Nurturing groups in Northern Ireland: A briefing from The Nurture Group Network

“The children’s attendance has improved significantly since attending the nurture group and this has had a positive impact on their attitude to learning.” Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate’s Evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project

What is a nurture group?

- An educational psychologist-designed, teacher-led intervention for disengaged and troubled children, which removes behavioural barriers to engagement and attainment in schools through re-creating missing or distorted early attachments. First developed in Hackney more than 40 years ago, there are now more than 2,000 nurture groups in nursery, primary and secondary schools across the UK.

- ‘Nurture children’ are carefully selected using the Boxall Profile, (a resource enabling teachers to develop a precise and accurate understanding of children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties; plan effective interventions and support activities; set goals and capture outcomes. The Boxall Profile is now online enabling schools and The Nurture Group Network to access this (anonymised) data on need and outcomes.

- Once in the group, a nurturing philosophy rooted in attachment theory is used to ensure that children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties are provided with the early nurturing experiences that are vital to learning. Nurture groups turn children’s lives around, ensuring no child is left behind, and are also an excellent ‘sharp end’ intervention, allowing teachers dedicated time and a framework through which to work with individual children to identify whether their needs could be met in school or if another course of action is necessary, such as an assessment for SEN support.

- In a survey of 100 NGN-accredited nurture groups, the majority of children have experienced significant trauma such as separation from family, exposure to family conflict, abuse, divorce, a new home or school, illness and hospitalisation, death of a loved one, parental drug exposure and maternal depression – 19% of primary school students in primary school nurture groups and 42% in secondary school have a diagnosed psychiatric disorder, most commonly ADHD.

What are the outcomes achieved by nurture groups?

Outcomes for children and other learners

- Greater academic attainment: Children and young people attending nurture groups have been shown in quasi non-randomised trials to have significant gains in academic attainment as measured by their total scores on their baseline assessment.  


Personal development, behaviour and welfare

● **Improved behaviour:** Nurture groups resulted in an improvement in pupils’ behaviour and improved social skills at school⁵ and at home.⁶

● **Improved attendance and reduced exclusions:** Nurture groups have proven to significantly improve attendance⁷ (a finding corroborated in Ofsted⁸ and Estyn⁹ publications) and significantly reduce exclusions¹⁰.

● **Attachment to teachers, school and community:** Nurture groups help develop affective bonds between teachers and students,¹¹ result in an increased nurturing ethos at school¹² and result in positive attachments to schools and the community.¹³

● **Long-term mental health improvements and resiliency:** Controlled studies have concluded that students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are significantly more likely to improve in social and emotional functioning by attending nurture group provision in school rather than remaining in their mainstream classroom, gains that were found to be maintained over time.¹⁴ One study found that children’s ‘Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire’ (SDQ) scores in the abnormal or borderline category improved by 29% to normal levels after three terms of nurture group provision compared to only 10% in the control group.¹⁵ Nurture groups promote good mental health as they help children feel valued, build confidence and self-esteem, teach children how to make good relationships with adults and each other, develop communication skills, provide opportunities for social learning and facilitate learning through quality play experiences¹⁶.

“Increasingly, the children demonstrated their ability to self-manage their work and behaviour and showed a good understanding of the targets set to help them achieve positive outcomes. “
From Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate’s Evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot, 2016

How do nurture groups work?

● A nurture group is a small group of 6 to 12 children or young people supported by two trained adults. Nurture groups are, on average, provided 5 times a week for 2.5 hours a day per child and are the only intensive psychosocial intervention available full-time whilst allowing students to remain a part of their mainstream class, joining them for some activities. Placements in the nurture group can be either short or medium-term

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with the average pupil returning fully to their mainstream classes between two and four terms. Both part-time and full-time nurture groups have been found to work well and nurture groups are effective in both primary and secondary school settings.

- The children are carefully selected according to their individual holistic profile of needs, identified using the Boxall Profile (a resource that gives practitioners a precise and accurate understanding of children’s educational and behavioural difficulties), whilst also ensuring the establishment of a cohesive nurture group. Social and developmental targets for each student in a nurture group are devised on the basis of the Boxall Profile.
- Teaching staff trained in the theory and practice of nurture groups create an attractive, safe, structured environment, usually within the context of a mainstream educational setting, with a number of areas and resources designed to bridge the gap between home and school. Not only does sharing the nurture group environment with other students help the pupils practice social skills that are fundamental to their reintegration into mainstream classes, it also prevents any inappropriate attachment between themselves and nurture group staff; the goal of nurture group is not to usurp the parent-child relationship, but to create a positive attachment to the school. The nurture group staff engage intensely with each student, within a daily routine that is explicit, uniform and predictable; activities undertaken include emotional literacy sessions, news-sharing, group activities, curriculum tasks and nurture breakfast.

**Nurture Groups in Northern Ireland national policy**

- In Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development has cited nurture groups as an important tool in challenging some of the barriers that result in low educational attainment and made additional funding available to establish new nurture units across the country.\(^{17}\)
- The Northern Ireland Executive has established 20 new nurture groups and funded the continued running of 10 others since 2013, as part of its ‘Delivering Social Change’ signature programmes aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion and improving children’s wellbeing.
- Recent evaluation of the nurture groups carried out by the Education and Training inspectorate of Northern Ireland found improvements in attendance, wellbeing and behaviour in the children attending the nurture groups.\(^{18}\)

**Costs and funding**

Most nurture groups cost less than £10,000 for schools to establish. As shown by a recent survey of nurture groups in schools, the most popular option in terms of funding for nurture group provision is annually via the Pupil Premium, with the exception of the signature funding, followed by Local Authority funding and then by individual school funding streams, Government funding or a combination of these different sources.

**About the Nurture Group Network**

The Nurture Group Network is a charity that aims to break cycles of low achievement and tackle social exclusion by ensuring that an unequal start in life does not mean an unequal chance to engage with learning. The Nurture Group Network works to ensure that every disadvantaged or disengaged child has access to a nurturing intervention to equip them with the skills and resilience they need to make the most of learning and school. We do this by supporting the development of nurturing interventions in schools through training, resources and support; making the case for nurture in schools with policymakers and politicians; and we have an on-going research and evaluation programme to monitor evidence of outcomes. For further information please visit: [http://www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org)

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\(^{17}\) Northern Ireland Executive, ‘Twenty schools selected for new nurture units’. Available at: [http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-de-210613-twenty-schools-selected](http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-de-210613-twenty-schools-selected)