



Nurturing Schools: how school leaders can optimise relationships

David Colley examines the advantages of nurture groups in managing behaviour, and sounds a note of caution for the DfE's new guidance.

In a nurturing school, the main motivation and focus is the care and protection of the children as they grow and develop. A nurturing school will use staff training to embed nurturing practices across the school and the development of positive, trusting relationships will inform classroom practice, whole school behaviour policies and decision making at the highest level.

Nurture as a whole school approach is developing strategically in key cities such as Glasgow, Scotland, but the philosophy underpinning the nurturing school owes much to the nurture group initiative developed by Marjorie Boxall in London, England during 1970s.

Background of nurture groups

Nurture groups originated in the 1970s as a response to the growing number of young children being labelled 'maladjusted' who were referred to alternative provision shortly after arrival in their mainstream school. Research informing nurture groups indicated that secure relationships and a sense of safety hold the key to positive social and emotional growth.

This research concluded that young children exhibiting disruptive behaviour simply needed time to catch up with 'missed early experiences'. Nurture group intervention sought to offer small groups of learners the opportunity to work with two trained adults in a discrete, well-resourced classroom on the mainstream site.

Nurture groups were intended to offer a compassionate response to supporting children whose behaviour was often perceived to be disruptive, and children would attend for regular sessions each week but maintain connection with their mainstream classroom. Skills such as listening to the teacher, accommodating others in the classroom or accepting disappointments were actively taught within the nurture group sessions, and then assessed through the Boxall Profile to ensure that each learner worked towards specific socioemotional targets that aligned with their learning needs. When these targets were achieved, the learner would return to full time mainstream education.

The success of Boxall's nurture group initiative in supporting the behaviour, emotional development and the learning of children is well supported by research, and Ofsted reported that, "When the nurture groups were working well, they made a considerable difference to the behaviour and the social skills of the pupils who attended them. Through intensive, well-structured teaching and support, pupils learnt to manage their own behaviour, to build positive relationships with adults and with other pupils and to develop strategies to help them cope with their emotions."

Nurture groups now feature in secondary school settings. Student access to a safe base in the school, coupled with the development of trusting relationships within the nurture group, have led to socioemotional improvements for learners. For example, in a case study cited by Cooke et al (2008), a nurture group attendee in Key Stage 3 saw her reading attainment increase by more than three years within a fourteen month period.

Nurturing approaches offer a direct alternative to current government policy in England, which has reiterated its commitment to 'improving pupil behaviour' by founding its latest Behaviour Hub Programme on the guidance offered by Tom Bennett's publication 'Creating a Culture: how school leaders can optimise behaviour'.

Optimising relationships to help behaviour

While Bennett's Creating a Culture is not fixated on infraction, punishment and power in the way that 'Behaviour and Discipline in Schools' continues to be, the two documents share a philosophical and pedagogical position around the relationships between children, young people and adults in schools. In Behaviour and Discipline in Schools, the DfE provides advice to heads and school staff on the powers that adults have to discipline pupils. A range of punishments include weeding the school grounds, writing lines, running around a playing field and weekend detentions.

The term punishment features on eleven occasions in the document and school staff are reminded that they have the power to "confiscate, retain or dispose of property that belongs to pupils" so long as this is "reasonable in the circumstances". It could be argued

that such punishments contravene the Equality Act 2010, which states that “schools must not victimise a pupil.. by subjecting them to any (other) detriment”.

The Creating a Culture document offers a clear set of features that maintain the Gove-Gibb-Bennett trajectory of behaviour guidance to schools that has held sway since 2010. It is apparent in the guidance that the term ‘behaviour’ refers only to the behaviour of the children and there is little emphasis on the effect of the behaviour of the adults in school, which many believe is an essential part of reflection.

Creating a Culture includes some laudable themes that emphasise the need for school leaders to be visible; to pay attention to detail and to promote consistent practices across the school. The sharing of best practice between schools is advocated, along with investment in staff training and a belief that all students matter equally. In the case study examples, Passmore Academy is celebrated for developing a Relationship Charter over a Behaviour policy, and relationships are again alluded to in the ITT Training content referenced in the guidance. But a focus on trusting relationships in school should be driving this guidance and its omission from the list of ‘common features of the most successful schools’ demonstrates where the emphasis lies; on rules, routines and the threat of sanctions.

Should we sanction behaviour?

Sanctions such as Internal Inclusion Units are supported by the Creating a Culture guidance and the parameters for their use are set out clearly. Unfortunately, this formal recommendation has opened the door to some schools developing ‘supervised isolation rooms’ that ignore the supportive context and provisos built into Bennett’s original guidance.

While Bennett maintains that Internal Inclusion Units can be a “positive outcome” for students and should offer “appropriate, fair and targeted support to help students improve their behaviour”, the BBC has found that some schools have been isolating individual students for up to five days consecutively, including those with special educational needs.

Is punishing children with “distressing and degrading” sanctions, as the Children’s Commissioner put it, any way to build the trusting relationships upon which high quality learning is based?

The current call to action, led by the National Association of Virtual School Heads and the Attachment Research Community, argues that government guidance to schools in England should take account of whole school attachment needs, as communicated by all members

of the school community. There is a need to nurture wellbeing across the school and value trusting relationships as the foundation for learning and wellbeing.

If the Bennett document was revised with the new title 'Creating a Culture: how school leaders can optimise relationships' rather than behaviour this could lead to positive changes. The current themes around visible leaders, staff engagement and attention to detail could remain but the guidance would do more to avoid adult responses that distress or embarrass children.

As children and young people prepare to return to fulltime learning in schools following an extraordinary period of disruption and fear caused by the international pandemic, now is the time to consider nurturing approaches as whole school initiative based on safety, trust, care and protection.

Bio

David Colley has taught children with special needs in primary, secondary and specialist settings. He joined the DfE steering group for *Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools* and is currently researching the impact of whole school nurturing practices on the wellbeing of children and staff in primary schools. David is an Associate to the School of Education at Oxford Brookes University and a tutor on SEBDA's Masters level Post Graduate Certificates at Brookes. For more information on the courses, visit <https://bit.ly/3Bbn99H>.