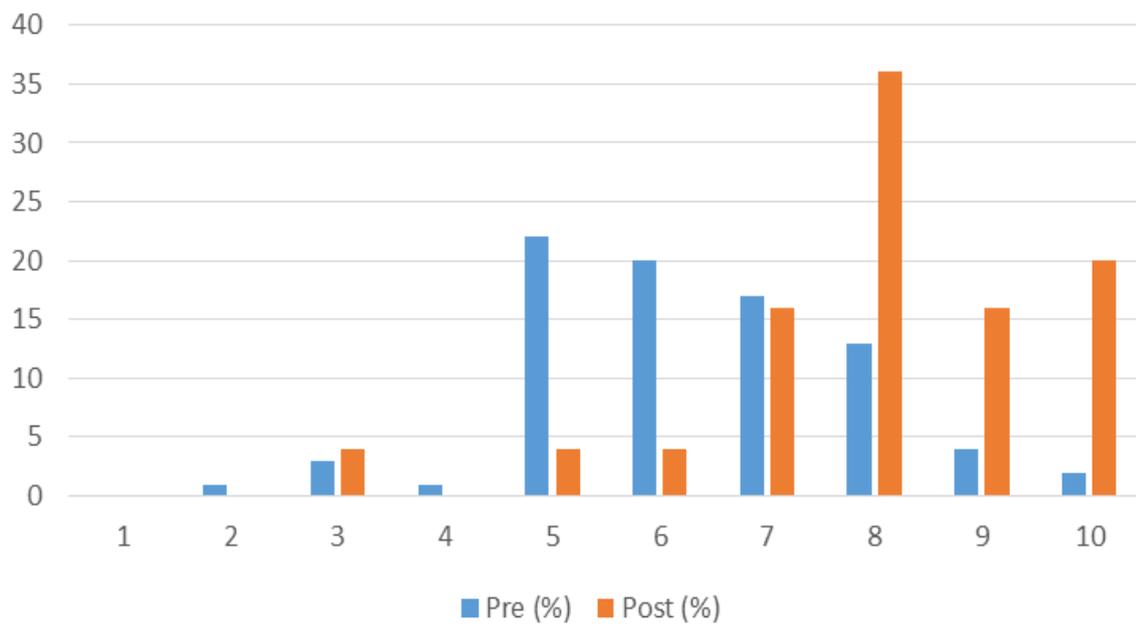




### There is a common language in school that helps staff to talk about attachment and trauma based needs

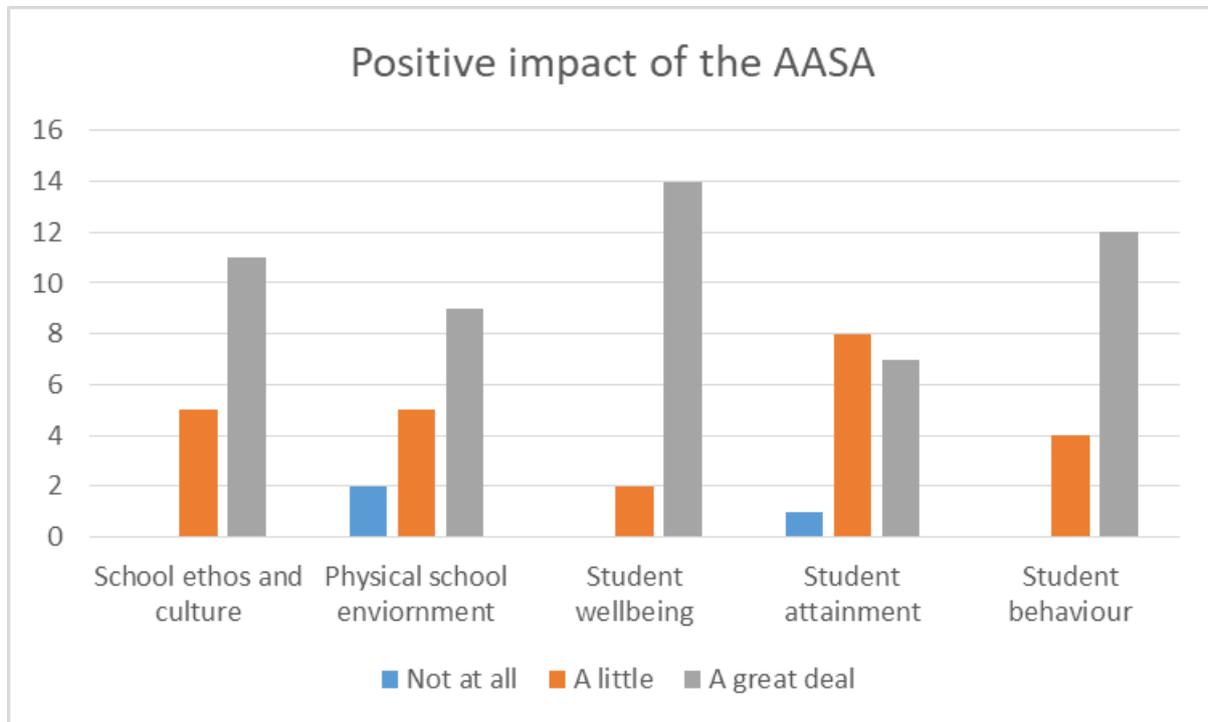


### School policies are attachment aware



Designated Teachers were asked whether the project had had a positive impact on a variety of stakeholders. 88% of DTs who responded to the AASA evaluation indicated that the AASA had 'a great deal' of positive impact on teaching staff and senior leaders, with 93% agreeing that the AASA had 'a great deal of positive impact on support staff.

Designated Teachers were asked whether the project had had a positive impact on a variety of aspects of school life and student outcomes. The significant majority noted 'a great deal' or 'a little' positive impact across all areas as can be seen in the graph below.



## **Designated Teacher post programme qualitative impact data**

In July 2021. Designated Teachers were asked 'What changes have you noticed in your school?' They were encouraged to gather the views of other stakeholders in their responses, such as teaching staff, parents, governors and pupil.

Below are a selection of quotes from those who responded.

*"We now have great staff knowledge on how to respond to children with attachment and developmental trauma - a lot of positive praise, focus on building strong relationships. We use visual timetables, child-centred learning, we focus on how young children learn best and think about what they might have been through. We build strong relationships with the children as well as the whole family"*

Class Teacher - Infant School

*"Mind set - look at behaviour differently concentrating on the root cause rather than the behaviour seen; Language used when talking about behaviour is shared and curious; collegiate approach; staff understand and empathise with each other more and are more prepared to help in difficult situations; way we speak to parents has changes - use brain development - fight, flight, freeze"*

Designated Teacher - Primary School

*"Huge support from Governors which is brilliant as this was quite a change of direction from what had previously been happening"*

*"Greater involvement of parents/carers in supporting young people"*

*"More restorative and inquisitive conversations are happening with students"*

*"The change in language being used around site by staff demonstrates a much more attachment aware approach"*

Designated Teacher, Secondary School

*"Now we understand why he is behaving this way we can help him regulate, build trusting relationship and hopefully he'll be ready to learn"*

*"We don't know what each child has been through before they walk through our doors in the morning but they know we care about them and they are safe"*

Staff at a Primary School

## ***Designated Teacher post programme focus group***

In order to gain a more in-depth insight into Designated Teachers experiences of being on the AASA programme, a focus group was held to explore this in more detail. Four Designated Teachers who led their whole school change projects volunteered to be part of the focus groups, which were facilitated by two Trainee Educational Psychologists in July 2021.

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Following the steps used in the Braun and Clarke (2006) model, the six steps were: 'familiarizing yourself with the data', 'generating initial codes', 'searching for themes', 'reviewing potential themes', 'defining and naming themes' and 'producing the report'.

Three themes were found based on both the frequency they appeared and their 'keyness' to the research aims (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### ***Theme 1: Positive impact of the project***

Participants spoke about the positive impact the award had within their schools on both pupils and teachers. Therefore, participants suggested that more schools should be able to have the opportunity to take part in the award:

*"I do think this should be widely available to schools and it just needs to be shared"*

*"I think all school should have the opportunity to do it and all must do it because, until you're in it, you can't actually see the outcomes"*

The most significant changes participants had noticed in their schools were the interactions between teachers and pupils:

*"One of the most striking impacts I noticed as a head walking around the school, was the language had changed from staff... and how they dealt with difficulties with children when they were having challenging behaviour."*

All participants labelled the coaching sessions they received from educational psychologists as being an important part of the project, that helped them to develop and progress ideas they had:

*"I found the coaching sessions really useful.. they helped me to understand what the project would entail and decide on what direction our project would take."*

*"I found those (coaching sessions) really valuable, I think just having somebody to bounce ideas back and forth with, I just found that really valuable."*

Emotion coaching was also frequently referred to as an aspect of the award that led to positive change. This was because:

*"Having a common framework amongst ourselves, that we know is research based, and if we deliver it effectively will have impact long term if delivered enough times. I think that was really powerful for us as a school and I think it empowered staff."*

*"I think now we're teaching our children aren't we, how to talk to each other."*

*"My friends text me now to be like, 'I'm the world's best emotion coacher'."*

In order to have a wider impact by reaching more schools, participants thought that the project could be advertised better and presented more clearly:

*"I saw the email and thought mmm, I'll give that a go, but I didn't really know what it was going to be about. It might just be worth having some kind of groups like this, for prospective schools to come and just have a discussion as to what it is and what it entails. And what the benefits can be."*

*"Yeah I think using the real life stories as a way to promote the program would be really good."*

Overall, participants highlighted the impact of the award, parts of the award that led to that impact, and how the award could have a wider impact in the future with better promotion.

### **Theme 2: The importance of organisation within the award**

Participants clearly stated that one of the main strengths of the award was the organisation:

*"It was very well organised."*

*"I think having the overview from X [Lead Educational Psychologist on the programme] of, sort of, what needs to be done at every single part of the program in each term was also helpful, because it meant you could organize your time."*

*"And the same for X [AfC Virtual School Business Manager] who sorted lots of the admin stuff. Having her as a key contact for any concerns or issues just meant it ran seamlessly.. she did lots of great reminders emails and the Google drive was really helpful because it meant you could just work on things."*

The organisation of the award was said to be particularly important given the additional work it means for DT's:

*"Although it's hugely valued, you know it's not, it's not part of our usual school structure, so I think having the high levels of organisation was really helpful."*

*"In schools it's really hard, sometimes, to organise your time effectively to get an additional thing done."*

Participants also discussed the organisation of resources that were provided, which made them more accessible:

*"What I really liked actually was the push to do your own reading. At the time it was something that I just really couldn't find the time actually but there's some really short articles out there that were provided."*

*"We could access different training opportunities and webinars which we were just signposted to that I wouldn't have known about before."*

### **Theme 3: Legacy of the award**

Participants spoke about how critical it was that the award continues to have an impact in the future:

*"I think in terms of going forward, it's really important that schools don't just do it, get the award and it's kind of closed. It really becomes an approach. It's too easy to kind of say yeah right I've done it."*

*"I do think sometimes within schools, there is that kind of we've got the plaque! But do we actually, do we still deserve the plaque in three years' time?"*

Participants discussed how the idea of 'legacy' could be built into the award because, if not, schools might not continue the work:

*"I do think that there really needs to be an opportunity to revalidate the award... in 10 years' time, what would that mean for that school and I think it's really important and that somewhere that's built into the program that there does need to be revisiting to make sure that it is kept up"*

*"I think there needs to be some validation in terms of keeping it up."*

Despite some concerns about the continued impact of the award in schools, the participants expressed motivation to continue the work in the upcoming year:

*"We're really excited that this is only the real start of the journey and we've still got so much to do. So it's definitely not a tick box exercise because we've got so much to do this year, but really exciting as well."*

*"It's going to be for us it's about sustainability and consistency and just continuing on that journey and tweaking things as we go, and thinking about, you know, what that would look like for each year."*

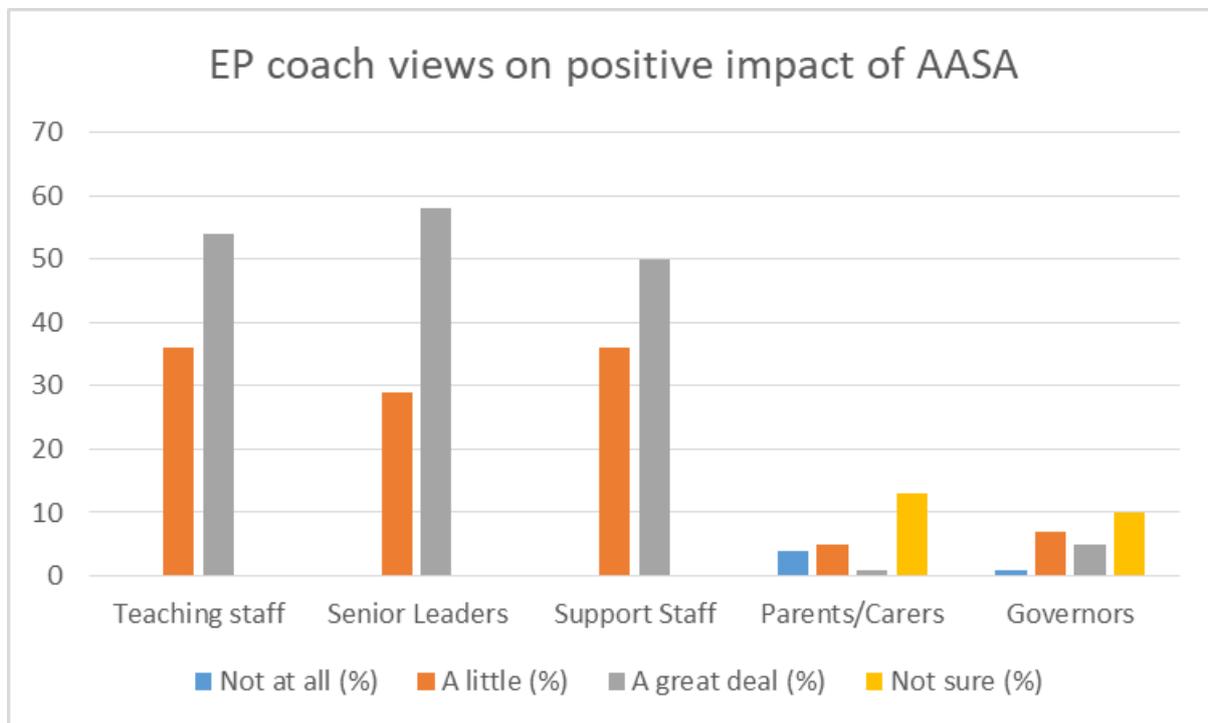
*"Parents is our next sort of step, to roll it out within the community, and I've directed a few parents to the resources on the beacon house website already, and some of the videos."*

*"We recorded the sessions and the training sessions... so we've got those as a long lasting resource to share with new starters, which is good."*

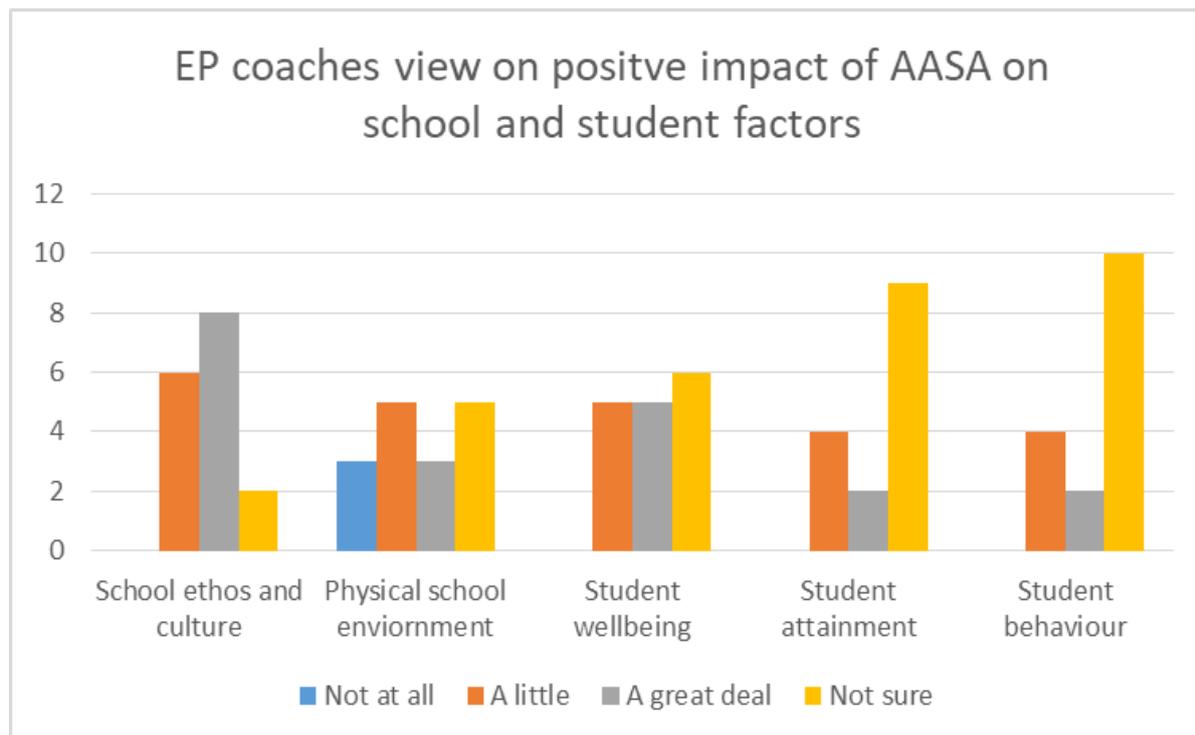
## AASA Impact Educational Psychologist Coach post programme data

AfC Virtual School Attachment Aware Schools Award was a collaboration between the Virtual School and AfC Educational Psychology Services. 16 EP coaches responded to the evaluation, who were coach to 24 schools on the project. Therefore, coaches to over 50% of provisions are represented in the below data. An experienced member of the Virtual School team was also coach to four schools.

- 100% of coaches who completed the evaluation indicated that they either agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (58%) that the AASA had had a positive impact on the school involved.
- The EP coaches identified a greater impact on teaching staff, senior leadership and support staff than parents/carers and governors as can be seen in the graph below.
- Where EP coaches indicated that they were not sure of the impact, this was due to the EP not having access to necessary data (attainment, exclusion data etc.) or relevant information at the time of the evaluation to make an informed judgement as to impact in that area. This was particularly the case if the main focus of the project and therefore the coaching sessions were on a different area.



The EP coaches were asked whether the project had had a positive impact on a variety of aspects of school life and student outcomes. The greatest identified impact was on school ethos and culture and student wellbeing.



100% of coaches indicated that their role as coach on the AASA had improved their understanding of the school context a great deal (71%) or a little (29%). Whilst the majority of EP coaches said that being part of the project had improved their relationships with school a great deal (67%) or a little (21%). 12% were unsure of the impact of their coaching role on their relationship with school. It should be noted that of those who responded, 83% were coach in a school they were the link EP for, whilst 17% were coach in a school they were not the link EP for. This includes settings that don't currently receive a buy back service from the EPS and therefore do not have an allocated link EP.

## **Legacy: Next steps for further embedding attachment and trauma informed practice following participation in the Attachment Aware Schools Award.**

### ***Designated Teachers***

100% of Designated Teachers who completed the evaluation plan to further embed or develop their project and or attachment aware practice in their schools in future years as a result of being part of the AASA.

### ***Educational Psychologist Coaches***

By July 2021, **67.7%** of EP coaches had, or were in the process of commissioning additional EP work in participating schools as a direct result of their coaching role on the AASA.

Examples of work commissioned include:

- Follow up training with staff who attended whole school training including:
  - Additional practical sessions to practice emotion coaching
  - Reflective practice sessions
  - Induction training for new staff
  
- Additional Training including:
  - Restorative practice
  - Attachment/Developmental Trauma/Emotion coaching workshops for parents
  
- Additional systemic working including:
  - Policy development
  - Auditing assessment tools/interventions for children with SEMH
  
- Additional coaching sessions, including in the 21-22 academic year to keep the AASA 'on the agenda'

### ***AfC Virtual School***

AfC Virtual School plans to follow up with participating schools after 6 months and 12 months following completion of the AASA to further understand the long term impact of the AASA and provide a peer to peer reflection space for participants to continue to share good practice.

In line with Virtual School extended duties, AfC Virtual School aims to enable ongoing termly coaching support to be provided to schools in the years following their participation on the AASA. Participating schools highlighted the effective function of these coaching sessions towards supporting whole school change and this level of support will enable schools to further embed and extend their Attachment Aware and Trauma Informed whole school change projects so that all children are supported in high quality, attachment and trauma informed schools. AfC Virtual School are exploring follow-on AASA programme models to support schools in their development.

AfC Virtual School will use the evaluation findings from the first cohort, alongside case studies and real life examples of participants experiences on the programme, such as those included in this evaluation, to further promote the programme across AfC schools and educational provisions.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all partners who assisted in delivery of the Attachment Aware Schools Award for AfC Virtual School in collaboration with the Education Psychology Service.

Special thanks to all our partners in schools, including Governors, Parents/Carers and our children. In particular we appreciate the commitment to the programme shown by our Designated Teacher participants and their contribution to this evaluation.

We are grateful to colleagues in the Education Psychology Services across Achieving for Children for providing dedicated coaching support and training to schools.

In addition, thanks to staff in AfC Virtual School who assisted in coaching and training sessions and in particular to the School Business Manager who provided administration to support the programme.

Best wishes,

*Suzanne Parrott (Executive Headteacher, AfC Virtual School)*

*Dr Sara Freitag (Senior Educational Psychologist, AfC Virtual School)*

*This AASA programme is a bespoke approach co-created by Suzanne Parrott, Executive Headteacher and Dr Sara Freitag, Senior Educational Psychologist for AfC Virtual School.*

*Training content overseen and/or designed by Dr Sara Freitag.*