

**An evidence based guide to opening a successful secondary school
nurture group**

Dr David Colley

Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

Dr Ruth Seymour

Mulberry Bush Organisation, Oxfordshire, UK

Corresponding author: David Colley - dcolley@brookes.ac.uk

Keywords: Nurture groups; secondary schools; socio-emotional functioning

Abstract

Nurture groups originated in primary school settings over fifty years ago and models of best practice at primary level are now well established. In secondary schools, however, best practice models are less clearly defined and guidance on how to set up a successful nurture group in a secondary school is currently lacking.

The aim of this research project was to create an evidence-based guide to opening a secondary school nurture group based on the experiences, opinions and ideas of professionals working in the field. The research sought to capture the views of 29 professionals on three specific aspects of best practice in secondary school nurture groups: (i) the preparations to be made before a nurture group opens (prerequisites) (ii) how the nurture group functions when it opens (operational features) and (iii) the challenges to anticipate once the nurture group is up and running.

A qualitative research methodology was employed where data derived from eight Focus Group interviews were thematically analysed at Phase 1. At Phase 2, the findings emerging from the Focus Group data were member checked through a process of semi-structured interviews with four nurture teams that had already contributed to the Focus Groups. Data from the Focus Groups and the semi-structured interviews were then combined through a recursive process to answer the research questions.

The research results found that commitment from the Senior Leadership team and training for mainstream staff on the principles of nurture and attachment informed practice were important prerequisites to have in place before the nurture group opened. Operationally, the nurture group needed a dynamic and flexible curriculum that prioritised social and emotional development at regular points each week. Support for staff wellbeing and supervision sessions were highlighted as being key operational features of a successful nurture group and opportunities to raise the profile of nurture across the school should be taken through school development planning and newsletter references. Once open, the challenges to anticipate included managing parental perceptions of nurture and planning appropriate cover for absent nurture staff in an environment that requires by definition, stability and predictability.

Based on the findings of this project, a succinct guide to opening a secondary school nurture group is included as Appendix 3.

Introduction

A nurture group is a form of educational provision that supports the social, emotional and mental health needs of pupils who are struggling to function constructively in the mainstream classroom environment. Developed by Marjorie Boxall in the 1970s (Boxall 2002), the nurture group philosophy understands that behaviours such as defiance, aggression, negativity or withdrawal are a communication of how the pupil perceives the world and their place in it. Rather than resort to punishment, suspension and exclusion, the nurture group will provide a safe environment where trained staff will prioritise the well-being and mental health of pupils above all else.

The ‘classic’ nurture group is part-time and time-limited (Boxall 1976). Pupils will attend for regular periods each week but will retain their contact with mainstream classes and staff. In the nurture group sessions, trained staff will help pupils with their feelings of self-worth, mastery and control over events. Specific targets will be generated for each pupil through the Boxall Profile assessment instrument that identifies gaps in social-emotional functioning and guides staff to appropriate activities and experiences that help to address a pupil’s missed early learning experiences (Bennathan and Boxall 1998; Bennathan, Boxall and Colley 2010).

A nurture group is typically located in a good sized classroom on the mainstream school site and offers small numbers of 10-12 pupils targeted, socio-emotional learning sessions at regular points in the week (Colley 2012). The nurture group is staffed by two informed adults who have been trained in attachment theory, the principles of nurture and the Boxall Profile assessment instrument. Attachment theory and relationship building are at the heart of the nurture group approach and sessions are designed to be explicit, uniform and predictable (Cooper and Whitehead 2007) with a focus on early level interactions that are both positive and supportive (Boxall 2002).

The nurture room itself is comfortable with a homely atmosphere. Sessions will typically last for a morning or afternoon period and these will be offered 2-4 times each week over a number of terms (Bennathan and Boxall 2000). During all other periods of the week, the pupils will be with their mainstream class and contact with mainstream is an important feature of this part time, time limited socio-emotional intervention.

Valuing and listening to the learners while developing a safe base and a sense of belonging are all fundamental features of the nurture group intervention (Bani 2011). The sessions move at a slow and predictable pace and the adults ensure that high levels of respectful and thoughtful interaction are maintained at all times (Cooper and Whitebread 2007). The nurture session might include circle time activities, supportive reflections on incidents and experiences, emotion coaching activities and games that encourage cooperation and turn taking. Formal curriculum activities will be completed including English and Maths tasks, but always the focus will be on the socio-emotional aspects of the learning during these activities (nurtureuk 2021)

The nurture breakfast is a key activity in the nurture room where the whole group of adults and learners sit together to share a small snack (Bennathan and Boxall 2000). The adults manage the discussions carefully and ensure that all learners have the opportunity to contribute and to be heard. Here individuals learn about their own agency and their ability to deliver a story, to make others laugh or to hold the attention of the room – perhaps for the first time. These are skills that most children pick up as they grow but for some, these opportunities have not been made available to them. In the nurture group, these missed early experiences (Boxall 2002) are deliberately returned to and the skills required to manage them are then explicitly taught.

The six principles of nurture are closely associated with practice in the ‘classic’ nurture groups and these are set out below:

Fig1. The Six Principles of Nurture (Lucas, Insley and Buckland 2006)



The 6 principles of nurture have been central to the development of nurturing practices in Scotland and in 2017 Education Scotland published a framework to support the self-evaluation of nurturing approaches in schools that also provides a rationale for the approach and a range of quality indicators. This framework, entitled ‘Applying Nurture as a Whole School Approach’, is highly recommended and is both free to access and free to use (see Reference List).

Nurture Groups in Secondary School

During the 1970s and 80s, the main setting for nurture groups was the primary school. But nurture groups began to evolve in secondary schools because evidence suggested that they worked (Colley 2012b). Early examples such as the Diamonds group at Shevington High School, Wigan, were receiving accolades (Ofsted 2008) while empirical research projects were reporting positive and at times dramatic changes in individual and group functioning. For example, Cooke, Yeomans and Parkes (2008) evidenced the significant progress made by a cohort of Year 7 students (aged 11-12years) following access to nurture but also an example of how a student described as ‘an emotional time bomb’ was able to recover following a series of sessions that focussed on self esteem and self image. Colley (2009) identified improved school attendance and improvements in socio-emotional functioning as key outcomes of secondary school nurture group practice, along with a positive impact on the whole school ethos, thereby supporting the earlier findings of Cooper and Tiknaz (2005).

The work of Cooke, Yeomans and Parkes (2008) also offered a practical, working model for secondary school nurture groups developed through their implementation of the ‘Oasis’ nurture group. Small groups of students from Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14 years) attended the nurture group based on assessment data generated through the Boxall Profile. Both parents/carers and students were consulted over the referral to nurture and consent was required before the intervention was implemented. Sessions would typically begin with a ‘meet and greet’ activity followed by a directed activity that might focus on team building, language development or problem solving. The nurture breakfast would follow with positive interactions supported and modelled by the two staff leading the nurture group. Negotiating the timetable for nurture presented difficulties with staff striving to accommodate the views of students regarding the sessions from which they were to be withdrawn.

Current research into secondary school nurture group practice suggests that when students access nurture group support their emotional stress levels reduce (Chiapella 2015) while their emotional, social and behaviour functioning improves (Chiapella 2015; Lyon 2017). Hilton (2014) has found that nurture group attendance increases the student’s sense of belonging and relationship formation improves along with their motivation and achievement (Perkins 2017; Garner and Thomas 2011). Transitions between primary and secondary schools were found to have been enhanced by nurture group support (Kourmoulaki 2014) while the views of students themselves have been summarised by Gates (2010) rather succinctly - ‘Fantabulosa!’

Despite these positive markers, the challenges of establishing a nurture group in a secondary school have also been highlighted in the literature. Colley (2009) argues that the size and complexity of the secondary school creates immediate barriers in terms of time tabling sufficient nurture group access as to be meaningful and effective, while Hilton (2014) highlights issues around stigma and bullying as a result of the student’s association with the nurture group. Garner and Thomas (2011) go on to question whether the secondary nurture group actually conforms to the classic model when support goes beyond the ‘part time and short term’ structure that was first advocated by Boxall (1976). Kourmoulaki (2014) makes reference to the systemic gaps in whole school communication, monitoring and reintegration

processes in her study of two secondary school nurture groups and these challenges are confirmed by Hilton (2014) in terms of the sadness and loss felt by some young people when their formal placement in nurture comes to an end.

Aim of the study

Explicit, evidence-based guidance on how to prepare for, set up and run a nurture group in a secondary school setting is not currently available. The aim of this research project was to create an evidence-based guide to opening a secondary school nurture group based on the experiences, opinions and ideas of professionals working in the field.

The three research questions were:

1. What are the prerequisites for a successful secondary school nurture group?
2. What are the operational features of a successful secondary school nurture group?
3. What are the ongoing challenges to anticipate?

Methodology

The research outlined in this paper is qualitative and explores the ideas, experiences and opinions of professionals working in the field of secondary school nurture group practice.

The study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the prerequisites for a successful secondary school nurture group?
2. What are the operational features of a successful secondary school nurture group?
3. What are the ongoing challenges to anticipate?

The research has been located within the pragmatic paradigm that advocates a relational epistemology (where knowledge is an insight developed between people and between all that exists) and a non-singular reality ontology (where each person has their own interpretation of reality) (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). In keeping with the pragmatic paradigm, the findings from the project are to be held lightly and judged against their successful application in the real world (Colley 2012a).

A qualitative research methodology was employed where data derived from eight Focus Group interviews were thematically analysed at Phase 1 (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis in this instance was theory driven and coding was linked explicitly to the three research questions throughout the recursive process. At Phase 2, the findings emerging from the Focus Group data were member checked through a process of semi-structured interviews with four nurture teams that had already contributed to the Focus Groups. Data from the Focus Groups and the semi-structured interviews were then combined through the recursive process in order to answer the three research questions.

Any potential researcher bias was mitigated through independent coding procedures and a member checking procedures with research participants that was built into the research methods.

Participants

A non-random, purposive sample of 35 professionals working in the field of secondary school nurture group provision were invited to participate in the study with 29 participants accepting the invitation and forming the final sample. Of the 29 participants, fifteen were actively engaged in secondary school nurture group practice while four were Educational Psychologists supporting nurture group in their local authorities. Four academics with shared research interests in nurture groups joined the sample alongside six members of local authority Behaviour Support and Inclusion teams. In all, twenty different professional settings were represented by the purposive sample as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Roles/Settings

Participant Roles/Settings	Number
Secondary Nurture Group practitioners 8 Teachers 5 TAs 2 SLT	15
Educational Psychology Services	4
Academics (Nurture)	4
Behaviour Support/Inclusion teams	6
	n=29

Data Collection

Focus Groups

A Focus Group is a form of group interview that collects qualitative information on specific topics through participatory discussion (Cohen et al 2018). This method for data collection was chosen because the project was seeking to explore the experiences, opinions and ideas of participants around models of best practice in secondary nurture groups and Focus Group methodology aligned well with this research aim.

The sample of 29 participants were invited to attend a one-day research conference that included Focus Group discussions of 50 minute duration. Participants were pre-allocated to one of four Focus Groups to ensure that each group had a balance of practitioners, educational psychologists and advisory team members. The first set of Focus Groups took place in the morning and, with the guidance of a moderator, discussed issues around ‘what needs to be in place before a successful secondary nurture group opens?’. The moderator in each of the four Focus Group was well versed in nurture group practice and was also a participant at the conference. Each moderator had been given guidance ahead of the day on the content to be covered, the timing of each Focus Group and contact numbers for assistance should this be

required. The discussion was semi-structured and moderators guided the discussions to include opinions around staff training, ‘must haves’ and whole school preparation. Research assistants attended each Focus Group and recorded the timings of each speaker on field notes for transcription identification purposes.

The second set of four Focus Groups took place in the afternoon with the same allocation of participants, moderators and research assistants. This time the semi-structured discussions were focused on the structures and operational features of the successful secondary nurture group with moderators ensuring that opinions on timetabling, curriculum content and mainstream links were all aired during the 50 minute session.

A total of eight 50 minute Focus Groups were audio-recorded then transcribed with the consent of all participants. The transcriptions were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006) and these initial findings constituted Phase 1 of the research project. At Phase 2, member check interviews took place.

Member check Interviews

Six months after the Focus Group data had been thematically analysed, a series of four member check interviews took place with four nurture group teams that had been represented at the original research conference. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to address the “fit” between the participant views expressed in Phase 1 (Focus Group data) and the researcher’s representation of them (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The member checking process was applied with the aim of testing the credibility and trustworthiness of the emerging results (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and each nurture team was presented with a summary of the initial findings from Phase 1 in advance of the interview (see Appendix 1).

Each interview took place on location and face to face with each being audio recorded to collect the views of the nurture team on the initial findings. The participants at Phase 2 have been summarised in Table 2 below. Each interview was structured around the findings summary and each aspect of the initial findings was considered in terms of its perceived accuracy and authenticity. All audio recording were then transcribed with the consent of all participants and a thematic analysis of these findings (Braun and Clarke 2006) constituted Phase 2 of the research project.

Table 2: Participants at Phase 2 Interviews

School	Participants member checking the findings of Phase 1
A	Nurture Teacher Nurture TA
B	Nurture Teacher
C	Nurture Teacher

D	Nurture Teacher Nurture TA School SLT (Nurture) School Executive Principal
---	---

Analysis

Thematic analysis is a systematic, qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al 2017). This study employed deductive thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report patterns (or themes) in the data at Phase 1 (Focus Group data) and at Phase 2 (Interview data). The analysis was theory driven and data was coded in relation to the three research questions throughout the analytical process. During this recursive and reflective process, the six stages of analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) were employed.

Phase 1 Analysis: Focus Group data

The thematic analysis of the Focus Group data was transcript-based and organised in relation to the research questions. The analysis was systematic and followed a prescribed procedure whereby researchers familiarised themselves with the transcripts in the first instance and then agreed a set of initial codes. This was undertaken manually with the colour coding of text in relation to the initial codes. By refining and prioritising these initial codes, potential themes emerged in relation to all three research questions and Table 3 illustrates how potential themes emerged in relation to Research Question 1.

Table 3: Coding in relation to RQ1

Research Question 1	10 Initial Codes in relation to RQ1	Potential themes
What are the prerequisites for a successful secondary school nurture group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing a Whole school approach to nurture Supportive SLT; Nurture Coordinator is on SLT Audit of whole school needs Whole school understanding through CPD and whole school training sessions (eg. On the principles of nurture, attachment theory and the impact of neglect on brain development) 6 Principles of nurture are understood by mainstream staff Annual staff training refreshers plus induction training for new staff 	<p>Support and Understanding of SLT for a whole school approach to nurture</p> <p>Audit of whole school needs</p> <p>Whole school staff training programme</p> <p>Nurture Group pre-requisites ('right people'; protected space)</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Right people’ in NG base (resilient, reliable, strong) • Right environment; protected space; home from home; foothold in the school • Budget – sustainability, funding planned; consumables; • Parents – agreements; information sharing; supportive • NG has a profile within the school (newsletter; nurture committee) 	
--	--	---	--

Phase 2 Analysis: Interview data

The initial findings from Phase 1 were presented to four nurture teams to member check for trustworthiness and authenticity. The 50 minute interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The data was then thematically analysed in relation to the three research questions and the findings at Phase 1 (Braun and Clarke 2006). By combining the data from the interviews with the Focus Group data, a number of key themes emerged in relation to each Research Question. An example has been summarised in relation to RQ1 in Appendix 2.

Ethics

Good ethical research practice is the responsibility of the research team and the underpinning principle of the research conducted is to do no harm to research participants (OBU Research Ethics Code 2021). Prior to the commencement of the study informed consent was secured from all 29 participants. An information sheet outlined the voluntary nature of the research and assured anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Ethical approval was confirmed by the Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) and the storage and management of data has followed the guidelines set out by the Oxford Brookes University Research Data Management Policy.

Findings

The research findings have been presented as thematic maps relating to each of the three research questions. Themes and subthemes have been presented and unpacked with supporting evidence from the research data. Selected data chunks can be located precisely in the data sets using the systematic identification descriptor (e.g. FG1 A8 = Focus Group 1, Group A, paragraph 8; B 93 = Interview B, paragraph 93)

Box 1. Thematic Map in relation to Research Question 1

Research Question	Themes	Sub themes
What are the prerequisites for a successful secondary school nurture group?	1.1 A Whole School Approach	Mainstream staff understanding of the principles of nurture A receptive school philosophy is already evident A range of socio-emotional support interventions exist
	1.2 The Senior Leadership Team are on board and committed	SLT understand nurture principles and are driving the intervention An audit of 'school readiness' has been completed A sustainable budget is agreed The intervention has protection
	1.3 The whole school is prepared	Trained, resilient staff have been appointed to the NG Robust systems are in place (referrals, mainstream links) Parents have been informed Students have been informed

The research has identified a number of prerequisites to establishing a successful nurture group in the secondary school and these will now be explored with reference to the data.

1.1 A Whole School Approach

Participants reflected on the importance of mainstream staff training in the principles of nurture before the nurture group opens and noted that without this training, the project may feel isolated and misunderstood

'The whole school understanding before you open a nurture group is very important - and something we still struggle with now' (FG1 A8).

'I feel that training on the principles of nurture absolutely needs to happen as soon as we start a nurture group. If we don't have this training, I think this is where the misconceptions occur' (C196).

A receptive school philosophy was regarded as fertile ground for the successful secondary school nurture group to take root and this was often illustrated by a range of complementary socio-emotional support interventions that were already in place at the school.

'It does seem to be working best where the whole ethos is receptive anyway. So, often these schools have had other programmes going on as it were in sympathy with nurture – restorative practice, rights respecting, those sort of things. So it's fertile ground really for this thing to take off' (FG1C 11).

1.2 The Senior Leadership Team are on board and committed

The commitment and knowledge of the SLT is vital to the success of the nurture group project and will help to drive the nurturing philosophy of the school while supporting those working in the nurture group. Schools should designate a 'Nurture Champion' from within the SLT who then undertakes the National Nurturing Schools programme with nurtureuk

'My experience is that nothing happens in school, or doesn't happen properly, unless we've actually got the senior leadership driving it' (FG1A 42).

In contrast, a lack of support and commitment from SLT can undermine the ability of the nurture group to take root – and no amount of staff training will compensate for that lack of commitment.

'If they (the SLT) are not behind it, I think probably your group will not continue' (FG1A 43).

1.3 The whole school is prepared

The team that lead the nurture group will need to be well trained in the theory and practice of nurture group provision and this training is available from nurtureuk.org. Without this training, early mistakes can be made that may then be hard to repair

'The training of the people running the group is important ...if you don't know what you're doing and you get it wrong, it is quite difficult to undo what you've got wrong' (FG1B 36)

The nurture team need to be physically robust but cover staff should be trained in the event of absence

'Reliability of people is an issue - you know (we have had) that experience with people who were fantastic at making attachments with children and then they are off on long periods of sick' (FG1C 6).

An important prerequisite for a successful nurture group is a clear referral system that is understood by mainstream staff, the pastoral team and the SLT. A placement in the nurture group should be evidence based and Boxall Profile assessments should be undertaken to help the referral panel make these judgements. These mechanisms will ensure that the nurture group works strategically and effectively with specific students and is not perceived to be a crisis management centre.

'I've always made it very clear and I like this phrase, we don't have a 'revolving door' in nurture, we can't just chuck someone through the door. We have a referral system and mechanism' (FG1C 3).

Informing key stakeholders about the purpose of the nurture group provision in advance of it opening will be an important preparatory step and both parents/carers and students may be wary or reluctant to engage unless this is explained with care.

‘Some parents can almost be offended if they don’t fully understand what (nurture) is there for, and they can take it personally; that you’re almost suggesting that they’ve failed in some way or something like that. So it’s making sure that it’s clear what nurture is actually about, and them feeling that this a positive thing for their children’ (FG1B 8)

The findings in relation to Research Question 2 have been summarised in Box 2 below:

Box 2. Thematic Map in relation to Research Question 2

Research Question	Themes	Sub themes
What are the operational features of a successful secondary school nurture group?	2.1 The prerequisites identified by Research Question 1 are in place	A whole school approach Senior Leaders are on board and committed The whole school is prepared
	2.2 The nurture group offers students a Safe Base	Safe base High quality relationships Predictable routines Year group focus A safe transition from Primary Balanced group size and dynamic A safe return to mainstream (with ‘check in’ time)
	2.3 The nurture group offers a Developmental Curriculum	The nurture group curriculum is flexible and dynamic The curriculum prioritises socio-emotional learning at the appropriate developmental level The 6 Nurture principles underpin the curriculum Boxall Profile assessments inform target setting
	2.4 Nurture group staff are proactively supported	Staff breaks are built into the working day Staff supervision is included
	2.5 Nurture group Impact: evidence and dissemination	Boxall Profile data Mainstream staff Evaluations Nurture group staff evaluations Case studies Informal updates for staff
	2.6 The profile of Nurture	Nurture Working Group Nurture Governor Nurture Group Newsletter School Newsletter

The research has identified a number of key operational features with regard to the successful secondary school nurture group and these will now be set out with careful reference to the data.

2.1 The prerequisites identified by Research Question 1 are in place

The research found that the features of a successful secondary school nurture group were predicated upon the prerequisites identified in Research Question 1. Where mainstream staff had a sound and integrated understanding of nurture and where the SLT were on board and driving the initiative, nurture groups thrived. It was imperative that the whole school, including all stakeholders, were prepared for the nurture group to open and that a ‘safe base’ was prioritised for the students attending nurture.

2.2 The nurture group offers students a Safe Base

The research data suggested that a ‘safe base’ for students was created through high quality relationships and a protected learning environment

‘An allocated space; a discrete space that is protected. The safety of that space has been so important to (students). From that safety - and the security of those relationships- they can spread their wings into their mainstream lessons and evolve. For me, that’s just been an essential remit’ (FG1C 3).

‘What explained the (successful) outcomes was the relationship that they were forming with practitioners and with the other students. It was the relationship that was the mechanism for change’ (FG2B 49).

The findings also suggested that to secure a predictable routine in the delivery of nurture, schools should be courageous and prioritise nurture over all other curriculum areas for the agreed period of referral. For the majority of research participants, providing nurture in the first two periods of each day provided the opportunity to settle students in to the school day, ensure that they had eaten and pick up on any issues that might undermine their learning in mainstream classes

‘We’ve managed to get priority for nurture. We want that first lesson of the day – that’s the one we take, regardless of whether it’s English or Maths’ (FG2A 134).

It’s really important to keep the continuity. So, lessons one and two for Year 7 – and it doesn’t matter what lessons they’ve got, that’s when they’re out for Nurture. (D229)

For the most part, a nurture group that focused on students transitioning into the secondary school in Year 7 (aged 11-12 years) was the most common model and practitioners expressed the view that students should be observed for an initial period (September-October) to see how they settled into their new school environment. Decisions about nurture support could then be made based on the students’ current presentation.

‘We definitely think it works best with Year 7’ (FG1B 38).

‘When they come into the school at first, after the primary transition, we give them some time to bed in, see how they settle, and then we usually pick up the group around October time’ (PrA 11).

‘The reason why we don’t take them out right at the beginning is that although we have very good lines of communication at the primary schools, we sometimes find that the primary schools say, “I think this could probably be very emotional; I don’t think X will cope with secondary”- and actually they flourish’ (FG1C 46).

The optimum group size for the successful secondary school nurture group is between eight and 10 students per nurture session. Inevitably, the students that require nurture support may have a range of emotional and behavioural difficulties that is communicated through volatile responses to staff and peers. Finding the right mix of students to make the nurture sessions successful for all is therefore a key operational feature that requires the careful analysis of Boxall Profile data, classroom observations and pilot nurture sessions before the members of the nurture group are confirmed

‘To have maximum impact, you’ve got to get the right group and the right group dynamics...’ (D210).

‘What we’ve found useful is to test out the group dynamics by inviting the young people in different groups to come down and we’ll maybe have them do a task and just observe how individuals work together. That’s helped us where we’ve maybe been unsure about the selection of certain pupils working together’ (PrA22).

The research suggested that maintaining relationships with students once they have returned full time to mainstream could be managed through informal ‘check in’ sessions at break times or more formally with timetabled meetings

‘After they re-integrate within our school, we have found it useful to offer a check-in time. So, all of our pupils are given five or 10 minutes a week with the Support for Learning worker that was supporting their group, and that maybe takes place throughout 2nd Year and 3rd Year, however long they need a little bit of extra support’ (PrA 22)

We have breakfast club and lunchtime clubs that they can all sort of check in with (us) (FG1D 176)

2.3 The nurture group offers a Developmental Curriculum

The nurture curriculum needs to be flexible and dynamic with staff able to adapt to the interests of the students to secure their engagement and enthusiasm. This ability to work at developmental levels rather than curriculum levels can cause mainstream staff to misunderstand and challenge the nurture curriculum if the preparation of staff for nurture has been incomplete. Adhering to the 6 principles of nurture is central to the curriculum and the research suggests that training in the 6 principles continues to help staff to reflect on their own practice.

‘A couple of the girls were really interested in doing fitness, so we did it as an intervention’ (FG2A 157).

‘(In the nurture group) you do what you see fit and look at the levels of the students and teach according to that. But Geography have a huge problem with that (saying) “They have to do six-digit coordinates.” and I’m like, “They don’t even understand three-digit numbers, so they’re not going to know six-digit coordinates, are they?” (FG1A 88).

But doubts were expressed regarding the reliability of the Boxall Profile assessments and its tendency to capture only one perspective on a student’s developmental progress

‘I think the Boxall is great for setting targets and planning activities during the nurture group sessions, but sometimes the people filling in their forms are the people that the child is most comfortable with and, you know, at their best with, so you don’t always see what they’re like out in other subjects’ (FG1B 78).

2.4 Nurture Group staff are proactively supported

The successful secondary school nurture group will have a staff team that feel supported. Supervision is an accepted practice in health and social care professions and yet its importance for teaching staff is underestimated. Formal supervision sessions for the nurture team, led by the local Educational Psychology service, and protected planning time were highlighted as being key operational features of the successful nurture group.

‘These members of staff are dealing with the most vulnerable children that we’ve got in these schools and they have no one to then pass it on to. One of my SENCos is paying for herself to have therapy once a week because she said, “I need to get rid of all of this before I go home to my daughter,” (FG1A 119)

I think there has to be a recognition that we’re dealing with children who have been traumatised more regularly and there’s a huge emotional demand on the role of the person working within nurture (FG1C 6)

‘It has to be recognised that breaks are important because of the job. If I’ve had a member of staff off and I’m looking for somebody just to take one break, so that I can get out and have a little bit of a break and recognise that that’s important. (FG2C 10)

‘I think supervision is a growing need’ (FG1C 6)

2.5 NG Impact: evidence and dissemination

Boxall Profile data was found to be central to the evidence trail alongside mainstream staff evaluations and parent/carer questionnaires. Case studies of individual students were also recommended for evidencing the impact of the provision where small steps of progress were celebrated with warmth and pride.

‘May-time is massive for me. I have to go to SLT and I’ve got all the Boxall data, I’ve got the parental and pupil and staff questionnaire results, and we do that on a really big scale (P2 43).

‘What I would suggest – do five case studies for secondary schools, a minimum of five case studies, so that when Ofsted come in, you’ve got them there and that’s your impact’ (FG2A 242).

2.6 The profile of Nurture

It is important that the nurture group is linked in to the range of socio-emotional support systems in the school and that its presence is celebrated and alluded to in the School Development Plan.

‘We encourage them to have (nurture) in the school development plan; to get a named school governor who’s going to be the governor for nurture; to really sort of think about it across the whole school community’ (FG1B 21).

‘Having a little segment in the newsletter, it just makes parents more aware to say, “Oh, okay, I know there’s lots of other young people that are going to this group,” If parents and young people understand it, they’ll just think it’s the norm and they won’t think it’s something different’ (FG1B96)

The findings in relation to Research Question 3 have been summarised in Box 3 below:

Box 3. Thematic Map in relation to Research Question 3

Research Question	Themes	Sub themes	
What are the challenges to anticipate when setting up a secondary school nurture group?	3.1 The prerequisites identified by Research Question 1 are not in place	Staff understanding of nurture principles is incomplete Timetable issues Nurture group protection is ineffective (the room; staffing; time to plan)	
	3.2 The demands on the nurture group team	Emotional demands Planning ‘backup’ for staff Resilience and reliability Rates of impact Potential Isolation	

	3.2 Student Experience	Stigma issues Unsuccessful transitions into mainstream	
	3.4 Parental engagement	Responses to referral Unpredictable engagement	
	3.5 No Quick Fix	Managing expectations Impact data Fluctuations in behaviour	

The research has identified a number of barriers to establishing a successful nurture group in the secondary school and these challenges will now be unpacked with reference to the data.

3.1 *The prerequisites identified by Research Question 1 are **not** in place*

The first challenge for schools wishing to set up a successful nurture group can relate to prerequisites that are missing or incomplete. For example, if the SLT is not on board and committed from the outset then training in the philosophy of nurture will not permeate the school and the understanding of mainstream staff will be incomplete. This will in turn lead to misconceptions about nurture ‘rewarding’ poor behaviour or providing a ‘dumping ground’ for those students that misbehave.

‘I remember once a teacher coming up to me and she said, “Well, this boy, he’s been kicking off in my lesson and you’re giving him a cup of tea and toast – I mean, what’s that all about?” (P2 23).

‘Their view is thinking, “Oh, it’s a sin-bin, isn’t it?” (FG1B 13)

In addition it was found that staff might also abrogate responsibility for the students and seek to off load students onto the nurture team at the earliest opportunity

‘We had one particular teacher who kept coming and saying, “When are you starting it? When are you starting it? I’ve got four kids in my class that you’ll definitely be having! I can’t cope with them. When are you starting it? Can you just take them out before you start it?” (D309)

Resistance might also be experienced from mainstream staff that ‘don’t get it and won’t get it’. Where the staff team comprises a high number of such colleagues, the challenges in establishing a pervasive nurturing philosophy across the school will be steep.

‘We’ve had some people not buying into this philosophy of Nurture. They say that we’re creating children who would never learn how to deal with mainstream if all you did was do this and keep them all together, without mixing. And so we had some resistance; a few people with opinions didn’t buy into it’ (C182)

‘I still think we’ve got some staff who don’t understand (nurture), but that’s because, really, they shouldn’t be in teaching full-stop if I’m absolutely blunt, because they don’t understand children full-stop’ (D280).

Time-tabling the nurture group sessions in a secondary school environment remains a perennial challenge for the nurture team, for Faculty Heads and for parents/carers who have raised concerns about students missing key lessons.

‘I’ve found timetables were probably the biggest issue that we’ve got because in primary, it’s easier to take them for, say, an afternoon but in secondary, you come up with lots of opposition’ (P2 18)

3.2 The demands on the nurture group team

A further pre-requisite identified by Research Question 1 findings alluded to the need for the nurture group to be protected as a space and as a team. Unfortunately, the research suggests that the nurture room can be commandeered for alternative purposes at times and that staff time for planning and preparation can also be compromised.

‘By Easter, (the nurture students) will go back into full-time (mainstream) education because we can’t physically run nurture at that time because our space is taken for exams’ (FG2B 102).

‘Our nurture time should be protected time, but it’s not, and sometimes, if they’re really desperate for cover, they will come and say, ‘oh, there’s two staff in there – you know, do we really need two staff for 12 children, when we’ve got a class that we need to teach?’ So, we have had occasions where they’ll come and say, “Sorry, we’re really desperate – can we take one of you to teach a class?” (FG1B 49).

The emotional demands made on the nurture team were highlighted in the data as a particular challenge and this was seen to impact on the attendance of the nurture team if plans for support and cover in nurture were not built into the planning.

‘The year I had extreme behavioural difficulties (in the group) and, yes, that year I was wiped out. I just spent every conscious moment just coming up with strategies and techniques and ways of trying to manage the behaviour, and of course, that affected me, mentally’ (C135).

‘Staff have to be very resilient’ (FG1D 24).

Staffing capacity (is an issue). Have you got a backup? And how do you grow your provision without draining a limited resource which is your human resource?’ (FG1D 55).

Demonstrating the impact of the nurture group provision was also a challenge at times because the ‘the nature of this process is slow’ (FG1C 30). Nurture staff articulated the fluctuations in progress that reflects the students’ emotional dysregulation and their assimilation of new social

skills. This progress might be perceived by some to be ‘slow’ but this is to misunderstand the context in which change is located. For some schools in the lowest Ofsted categories that require evidence of impact ‘fast’, a leap of faith is required to embark on the nurture journey.

‘Their journey fluctuates because sometimes it’s the first time that they’ve been in a safe space. They’ve developed those relationships of trust with people and that can take time in itself. So, in a way, you’re going to go further downhill when those things happen in order to help resolve that issue for that child. So, their journeys can be very different and its recognising there will be some fluctuations, so the danger is always sort of (expecting) an upward trajectory’ (FG1C 32)

3.3 *Student Experience*

For some students, issues around stigma, embarrassment, bullying or questioning their placement in nurture were raised with the nurture teams who responded calmly and creatively.

It’s this stigma, especially for pupils. What we find is a sort of attitude which is, ‘what do I say to my classmates, Miss’ and that’s just a challenge I think (FG1D 137)

‘This is how I present it to the children (struggling with the placement) – I say all of us, including myself, you know, have times in my life where there are things that I find more difficult to deal with, and we will all have those things happening at some point in our lives, and you may already have things at the moment you find difficult to deal with. So, what we’re here to do, together, is to find ways to not only support each other but to give you the tools to deal with those things that happen in life. So, that’s how I present it’ (FG1A 85).

‘As soon as we’ve had the bullying occur, I will (visit every form) and talk about what they know of the nurture group, what is it that they want to say - and we have an honest conversation. And then I do a little thing where they have to try to shoot a paper ball into a bag that I put at a distance, and none of them can get it in. But then when I move the bag to help them get it in, I say, “Well, that’s just what we do (in nurture) to help the children to have success,” and it resonated’ (C174).

The transition back to a full time placement in mainstream can be stressful for students and where schools have a rigid policy of, for example, only running the nurture group for Year 7 students, the outcomes can be poor.

‘Students that we’ve worked with over the last couple of years, I feel that we’ve sort of abandoned them. We worked with them through Year 7 and then, “Off you go!” as if everything is suddenly miraculously, they don’t need us. Some of them clearly do. Sadly, you know, we’ve lost a couple [to] exclusion. How has this happened? How it’s happened is that we need to not be dropping these students - they weren’t ready’ (FG2A 142).

3.4 Parental engagement

The response of parents/carers to a nurture group referral can be unpredictable with some parents refusing to allow the support to be put in place while others leap at the chance

‘We have had parents saying, “No, I don’t want my child to be part of that group” (FG1B 81).

‘So, actually, parents tend to be really, really, really grateful that their child is getting some level of support for whatever their additional need is’ (FG1B 87).

For others, the suggestion that their child may need help with their social and emotional functioning can be perceived as a slight or attack on their parenting

‘Some parents take it as a personal attack, but if you explained it as, ‘Well, if your child is struggling in Maths, you’d put a Maths booster intervention in, wouldn’t you?’ But when it comes to social and emotional behavioural needs, (a referral to nurture) kind of becomes a bit of a personal attack with some of the parents’ (FG1B 81).

3.5 No Quick Fix

Managing the expectations of staff, parents and Senior Leaders regarding the immediate impact of nurture group attendance on student behaviour and progress was identified as another challenge to anticipate. Providing data and evidence for the impact of nurture group intervention is clearly important but the behaviours that have generated the initial referral to nurture may well be ingrained. Time will be needed to address the missed learning experiences being communicated through the presenting behaviour and progress will not necessarily be linear or immediate. Indeed, student behaviours may fluctuate and appear to get worse before they get better.

The data drive is (around) what’s the impact? I should imagine that could be a challenge because seven years and you see an impact - but that kind of thing may take some years to show. (FG1C 30)

Their journey fluctuates because sometimes it’s the first time that they’ve been in a safe space and they’ve developed those relationships of trust with people and that can take time in itself (FG1C 32)

You just need to wait a while because (negative) behaviours are more ingrained in adolescents. It can take longer to see a change. (FG1C 30)

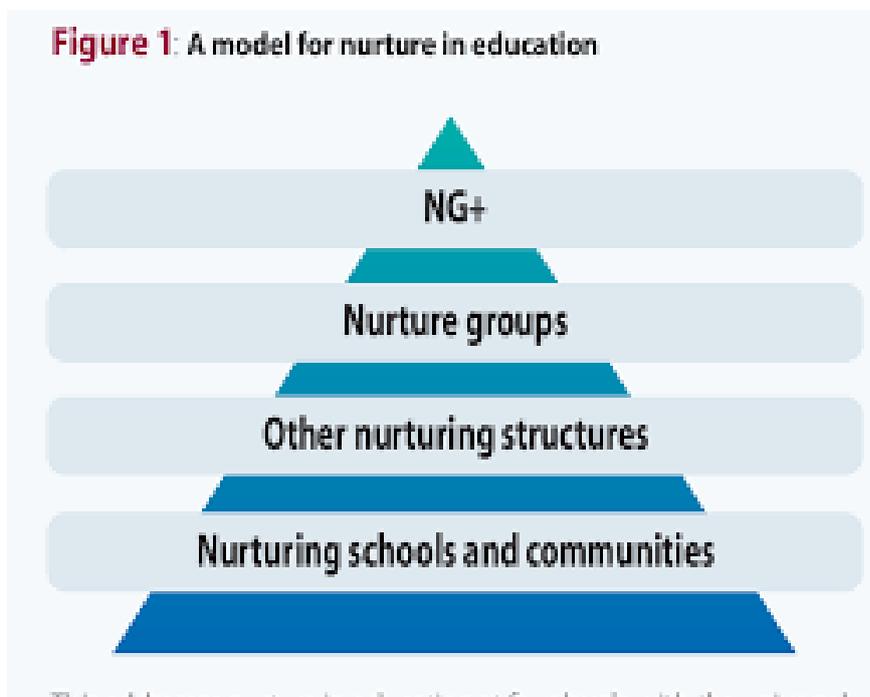
So, their journeys can be very different and its recognising there will be some fluctuations, so the danger is always sort of (expecting) an upward trajectory. (FG1C 32)

Discussion

The findings from this research project suggest that, to be successful, a secondary school nurture group needs to be embedded in a school community that understands the principles of nurture and is receptive to the philosophy of nurture. MacKay (2015) has offered a model of nurture in education that are founded upon a whole school, nurturing community in the first instance (see Fig 1.). This will be reflected in nurturing structures that complement the nurture group (such as counselling sessions, restorative justice, nurture corners, ‘Quiet’ rooms) and the philosophy of the Head teacher and Senior Leaders who will be driving the nurture initiative.

Fig.1: A model for nurture in education (MacKay 2015)

(Note to Eds – for Fig 1 - please use the original Figure published by IJNE in vol 1,1 MacKay 2015)



Schools need not embark on this journey alone. Support is available from experienced organisations such as nurtureuk (www.nurtureuk.org) and high quality documentation from Education Scotland (2017) provides an excellent framework for auditing, planning and delivering nurture as a whole school approach. Training in attachment informed practice and approaches that complement and layer nurturing approaches throughout school communities (e.g. Emotion Coaching, Restorative Approaches, Zones of Regulation) can be accessed through reputable training providers and local authority services.

A six month period of preparation for the whole school is recommended before the nurture group opens. This is to ensure that the nurture group support is fully understood by staff, students, parents/carers and the wider community before it opens. Preparations should include whole staff training in the six principles of nurture, attachment-informed practice and the Boxall Profile assessment where possible. By offering this training to staff, the project will reduce the challenges identified by Kourmoulaki (2014) in terms of systemic gaps in whole school communication, monitoring and reintegration. The Boxall Profile assessment will be understood by all staff instead of it being the remit of specialists and the targets set by the assessment will be respected and contextualised by mainstream staff. Refresher training should be built into the school's ongoing Continuing Professional Development programme and new staff appointments should have access to an induction training session that covers the salient points.

A robust referral system will protect the nurture team from 'knee-jerk' placements and crisis management decisions that can disrupt the finely tuned dynamic within the existing nurture group. Referrals should be based on Boxall Profile evidence and a panel comprising the nurture team, the nurture 'champion' on SLT and the pastoral team should consider the student data and the group dynamic before parents/carers are consulted and a placement is offered.

As a prerequisite, the nurture group should be included in the School Development Plan and funding for staffing, furnishings and on-going running costs should be ring-fenced in the school's annual budget. An audit of whole school readiness (see Education Scotland 2017) might be completed by the SLT and mainstream staff as part of the preparatory process - to focus minds, generate discussion and clarify queries.

In terms of the practical preparations, an appropriate room should be allocated for the nurture group. Ideally this would be a discrete classroom on the mainstream site that is furnished in a way that is comfortable and homely, with high quality resources and materials. Second hand furnishings and shoddy resources can reflect poorly on the students accessing this provision.

The nurture team, ideally consisting of a teacher and teaching assistant, need to be trained in the theory and practice of nurture in advance and they need to be 'the right people'. This means that they are individuals who can work well as a team and can make relationships with students easily. They will then have the personal qualities to maintain those relationships under pressure, including the challenges generated by students who might lack trust in the intentions of all adults. The appointed nurture team will therefore need to be resilient, creative, determined and committed. The nurture staff need to be reflective and aware of the needs that they might be bringing to the work and professional supervision is vital to support this. Roberts (2017) offers a good starting point on the importance of professional supervision in schools. In short, the

nurture group needs a staff team that is fresh and professional every morning at 8.30am to welcome the group and model ways in which life can be embraced and enjoyed.

Garner and Thomas (2011) questioned whether the secondary school nurture group can conform to the 'classic' model when support goes beyond the 'part time and short term' structure that was first advocated by Boxall (1976) - but the research found that many similarities with the 'classic' model do exist. A cohort of between 8-10 students was still considered optimum and referrals were made through Boxall Profile for a placement of 2-3 terms. Sessions would prioritise socio-emotional development over all else and offer predictable sessions at regular points each week. Many schools chose to focus on Year 7 students (aged 11-12 years) in support of their transition from primary school but invariably, students were given a few weeks to find their feet before referrals took place. This was because some students earmarked for nurture actually blossomed in their new secondary school setting and did not need nurture support despite the recommendations received from primary.

Securing the right group dynamic in the nurture group was found to be a key operational feature of the successful facility. A failing nurture group fails for everyone and creating a group that is unbalanced by too many similar needs should be avoided. A way to mitigate this was found to be 'pilot' nurture sessions that allowed staff to monitor the group dynamic in advance, before confirming the cohort membership.

The size and complexity of the secondary school setting when compared with primary was raised as a complication for secondary nurture (Colley 2009) and the research suggests that the nurture team will come under pressure at times to take on additional roles within the school or be taken for teaching cover when mainstream teaching staff are absent. Schools should avoid this. Nurture teams need protecting from providing mainstream cover because the students accessing nurture need consistent staffing and predictable routines.

The nurture team will invariably be working with the school's most vulnerable young people. These students may have complex social backgrounds and a range of adverse childhood experiences (Feletti and Anda 1998). Given the intensity of this daily work, nurture teams should be offered professional supervision on a regular basis as part of a pro-active and forward-thinking approach to staff wellbeing. Professional supervision offers the opportunity for staff to reflect critically on their own practice in a safe, confidential and supportive environment. An experienced supervisor, often an Educational Psychologist, can help the supervisee to explore their emotional work and review the priorities in their current workload. While it is common practice in health and social care professions to receive this kind of support, professional supervision largely goes missing in education and nurture teams may well offer the ideal place to inaugurate this work.

A number of challenges for the successful secondary school nurture group were highlighted by the literature and these included timetabling issues (Colley 2009), the stigma of attending nurture (Hilton 2014) and the sadness felt by students once their nurture placement was complete (ibidem). The research acknowledged these issues as ongoing but encouraged schools to be bold and to prioritise nurture over all else in the timetabling of sessions. While this might irritate mainstream staff and Faculty heads, the quality training in whole school nurture will emphasise that all learning is emotionally based and that we must attend to the emotional needs of students before they can learn successfully. Placing the timetabling of nurture in this context will help mainstream staff – and parents/carers - to accept ‘this is how we are going to do it’.

Training will also draw out those members of staff who are struggling with the concept of nurture. This group must be anticipated by those planning a whole school nurturing approach that includes a nurture group. These colleagues may challenge the role that the nurture a group plays (‘sin bin’; reward for naughty kids; soft option) while undermining the relational basis of nurture through punitive and/or coercive classroom management techniques. Unfortunately, such thinking has been exacerbated by documents such as the DFE’s 2016 publication ‘Behaviour and Discipline in Schools’ that refers to punishment on eleven occasions and the development of zero tolerance cultures and isolation rooms in a growing number of secondary schools nationally. Engaging with colleagues who are resistant to a nurturing ethos and allowing time to challenge their perceptions should be anticipated by Senior Leaders preparing to drive a whole school nurturing approach. One way of doing this is through facilitating time for staff to visit and spend time within the nurture group, where they can often see first hand the change in students when experiencing a nurturing and supportive environment.

The profile of nurture in the School Development Plan, on the school website, via newsletters and through the formal celebration of nurture will help allay the concerns of parents/carers and allow students to see nurture as one of many forms of student support that the school provides. Some students need support for literacy or for medical needs. Some need extra maths tuition or support from Place2Be. Some students get Pupil Premium, some get support from the nurture group. It is this spectrum of support -open to those that need it - that should be emphasised and explained to reduce stigma and promote tolerance across the whole school.

In order to maintain relationships and student progress, the research suggests that nurture teams build in ‘check in’ times for those students. This might involve staff calling in to mainstream lessons to ensure that students know they are being ‘kept in mind’ or arranging student visits back to nurture, before school or at breaks. In this way, relationships are maintained and students feel held in mind by the nurture team despite not attending the group any longer.

Schools should be proactive in preparing for cover in the nurture group should staff be absent. A trained teaching assistant should provide 'back up' for the nurture team and he/she should already know the nurture group students through close liaison over time. This kind of planning will reduce the impact of staff absence on a group that relies on stability and predictability.

A final challenge for those leading the nurture initiative in school is the rate of impact on student attendance, attainment and socio-emotional functioning. A range of research has shown nurture to impact positively in all these areas (Sloan et al 2020; Lyon 2017; Colley 2009) but this current research project confirms that progress is not linear and may not be immediate. Students work through a range of emotional issues in the safety of the nurture group and may appear to deteriorate in their behaviour before they find the trust and support to begin the road to improvement and recovery. For this reason, Senior Leaders, mainstream staff, parents/carers and students must remain patient with the project and be prepared for nurture to take time to become established and effective.

Limitations

The research study had a limited sample size of 29 professional participants of whom only 15 were nurture group practitioners. A larger sample size and greater representation of nurture group practitioners would have enhanced the study. The deductive, theory driven nature of the study may have limited the breadth of discussions due to its focus on three distinct research questions. In addition, the voice of young people attending secondary nurture group intervention was not included in the research study and this was a clear limitation.

Future Directions

Further research into best practice models for secondary school nurture groups is recommended. This might involve an analysis of how the 'guide to opening a secondary school nurture group' (Appendix 3) impacts practice when funding is made available to follow the guidance in full. The voice of young people attending secondary nurture groups is under-represented in the research and the ways in which nurturing approaches can mitigate the impact of the current Covid-19 pandemic might be a future area for exploration with young people.

Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to create an evidence-based guide to opening a secondary school nurture group based on the experiences, opinions and ideas of professionals working in the field. Focus Groups were held at a one day research conference and explored the detailed preparations required before a nurture group opens, the key operational features of a nurture group and the challenges to anticipate once the nurture group has opened. Findings from the thematic analysis of eight Focus Group transcripts were then member checked through a series of semi-structured interviews with teams that had been represented at the research conference

In keeping with the pragmatic paradigm, the findings from the project are to be held lightly and judged against their successful application in the real world. In this case, the success of the project will be judged by the successful application of the guide to opening a secondary school nurture group that is included as Appendix 3.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Funding

This research was supported by a Mulberry Bush Organisation Research Grant

References

- Bani, M. 2011. The Use and frequency of verbal and non-verbal praise in nurture groups. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 16(1), pp47-67.
- Bennathan, M., & Boxall, M. (2000). *Effective Intervention in Primary Schools*. 2nd Ed. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Bennathan, M and Boxall, M, (1998) *The Boxall Profile* London: Nurture Group Network.
- Bennathan, M, Boxall, M, and Colley, D (2010) *The Boxall Profile for Young People: Assessment and Intervention at Secondary Stage*. London: Nurture Group Network.
- Binnie, L. M., & Allen, K. (2008). Whole school support for vulnerable children: the evaluation of a part-time nurture group. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 13(3), 201–216.
- Boxall, M. (1976). The Nurture Group in the Primary School. In Bennathan, M. and Boxall, M. 2000 *Effective Intervention in Primary Schools*. (2nd edition). London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Boxall, M. (2002). *Nurture Groups in School. Principles and Practice*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Braun, V and Clarke, V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.
- Chiappella, J. (2015) "Part-time secondary school nurture groups", *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, Vol. 1 Issue: 1, pp.15-24.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research methods in education*. Eighth edn. London: Routledge.
- Colley, D. (2009). Nurture groups in secondary schools. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(4), 291–300.

Colley, D. (2012a): *The Development of Nurture Groups in Secondary Schools*. University of Leicester. Thesis. <https://hdl.handle.net/2381/10132>
https://leicester.figshare.com/articles/thesis/The_Development_of_Nurture_Groups_in_Secondary_Schools/10105514/1

Colley, D. (2012b). Setting up a nurture group in your secondary school. Chp 8 in *Transforming Troubled Lives : Strategies and Interventions for Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, edited by Ted Cole, et al., Emerald Publishing Limited

Cooke, C., Yeomans, J., & Parkes, J. (2008). The Oasis: nurture group provision for Key Stage 3 pupils. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 13(4), 291–303.

Cooper, P. and Tiknaz, Y. (2005). Progress and Challenge in Nurture Groups: Evidence from Three Case Studies. *British Journal of Special Education*, 32 (4), pp211-221.

Cooper, P., & Whitebread, D. (2007). The effectiveness of nurture groups on student progress: Evidence from a national research study. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 12(3), 171–190.

Department for Education (2016). *Behaviour and Discipline in School*. London.

Department of Education for Northern Ireland (2020) *Nurture Group Provision – Guidance for Schools*. Bangor, DoENI Education Authority. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Nurture%20Group%20Provision%20-%20Guidance%20for%20Schools%20DEC%202020.pdf>

Education Scotland (2017). *Applying Nurture as a Whole School Approach* <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/inc55ApplyingNurturingApproaches120617.pdf>

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P. and Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* Volume 14, Issue 4, 1998. p.245-258

Garner, J., & Thomas, M. (2011). The role and contribution of Nurture Groups in secondary schools: perceptions of children, parents and staff. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 16(2), 207–224.

Gates, R. (2010) “*Fantabulosa!*” *Children’s perceptions of one secondary school Nurture Group* (Masters Thesis) Lancaster University UK <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/576658/> accessed 30 Nov 2020

Hilton, J. (2014) *A multiple case study to explore the implementation and effects of Nurture Groups as an intervention for pupils with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in secondary*

schools (Doctoral Thesis). University of Manchester UK. <https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/uk-ac-man-scw:232133> Accessed 30 Nov 2020

Kivunja, C. and Kuyini A.B (2017) Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts *International Journal of Higher Education* Vol. 6, No. 5

Kourmoulaki, A. (2013). Nurture Groups in a Scottish Secondary School: Purpose, Features, Value and Areas for Development. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 18(1), 60–76.

Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Lucas, S, Insley, K & Buckland, G (2006). *Nurture Group Principles and Curriculum Guidelines*. London: Nurture Group Network.

Lyon, L. (2017). A pilot study of the effectiveness of a nurture group in a secondary special school. *International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 3(April), 6–17.

Mackay, T. (2015). Future directions for nurture in education Developing a model and research agenda. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 1(1), 33–38.

Nurtureuk. (2021). <https://www.nurtureuk.org/nurture/what-nurture-group>

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis : striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>

Ofsted Report. (2008). Shevington High School, Wigan. [http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/\(id\)/92426](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/(id)/92426)

Perkins, J. (2017). Improving our practice: a small-scale study of a secondary nurture group. *International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 3(April), 18–30.

Roberts, D. (2017). The importance of Professional Supervision for all staff in schools. Chp 15 in *Attachment and Emotional Development in the Classroom*. Colley, D. and Cooper, P. (Eds) London. JKP

Sloan, S., Winter, K., Connolly, P., & Gildea, A. (2020). The effectiveness of nurture groups in improving outcomes for young children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in primary schools: an evaluation of nurture group provision in northern ireland. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108.

Tobin, G. A. and Begley, C. M. (2004). “Methodological Issues in Nursing Research: Methodological Rigour Within a Qualitative Framework,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(4), pp. 388–396.

Appendix 1 – Initial Findings presented to nurture teams at Member Checking interviews

Please consider the initial research findings from Phase 1 and reflect on their accuracy and authenticity in light of your own experience

RQs	Phase 1 - Initial Findings	
What are the prerequisites for a successful secondary school nurture group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole school approach; Supportive SLT; Whole school understanding through CPD and whole school training sessions (eg. On the principles of nurture, attachment theory and the impact of neglect on brain development) • Annual staff training refreshers plus induction training for new staff • Nurture Coordinator is on SLT? • ‘Right people’ in NG base (resilient, reliable, strong) • Right environment; protected space; home from home; foothold in the school • Budget – sustainability, funding planned; consumables; • Parents – agreements; information sharing ; hard to engage? • NG has a profile within the school (newsletter; nurture committee) 	
What are the operational features of a successful secondary school nurture group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular sessions; regular routine • Mainstream registration then nurture session 1 – every day • Consistent staffing • Consistent room/environment • 6 Principles of nurture are central to practice • 6 Principles of nurture are understood by mainstream staff • Nurture breakfast • Boxall Profile assessments and targets • SDQ assessments • Group balance and dynamic; groups of 6 or 7 students only • Referral structure based on Boxall Assessment • Commence in October after a settling period • Yr 7 and 8 focus • Regular sessions not a drop in; regular students not a revolving door; protected staffing not taken for cover • Time in the week for staff to reflect as a team and with mainstream staff /SLT. PPA time is scheduled and protected • Staff do access a break (breakfast clubs, break time clubs and lunch clubs are common features) • Regular staff supervision is in place • 4 terms placement is the maximum <p>Plus Nurture Committees Nurture Champions (in each Department) Nurture Networks (across schools and areas)</p>	
What are the ongoing challenges to anticipate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity (limited numbers of students) • Funding (for resources) • Stigma felt by students • Student progress will take time • Mainstream attitudes (rewarding the poorly behaved) • Timetabling issues (protected core subjects; different year groups; different break times) • SLT management fragmented (one lead on behaviour with another lead on wellbeing) • NG isolation within the school 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student attendance in school • NG staff resilience (illness; cover staff; lack of supervision) 	
--	---	--

What are your reflections on the accuracy and authenticity of the following initial research findings?

1. The full support of the Senior Leadership Team is critical. Without this the nurture project will struggle to take root.
2. All school staff need to have training in the principles of nurture, attachment theory and the impact of neglect on brain development BEFORE a nurture group is opened.
3. Traditionally, small nurture groups have opened in schools and the influence of nurture has often been seen to impact on the whole-school ethos. Today, the opposite needs to be explored. In the secondary setting, the 'model that works' is one that develops a whole school, nurturing ethos (with training and SLT support) so that the nurture group is a *natural extension* of that philosophy for students with additional needs. Crucially, the nurture group's role with these students is fully understood by staff from inception.

Appendix 2 - Example of Phased Codes and Themes in relation to RQ1.

	Phase 1 – Focus Groups		Phase 2 – Semi structured Interviews		
Research Question 1	Initial Codes	Potential themes	Second Level Codes	Emerging themes	Combined Themes
What are the prerequisites for a successful secondary school nurture group?	<p>Establishing a Whole school approach to nurture</p> <p>Supportive SLT; Nurture Coordinator is on SLT</p> <p>Audit of whole school needs</p> <p>Whole school understanding through CPD and whole school training sessions (eg. On the principles of nurture, attachment theory and the impact of neglect on brain development)</p> <p>6 Principles of nurture are understood by mainstream staff</p> <p>Annual staff training refreshers plus induction training for new staff</p> <p>‘Right people’ in NG base (resilient, reliable, strong)</p> <p>Right environment; protected space; home</p>	<p>Support and Understanding of SLT for a whole school approach to nurture</p> <p>Audit of whole school needs</p> <p>Whole school staff training programme</p> <p>Nurture Group prerequisites (‘right people’; protected space)</p>	<p>Establishing a whole school approach to Nurture</p> <p>Vision at authority level</p> <p>Joint responsibility / Communication with the rest of the school</p> <p>HT and SLT who are fully on board and champion Nurture. Nurture representative on SLT</p> <p>A receptive school philosophy is already evident</p> <p>Audit of whole school needs</p> <p>Whole school wide training sessions on trauma informed practice before opening (trauma, attachment theory, brain development)</p> <p>Ongoing, meaningful and reflective CPD</p> <p>Get the set up right</p> <p>Six principles are understood by mainstream staff</p> <p>Trained staff in NG</p>	<p>Establishing a whole school approach to nurture</p> <p>Joint responsibility / Communication with the rest of the school</p> <p>HT and SLT who are fully on board and champion Nurture. Nurture representative on SLT</p> <p>Whole school wide CPD and training sessions on trauma informed practice before opening (trauma, attachment theory, brain development)</p> <p>Ongoing, meaningful and reflective CPD / training</p> <p>Getting the right group dynamics</p> <p>Referral systems are in place</p> <p>Marketing the NG</p> <p>Six principles are understood by mainstream staff</p> <p>Trained staff in NG</p>	<p>A whole school approach</p> <p>Mainstream staff understanding of the principles of nurture</p> <p>A receptive school philosophy is already evident</p> <p>A range of socio-emotional support interventions exist</p> <p>SLT on board and committed</p> <p>SLT understand nurture principles and are driving the intervention</p> <p>An audit of ‘school readiness’ has been completed</p> <p>A sustainable budget is agreed</p> <p>The intervention has protection</p> <p>Whole school is prepared</p> <p>Trained, resilient staff have been appointed to the NG</p> <p>Robust systems are in place (referrals, mainstream links)</p> <p>Parents have been informed</p> <p>Students have been informed</p>

	<p>from home; foothold in the school</p> <p>Budget – sustainability, funding planned; consumables;</p> <p>Parents – agreements; information sharing; supportive</p> <p>NG has a profile within the school (newsletter; nurture committee)</p>		<p>Nurture group is a protected space, foothold in the school, sense of ownership from students</p> <p>Budget (Variable models - schools fund staffing, consumable funded through various means)</p> <p>Getting parents on board / communicating with parents whilst not undermining student's independence</p> <p>NG has a positive profile within the school – staff and student perceptions</p> <p>Supervision</p> <p>Impact of the NG</p> <p>A range of socio-emotional support interventions exist</p>	<p>Nurture group is a protected and respected space truly owned by the students</p> <p>Budget (Variable models - schools fund staffing, consumable funded through various means)</p> <p>Communicating with parents Building relationships with parents – whilst not undermining students independence</p> <p>NG has a positive profile within the school – staff and student perceptions</p>	
--	---	--	---	--	--

Appendix 3 - A guide to opening a secondary school nurture group

Prerequisites

1. Senior Leaders need to be on board and committed to developing a nurturing school. If they are not, do not open a secondary school nurture group. A member of SLT should be designated the 'Nurture Champion' and link closely with the nurture group team.
2. Ensure the nurture group is included in the School Development Plan and that the budget for nurture staffing is ring-fenced.
3. Source and consult with Education Scotland's publication 'Applying Nurture as a Whole School Approach' (Education Scotland 2017)
4. Consider a six month period of whole school preparation before the nurture group opens.
5. During this six month period Senior Leaders should plan for the following:
 - Identify a 'safe space' in the school for the nurture group to be located.
 - Find funds to furnish the nurture room and to provide an ongoing nurture budget.
 - Appoint the 'right people' to run the nurture group (ideally a teacher and TA) and ensure they have received the appropriate nurture training in advance.
 - Enrol two staff on the National Nurturing Schools programme delivered by nurtureuk
 - Plan and deliver whole staff training in the principles of nurture, attachment-informed practice and the Boxall Profile assessment instrument.
 - Complete an audit of Whole School Readiness (in the Education Scotland doc 2017)
 - Share information with parents, students and the wider community
 - Establish a clear referral system to nurture using the Boxall Profile to assess need. Nurture must dovetail and communicate with other support systems (e.g. counsellors, ELSA support, pastoral systems)
 - Plan a celebration of the nurture group's opening (Newsletters, social media, local press)

Operational features

1. Identify a year group that require this support. Many schools focus on Year 7 but this feature is flexible. If your focus is Year 7, allow students until October to settle into school first.
2. Consider the dynamics of the group carefully. A balance must be found and pilot sessions are recommended before the nurture group cohort is confirmed.
3. Nurture group staff will target the identified social and emotional needs of between 8-10 students during the nurture sessions. The developmental curriculum will support and prioritise relationships, educational engagement and emotional regulation.
4. The students will attend the nurture group for 3 or 4 sessions each week. A full return to mainstream is expected after 2-3 terms.
5. Progress against targets is monitored through the Boxall Profile and additional assessments. These will be shared with mainstream staff.
6. Nurture has a high profile and nurture group activities feature regularly in school communications
7. Nurture group staff are protected from being drawn into other roles, they have breaks and they receive professional supervision every 6 weeks (at least) from the local Ed Psych team.
8. Reintegration into mainstream is carefully planned and the nurture team have time to check-in with students who have left the nurture group

Challenges to anticipate

1. Schools should be courageous with their timetabling and prioritise nurture over all other curriculum areas for the agreed period of referral.
2. If mainstream staff have not received the required training then anticipate the potential for misunderstandings and mistrust.
3. If the nurture group is not couched in a suite of interlinked support systems it may find itself isolated.
4. Effective communication with parents and mainstream students is the key to avoiding stigma and offence when referrals are made.
5. Plan for staff 'backup' with trained staff able to cover for absent nurture colleagues, as required.
6. The nurture group will need time to become established and to provide evidence of its effectiveness as an early intervention.