



# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NURTURE IN EDUCATION

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**Social emotional wellbeing of primary school pupils:  
insights from the Boxall Childhood Project**

**Attachment and learning – the links between early experiences  
and responses in the classroom**

**Working with children with social, emotional and mental health needs  
in a nurture group setting: the professional and personal impact**

**Improving pupils' perceptions of the learning environment through  
enhanced nurturing approaches: an evaluation**

**Scottish teachers' experiences of the effectiveness of nurture groups  
in supporting autistic children**

# **THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NURTURE IN EDUCATION**

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## **Aims of the Journal**

The International Journal of Nurture in Education aims to attract papers that explore themes related to the effectiveness of nurture groups, nurture in education, whole-school approaches to nurture and related subjects. The intention is to present the most up-to-date research of how nurture principles and practice improve the socio-emotional functioning and academic achievement of children and young people.

The journal aims to cater for a wide audience and the intended readership includes:

- Nurture practitioners, special needs practitioners and mainstream teachers;
- Academic researchers concerned with education, psychology and child development;
- Educational and clinical psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists;
- School leaders, consultants, social workers and local authority officers working to support the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people

## **Review process**

Articles submitted to *The International Journal of Nurture in Education* will first be seen by the editor who will decide whether the article will be considered for review or not. Articles then go through a rigorous double-blind review process where both the author and the reviewer remain anonymous throughout the evaluation.

## **Author guidelines**

The call for papers for the Volume 5 of the International Journal of Nurture in Education will be open from 1 June until 30 September 2018. A guide for authors wishing to submit their research is accessible at:

[www.nurtureuk.org/evidence/international-journal-nurture-education/author-guidelines](http://www.nurtureuk.org/evidence/international-journal-nurture-education/author-guidelines)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jennifer Burns** previously worked as a research and development officer for North Lanarkshire Psychological Service and is currently training as an applied psychologist for children & young people.

**Dr Nancy Ferguson** is principal educational psychologist in North Lanarkshire Council.

**Dr Heather Geddes** is an educational psychotherapist who has worked in a variety of settings in education and child and adolescent mental health services, concerned primarily with pupils presenting challenging behaviours. Her field of interest is the effects of emotional experience on children’s capacities to learn, and in particular the implications of attachment patterns.

**Alison MacDonald** was formerly principal educational psychologist in North Lanarkshire Council and currently works with the Scottish Attainment Challenge in North Lanarkshire.

**Tristan Middleton** worked as a primary school teacher, senior leader and nurture practitioner before his current role as Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Gloucestershire, where he specialises in Special Educational Needs.

**Dr Anna Robinson** is lecturer in Autism and programme leader of the Masters in Autism at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland.

**Dr Florence J. M. Ruby** is researcher at *nurtureuk* where she is responsible for gathering, analysing and using evidence available on nurture provision. She completed her PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of York, UK.

**Christina Symeonidou** is a primary teacher working in a mainstream primary school in West Lothian. She qualified in Greece and completed an MSc in Autism at the University of Strathclyde. She is interested in investigating interventions in terms of their effectiveness in autistic children. Lately, she has focused on LEGO®-therapy.

# WELCOME

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## Dr Marianne Coleman, Editor of the International Journal of Nurture in Education and Trustee of nurtureuk

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On behalf of nurtureuk, I welcome you to the fourth edition of our International Journal of Nurture in Education.

First, we would like to pay tribute to Marion Bennathan, the lifelong President of The Nurture Group Network, who sadly passed away earlier this year. Following the establishment and development of nurture groups by Marjorie Boxall, she was one of the founders of The Nurture Group Network (now nurtureuk). Her vision and energy lay behind the development and growth of nurture and nurture groups in this country and the resulting positive impact on the lives of so many young people. This edition of the journal opens with her obituary written by Kevin Kibble, chief executive of nurtureuk.

The first contribution to this issue of the journal is from Florence Ruby, who provides a broad-brush picture of the potential importance of nurture in this country in her article 'Social emotional wellbeing of primary school pupils: insights from the Boxall Childhood Project'. In the last two years nurtureuk has steadily been building up data that captures the extent of emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by children and young people and we are proud to present initial findings in the current edition.

Her article is followed by a further broad-brush paper, this time of a theoretical nature, contributed by Heather Geddes. Her paper 'Attachment and learning – the links between early experiences and responses in the classroom' summarises her seminal work on attachment theory and its implications for teachers and pupils in the classroom (Geddes, 2006). This paper will provide the most valuable introduction to attachment theory for those new to it and a useful reminder for those who are familiar with it. The paper touches on possible interventions, dependent on the nature of the particular attachment problems, and indicates how both teacher and pupils can benefit from teachers' greater understanding of attachment.

Tristan Middleton's paper 'Working with children with social, emotional and mental health needs in a nurture group setting: the professional and personal impact' picks up on the impact on staff working within a nurture setting with young people with emotional and

behavioural issues. It provides a rich and detailed analysis of the toll that can be taken on staff, echoing the call for more supervision made by Rae et al (2017).

The paper by Burns et al entitled 'Improving pupils' perceptions of the learning environment through enhanced nurturing approaches: an evaluation' is concerned with the impact of a range of enhanced nurturing approaches taken in 15 Scottish schools, each identified because of a high level of pupil deprivation. The positive impact of the interventions on pupils was significant, both in terms of academic achievement and the alleviation of emotional and behavioural difficulties. The perceptions of staff were not as clearly positive as those of the pupils, and in the paper the authors thoughtfully consider why this might be the case.

The final paper by Symeonidou and Robinson 'Scottish teachers' experiences of the effectiveness of nurture groups in supporting autistic children' investigates a new area: the role nurture groups can play to support children with autism. The findings are positive but the authors point to the possibility of some slight adaptations in the nurture approach for these young people.

We are proud to present further research on nurture and nurture groups and welcome contact from any potential contributors for future editions of the Journal. The call for papers for the fifth edition of the Journal will go out in June 2018 and we look forward to hearing from you. In the first place please contact our researcher Dr Florence Ruby at [florence@nurtureuk.org](mailto:florence@nurtureuk.org).

### REFERENCES

**Geddes, H.** (2006) Attachment in the Classroom. The links between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school. Belper, Worth Publishing.

**Rae, T., Cowell, N., & Field, L.** (2017) Supporting teachers' well-being in the context of schools for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 22(3), 200-218.

# CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF MARION BENNATHAN

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**Kevin Kibble, Chief Executive, nurtureuk**

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We would like to open the fourth volume of the International Journal of Nurture in Education by paying tribute to Marion Bennathan, the lifelong President of nurtureuk (formerly the Nurture Group Network), who passed away peacefully on Sunday 4 February, aged 90, surrounded by her family.

There is much to celebrate about Marion's long life – the many vulnerable children who succeeded at school, the teaching professionals who gained a more nurturing approach, and the nurture group movement that flourished – all thanks to her determination, passion and drive.

Born in Blackburn, Lancashire in 1927, Marion was the fifth of six children born to working-class parents. On leaving school, she gained an economics degree from Birmingham University and, a few years later, went on to read psychology at London's Birkbeck College. That was followed by training as an educational psychologist at the Child Guidance Training Centre, where she met and became friends with Marjorie Boxall.

After finishing their studies, the two stayed in touch, and Marion showed a keen interest in the nurture groups Marjorie set up in Hackney, east London. After a short spell as a teacher, Marion spent the next 12 years working as an educational psychologist, moving in 1969 to become Bristol Education Department's Senior Educational Psychologist. During this period, Marion spoke at many conferences and served on many committees. She was never shy of promoting nurture groups to those she met, including members of the Association of Workers for Maladjusted Children (now the Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Association, SEBDA) of which she was chair for many years. Marion retired from her position as the head of Avon's Educational Psychology Service in 1987, returning to London.

While enthusiasm for nurture groups had continued to grow, by the late 1980s they were in danger of disappearing as Marjorie retired and ILEA funding was withdrawn. Determined that nurture groups should stay on the public agenda, Marion and Marjorie co-wrote 'Effective Intervention in Primary Schools: Nurture Groups' in 1996.

The response to this seminal publication was extremely positive. Conferences were held around the UK, and teachers, who quickly understood the formative influence of early relationships, demanded nurture-based training. The authors were told to start training teachers and to convert the government. The first was easy; training took off immediately. The second was more difficult, with Marion, Allan Rimmer and Bob Law of SEBDA presenting to the Department of Education. In 1997, the New Labour government recommended nurture groups in several policy papers as the outstanding example of effective early intervention.

In the same year, with Professor Fred Stone, she led the move to change the Child Guidance Trust into Young Minds and became its honorary director until 1991. Marion may have been retired but she continued to work as a consultant, writing articles and books – including the Boxall Profile Handbook in 1998 – and giving talks on nurture groups in the UK and overseas. Instrumental in setting up the Nurture Group Network in 1997, she became its Honorary Director and was elected Honorary Life President in 2007. In 2011, she was awarded an OBE for services to special education and the development of the Nurture Group Network.

Marion has left a wonderful legacy. Her name, along with Marjorie's, will always be synonymous with nurture groups. It is through her tireless work and determination that her vision of nurture groups throughout the world is becoming a reality – with over 2,000 nurture groups and 300 nurturing schools in the UK alone and more being set up every day. The staff at the Nurture Group Network (renamed nurtureuk in May 2018), joined by the thousands of nurture practitioners around the world, thank her on behalf of the millions of vulnerable children who have been able to participate and benefit from mainstream education. For this reason, nurtureuk set up The Marion Bennathan Memorial Fund to help teaching professionals access nurture-based training.

A final fitting accolade for all Marion's work would be if governments took on the challenge of caring for all vulnerable children and ensure that they had a nurturing environment to thrive, explore and learn in. Nurtureuk will continue what Marion started – to take nurture to the heart of government – and reach more children than ever before.

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS: INSIGHTS FROM THE BOXALL CHILDHOOD PROJECT

**Dr Florence J. M. Ruby**

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**Keywords:** social emotional wellbeing, nurture approach, primary school, Boxall Profile

## ABSTRACT

In recent years more and more schools have recognised the important role they can play to support the mental health and social emotional wellbeing of their pupils. However, school staff are generally unaware of the scale of need because they rely on ad-hoc identification and do not conduct universal screenings of pupil wellbeing. In 2017 we launched the Boxall Childhood Project to campaign for schools to assess the wellbeing of all their pupils using the Boxall Profile, a teacher-led assessment tool of social emotional and behavioural difficulties. As part of the two-year pilot project, 40 English schools were recruited and trained to assess children using the Boxall Profile. Schools completed their first data collection in summer 2017 and more than 6,000 pupils were assessed. Overall, we found that pupils experienced high levels of social emotional and behavioural difficulties, but that little support was available to address their needs. We also replicated previous findings showing that, compared to girls, boys were experiencing higher levels of social emotional and behavioural difficulties. The current study provides an estimate of the scale of social emotional needs experienced by the UK pupil population and highlights the need for schools to provide more support.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, more emphasis has been put on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, both within government and in the education sector. The government has shown more commitment towards mental health and wellbeing through the release of a green paper (Department of Health & Department for Education, 2017), reports (Department for Education, 2017) and inquiries (eg. House of Commons & Education and Health Committees, 2017) as well as policies designed to better support the needs of children and young people.

More and more schools also recognise the importance of mental health and wellbeing and are eager to support their pupils through targeted interventions and whole-school approaches (Weare, 2010). However, the levels of need do not seem to match the resources available. While headteachers report a rise in mental health needs over recent years (Young Minds & National Children's Bureau, 2017), teachers feel poorly equipped to answer those needs (Department for Education, 2015; Place2Be & National Association of Head Teachers, 2015) and schools' financial resources

remain limited. Overall, schools need better tools and practical expertise to support the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils.

Previous research has shown that social emotional wellbeing in childhood is a key predictor of mental health later in life. For example, Goodman, Joshi, Nasim, & Tyler (2015) have found that emotional and social skills as well as self-esteem and self-control are strongly associated with good mental health in adulthood. In addition, high-quality school-based programmes designed to improve social emotional skills have been shown to impact not only the social emotional wellbeing of pupils, but also their mental health as well as behavioural issues, academic attainment and substance misuse (as reviewed in Early Intervention Foundation, 2017). Therefore, addressing the social emotional needs of children could benefit them now and prevent them from experiencing more serious mental health and wellbeing issues later in life.

Many school-based interventions exist to efficiently support the social emotional wellbeing of pupils (for a review see Clarke, Morreale, Field, Hussein & Barry,

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2015). In the current paper, we focus on the nurture approach (Bennathan, 1997; Boxall & Lucas, 2010); nurturing interventions such as nurture groups aim to provide a range of opportunities for children and young people to engage with missing early nurturing experiences, helping them develop the vital emotional and social skills required to function well in school and prevent mental health difficulties (MacKay, Reynolds, & Kearney, 2010; Reynolds, MacKay, & Kearney, 2009; Seth-Smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy, & Jaffey, 2010; Sloan, Winter, Lynn, Gildea, & Connolly, 2016). Nurture interventions are organised hierarchically according to the Nurture Pyramid (**Figure 1**). The model, first proposed by Mackay (2015) and adapted by nurtureuk (formerly The Nurture Group Network; 2016), maps out the support schools can provide to help children and young people's social emotional wellbeing, from a universal reach at the bottom tier to one-to-one targeted interventions for the most vulnerable children and young people at the very top.

Although many schools want to support the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils, they do not necessarily conduct systematic assessments to identify pupils' needs. For example, a recent government report highlights that more than 80% of schools rely on ad-hoc identification to pinpoint mental health difficulties, and only 15% conduct universal screening of all pupils to pick up on those with particular issues (Marshall et al., 2017). Under these circumstances, although pupils with severe social emotional and behavioural difficulties may be easily identified by staff, children and young people who experience less overt difficulties or have sub-threshold needs may be overlooked and may not be provided with the support they need.

In recent years, nurtureuk has been campaigning for all schools to monitor the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils, as shown in the bottom tier of the Nurture Pyramid (**Figure 1**). As part of the campaign, in spring 2017 nurtureuk launched the Boxall Childhood Project (BCP), a pilot project exploring the benefits and challenges experienced by schools monitoring the social emotional wellbeing of their pupils.

### **Boxall Childhood Project**

As part of the BCP 40 schools and educational institutions located across the north and south of England (in Barking and Dagenham, Halton and Wigan) were recruited and trained to assess the social emotional wellbeing of their pupils. The project lasted from summer 2017 to summer 2018, and schools assessed their pupils once a term for a period of four terms.

Every term the 40 schools used the Boxall Profile online (boxallprofile.org) to assess the social emotional wellbeing and behavioural difficulties of their pupils

(Bennathan, 1998; Bennathan, Boxall, Colley, & Nurture Group Network, 2010). The tool is divided into two sections: the first section, Developmental Strands, measures aspects of the child's cognitive, social and emotional development that influence how well a child is able to learn and function in the classroom. The second section, the Diagnostic Profile, measures the child's challenging behaviours that prevent successful social and academic performance. These behaviours are (directly or indirectly) the outcomes of impaired development in the early years and can be resolved once the necessary social and emotional skills are acquired. In addition to the data obtained from the Boxall Profile, schools also provided information about the pupil (including their age, gender and the mental health and wellbeing support they accessed).

The aims of the BCP were twofold:

1. To gain a better understanding of the social emotional needs across the UK pupil population thanks to the sample schools collecting quantitative data, in particular Boxall Profiles.
2. To evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of monitoring the social emotional wellbeing of all pupils through the collection of qualitative data gained through interviews, focus groups and feedback from staff taking part in BCP.

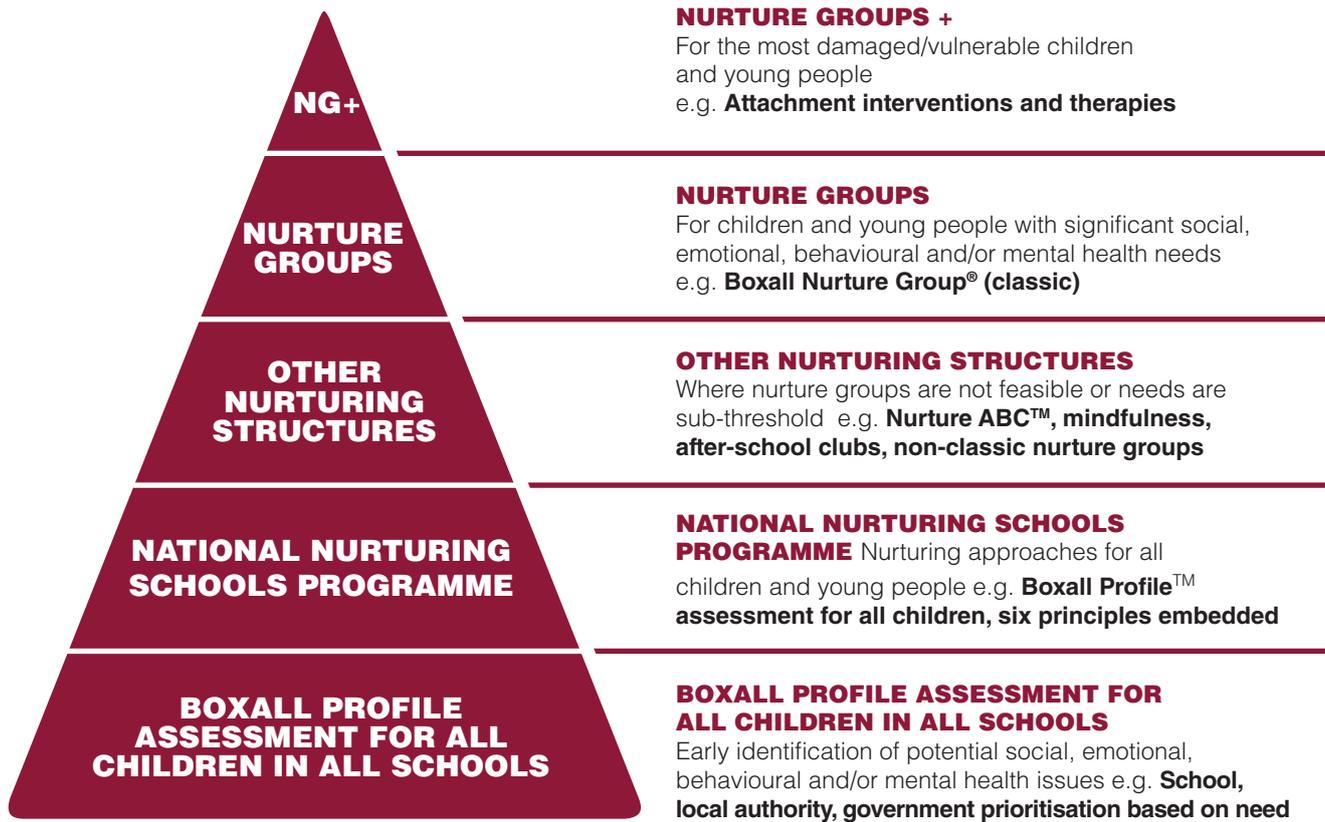
### **Current study**

The current paper focuses on gaining a better understanding of the social emotional wellbeing of the UK pupil population (the first aim of the BCP). To this end, we analysed the Boxall Profile data collected by the sample schools during the first term of the pilot project (summer term 2017). In total, 26 primary schools assessed either their whole school or whole classes of pupils and as a result, more than 5,400 primary school pupils were screened using the Boxall Profile.

Using the Boxall Profile data, we aimed to answer three questions:

1. What are the levels of social emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by children in primary schools?
2. Do these difficulties vary according to gender and age?
3. Were children receiving any form of mental health and wellbeing support to help them cope with their social emotional or behavioural difficulties?

**Figure 1:** The Nurture Pyramid maps out the different types of nurturing interventions schools can provide to support children and young people with varying levels of social emotional and behavioural difficulties. For each level, an example of nurtureuk intervention is indicated.



**METHODS**

**Participants  
Schools**

Forty-one schools and educational institutions were recruited as part of the BCP. Seventeen were located in Greater London and 24 in the North West of England. Educational institutions included: 30 infant and primary schools; four secondary schools; four special schools (primary or secondary); two Additional Resource Provisions (ARPs) and one virtual school. Following initial training, two secondary and two primary schools left the project.

Many staff who attended the initial training were already familiar with the Boxall Profile and had used it to assess children with social emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Many schools were also offering nurture provision to pupils (eg through classic or variant nurture groups). At the time of recruitment, eight schools were also part of the National Nurturing Schools Programme, a two-year programme designed to support schools in adopting a nurturing ethos across the whole school.

During the summer term 2017, 26 primary schools (including two special schools) completed whole-school or whole-class Boxall Profiles and assessed 5,414 pupils. Fifteen additional schools also collected

669 Boxall Profiles in a targeted manner (focusing on pupils with difficulties). This data is not included in the subsequent analyses as this sample would not be representative of the general English pupil population.

Compared to England’s average, the 26 schools had a similar percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an education, health or care plan (3%), but had a higher percentage of pupils who were eligible for free school meals (37% vs 24.7%) and a higher percentage of pupils whose first language was not English (26% vs 20.5%; Department of Education, 2017). All results must therefore be interpreted keeping in mind this context.

**Children and young people**

Informed consent was sought from parents and carers on behalf of the pupils and opt-out consent forms were circulated, given them the opportunity to withdraw their children’s data from the research.

Over the summer term 2017, a total of 6,083 children and young people were assessed. The 26 primary schools who completed whole-school or whole-class Boxall Profiles collected 5,414 Boxall Profiles, thus assessing 61% of their pupils. Pupils were aged between 3 and 10 (mean age: 6 years 11 months, standard deviation SD: 1 year 10 months), attended school from Reception to Year 5<sup>1</sup>, and approximately

half of the pupils were females (47.4%) and half were males (52.6%). The majority of children were assessed by their class teachers.

**Procedure**

Schools attended an initial two-day training course that provided delegates with a general understanding of the principles underlying the nurture approach, in particular neuroscience, child development and attachment theory. They also received training in Boxall Profile (both theoretical and technical).

Delegates then organised in-school training for their colleagues, and were provided with the necessary resources and materials to deliver Boxall Profile training to them. Midway through the summer term, schools attended a support meeting where they could provide feedback about the first phase of the project and received targeted support to resolve the barriers they were experiencing. Overall, schools collected data between February and July 2017, with a majority of Boxall Profiles completed in April and May.

**Measure collected**

Data was collected anonymously using the Boxall Profile Online (boxallprofile.org). For each child, school staff provided the following information: Boxall Profile data; year and month of birth; school name; year group; class name; current SEBD or mental health support accessed (within or outside school); current nurturing provision (nurturing school; nurture group; nurture group + or other nurturing structure). Staff also provide information about their own occupation (eg. mainstream class teacher, nurture practitioner, headteacher, etc.) and the number of terms they had known the pupil assessed. They also provided information about the quality of their relationship with the child using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7, 1 being 'very negative' and 7 being 'very positive', with additional options 'prefer not to say' and 'not known'.

**RESULTS**

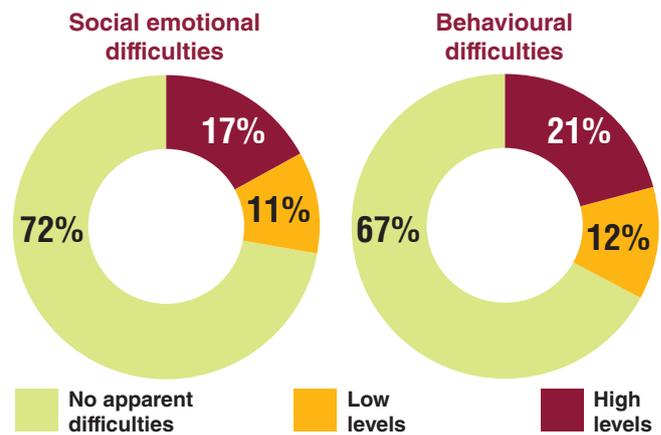
Our main aim was to investigate the SEBD needs experienced by the sample of English primary school pupils using the Boxall Profile. Social emotional difficulties were measured using the total Developmental Score (total scores for all developmental strands of the Boxall Profile) and behavioural difficulties were measured using the total Diagnostic Score (total scores for all diagnostic profile strands). Both scores were used to categorise children as having 'no apparent difficulties', 'low levels of difficulties' or 'high levels of difficulties' (see **Table 1**). For example, a child scoring 90 on the total Developmental Score would be categorised as having 'high levels of social emotional difficulties'.

Overall, we found that 17% or approximately one in six pupils had high levels of social emotional difficulties, and 21% or one in five pupils had high levels of behavioural difficulties (**Figure 2**). This result provides an estimate of potential SEBD needs in UK primary schools.

**Table 1:** Pupils' SEBD levels according to Boxall Profile scores

	<b>Social emotional difficulties</b> <i>Total Development Score</i>	<b>Behavioural difficulties</b> <i>Total Diagnostic Score</i>
No apparent difficulties	116 to 136	0 to 9
Low level of difficulties	102 to 115	10 to 19
High level of difficulties	0 to 101	20 to 136

**Figure 2:** Social emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by primary school pupils in England



**Gender differences**

Next, we investigated whether SEBD varied according to pupils' gender (**Figure 3**). For these analyses, we again used categorical variables rather than raw scores. Total Developmental and total Diagnostic scores were categorised as 'no apparent difficulties', 'low levels' or 'high levels of difficulties'. We also categorised individual strand scores as 'within the norm' or 'outside the norm' according to the standardised norms used in Boxall Profile 2017 (Ruby, 2017).

We used Chi-square tests to determine whether gender differences were statistically significant. P-values were Bonferroni-corrected to control for the high number of tests we performed. A total of 22 Chi-square tests were computed (2 for total scores, and 20 for individual strands), leading to an adjusted p-value  $p = .05/22 = .002$ . In other words, a Chi-

1. Schools did not collect data for Year 6 pupils as they would not have been able to put in place support before the end of the academic year.

square test would lead to a statistically significant result if the p-value were below .002.

### Developmental Strands

We first explored whether girls and boys had different levels of social emotional difficulties using the total Developmental scores. In line with previous literature, we found that boys had higher social emotional difficulties compared to girls (Table 2; Figure 3; e.g. Brody, 1985; Walker, Irving, & Berthelsen, 2002). We also explored whether these gender differences were observed for specific social emotional difficulties i.e. for specific developmental strands. We computed one Chi-square test for each developmental strand and found that, across all social and emotional difficulties measured, boys experienced significantly higher difficulties compared to girls.

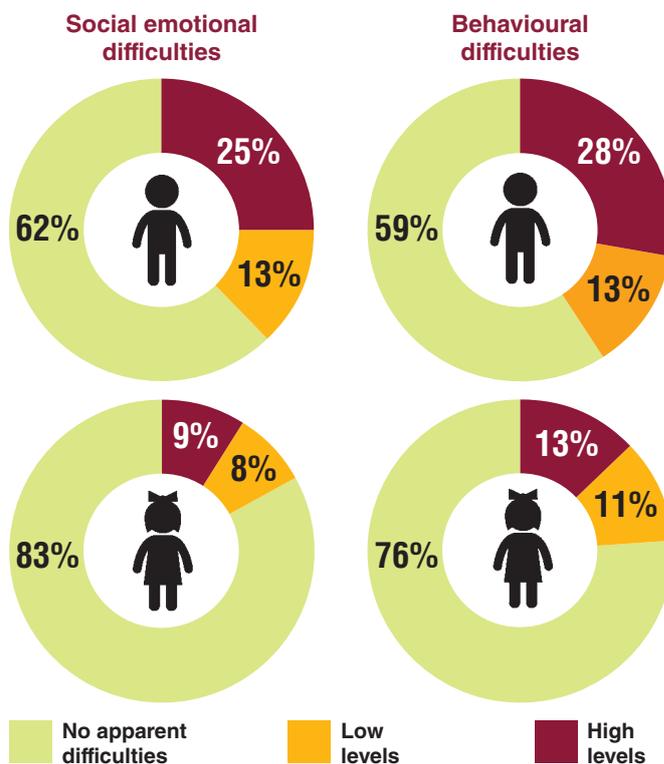
### Diagnostic Profile

Next, we explored gender differences in behavioural difficulties using total Diagnostic Profile scores. We found that overall, girls were significantly less likely to experience behavioural difficulties compared to boys (Table 2; Figure 3). In addition, girls had fewer apparent difficulties compared to boys on all but one strand (Strand U 'craves attachment, reassurance':  $X(1, N = 5414) = 5.77, p = .02$ ), suggesting that girls and boys crave attachment and reassurance to a similar extent.

**Table 2:** Chi-square test results for Boxall Profile strands and total Developmental and Diagnostic scores.  $N = 5,414$ . P-values Bonferoni corrected at  $p = .002$ .

Developmental Strands				Diagnostic Profile Strands			
Strand	X-value	df	P-value	Strand	X-value	df	P-value
A	286.79	1	<.001	Q	209.83	1	<.001
B	215.59	1	<.001	R	79.84	1	<.001
C	117.16	1	<.001	S	95.98	1	<.001
D	151.97	1	<.001	T	370.86	1	<.001
E	158.94	1	<.001	U	5.77	1	.02
F	254.37	1	<.001	V	164.54	1	<.001
G	301.49	1	<.001	W	111.98	1	<.001
H	261.40	1	<.001	X	189.38	1	<.001
I	169.51	1	<.001	Y	172.85	1	<.001
J	294.96	1	<.001	Z	194.09	1	<.001
Total Dev Score	300.67	2	$p < .001$	Total Diag Score	211.65	2	<.001

**Figure 3:** Gender differences in social emotional difficulties (left panel, measured using Total Developmental scores) and behavioural difficulties (right panel, measured using Total Diagnostic Profile scores) of primary school children. In both domains, boys experienced higher levels of difficulties compared to girls.  $N = 5,414$ .



### Average class

Next, we explored how the levels of difficulty in our sample would be reflected in an average class of 30 pupils, assuming an equal number of girls and boys.

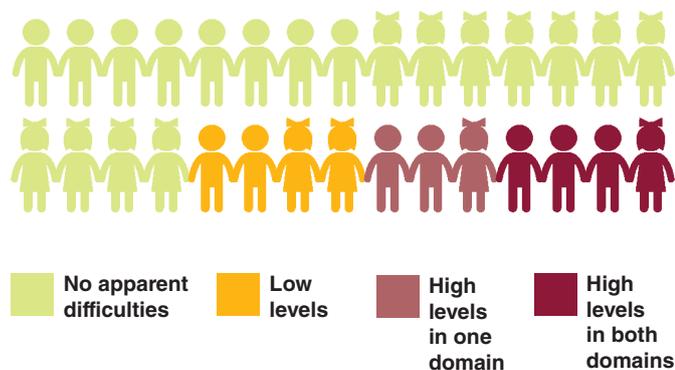
We divided our pupil sample into four categories: Pupils who had no apparent difficulties in either social emotional and behavioural difficulties ( $n = 1855$  girls,  $1489$  boys;  $61.77\%$  of the sample); Children with low levels of difficulties (i.e. low levels of difficulties in either social emotional, or behavioural difficulties, or both domains;  $n = 315$  girls,  $394$  boys); Children experiencing high levels of difficulties in one domain (i.e. social emotional or behavioural difficulties, but not both;  $n = 235$  girls,  $434$  boys); and children with high levels of difficulties in both social emotional and behavioural difficulties ( $n = 162$  girls,  $530$  boys).

**Table 3:** Percentage of girls and boys according to SEBD levels.

	Girls	Boys
<b>Total number of children</b>	<b>2567</b>	<b>2847</b>
No apparent difficulties	72.3%	52.3%
Low levels of difficulties	12.3%	13.8%
High levels of difficulties in one domain	9.2%	15.2%
High levels of difficulties in both domains	6.3%	18.6%

Results are shown in **Figure 4**. We can see that in an average class of 30 pupils, roughly one in three children would experience some form of difficulties. A majority of pupils with both types of difficulties would be boys (3 out of 4 pupils), whereas a majority of pupils without apparent difficulties would be girls (11 out of 19 pupils).

**Figure 4:** Levels of SEBD in an average class of 30 primary school pupils.



On average, pupils with no apparent difficulties had between 0 and 2 strands outside the normal range of scores ( $M = .70$ ;  $SD = 1.22$ ); pupils with low levels of difficulties had between 4 and 9 strands outside the norm ( $M = 6.37$ ;  $SD = 2.39$ ); pupils with one type of difficulty had between 8 and 14 strands outside the norm ( $M = 10.97$ ;  $SD = 2.81$ ) and pupils with both types of difficulties had between 15 and 20 strands outside the norm ( $M = 17.32$ ;  $SD = 2.30$ ). This data show that even pupils with low levels of difficulties may struggle with a few social or emotional skills. These 'sub-threshold' needs could be addressed using whole-class nurturing strategies delivered by mainstream class teachers (see the discussion for more details).

### Age differences

We also investigated whether SEBD levels varied according to pupils' age. We conducted Chi-square tests on total Developmental and total Diagnostic scores categorised as 'no apparent difficulties', 'low levels of difficulties' and 'high levels of difficulties' (**Table 1**). We used mosaic plots to explore the relation between age and Boxall Profile scores (not shown; Field, Miles, & Field, 2012).

### Developmental Strands

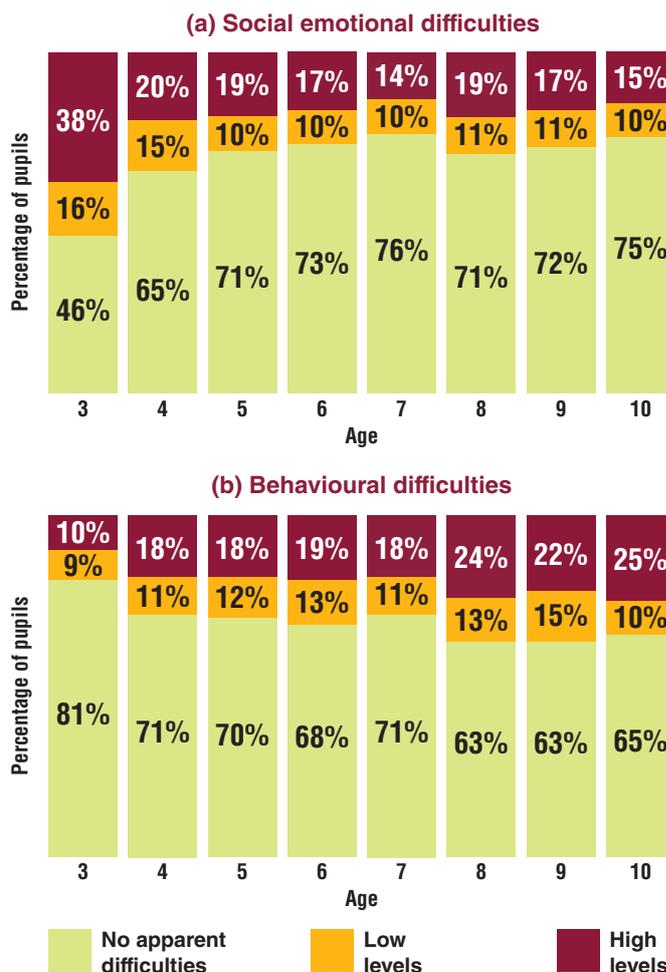
For total Developmental Strands scores, we found a significant effect of age ( $X(14, N = 5414) = 64.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with 3-year-old children being more likely to experience low or high levels of social emotional difficulties, and 4-year olds more likely to experience low levels of difficulties (**Figure 5a**). We also observed that 7-year olds were less likely to experience high levels of difficulties compared to other age groups.

### Diagnostic Profile

For total Diagnostic Profile scores, we also found a significant effect of age ( $X(14, N = 5414) = 43.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with 3-year-old children being significantly less likely to experience high levels of behavioural difficulties, and 8-year olds as well as 10-year olds being significantly more likely to experience behavioural difficulties (**Figure 5b**).

Overall, the data shows that younger pupils (at reception level) have lower social emotional skills, probably because they are still developing the skills necessary to become school-ready. They also display fewer challenging behaviours compared to older pupils, probably because they have faced fewer difficult experiences and have had fewer opportunities to reinforce negative coping strategies such as acting out or withdrawal.

**Figure 5:** Percentages of children experiencing SEBD according to age. Social emotional difficulties are shown in panel (a) and behavioural difficulties are shown in panel (b). Younger pupils, aged 3 and 4, have lower social emotional skills as well as lower levels of challenging behaviours compared to older pupils.  $N = 5,414$ .

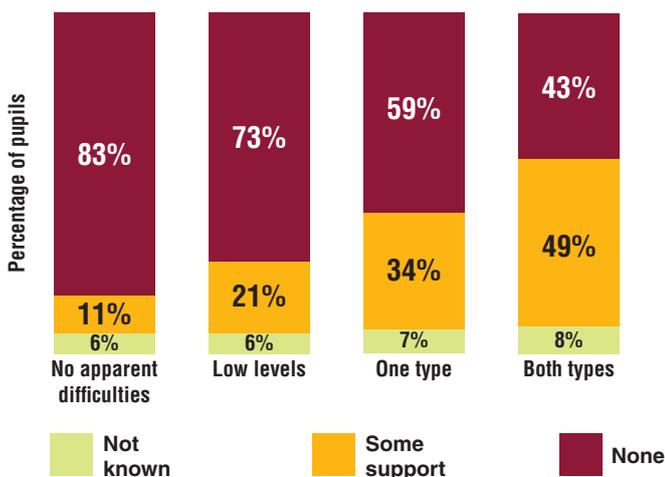


## Support provided to pupils

Finally, we explored the mental health and wellbeing support provided to pupils in our sample. In particular, we wanted to know whether pupils experiencing SEBD received the appropriate level of support. Every time teachers completed a Boxall Profile for a child, they also indicated whether the child was receiving any form of mental health or wellbeing support from the school itself or from other services. Options included: educational/child psychologist, external counsellor, CAMHS, school counsellor/pastoral care, school interventions (e.g. mentoring, focus groups, etc.), other and none.

We found that, even among pupils who were experiencing high levels of both social emotional and behavioural difficulties, only half of them were receiving some form of mental health/wellbeing support (**Figure 6**).

**Figure 6:** Mental health and wellbeing support provided to pupils according to SEBD levels experienced. *N* = 5,414. Teachers could indicate that children were receiving 'some support' (including educational/child psychologist, external counsellor, CAMHS, school counsellor/pastoral care, school interventions e.g. mentoring, focus groups, etc, other form of support) or 'none' or that they did not know.



## DISCUSSION

The current study explored the levels of SEBD in a sample of 5,414 children attending 26 primary schools and nurseries in England. Overall, we found a high level of need in our sample with 38% of children experiencing some form of difficulty (either with low levels or high levels of difficulties). Boys were particularly at risk of experiencing SEBD, with 48% of boys experiencing some form of difficulties compared to 28% of girls, replicating previous studies on gender differences in SEBD (Bennett, Farrington, & Huesmann, 2005; Brody, 1985; Deighton et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2002). We also observed that the youngest pupils in our sample (aged 3 and 4) had significantly higher social emotional difficulties and lower behavioural issues. Finally, we also found that

only a subset of children experiencing difficulties were receiving some form of mental health or wellbeing support from the school or from community services, with only 43% of children with high levels of SEBD needs receiving help.

Our data highlight that many children are struggling with SEBD and wellbeing difficulties, perhaps much more than previously thought. One reason that could explain this finding is that the Boxall Profile is able to capture signs of difficulties that other measures (focusing on more overt issues) may easily miss. In line with this, many teachers working in our sample schools indicated that assessing all their pupils using the Boxall Profile allowed them to identify children needing support, but who would have been missed if they had not been assessed because they did not exhibit extreme behaviours or overt difficulties.

Our data also identified a relatively low level of support available, suggesting that many children as well as their families and their teachers, are left to deal with their difficulties alone and are at risk of developing more severe mental health and wellbeing needs (Weare, 2010). However, schools and teachers can play a key role in answering children's SEBD needs. One way they can do this is by applying a graduated approach to nurture and wellbeing in their setting, i.e. monitoring all children's wellbeing, delivering whole-school and whole-class strategies to all pupils, and providing targeted support to children with high levels of difficulties through nurture groups and one-to-one interventions.

The high levels of need experienced by children also mean that class teachers face high levels of difficulties on a daily basis. Previous research has shown that teachers generally feel ill-equipped to answer mental health and wellbeing needs (Department for Education, 2015). However, their privileged relation with children could help them play a key role in supporting pupils' social and emotional needs. This would require that teachers be equipped with a better understanding of the importance of social emotional wellbeing and effective tools to help them make social and emotional learning a part of everyday classroom activity. By assessing all their pupils using the Boxall Profile, class teachers would better understand the needs of individual children and could use this information to inform their teaching, delivering the curriculum in a way that supports the specific social emotional and behavioural needs of their class. Teachers would be helped in this by being aware of nurturing principles and whole class nurturing interventions that could help them effectively manage and answer children's emerging social emotional and behavioural needs.

## Limitations

One limitation of the study concerns the quality of the data. All the data included in this large-scale study were collected by teachers and school staff. Although we trained key school members to complete and analyse Boxall Profiles, we relied on those members to subsequently train their colleagues and to ensure that all staff would complete assessments accurately and rigorously. Time constraints, limited understanding of the Boxall Profile, low commitment to the project and school pressures might have impacted the quality of the data. One example concerns the Boxall Profile data, where teachers are asked to observe and rate difficulties of their pupils; these ratings may be negatively impacted by subjective information, such as the quality of the relationship between the child and the teacher, or pre-conceived beliefs about a child. Another example relates to the data collected regarding the mental health and wellbeing support provided to pupils. Class teachers may not be aware of the full range of services provided to the pupils in their class, and may incorrectly indicate that a child is receiving no form of support. However, this is unlikely as teachers are given the opportunity to indicate that they do not know whether support is provided or not.

Next, we observed that younger children aged 3 and 4 were experiencing significantly more social and emotional difficulties compared to older children. One reason underlying this difference may be that children attending nursery and reception years are still developing the necessary social emotional skills to become 'school-ready' and that low scores on the Developmental Strands do not represent delays in development per se. This result suggests a need for the Boxall Profile to be adapted to effectively assess and identify the needs of younger children. A new version of the Boxall Profile could be created, with items and norms adapted to younger pupils, similarly to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire that exists in two versions (one to assess 2 to 4-year olds, and another to assess 4 to 17-year olds; Goodman, Ford, Simmons, Gatward, & Meltzer, 2000).

Finally, another limitation concerns the gender differences highlighted by the Boxall Profile. In the current study, boys had significantly lower social emotional skills and higher behavioural difficulties. Previous studies however have shown that although boys experience more externalising difficulties (such as aggressive behaviour) girls tend to experience more internalising difficulties (e.g. depression, anxiety, withdrawal, etc; Deighton et al., 2018; Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005). It is therefore unclear why the Boxall Profile does not highlight higher internalising difficulties for girls compared to boys in our sample. Future studies will need to explore the relation between the SEBD as measured using the

Boxall Profile, and the internalising and externalising difficulties measured using other tools such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

## Future directions

The current study provides the first analysis of the large-scale dataset collected as part of the BCP. Here, we focused on identifying SEBD levels in the English primary school pupil population, taking into account gender and age differences. Subsequent studies will explore the relation between SEBD and other pupil characteristics, for example individual differences in academic attainment, socio-economic background or special educational needs in order to better understand the difficulties and risk factors associated with SEBD. In addition, qualitative studies will also be conducted to address our second research question, i.e. identifying the benefits and challenges experienced by schools who monitored the wellbeing of all their pupils using the Boxall Profile. Case studies based mainly on interviews will be compiled to explore how all school actors (pupils, teachers, staff) can be impacted when wellbeing is part of the school ethos.

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# ATTACHMENT AND LEARNING – THE LINKS BETWEEN EARLY EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSES IN THE CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

Many children are underachieving in schools and some are presenting very difficult behaviours that challenge and stress the teacher and affect the measures of school achievement. The purpose of this paper is to summarise the research findings reported in 'Attachment in the Classroom' (Geddes, 2006) with the aim to inform and support teaching practice in the classroom and to enhance engagement in learning for the vulnerable pupils. In this paper, I review the different patterns of attachment first and their related patterns of behaviour that were observed in data from Geddes (2006). These patterns of behaviour were evident in the research findings that highlighted the significance of response to the teacher and engagement with the learning task. This has implications for classroom practice and the article seeks to briefly describe the patterns of insecure attachment responses to inform and support responses to the challenging pupils and to implications for interventions in the classroom. Each insecure attachment pattern is described as are the related responses in the classroom and briefly linked to interventions in terms of task and classroom practice. Awareness of the different meaning of these behaviours reduces teacher anxiety and enables the child to feel understood and to gradually adjust in terms of their responses to the teacher and the learning task.

## INTRODUCTION

My interest in the vulnerable children in school arises from the challenges I faced as a classroom teacher and then as a teacher in a social services unit, where I could not understand how children could know and understand so little about the world they lived in. I trained as an Educational Psychotherapist (Caspari Foundation, <http://www.caspari.org.uk/>) then worked as a therapist in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) so became aware of the experiences many children carried into school, affecting their expectations and behaviour. Later, research into cases referred to CAMHS teams gave me access to their stories, the nature of their behaviour and learning difficulties and also the observations of their relationships with their carers that are available in clinical practice. Formal examination of these data for a PhD thesis exposed the links between the relationships with their significant carers and their responses in the classroom.

The most significant and well-researched theory that supported this research was attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and when the research data

were analysed, attachment theory was the framework used to examine the behaviour of the children and so linked early experiences of care to experience of difficulties in school. The research exposed the links between differing patterns of attachment and behaviour and responses in the classroom, to the teacher and to the task. This research thesis was then written as a book specifically for teachers, 'Attachment in the Classroom' (Geddes, 2006) which explored the links between children's early experiences, emotional wellbeing and performance in school.

In this paper I seek to summarise these issues as an introduction to the understanding of children struggling to learn in school, with implications for intervention in terms of task, classroom and whole school practice. The premise is that when problems are understood, we are more likely to develop a response that can make a difference and so improve learning outcomes for children, as well as lessen the impact on the teacher of (often) very challenging behaviours.

There are rising concerns about the levels of achievement of many children in schools mainly

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identified by academic performance. This has created a pressure on education services and teachers in particular. However, I would argue that many children underachieve in school, not because of their 'inadequacy' or the work of teachers but because their social and emotional development has not prepared them for the demands of the classroom. We all pass through school so it is a critical experience for all and has significant implications for future engagement in life and work. We start at four years old (if not sooner at nursery) with separation from family carers. This is within the context of the support of a teacher and other classroom support workers, thus bringing new relationships into the child's life. Starting school can be a challenge and it takes time to adapt and participate and most children do, but a significant number do not. The children who struggle to adapt to school and to engage in learning can create challenges to the system and to teachers. It is the difficulties children experience that need to be understood so that appropriate support can be provided to enhance engagement in learning and performance. Early social and emotional experiences are critical in the development of the capacities to cope with the challenges inevitably presented by school and life.

The work of John Bowlby on attachment theory arose from his experience of working with pupils in a school for delinquent boys (in 1944) who were struggling with behaviour and learning issues. He started exploring the early-life experiences affecting children's emotional and social development, and Ainsworth and colleagues carried the research forward (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978); they conducted extensive observations on the nature of these early-life experiences, focusing in particular on interactions between mother and child. The behaviours that emerged in the observations highlighted the significance of 'secure enough' early experiences in preparing a child for the future in terms of coping with life experiences and relationships with others. The observations of the mother/infant interactions were used to identify patterns of relating that reflected the responsiveness of the mother and impacted on the child's future expectations of adults: critical in the classroom. The implications for learning are significant, and awareness of the effects of early experiences on behaviour and expectations can inform the teacher about the way that the challenges of learning can impact on the child.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF SECURE ENOUGH ATTACHMENT EXPERIENCE**

In the context of one-to-one early care, the infant experiences feelings and sensations that are all entirely new: comfort, hunger, noise, bodily excretions. These sensations and feelings are understood by the carer, whose response makes them tolerable and understandable. Over time, the infant becomes aware

of their own feelings: 'We begin to know ourselves because someone else knows us first' (Barrows, 1984). Gradually as movement develops the infant begins to explore the outside world and engage with curiosity with objects as well as with the carers. To do this, the infant needs to feel confident that the carer is available when anxious or afraid; the carer is therefore acting as a 'secure base'. The availability of the carer is crucial in the experience of exploration and feeling safe to do so. Over time the infant is reassured of the availability of the carer; even when 'she' is not visible, 'she' will return and her presence can be 'held in mind' and reassuring.

The capacity to tolerate separation starts here. By just over a year old, when the child is mobile and can range free, confidence that the carer will be available in times of fear and uncertainty is at the core of the confidence to explore the outside world. The experience of having one's emotions understood and using words to express feelings and needs is at the core of relationships. The capacity to cope and communicate fear and uncertainty is a significant aspect of resilience. In this sense, the experience of the relationship with early carer/s is at the heart of resilience reflecting a sense of safety, self-awareness and the capacity to empathise with others, the peer group and the community. The quality and nature of the care also reflects the experience of the carer. The social network around the carer also plays a significant role in particular the father, family and friends. The engagement of fathers has also been proven to be a significant aspect of children's later engagement in relationships and work.

Thus the child begins engagement with the outside world cognitively and socially reflecting early experiences of sensitive and reliable enough care and support. The characteristics of 'secure enough' early attachment experiences are the foundations of learning, as it brings the confidence to explore the outside world and provides opportunities to seek support and comfort when challenges arise, and to use words and thoughts to communicate distress and uncertainties and so share with others and accept support. Self-awareness also has implications for the capacity to empathise with others and so is the basis of relating to others and sharing experiences. Tolerating difference with others is a critical social skill and is critical in school as peer groups are an important aspect of school life. In the primary school the playground can be a challenge to vulnerable children whose behaviour can be a challenge to others. Often a mentor helps, and also organised games can structure the time and the interactions with others. In adolescence the peer group is the means of transition into adulthood so belonging to a peer group is significant, hence the importance of online communications within the groups.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF INSECURE ATTACHMENT

However, what is described above is not always the experience of early attachment and care. The experience of being a mother can unconsciously remind us of our own experiences of being cared for as infants and so without deliberate, conscious intent, carers may respond with negative emotions and behaviours to the demands of the infant, an acting out of unprocessed experiences in the context of our own early care: a form of intergenerational re-enactment. When the carer experiences emotional pain then their responses towards the child may be unsupportive, and they may avoid any involvement with services seeking to help. Often these are the parents who do not attend meetings and avoid engagement with school or other services.

Other factors can also add stress to the caring relationship, in particular the current stress many families feel (work, finances, housing) related to the real outside world and other demands that can be distressing and distracting. And so, the infant can experience 'insecurity' in the early stages of care influencing self-awareness, the development of confidence in self and others, confidence in the availability of the carer, the response to adults, the experience of feeling understood and the capacity to communicate feelings and thoughts. Resilience is affected, so challenges including learning may be overwhelming rather than interesting, and engaging learning may become difficult. This can be the experience that children bring into the classroom and we see acted out as behaviour that can be difficult to understand and to respond to and that impact on engagement in learning and performance.

The start of school is a crucial time, when we engage with a new environment and community and face new challenges. The entrance to school in early years is an interesting area to observe as children and parents navigate the transition from home and community to a new world of experience. It is a critical time of separation. In the context of the classroom the pupil experiences new relationships with unfamiliar adults and a new peer group of social contacts within a routine that is set by the practice of the school. Where to be and where to sit and access to resources are all built into the classroom practices that the new pupil has to become familiar with. School soon becomes as familiar as home. But there is also the expectation that the child will respond with interest and engagement in learning tasks set by the teacher and shared with others. For securely attached children this is possible, but for less securely attached children whose caring experience has been of less reliable presence and support, this can present a challenge when they are expected to rely on an adult and experience what they don't know. This can trigger uncertainties and reactive behaviours to the teacher and the learning task.

## BEHAVIOUR AS COMMUNICATION

Behaviour raises considerable concerns when lack of co-operation and reactivity challenge the teacher and in severe cases can lead to exclusions. The quiet worried children are often overlooked but the acting-out children are noticed and in particular the 'naughty' boys lead the concerns. However, behaviours are often the only manner of communicating when language and emotional sensitivity are poorly developed. Experiences can be acted out rather than talked about:

- a pupil can attack another who reminds him of his own painful experiences and unprocessed distress;
- the bullied can become the bully;
- aggressive response to the teacher can reflect an unprocessed anger at the lack of support in earlier years;
- the task can be a threat to insecure children for whom support was not available when new experiences were a threat and so it is rejected as 'rubbish';
- experiences of violence can be acted out as aggression towards others.

When children react in the classroom with challenging behaviour, it is therefore important that we think about what the behaviour might be telling us about that child's own experiences. It is also significant that the teacher can tolerate the experience the child is communicating so that the child experiences an adult who understands how they feel and help them to process the experience rather than continually re-enact it. The relentless behaviour often expresses a need to be relieved of the overwhelming feelings the early relationships have not coped with.

Direct communication about this can be challenging, but the school presents an opportunity to explore feelings and reactions to events through the medium of the stories: a basic tool of early classroom engagement. Legends, fairy tales and well-written children's stories are an excellent opportunity to explore and think about life events and strong feelings using metaphors. Fear, separations, loss, new arrivals, danger and threat are common features of children's stories and provide the opportunity to explore experiences, enhance personal awareness and the language of emotions without direct reference to personal experience. Story time is invaluable to explore the 'unthinkable', providing opportunities for emotional development in a safe and unthreatening way and shared by others. The book itself is significant as an object that can be held, shared and lasts, to be looked at again and again. An example of this is 'Badgers Parting Gift' by Susan Varley which expresses loss so well and in ways that can be thought about (Varley, 1984). Even at secondary school level,

the children's stories can be used for developing the language of feelings, such as when a Year 7 class in a special school reviewed children's stories as an exercise in the English class and discussed their use for younger children. This proved a very significant experience for a particularly challenging boy unable to resolve his rage with his mother: he chose to review 'Where the Wild Things Are' (Sendak & Schickele, 1963).

## **PATTERNS OF INSECURE ATTACHMENT IN THE CLASSROOM**

Attachment research identified patterns of parenting affecting the behaviour of children in the context of relationships (e.g. Ainsworth et al., 1978). They were described as **Avoidant, Resistant Ambivalent** and **Disorganised**, all on a continuum from mild to severe and with implications for the child in the classroom. These behavioural patterns and responses reflect the coping mechanisms that have developed and has implications for the pupil in the classroom. In a modest research sample of less than a hundred cases (Geddes, 1999), examples of these patterns of behaviour emerged from the data. Without being 'searched for' they were easily identified. Clear patterns emerged with implications for responses to the teacher and engagement in the learning task: a triangular dynamic between the pupil, the teacher and the learning task.

It is important to note the role of parents and care givers when trying to resolve children's difficult behaviours. The behaviour and responses of all parents is affected by early experiences of care. The behaviour of the carer/mother is not interpreted as a deliberate response to the child but as an unconscious response reflecting their own unprocessed experiences of early care. Blaming the parent is a common response to challenging children in the classroom but does not help the process of resolving the issues affecting the child. The parent also needs a form of response that reflects awareness and support that can contribute to more positive experiences for the child.

### **Avoidant responses in the classroom**

The life events reported by the sample of Avoidant cases investigated (Geddes, 1999) also related significant experiences of separations and loss that appeared to have been unprocessed emotionally but were carried with them and re-enacted in later generations. The challenge to the Avoidant pupil is to trust in the reliable presence and responsiveness of the teacher. The sample pupils who were investigated were underachieving and showed a tendency to avoid creativity and open-ended tasks with limited use of language, preferring concrete solutions.

Interventions with the Avoidant pattern need to acknowledge the anxiety that direct contact from the teacher can trigger. They often choose to 'sit at the back' and may avoid approaching the teacher and physical proximity and face-to-face interaction is avoided so that working with them in small groups is more tolerable than in one-to-one contact. Interventions with such pupils involve an acknowledgement of their need to avoid the support of the teacher and to make the tasks as independently doable as possible with all necessary 'tools' available. The pupil can then experience engagement in the learning task and the success of completion and learning but without triggering the anxiety of fear of failure and the need for an adult support. The teacher can then acknowledge success and show respect for achievement. Over time this can be experienced by the pupil as an awareness of him/her and interest in him/her without the association of perceived rejection. The pupil gradually experiences the availability of support if and when needed and gradually the pupil's confidence in the availability and reliability of the teacher develops.

Gradually, with greater awareness of the teacher's availability, the child can begin to experience some sense that the teacher will not reject them when help is needed so safety in the proximity and availability of the teacher increases. The pupil can then experience being understood and emotionally supported and can become less Avoidant and permit greater support and so make more progress in learning.

### **The Resistant Ambivalent attachment pattern**

This pattern of response arises in a relationship with the carer that reflects the needs of the carer rather than the needs of the infant. This can arise when the carer is emotionally needy themselves and needs the constant presence and attention of 'another'. The infant thus experiences a mind that is not available to them but preoccupied by their own emotional needs and fears, and needs to have emotional engagement with another where the infant is often the provider of that presence, but attunement to the infant's needs is not available. To achieve proximity and closeness the child learns to be physically, emotionally and verbally available to the carer and to stay in touch with the carer in terms of their attention and presence to feel 'safe' enough. They become focused on seeking and keeping adult attention and separation is a significant challenge that organises their behavioural responses to adults. Attendance at school can be a major challenge for child and carer. Separation can be a significant threat to the child and to the parent. This pattern of behaviour is associated with absences and frequently with many related to 'illness'. The child may be kept at home to meet the parent's needs for the presence of another. In extreme cases the carer may be afraid to be alone in the outside world and need the child to accompany

them when going outside the home. In a police 'stop and question' day in a Sheffield it was reported that almost all children not in school were accompanied by their parent ('Often parents just want company when they go shopping'; Smithers, 2002), perhaps reflecting the parent's need to have a companion when outside the house, rather than be alone.

In school the child can re-enact this in their relationship with the teacher and seek her constant attention and presence, is frequently described as 'attention seeking' and creates significant demands on the teacher. Often the pupil is designated a classroom assistant who manages their need for constant adult presence and attention so that the teacher manages the many other tasks of their work. However, this colludes with this pattern of behaviour and so reinforces the pattern of response.

This clearly has implications for learning. The pupil's skills at attracting and keeping attention may be very highly developed and they are often able to talk and engage attention very skilfully but the task is experienced as an intrusion into the relationship and so must be ignored as it threatens the engagement with the teacher/adult. Their focus is not on learning new things but on retaining attention. They underachieve, in the sample investigated, and numeracy was weak which I interpret as the initial challenge of separation from the 'one-ness' with the relationship with the primary carer to the two-ness of separate identities. The enmeshed relationship between carer and child can obscure the experience of being two separate individuals with their own identity and autonomy. Any separations and change of adults can be perceived as a threat so the end of terms and changes of class and teacher can trigger anxiety. Even the end of the week can do this. School phobia is at the extreme end of the behaviour continuum.

Such pupils often have very well-developed language skills and the capacity to engage adults in talk and conversation but otherwise are often underachieving and often with numeracy difficulties as 'taking away' can be a challenging concept. Games involving dice were found to be useful as it involved counting the numbers of dots and moving on to new places on the board. Helping the pupil to feel noticed without continuous engagement with the adult is a significant aspect of intervention and differentiation of the task. A regular reminder of the teacher's awareness of the pupil is supportive but not continuous attention. It helps if the tasks are broken down into small steps that can be experienced as one small independent step at a time so that the separation from attention is not felt as a threat and does not trigger anxiety. An egg timer was successfully used in a class to do this. The awareness of the anxieties that the task can trigger

can then influence the differentiation of the task, which is the expertise of the classroom teacher. The pupil can then begin to experience being a separate person with their own identity and needs recognised by the teacher.

### **Disorganised attachment behaviour**

This is the most challenging behaviour often diagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and may be treated by medication. It arises from the experiences of extreme adversity and trauma within the context of the carer/child relationship/s with an absence of a secure base that can support or process experience. This can be violence, extreme abandonment, absence of care, drug and alcohol misuse, witnessing traumatic events and can influence the behaviour responses to the extreme. Such experiences of the absence of reliable care can result in children being looked after by the community services and often adopted; looked after children can have a high incidence of disorganised behaviour and can be challenging. They are also likely to be challenging in terms of behaviour, frequently excluded from school and may be educated in special units.

The development of the brain in early years is crucial and instead of adaptation to the environment in terms of thinking and language, the early development of the neural fibres is organised around responsiveness to fear and uncertainties: to reaction rather than reflection. Any unexpected event, no matter how slight, for example, a door banging, a chair falling over, can trigger a reactive response often involving aggression. The brain is organised for flight and fight rather than thought and reconciliation. Extreme cases of absence of consistent care can also confuse thinking about self, identity, time and geography (Beaumont, 1988, 1991, 1999). The child who has not been understood by another can have a very poor sense of who they are, as well as what they are feeling. If the carer is not available when needed and frequently absent with little sense of where or for how long, it can be difficult to understand the passing of time as there is no reliable return and similarly a sense of where they are can be affected when the whereabouts of the carer is never understood. This affects how children then interact with the basic understanding of self, time and geography: basic concepts that are a part of everyday learning. What day it is and what time it is can be a challenge. These can be addressed in the curriculum. My experience of working in the Social Service Unit led me to adapt the curriculum so that it was led by 'Who am I' – a study of the human body, 'Where am I' – a study of local geography widening into world geography and 'What time is it' – a study of dates and calendars and referring to actual time during the day. This made a considerable difference to the involvement and engagement of otherwise very disengaged pupils.

Such unreliability in early years also affects any sense of safety and fear can be a significant aspect of their experiences with implications for emotional and physical vulnerability. Extreme fear and vulnerability may also be an aspect of recidivist offenders who described their fears when released from prison, driving them to re-offend and so be returned to prison where they felt safer than on the street. Gangs can also provide a sense of safety, especially when their vulnerability and fears are projected on to others outside the gang, making others feel afraid and threatened. Imprisonment and gang membership that can seem intimidating, may be an expression of extreme vulnerability.

For these children, school is often their first experience of a consistent, safe place where they are known, acknowledged, respected and safe with adults who are reliably and predictably present; perhaps their first experience of feeling noticed, as having their own identity and a responsiveness to their feelings and experiences. Despite the challenge they present in the classroom, school clearly matters to them. They are often 'persistent attenders' perhaps reflecting their profound need to feel safe. Their challenging behaviour may be a communication about their chaotic development and the absence of any sense of safety or certainty or reliability. The predictability of school routines and procedures, consistent and trustworthy adults, rules that are based on keeping everyone safe, opportunities to enhance awareness without threat and the opportunities to develop the language of emotional experience through stories and the recounted experiences of others are all aspects of reliable school life. The safety of the school environment may be the beginning of the possibility of relationships. It is unlikely that relationships will develop until the reactivity of the child has lessened and they can begin to experience feeling safe. Their reactivity can be a challenge in the classroom and having a response when behaviour is triggered is helpful, a quiet corner with do-able concrete tasks can be calming – having a 'calm box' available. I found the series of 'Where's Wally' books useful (Handford, 1989), as searching and counting was a calming distraction. The teacher can then acknowledge the need to feel calm so that they can return to thinking in the lesson.

### **FROM REACTION TO REFLECTION**

Despite the challenge presented, vulnerable children can be enabled to learn. But it is important that their difficulties and needs are understood so that teaching practice reflects this. Differentiation of the task to reflect the different ways in which children react to the challenge of not knowing and the fear of failure can be a useful start. The staff can be greatly supported in this by the inclusion of children's social and emotional development in their initial and ongoing training and

reflected in their ongoing support. This does not imply that teachers should be social workers but it does imply that without adequate understanding of the factors that can affect learning, they are less likely to enable all children to learn. It is also important to acknowledge that schools are a very significant experience for all children, where apart from the home, most children spend their most significant years of social and emotional experience and make the significant progress in terms of later engagement in work and community. School is not just about learning and qualifications.

This is apparent when working with teachers in support groups where the teacher can present and discuss the concerns about children in their class. This form of intervention is based on the work of Gerda Hanko (1995) who worked with groups of teachers to address the challenges and needs of difficult to teach pupils. With the support of a therapeutically trained leader the behaviour can be understood. Sharing their professional experience as teachers also leads to planned, consistent interventions reflecting a broad range of experience and expertise, which are collectively understood and so more consistent for the pupil. From this work my experience has been that the teachers make fewer referrals to mental health services because they have an awareness and understanding that informs their practice, and the problems become more manageable in the context of their work as teachers with implications for the learning outcomes of the child (Geddes, 1991).

The response of the teacher is affected by many factors including their own experiences of early life and self-awareness helps in this respect as they are otherwise vulnerable themselves. The behaviour of children can evoke negative responses and feelings in the teacher as the child will project on to the teacher their expectations that can affect the teacher's response to them. Vulnerable pupils very often act out their expectations of adults on the teacher who finds themselves filled with feelings of rejection and anger which are not 'theirs'. Many teachers have commented on feelings of inadequacy and helplessness after a day in the classroom but when this is understood as the feelings of a particular child projected on to them they are able to become more aware of the child's feelings and so less vulnerable to the projected feelings.

There are interventions that can affect and support school practice and outcomes for the challenging children. A recent book by Marie Delaney is focused on the interventions in the classroom and contains many suggestions that support classroom teaching and practice (Delaney, 2017). Identifying vulnerable children as soon as possible is significant, as the longer their behaviour remains misunderstood

and reacted to, the more their negative patterns of responses are strengthened as their behaviour is their means of survival. Early years is the most positive time to intervene. The work of nurtureuk for example, offers this in the context of school practice by identifying the children who are challenged in the classroom and not engaging with the learning expectations. They are then offered selective small group work which seeks to understand and support their anxieties and encourage trust and more positive responses to adults and more hopeful and positive responses to education staff and trust in the system. Change is possible. Other forms of training enhance skills in working with these children, offering training to enhance their awareness and intervention skills: for example, nurtureuk, Place to Be, Educational Psychotherapy and other interventions are available to schools. As the local CAMHS services have shrunk, many schools have taken the mental health initiative into their own practices.

I would argue here that attachment theory is a core aspect of our understanding of the issues affecting learning and performance in the classroom with implications for the wellbeing of the teacher. Understanding the causal factors can enhance the opportunities for teachers to use their teaching skills in a way that supports a wider range of pupils and relieves the tensions they frequently have to work with. This also has implications for the expectations imposed on schools concerning achievement outcomes.

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# WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS IN A NURTURE GROUP SETTING: THE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a small-scale research project to identify the impact of working in a nurture group setting on two teaching assistants in an English primary school. This research uses a narrative inquiry approach to provide rich data from the stories through which the practitioners interpret, and make sense of, significant events in their professional experience. The research methodology includes sessions that reflect both a supervision approach, providing a safe space in which to be heard, and more directed narrative spaces.

Two themes from the research are the challenges of the nurture work impacting on both professional motivation and personal relationships, and the emotions being expressed through physiology. As a result of the collaborative nature of the research methodology further themes emerged. These were: an identification of the factors that impacted on the practitioners' resilience and the positive impact of the sessions and relationships within the research process.

The discussion provides potential implications for schools, which school leaders may choose to consider when designing nurture group provision, and for practitioners to address their own needs which arise from supporting children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, thereby developing more resilient and effective nurture group practitioners.

## INTRODUCTION

The rationale for this small-scale research emerged from the researcher's experience of working as a nurture group practitioner and the resulting cognitive, ethical and emotional challenges. The researcher identified the need for greater understanding of the topic so that future planning for this type of provision may consider the impact on practitioners. This is in the context of a significant gap in research literature about teaching assistants (TAs) which extends beyond studies into their impact on learning and social and emotional development.

This research sought to identify the impact that working in a nurture group has on TAs' professional and personal lives. Subsequently it identified factors that influence the impact of this work and also the impact that the research process had upon the TAs who participated.

This research employed a narrative inquiry approach methodology working collaboratively with the research participants and allowing for understanding within the range of contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) experienced by both researcher and participants.

An important aspect of this research is that it focuses on TAs, who in the UK account for 26.4% of the workforce employed in state schools (Department for Education, 2014) and for whom the majority of their work involves direct pedagogical interactions (Blatchford et al., 2009). The definition of the TA role is very broad and there is no agreed national standard for their role, job description or level of training. However, it has been recognised that there has been a significant change in general expectations of the TA role from someone who helps and tidies in the classroom to a member of staff who directly contributes to teaching and learning

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(Groom, 2006). Equivalent international terms for the role include: learning support assistant, teaching aide, para-professional educator and education assistant.

The research is situated within the specific provisions of a nurture group, which are an approach to supporting children whose social, emotional and mental health needs are unable to be met in a mainstream classroom. Nurture groups were first developed in London in the 1970s (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996) and have grown in use, to reach the recent number of 2,114 schools in the UK (The Nurture Group Network, 2015).

Methodologically a narrative inquiry approach has been used, as an approach that seeks to understand experiences through the meaning that is made of them, by those who live them, when shaped and ordered in a narrated form (Chase, 2011). This approach is based within an ontological framework in which humans make sense of the world through narrative construction (Bruner, 1991). Narrative inquiry is able to embody “theoretical ideas about educational experience as lived and told stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990 p18).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of research that identifies the effectiveness of nurture groups in supporting the needs of children who attend them (Bennett, 2015; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Gerrard, 2006; Lyon, 2017; Seth-Smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy, & Jaffey, 2010; Sloan, Winter, Lynn, Gildea, & Connolly, 2016).

While established texts about nurture group practice take for granted the model of a teacher and a teaching assistant staffing a nurture group (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996; Bishop, 2008) an increasing number of nurture groups are run by teaching assistants without a trained teacher. This approach to staffing nurture groups may well be the result of the challenging financial situation for schools and is reflected in more recent publications and guidance, for example, “Nurture groups: a handbook for schools” (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010), where the role of a teacher is not specified. Instead the focus is on accredited nurture group training for staff. Anecdotal evidence points to the view that a significant number of nurture groups are staffed by TAs without a teacher and the significant involvement of TAs in nurture group work is reflected in the attendance at Nurture Group Network training and conferences. However accurate data about the staffing composition of nurture groups in the UK is unavailable. The need for research into the views of TAs in nurture groups has been acknowledged by Syrnyk (2012).

The approach demanded when working in a nurture group implies a ‘special pedagogy’ (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016, p117). The focus of the nurture approach begins with a ‘whole child’ view (Syrnyk, 2012) and is defined by valuing the importance of developing

positive attachment relationships (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), understanding behaviour as communication and understanding children’s learning developmentally (Lucas, Insley, & Buckland, 2006). In short, nurture approaches have ‘relationships at their core’ (Warin & Hibbin, 2016, p13) and inhabit a different ethos and attitude to learners (Turner & Waterhouse, 2003) than implied by the ‘standards agenda’ (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), which is pervasive in shaping the schools’ relational ecologies (Warin & Hibbin, 2016) and ethos. Nurture practitioners have also been found to have closer relationships with their pupils (Balisteri, 2016) and, as such, may often view themselves, and be viewed by other practitioners, as separate from the main staff body in a school.

While research into nurture groups has most often focused on outcomes for learners, it may be considered that there is a lack of recognition of the level of challenging behaviours experienced by nurture practitioners. A pilot study conducted by the Nurture Group Network (Scott-Loinaz, 2014) identified a range of challenging behaviours associated with young people in nurture group provision, including being aggressive, being unco-operative, having frequent outbursts, exhibiting dangerous behaviour, and being disruptive. The extent to which nurture practitioners experience physically and emotionally challenging behaviours, and the impact on nurture practitioners of this range of difficult behaviours, is broadly missing from current research evidence.

It is important to understand the current context of TAs in England to appreciate the perceptions that TAs working in nurture groups may be communicating. There is an unresolved situation regarding the professionalism of TAs in the UK. Two key events, the removal of government funding for higher level teaching assistant training in 2010 and the failure to take forward the draft professional standards for TAs that were commissioned by the government in 2014, have left the professional role of the TA without clear definition. TAs’ salary levels and expectations for their qualifications are set by individual schools (National Careers Service, 2017) and there is limited opportunity for professional progression. Furthermore, shortcomings in training available for TAs have been identified (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Martin & Alborz, 2014). Nevertheless, the demands placed on TAs in schools continue to increase, with anecdotal evidence pointing to more TAs undertaking more and more activities previously regarded as the responsibility of trained teachers, including planning and teaching whole-class teaching sessions. Research has identified TAs as working on the margins (Howes, 2003), unsupported by government policies (Russell, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2005) and they have also been identified by Mansaray as ‘separate

and peripheral' (Mansaray, 2006, p68). This difficult professional situation for TAs was compounded with the publication of the Diss Report (Blatchford, Russell, & Webster, 2012) and the media reports following this, for example: 'They [TAs] appear to have a negative effect on pupils' results' (Stevens, 2013). Recent literature about TAs focuses on their efficacy and impact (Radford, Bosanquet, Webster, & Blatchford, 2015; Roffey-Barentsen, 2014; R. Webster, Russell, & Blatchford, 2015) and their role, skills and training needs (Clarke & Visser, 2017; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; Martin & Alborz, 2014; Takala, 2007). The research of Cockroft & Atkinson (2015) provides some information about facilitators and barriers to the TA role in supporting learning, however these are significantly focused within the teacher/TA relationship. Sharples, Webster, & Blatchford (2015) suggest that research into TAs' impact is narrowly focused on academic attainment and highlight the need for robust research into non-academic, 'soft' development. While there is a small body of research that focuses on resilience and emotions for teachers working with children presenting challenging behaviours (Chang, 2013; Doney, 2013; Zee, de Jong, & Koomen, 2016), with the exception of Strynyk (2012) and Cockroft & Atkinson (2015) there is a significant gap in research focused on TAs in this field of work.

## **METHODS**

### **Approach**

The narrative inquiry approach was chosen as it allowed the researcher to capture the qualitative elements of the TAs' experiences across a passage of time (Alleyne, 2014). The contextual, or social and interactive (Dewey, 1957; Townsend & Elliott-Maher, 2016), importance of a learning situation and the nature of the data's situation within, 'an emotive or emotional and expressive register' (Alleyne, 2014, p40), could be fully appreciated through this approach.

The epistemological positioning of the narrative inquiry approach, which leads to the researcher engaging with the complexity and ambiguity of the data (Riessman, 1993), can be seen to challenge a normative view of knowledge and experience (Townsend & Elliott-Maher, 2016). The understanding within this approach is that settings and intentions are key to human conduct (Schutz, 1973). As such, rather than being a neutral listener, the identity and role of the researcher becomes an important and integral part of the research process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This researcher's experience and pedagogic values, after working in nurture groups for 10 years, were important within the research methodology. This alignment with the practitioners' experience not only served to reduce the likelihood of a patronising relationship (Hollway & Jefferson,

2000), but also to develop trust and a shared research purpose, as well as serving to provide recognition and affirmation of the practitioners' role. This is seen as leading to the data constituting a more open, honest and reflective narrative as a result of the development of a 'bond' (Webb, 2006) between the researcher and the participants. The importance of the relationship between the researcher and the practitioners (Creswell, 2003), representing a meeting of lives (Clandinin, 2013) led strongly towards a collaborative approach (West, 2010) to the research methodology and views of the practitioners as passive participants without acknowledging their expertise (Webb, 2006) was inappropriate. This approach implicates the practitioners as participants or co-researchers (May, 1997) within a co-composition space (Clandinin, 2013). This approach and the processes it employed had a significant impact on both the practitioners and the researcher (May, 1997). Through valuing the participants and re-framing their role as co-constructors there are ethical implications which are discussed below, and implications for lifelong learning (West, 2010), as both the researcher and participants, through seeking new understanding of a situation, learn through the research process.

During the planning for this research, a request to provide 'supervision' for the TA participants was made by the senior leaders in the school. There is a broad array of literature concerned with the concept of supervision, much of which is focused on supporting staff working within social work (Wonnacott, 2011) or counselling and therapeutic work (Guiffrida, 2015). There is some conflict of views between those who believe that supervision should include accountability and performance checks (Beddoe, 2010) and those who see supervision providing a safe reflective space outside performance indicators (Chappell, 1999). As the researcher is not trained in supervision approaches, it was important to identify and agree a shared understanding of the nature of the supervision offered to the participants. The supervision aimed to provide a safe, supportive space that allowed the TAs to reflect on their practice and where there was freedom to engage in frank and open discussion and explore sometimes difficult situations (Beddoe & Davys, 2016; Johnston, Noble, & Gray, 2016) and express distress that may have been brought up by their work (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). This space provided a compassionate (Carroll, 2007) and sympathetically aligned researcher who could support the practitioners through personal and professional validation (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). The researcher was not seen as an expert in supervision, but as an 'egalitarian empowerer' (Chappell, 1999) and collaborator with the TAs,

enabling them to be open to their experience and specifically their nurturing work (Lambers, 2000) through offering a ‘third-person’ perspective from outside their work-system (Carroll, 2007).

The ethical context of this research is framed within a social justice (Chase, 2011) and human rights (Mertens, Sullivan, & Stace, 2011) approach, underpinned by empathy (Webb, 2006) and trust (Bond, 2004). Within the desire to conduct ‘good research’ (David and Sutton, 2004 cited in Webb, 2006), the research process itself was considered with regard to its usefulness to the practitioners and whether they would feel it was worth participating. Within this context the supervision element of the process was negotiated and scope for development of the process was implied. To maintain anonymity the participants chose pseudonyms to use in the research. Ethical boundaries were also supported through adherence to the researcher’s own university ethics committee guidelines.

### Data collection

The data was collected with two nurture group practitioners employed as TAs in a UK primary school. The practitioners chose their pseudonyms that are used throughout the research and this article. Data was collected over the period of one academic year within three cycles (**Figure 1**). Each cycle began with a 45-minute one-to-one ‘supervision’ session. This session was recorded, transcribed and the transcription was provided to the participant. The participant was asked to identify ‘critical events’ (Webster & Mertova, 2007) from the transcription prior to the Research Session (RS). At the RS, the researcher and participant shared the ‘critical events’ they had identified and the researcher prompted the participant to tell the story that surrounded the ‘critical event’, with the researcher sometimes prompting or asking around the subject of the impact of the narrated events on the practitioner. The RS was recorded,

transcribed and provided to the participant. A further ‘supervision’ session (SS) took place following the RS. This cycle was repeated three times across the academic year. As the research proceeded and the co-composition space (Clandinin, 2013) developed, on two occasions the participants requested that the supervision sessions took place with both practitioners together. Following the final SS the participants were also invited to write their own reflections about the research process and the impact it had on them.

The data has been analysed through an immersive and holistic approach (Merrill & West, 2009) where the aim is to work with the detail and narrative language (Riessman & Speedy, 2007), making choices of extracts from the narrative that represent the meaning of events (Elliott, 2005) in relation to the identified focus and summarising these for the reader, with a focus on the phenomenological, that is, evocative, powerful, unique and sensitive aspects (Van Manen, 1990, p58). The analysis was therefore approached inductively, as a result of the relational negotiations with the practitioners, reflecting the truth of the narrative inquiry space (Clandinin, 2013). This process began as the practitioners reviewed their transcripts and made choices about the critical incidents they chose to expand their narrative about and continued as the researcher immersed themselves in the transcripts reading and re-reading, allowing common themes to emerge, through the identification of words, language, statements, signifiers and patterns these created (Dunne, 2011). The ‘relational responsibilities’ (Clandinin, 2013, p201) were then addressed, with the researchers’ findings sent to the practitioners asking for comment and approval.

## RESULTS

### Participants’ narratives

The initial sense of the narrative communicated by the two participants which frames their professional experiences, is one of being separate from others who do not work within the context of nurture and of difficult experiences.

**Figure 1:** *Research cycle*

CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
<b>Phase A:</b> 45min Supervision Session	<b>Phase A:</b> 45min Supervision Session	<b>Phase A:</b> 45min Supervision Session
<b>Phase B:</b> Transcription shared with practitioners	<b>Phase B:</b> Transcription shared with practitioners	<b>Phase B:</b> Transcription shared with practitioners
<b>Phase C:</b> 45min Research Session	<b>Phase C:</b> 45min Research Session	<b>Phase C:</b> 45min Research Session
<b>Phase D:</b> Transcription shared with practitioner	<b>Phase D:</b> Transcription shared with practitioner	<b>Phase D:</b> Transcription shared with practitioner
<b>Phase E:</b> 45min Supervision Session	<b>Phase E:</b> 45min Supervision Session	<b>Phase E:</b> 45min Supervision Session

The participants describe their work as something that is distinct and different to the understanding of working in a school for those outside the profession. This is expressed in relation to people they meet socially:

“I usually just say, ‘I’m a TA’. I don’t tend to say about nurture because maybe people don’t really know” (Lilly Supervision Session Cycle (SSC) 1)

and family members:

‘He just doesn’t get it, no matter how many times I explain it...’ (Lilly Research Session Cycle (RSC) 2)

While the distance and difference is also expressed in relation to discussions with others within their school:

“‘Oh yes, that’s really good. Oh that will be so helpful,’ and then it’s like whoosh, now you’re right on the outside”. (Kerry RSC2)

‘I almost feel like I’m always railroaded, I’m always round the outside of it.’ (Kerry RSC2)

as well as their general understanding:

‘...they don’t know what we were dealing with on a day-to-day basis’ (Kerry SSC1)

and describing colleagues as being:

‘.... quite closed to the whole thing.’ (Kerry SSC1).

This sense of distance and difference is viewed as being the cause of significant frustration:

‘Oh, it just frustrates me, it really frustrates me.’ (Kerry RSC2)

‘I’m not being listened to, oh this is so frustrating.’ (Lilly RSC3)

The context of working with children in a nurture group context is framed as being difficult:

‘I am doing my best and trying to give him my all, I really am, but it’s really difficult...’ (Kerry RSC1)

With particular reference to difficulties related to the emotional challenges the work places on the participants:

‘I just felt so het up and so anxious all the time.’ (Lilly RSC3)

‘I think within nurture things are disclosed that are quite... that can be quite tricky and obviously sometimes we are told things... that are quite hard to deal with...’ (Lilly RSC3)

Within the initial research aims of focusing on the impact of working with children within a nurture group context three themes emerge from the data; the physiological impact of the work, impact on motivation and impact on personal relationships.

### **Physiological impact**

The participants used a range of metaphors to describe the impact of their work with the children, some of which relate to physical impact:

‘I’d had so many buttons pressed...’ (Lilly RSC3)

‘I was on my knees...’ (Lilly SSC1)

and also exchanges with other colleagues:

‘My face hit the floor and it was that thing of like, okay, take it on the chin. You’ve got to take that on the chin...’ (Kerry SSC1).

When describing the impact of the permanent exclusion of one of the children with whom they worked closely, the metaphors included:

‘When he left it felt like losing an arm.’ (Kerry SSC1)

‘I started to feel all right about him not being here and now it feels like the band aid has just been ripped off and I’ve started hurting all over again.’ (Kerry SSC1)

The participants also included actual physical impact on them within their narrative. A key event that took place prior to the sessions was related by Lilly in preliminary discussions. Lilly had agreed with a child that, as it was the end of term, he could bring his skateboard to school and she took him into the playground to use it. The child encouraged Lilly to try his skateboard and when she did so, she fell off the skateboard. Aware that she was injured, she then walked the child back into the school, including walking down a flight of stairs. When they reached another member of staff inside the building, Lilly sank to the floor and was subsequently taken to hospital where she was diagnosed with a broken leg. More generally, the physical impact of the work was clearly illustrated:

“It does impact on your life because you’re just going, ‘Oh I’m so tired’ I said before, ‘I’ve got nothing else to give.’ I just want to sit here, drink tea and then just fall asleep on the sofa, which most of my Fridays are as exciting as that.” (Lilly RSC2)

‘It’s draining as well, it’s tiring. It’s tiring.’ (Lilly RSC3)

‘I was on my knees, I had nothing else to give at the end of the year and I was physically crying, it was my best year.’ (Lilly SSC1).

### **Impact on motivation**

Both participants expressed a very high level of commitment to their nurture work in both a professional and personal sense:

‘I love my nurture group, I love my job.’ (Lilly RSC3)

‘That’s what I love about the job, that is what gives me my drive, because I know by doing that sort of stuff I’m

hopefully supporting them and hopefully helping them to feel better about themselves, too, understanding themselves, too.' (Kerry RSC3)

In spite of this deep commitment to nurturing, a strong sense of their nurture group work impacting on their motivation was communicated:

'...a couple of hours just sat and thought about it .....that was me trying to...gee myself up to get in, a come on, come on, we can do this...' (Kerry RSC1)

'I felt like I wasn't giving all the children 100% what they needed ... So I think because I felt so frustrated I was almost at a point where I thought, actually, I'm not even going to do it anymore ...' (Lilly RSC1)

Motivation was also impacted by the particular phenomena of the 'differentness' in relation to other staff:

'If you are butting heads with the teacher, it's really difficult to want to continue.' (Lilly RSC2)

'So just personally I was sort of saying I don't want to go to work. For the first time in my life, I do not want to go.' (Lilly RSC1)

'I know both of us have been looking at other jobs too which is really bad.' (Kerry RSC1)

### **Impact on personal relationships**

While it may be expected that professionals, at times, think about their work into their 'non-work' time in general, there was evidence of thoughts about nurture work dominating this time:

'I mean, I've even dreamt of it before... I was worried about him the whole time thinking, oh my God, what's happening to him at home and what's he doing, is he okay... and yes, even dreamt about being in this room.' (Kerry RSC1)

The impact on personal relationships was communicated in relation to friends' comments:

'...one of my friends said to me 'God, is that all you do?' I said, 'What do you mean?' She said, 'All you've done is talk about work.' 'What?' She said 'That's all you do, isn't it?'" (Kerry SSC3).

The participants' narratives particularly highlight the impact on their home life:

'I mean, I went home and I went, grrrrr, you know, screaming my head off.' (Kerry SSC1)

'I think everybody is feeling more positive around me because I'm feeling more positive in myself.' (Lilly RSC2)

'And when you finally get that recognition that actually what you are saying is right... it is a relief. It's a relief

everywhere. It's a relief at work, it's a relief at home.' (Lilly RSC3)

### **And on relationships with family members:**

'It did feel like it became... he became almost an extension of my own children, he was then... So they're always there, always.' (Kerry RSC2)

'We take the dog for a walk every evening... most of that half an hour is me talking at my husband about the frustrations of my day to the point that eventually he says, "Just stop. Just stop talking. You are doing it again."... there's so much going on in my own mind that I need to get out, that I can't focus on what he's saying to me.' (Lilly RSC2).

The recognition of this impact is clearly communicated through Lilly's reflection on changes in her relationship with her son:

'We sort of talk to each other in the mornings and we have a bit of a giggle on the way to school now rather than me shouting at him and bellowing and being stressed.' (Lilly RSC2)

### **Emergent findings**

Through exploration of the research question as a guide rather than a destination (Kim, 2015), as a consequence of the collaborative, co-constructed nature of the research (May, 1997), further findings also emerged through the participants' narratives. These can be summarised as identifying three key factors that act as barriers and promoters for successful nurture group practice and the impact of the research process on the participants.

### **Successful nurture group practice**

The three key factors that emerged through the narratives are: shared belief, friendship and leadership. The evidence for these factors are explored below.

#### *Shared belief*

As identified above, the participants evidenced strong beliefs in a nurture approach. The participants identified that sharing this strength of belief was a key factor that supported them when negotiating the challenges the work presents to them:

'It's that connection, it's knowing somebody and obviously myself and Kerry have both had the same training and we've both been in nurture for quite a while now.' (Lilly RSC3)

The significant use of the personal pronoun 'we' in the following extract further evidences the importance of a shared belief:

'That opportunity and seeing their faces, it's like a toddler-like delight isn't it? We looked at each other and said yes, this is why we do nurture.' (Lilly SSC3)

While the significance of times when their work together was not working well provides further evidence of the importance of the shared beliefs:

'It feels like we are all disjointed. It doesn't feel like we are flowing'. (Kerry RSC3)

#### *Friendship*

The importance of friendship that goes beyond professional teamwork was communicated as an important factor in the successful work of the participants:

'...we are really lucky and I think you've got to have that, you've got to have a good working relationship and a good friendship to obviously be able to co-lead a nurture group I think.' (Lilly RSC3)

'You've got to have a strong working and maybe strong friendship to be able to work together and give the best you can for these children.' (Lilly RSC3)

An important aspect of working together was identified as being physically with the other practitioner:

'...not even talk about nurture necessarily but just to sort of wander.' (Lilly RSC3)

#### *Leadership*

The impact of the school leadership was increasingly present in the participants' narratives across the research year. Four key issues related to leadership were communicated. These were; being listened to, feeling recognised and supported, not letting problems escalate, and a shared belief with the leadership.

**Being listened to.** Occurrences where members of the school leadership team were perceived as not having listened were highlighted as having a significant negative impact:

'...that thing where you just know she's not really listening...it was almost like we weren't being listened to in a way...that really just makes you feel undervalued.' (Lilly RSC3)

'I've tried to discuss about the whole situation and how it was dealt with and how I felt about it but I was shut down.' (Kerry RSC2)

**Feeling recognised and supported.** Beyond being listened to, the narratives identified the importance of their work and the challenges they encounter being acknowledged by leaders:

'So, for me, it's the relief of being recognised'. (Lilly RSC3)

'I almost feel like I'm always railroaded, I'm always round the outside of it.' (Kerry RSC2)

And that leaders communicate their support for the actions of the practitioners:

'So yes, I felt a bit funny about that then yesterday, unsumm... yes, unsupported, I guess, that thing of I feel like I'm doing everything I can but then not being able to talk to the correct person at that time.' (Kerry RSC2)

Kerry communicates feelings about being supported that impacted negatively on her work:

'...they don't trust me as much or they've lost confidence in me.' (Kerry RSC2)

'I'm doing the right thing by following procedures, policies, etc, but I'm not being backed up with it.' (Kerry RSC2)

And in contrast, Lilly identified a positive impact from positive recognition:

'I think the realisation that actually I must be doing something right is a good feeling.' (Lilly RSC2)

**Not letting problems escalate.** Further developing the theme of being listened to, recognised and supported, the issue of this taking place in a way that is timely, as perceived by the practitioners, was highlighted by the participants:

'...that thing of I feel like I'm doing everything I can but then not being able to talk to the correct person at that time.' (Kerry RSC2)

"Rather than a proper discussion and it only seems to get to a proper meeting point when you go, 'Do you know what, I've had enough of this.' And I find that really strange because you don't need to get to that point of like going, 'Do you know what, I've had enough.'." (Kerry RSC2)

These comments highlight the perception that problems become greater when not addressed at the time of need.

**Shared beliefs and being involved in decision making.** A key barrier that was identified in the narrative was a perceived gap between the participants and their managers in the area of beliefs and the decision making:

"I feel that actually there's so much more we could do and then if you want to do those things and then you're almost being cut off then you think eventually it will just be, 'well, you know what, you do it your way.'." (Kerry RSC2)

"So yesterday I just went, 'Well that's fine if that's what you want to do but you find someone else to run nurture because I'm not doing it.'." (Kerry RSC1)

'How can we possibly make it a success if we're not all singing from the same hymn sheet?' (Lilly SSC2)

### **Impact of the process**

In response to both the emerging findings that relate to barriers and promoters of effective practice, and also the participants' comments in the research sessions about how they had changed during the research, the participants agreed to write a reflection about the impact of the research process and additional 'supervision' sessions.

The comments and reflections highlight a significant consideration for enabling nurture group practice:

'So even having that, the ability to talk through those things, because you can't carry that burden just on your own, you need to offload. If you constantly store it, I think you'd end up an emotional wreck by the end of it.' (Lilly RSC3)

'The research process was a very positive experience. While it highlighted ...the non-existence of supervision for nurture practitioners within my setting, I have become a more confident and effective practitioner, developed personally and become more self-aware. The process has made me continuously self-evaluate. I have a deeper understanding of my beliefs and boundaries.' (Kerry reflection)

'And I feel happy and I just feel being able to talk and being able... I felt more confident after our chat actually and after reading through some things I said, I thought, yes, I am going to say that, in a constructive way.' (Lilly reflection)

'The supervision has been vital this year...it has given me the reflection time I needed to make valuable decisions and to recognise when it is okay to say no. It also gave me time to just talk to somebody who wasn't connected to school but understands the importance of nurture coupled with the importance of taking care of yourself to be the best person to do the job I love.' (Lilly reflection)

'I found talking to another professional, who had been a nurture practitioner themselves, easier to discuss situations that had happened with children within the nurture group and staff. It put me at ease and I felt able to give my opinions, thoughts and feelings without being judged.' (Kerry reflection)

'The process allowed me to have a voice and to realise the impact of nurture upon myself.' (Kerry reflection)

These comments identify the positive impact of having a sympathetic external listener, who facilitates reflection on the part of the practitioners and the exploration of their professional and personal challenges. The fact that the listener shares the values and professional understanding of nurture group work is identified as having a positive impact on the 'supervision' relationship.

While these comments may imply that the 'supervision' relationship fulfils a supplementary and supportive role, the participants identified that this may actually be a requirement:

'We needed the emotional support to be able to just offload sometimes because it can be heavy, can't it?' (Lilly RSC3)

### **DISCUSSION**

This research has highlighted that the nature of the specialised work within a nurture group, which could be identified as having a significant element of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 2003, p16), and the challenging behaviours encountered, have a significant impact on practitioners. There may be a literature gap in the acknowledgement of the extent to which practitioners in nurture groups encounter physically and emotionally challenging behaviours. This research has identified the way in which the professional challenges of nurture group work impact significantly on the personal lives of practitioners.

The emergent findings have led to the consideration of factors that impact on the resilience of nurture group practitioners within the context of these challenges. Participants in this research identified the following factors within their setting: shared belief, friendship and leadership, and also the positive impact of the 'supervision' opportunities provided as part of the research process. These factors relate closely to the findings of Warin and Hibbin, (2016) that relationships are at the core of successful nurture groups. Alignment is also identified with the four promoters of teacher resilience: thoughts, relationships, actions, and challenges (Greenfield, 2015) and also the protective factors of sense of agency, support (including a competent and caring leadership team), pride in achievements and competence identified in resilient teachers by Howard and Johnson (2004, p415). While the factors of shared belief and friendship can be seen to be present for the participants, underpinned by interpersonal relationships (Rae, 2016), the factor of leadership, including agency and support, is an area that can be fostered and developed. The negative impact of leadership that is not perceived to support practitioners, nor give agency, was clear throughout the narrative.

The positive impact of and the need for a 'supervision' relationship was made clear by the participants. This is within the context of national education policies where early years practitioners are the only education practitioners who have a statutory right to supervision (Department for Education, 2017, Sections: 3.21, 3.22). This research further identified that there may be value in a 'supervision' relationship that is underpinned by a relationship based on congruence (Rogers, 1957),

where the supervisor's experience and values are matched with those of the practitioners, enabling the practitioners to be deeply heard (Rogers, 1967).

A range of limitations can be identified within this research, forefronted by the specific context of the nurture group setting. The type of nurture group, the age phase and location of the school and the personal relationships and histories of the staff within the school may all have presented particular characteristics and meanings into the narrative, which may not have been present if the research were undertaken in a different setting. A recognition of these limitations can act as a springboard for further research into settings with different contexts, leading to a wider body of knowledge. A further limitation may be considered, linked to the relationships between the researcher and the participants. In particular, the implications of gender and status, given that the researcher was a male university lecturer and the participants were female practitioners without university level qualifications. In addition, further research challenges to the researcher-participant relationship of trust and confidentiality were faced by the researcher in negotiating their relationship with the gatekeepers, the senior leadership of the school, and their desire for tensions and challenges raised during the research to be shared with them.

## CONCLUSION

This research did not set out to provide generalisable findings, given the limitations of being small-scale and contextual in character. However, this is compensated for by the resulting, 'inclusive, enriched and nuanced understanding' (West, 2010, p. 84) which can, rather, contribute to the understanding of the work of nurture group practitioners as a way of providing areas for leaders and policy makers to consider.

This research has identified that the challenges presented by nurture group work can have a significant impact on the motivation of practitioners, and on their professional and personal lives.

This research has further identified key factors that can mediate the impact of these challenges, contributing to the resilience of practitioners within nurture groups, and that where these practitioners are teaching assistants rather than teachers, these factors may impact differently as a result of the status difference between these two roles.

As a result of the findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Research into the nature and extent of the physical and emotional challenges encountered by nurture group practitioners should be undertaken

- Research into the impact of supervision on the resilience of nurture group practitioners should be undertaken
- Leaders and policy makers concerned with improving the outcomes for nurture group provision may benefit from considering how to support the resilience of practitioners, in particular through:
  - Considering relationships between practitioners
  - Considering how shared beliefs can be developed
  - Developing understanding and awareness of the nature of leadership approaches and relationships and how these impact on practitioners: this may include issues of status, shared vision, relationships and decision making
  - Evaluating the need for supervision or other opportunities that give the opportunity for practitioners to speak, reflect and be heard

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# IMPROVING PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THROUGH ENHANCED NURTURING APPROACHES: AN EVALUATION

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## ABSTRACT

Nurture interventions were offered to 15 'key to success' primary schools, following access to a core package that focused on readiness and self-evaluation. The schools involved were identified on the basis of the percentage of pupils living in deprivation. Based on the identification of need, schools were offered a range of interventions from training to consultation. Video Enhanced Reflective Practice was used as a coaching and mentoring tool throughout to develop and embed skills that underpin nurturing practice. This was supported by funding provided through the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The aim of this evaluation was to determine the impact of these activities on pupils' and teachers' perception of the learning environment, and on pupils' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. A total of 380 primary aged pupils and 115 class teachers participated in the study. Independent samples t-tests revealed pupils had a significantly improved perception of the learning environment. This study illustrates that enhanced nurturing approaches allow for a more nurturing ethos to become embedded, which is of benefit to all pupils' wellbeing, including those facing poverty-related educational barriers. Moreover, it contributes to the wider literature on the positive impact of nurturing classrooms.

## INTRODUCTION

This study took place in the context of improvement work carried out in 15 mainstream primary schools as part of The Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC; Education Scotland, 2018), a national initiative that seeks to raise attainment for all while also narrowing the poverty related attainment gap in seven local education authorities across Scotland. This five year funding initiative utilises The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to target local authorities in Scotland that have the highest concentration of school children living in deprivation. SAC considers literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing as the bases and catalysts for successful academic attainment. The focus of the current report is the impact of funding on health and wellbeing in one of the chosen local authorities. Fifteen schools that had access to additional funding took part in an evaluation conducted by the Educational Psychology Service over the course of 2016-17, undertaken as part of ongoing reporting to the Scottish Government. This allowed us to ascertain where schools were prior to and after a year of accessing Attainment Fund activities in relation to the desired longer-term outcomes. The anticipated long-term

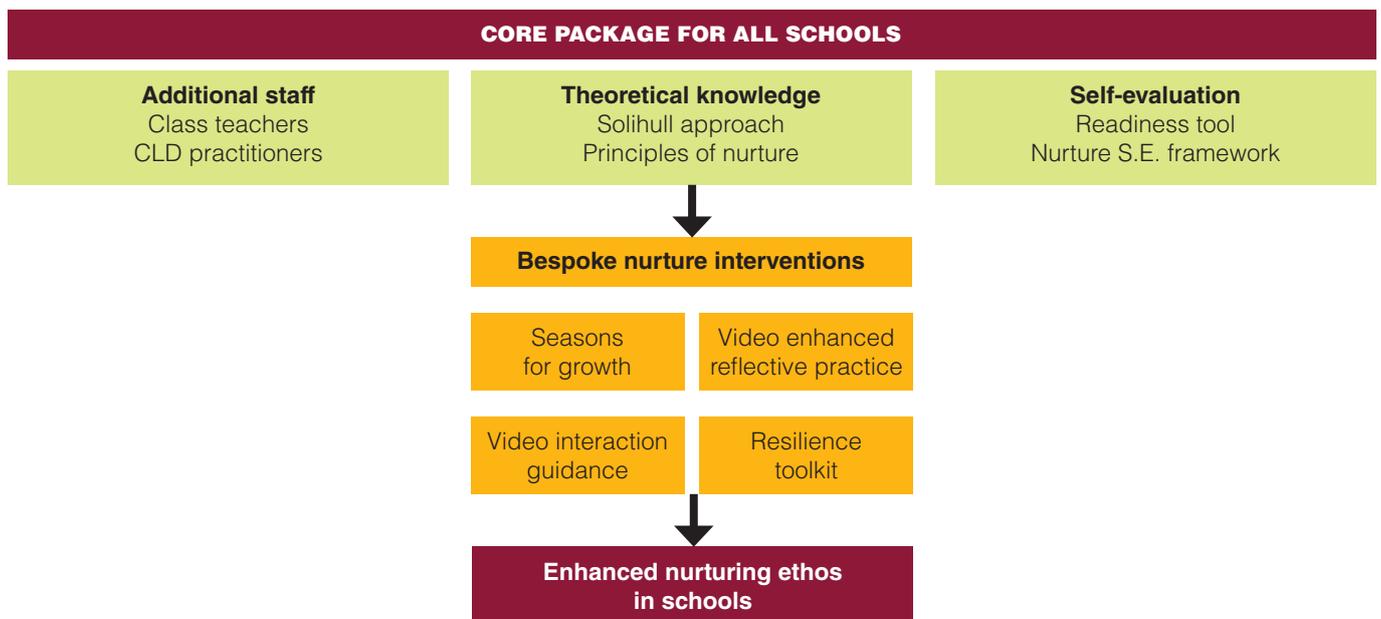
outcomes are outlined within the Nurture Logic Model (see **Appendix 1**). This tool was created by the project co-ordinator and SAC Lead Officer to inform planning, implementation and tracking of progress.

Since early 2016, 15 'key to success' schools across three localities have formed the 'nurture layer' of the local authority initiative. Although these schools shared a high percentage of pupils living in deprivation, there were inevitable differences in each school's circumstance and also in terms of a nurturing ethos. The overall aim was therefore to create more nurturing classrooms, schools and communities to benefit all pupils, as proposed in level 1 of Mackay's Model of Nurture in Education (Mackay, 2015). This model, along with a small yet expanding number of studies, highlights that when the nurture principles inherent within nurture groups are applied more widely across primary schools, learning and teaching is improved (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Doyle, 2004; Lucas, 1999). All schools therefore received a core package that focused on providing the theoretical background to nurturing practice; thereafter, schools had the opportunity to opt into bespoke offers of

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**Figure 1:** Flow chart outlining core package and bespoke nurture interventions for schools



nurture interventions to promote equity (see **Figure 1**). Implementation science guided the introduction of nurture interventions to ensure that each school's efforts were appropriately focused and tailored to address their specific needs. The Educational Psychology Service supported schools in their improvement journey using the stages of implementation detailed within the "Framework for Implementation – Nurture" (see **Appendix 2**; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009), along with senior colleagues from Community Learning and Development.

The Psychological Service played a fundamental role in the delivery of this core package by supporting schools with robust self-evaluation and staff development. As part of the core package, schools accessed additional class teachers to provide existing staff members with increased capacity to fully engage with the improvement work. Moreover, schools gained more intensive support from additional senior community learning and development practitioners to focus on parental engagement and family learning, in alignment with the identified nurture priorities of the school. To develop a shared vision (Fixsen et al., 2009), the Nurture Logic Model was generated to outline the desired short, medium and long term outcomes for schools to work towards. Fixsen et al. (2009) identify 'readiness and commitment' as the core component in their first stage of nurture implementation. To that end, all 15 schools involved in this improvement work firstly engaged with a readiness tool to identify their capacity for change. Following on from this, the schools began their own self-evaluation by engaging with North Lanarkshire's Nurture Self-Evaluation Framework (NLC). This framework allows each school to audit their own practice while also identifying a nurture principle that requires attention within the establishment. This

identified area was then incorporated into the school's improvement plan to ensure all staff shared a clear focus. This self-evaluation activity also allowed schools to plan and assess their next steps in terms of the bespoke nurture interventions available.

There is ever growing emphasis on the importance of robust self-evaluation within schools. It is now widely recognised as being at the core of all planning within schools and is, in fact, considered an essential element of schools' practice (MacBeath, 2005). Self-evaluation is a regular and cyclical process whereby schools develop a much deeper understanding of themselves; this enables establishments to identify weaknesses and enhance strengths to more systematically embark on an improvement process. Self-evaluation is advantageous because it shifts the responsibility of developing and maintaining effective quality assurance procedures on to school leaders while also contributing to programmes of continuous professional development (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). Inherent however within self-improvement is the assumption that schools are ready and have capacity to embark on an improvement cycle. The information within both the readiness tool and self-evaluation framework highlighted that building staff capacity in the area of nurture was a shared focus across the schools. School staff were therefore exposed to training that explored the theory underpinning the nurturing principles. Each school also received training in the Solihull Approach (<https://solihullapproachparenting.com>) that reinforced and extended this thinking around the underpinnings of nurture. This core package ensured that the 15 schools were adequately prepared to further develop their nurturing practice and implement bespoke nurture interventions.

Based on learning from their self-evaluation, schools were able to identify and access any nurture interventions they felt would be advantageous. This included Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) which was accessed by staff members from at least five of the schools. Using the principles of attunement (Birbeck et al., 2015), teachers were provided with theoretical background on the significance of communication and interaction in the classroom. The training adopts a coaching and mentoring format whereby teachers regularly use video to reflect on their practice in relation to the attunement principles, which highlights the positive impact of this. It enables teachers to apply their knowledge of nurture and resilience during their interactions with children. Furthermore, five schools accessed and received training on the use of the Resilience Toolkit (North Lanarkshire Educational Psychology Service, 2017), developed by the Psychological Service to support the planning of pupils experiencing adversity by implementing evidence based interventions. Nineteen class teachers also accessed Seasons for Growth training that equipped them to support children in their own establishment who may be experiencing loss, separation or divorce. Psychological Service also provided targeted and intensive therapeutic support in the form of Video Interaction Guidance for pupils experiencing attachment difficulties. Finally, the schools were also able to access universal offers in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Crucial to the success of this work was regular meetings throughout the term between the SAC team and the leaders of the schools, as these occasions provided the opportunity to update, provide examples of best practice and maintain focus on the long-term aims.

### **A social-ecological model of pupils' school experience**

The social-ecological model holds that many factors, at various levels, shape the school experience and attainment of primary aged pupils (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The overarching tenet of the model is that while behaviour is understood primarily by individual differences, the context in which the behaviour occurs must also be considered. Previous research has outlined five levels within the framework: the individual child, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Barboza et al., 2009; Lee, 2011). While factors at the levels of mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem less directly impact pupils, factors at both microsystem and individual level are recurrent, immediate and apparent to the child. Moreover, although each of the aforementioned levels certainly influence pupils' school experience, it is beyond the scope of the present study to consider factors at all five levels. On that basis, only factors at an individual and microsystem level were explored, as these are considered central to children's social development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

At the individual level, research has consistently illustrated that attainment can be best achieved when pupils are healthy, emotionally secure and psychologically at ease with themselves (Thorburn, 2014). Children considered to be 'most deprived' according to their socio-economic status however are more likely to present with social, emotional and/or behavioural issues. The research illustrates that addressing these health and wellbeing needs is central to reducing the poverty-related attainment gap (Higgins, Kokotsaki, & Coe, 2012; Sharples, Slavin, Chambers, & Sharp, 2011). Inevitably however, psychological and emotional attributes of students' learning are susceptible to change from the environment and social interactions (Sedlacek, 2005).

In accordance with the social-ecological viewpoint, contextual factors have been identified as central to facilitating effective whole school approaches aimed at developing pupils' social and emotional skills. Moreover, one of the most important aspects in ensuring an intervention continues to have a positive impact after its cessation is pupils' perceived quality of their learning environment (Bailey, Duncan, Odgers, & Yu, 2017). Indeed, the learning environment is often conceptualised as both teachers' and pupils' subjective perception of the learning setting (Frenzel, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2007). Studies have frequently demonstrated the powerful effects of the way in which pupils perceive their school, teacher and classmates on key outcomes. For example, both pupils' and teachers' sense of school cohesion has been found to promote successful pupil outcomes (Stewart, 2008) and equally, pupils like school more when they feel supported by their teacher and peers (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996). Similarly, pupils who feel accepted within their school have an overall more positive orientation towards school, their teacher and classwork (Osterman, 2000). This research suggests positive pupil outcomes are more likely to occur when teachers and pupils share a common positive view of the learning environment.

Ireson & Hallam (2005) provide some explanation of these findings as they argue that pupils who feel supported within the school community are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and to become autonomous learners; thereby increasing the chances of positive pupil outcomes. Longitudinal research (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Wang & Holcombe, 2010) strengthens this view, as it found pupils' perceptions of the learning environment shaped their level of school participation and engagement the following academic year, consequently influencing their academic attainment. Interestingly, pupil perception of the learning environment was also found to influence pupils' utilisation of self-regulation strategies, the use of which has been found to improve learning achievement (Zimmerman, 2000). Combined,

this body of research evidences the impact of social-ecological factors at both individual and microsystem level on children's wellbeing, learning experience and academic success.

### **Aim**

The aim of this evaluation was to determine the following:

1. Have there been improvements in both teachers' and pupils' perception of the learning environment as a result of the Attainment Fund activities focused on enhancing nurturing approaches?
2. Have pupils' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties reduced?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

#### ***Pupils***

Data included in this evaluation comes from pupils within the 15 nurture layer schools. These pupils were selected using stratified random sampling on the basis that they were living within deciles 1, 2 or 3 and were therefore considered 'most deprived' (according to the SIMD 2012). Within the 15 schools, three pupils from each class were randomly identified from a database and invited to participate. Participants were aged five to 11 years from Primary 1-7 classes. As the testing period spanned two academic years, children had moved on a stage at the time of post-test and, in some instances, had either left the school (n=18) or had a new decile that meant they were no longer considered 'most deprived' (n=124; according to the updated SIMD 2016). As a result, the Primary 7 pupils from pre-test had now moved on to secondary school. Likewise, the new Primary 1s who were randomly selected from the database in a similar manner (based on their SIMD 2016 categorisation) had not participated at pre-test. This meant that although proportionate sampling was achieved at pre-test, this was not entirely possible at post-test. The number of overall participants therefore varied from pre (n=381; 188 males and 193 females) to post test (n=337; 178 males and 159 females), as did the number of participants within each SIMD decile. Despite the decile changes, the majority of participants remained to be considered 'most deprived' at post-test (i.e. 90.5%).

#### ***Class teachers***

Data included in this evaluation also comes from class teachers within the 15 nurture layer schools. Due to changes in staffing and movement between stages, it was not necessarily the same teachers included in the evaluation from pre to post test (n=111 and n=115, respectively). Only one school did not have their class teachers complete the 'My Class Inventories' (MCI), meaning the data on teacher perception is representative of 14 schools.

## **Measures**

### ***Pupils***

Pupils completed a MCI (Fisher & Fraser, 1981) to capture their perception of their current learning environment. This measure has 25 items constituting five subscales: satisfaction with classwork, friction among peers, sense of competition among them and classmates, level of difficulty with classwork, and sense of cohesion among the class (Fraser, 1998). It was therefore anticipated that a more nurturing ethos would be evidenced through improvements in these areas. The measure is considered internally reliable with a Cronbach Alpha of .58 to .82 for the various subscales (Fisher & Fraser, 1981).

### ***Class teachers***

Class teachers also completed a MCI based on their perception of their classroom and pupils within their class. They then completed a Strength and Difficulties questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) for each of the three identified children in their class. The SDQ is an extensively used brief behavioural screening questionnaire designed for children aged four to 17 years. The SDQ contains 25 items covering five subscales, each with five items describing positive and negative attributes of children. The five subscales are: emotional problems, hyperactivity, conduct problems, peer problems and prosocial behaviour. The SDQ total difficulties score, which is the sum of the emotional, conduct, hyperactivity and peer subscales, has been found to be a sound measure of overall child mental health problems in studies from around the world (Achenbach et al., 2008; Goodman & Goodman, 2009; Klasen et al., 2000). Internal reliability for the teacher rated questionnaire has been found to range from .63 to .83 across the subscales; with test-retest reliability ranging from .72 to .85 (Stone, Otten, Engels, Vermulst, & Janssens, 2010). The SDQ therefore provides a valid measure of children's social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Goodman, Ford, Simmons, Gatward, & Meltzer, 2000).

## **Procedure**

The evaluation was undertaken over the course of a year, with children and class teachers participating at two set time points one year apart – March 2016 and February/March 2017. This provided a baseline of pupils' health and wellbeing prior to schools accessing the core package and any bespoke offers, and then again after a year of being within the nurture layer. Given that the pupils involved at pre-test had moved on a stage at the point of post-test, they therefore had a new class teacher and similarly, the class teachers had a new class of pupils. The data was therefore explored at a school level with comparisons of each stage being made to determine if for instance, pupils' perceptions of the learning environment at Primary 3 had improved this

year as a result of the activities. The procedure for collecting data was replicated at both time points of the evaluation, meaning the data was collected in the same manner for both pre and post-test. SDQ and the Teacher MCI were distributed to class teachers approximately a month prior to a research and development officer visiting the school (i.e. visiting in March 2016 and then again in February/March 2017), to ensure teachers had adequate time to complete these in full. A research and development officer then visited the schools to support the participating pupils with completing the MCI measure. Pupils were taken out in small groups (maximum nine per group), depending on their stage and abilities. At this visit, the research and development officer provided verbal instructions to the group of pupils on how to complete the MCI and the measures completed by class teachers were collected.

## RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** *Have there been improvements in both teachers' and pupils' perception of the learning environment as a result of the Attainment Fund activities focused on enhancing nurturing approaches?*

Appropriate data assumptions were explored prior to statistical analysis of the pre and post measures. The output of these allowed for parametric statistics to be conducted, and so independent samples t-tests were used for mean comparisons. Comparisons of means were explored from 2016-2017 for each primary stage across the measures. Considering the numerous

opportunities the schools had accessed, it was anticipated that whole school developments would have ensued and therefore same stage comparisons were viable and should evidence improvements in pupils' and teachers' perceptions. Given the number of variables being compared and therefore the increased likelihood of a Type 1 error, a Bonferroni adjustment was used to raise the level at which results would be accepted as statistically significant to  $p < 0.01$ .

Independent samples t-tests were employed to analyse the MCIs completed by pupils and teachers. In terms of pupils' perception of the learning environment, the results varied depending on the stage of pupils. Significant improvements were found for Primary 4 pupils' perception of the learning environment in terms of enhanced satisfaction and reduced friction (see **Table 1**). For all other primary stages, no significant changes were found.

The teacher-rated MCI did not reveal any significant changes. It should be noted however that teachers' means on the pre-MCI indicated a very positive perception of their learning environment prior to Attainment Fund activities occurring.

**Research Question 2:** *Have pupils' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties reduced?*

SDQs did not reveal significant changes across the primary stages.

**Table 1:** Primary 4 Pupil MCI, mean, independent samples t-test and effect size

Aspects of learning environment	Mean pre (n=51)	Mean post (n=54)	Independent samples t-test	Significance (p) Effect size (d)
Satisfaction	11.08	12.48	t = -2.778	p = .007* d = 0.54
Friction	12.00	9.96	t = 3.169	p = .002* d = 0.62
Competition	12.10	11.85	t = 0.398	p = .691 n.s.
Difficulty	7.27	7.46	t = -0.426	p = .671 n.s.
Cohesion	10.82	10.78	t = -0.066	p = .947 n.s.

\*significant p-values

## DISCUSSION

The results outlined above demonstrate that Primary 4 pupils from the 'key to success' primary schools had improved perceptions of their learning environment following a year of nurture interventions provided through SAC. These findings appear to highlight that schools' efforts to embed nurturing approaches are effectively contributing to a more positive and supportive environment for pupils in school, including those facing poverty-related educational barriers. This is extremely encouraging given that the literature has consistently demonstrated that a positive perception of learning environment increases a pupil's sense of belonging to a school (Stewart, 2008), motivation to achieve (Ireson & Hallam, 2005), engagement and academic attainment (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). A supportive learning environment is also thought to act as a buffer to children's potentially challenging personal circumstances.

No significant changes were found to pupils' social, emotional and behavioural functioning in the SDQ. It should be noted however that as the teacher-rated version of the SDQ was employed for this study, their observations of pupils may not have fully detected sensitive changes in this area of wellbeing. To avoid this, future studies could perhaps utilise the self-report version of the measure, where age appropriate.

The current study has allowed for important progress to be made towards nurture in education becoming a universal concept as opposed to the benefit of only vulnerable pupils, by upskilling whole school staff teams in the theory and practice of nurturing approaches (Mackay, 2015). Furthermore, while there is a wealth of evidence on the positive outcomes achieved from the provision of targeted nurture groups, there is significantly less around whole school nurture provisions. This is regrettable given that nurture groups are not always feasible. Moreover, whole school nurturing approaches can reduce the need for this level of support. The current study goes some way to address this, as well as tackling Mackay et al's call to 'investigate different models in comparison with traditional nurture group structures' (MacKay, Reynolds, & Kearney, 2010).

### Limitations

One possible limitation of this study is that because children had a new class teacher and had most likely moved to a new classroom by the time of post-test, their perception of the learning environment would inevitably differ. Given the shared focus however on nurturing approaches, whole school changes were expected and improvements should have been visible at every stage. With this evaluation returning significant positive trends, this indicates improvements did not happen by chance as children could easily

have disliked their new class. Furthermore, it is unlikely that their classmates changed from year-to-year, nor the curricular areas they engage with, and as demonstrated previously these are very salient aspects of the classroom experience. This therefore means that improvements occurred despite many determinants remaining the same.

Another possible limitation is that the measures of learning environment employed for this evaluation were self-reported by nature and provided only perception data. Self-report perception data is of course confounded by individual respondents' personal beliefs and biases. To minimise this limitation however, both teacher and pupil perceptions of the learning environment were gathered, allowing for triangulation of teachers' views with those of their pupils; therefore meaning the data included in this study came from the whole school population. Furthermore, social desirability effects are to be expected when teachers are reporting on their own classroom. Efforts were made to combat this, by having teachers and pupils complete the measures entirely independently from the external researchers carrying out the study, and assuring all participants that their responses would be anonymised and confidential; this therefore increased the chances of participants providing their honest views within their responses. Generally, the trends found in teachers' perceptions were similar to those of their pupils, which enhanced the reliability of the perception data. As noted in the results however, teachers' perceptions did not change significantly from pre to post-test. This is most likely due to teachers reporting so positively about the learning environment at pre-test, which did not allow for substantial improvements to be evidenced at post-test.

The bespoke approach that was necessary across the schools inevitably led to variation in the way in which they each worked to enhance nurturing approaches and in what they accessed. The current evaluation was limited therefore by only being able to capture the combined efforts across the schools and not the outcomes of any particular activity (i.e. specific outcomes of training around the nurture principles etc.). Moreover, schools were able to access training in the area of literacy during the time period covered within the present evaluation. This cannot be discounted as a potentially confounding variable. It should be noted however that uptake of literacy development opportunities was a voluntary extra and so only a small portion of the schools included in this evaluation accessed these.

In terms of the study's methodology, it was limited by having no matched control schools. This makes it more challenging to attribute the improvements in learning environment to the core package and

bespoke interventions that schools accessed. This was unavoidable however given the exploratory nature of the evaluation. Moreover, other schools in the same local authority that were similar in terms of deprivation, were themselves part of either the 'literacy layer' or 'numeracy layer' of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and so could not provide a suitable control sample given the activities they were engaging in.

### Future recommendations

In relation to the Nurture Logic Model, the results of this evaluation confirm that schools are meeting the anticipated medium term outcomes, i.e. 'Staff members are applying the nurture principles in practice' and 'All schools undertake opportunities for bespoke training based on self-evaluation'. In terms of the longer-term outcomes that are not anticipated until 2020, results suggest that schools are on track to meet these. The data, for example, shows that at least a proportion of children within the nurture layer are showing trends in the desired direction. Future studies could revisit this sample of children and explore the long-term impact of the desired outcomes.

The current study explored the combined impact of a core package and nurture interventions on pupils' perceptions of the learning environment and their social, emotional and behavioural functioning. These areas, while important and appropriate for this evaluation, are not representative of all aspects of health and wellbeing. Further research could therefore seek to explore the impact of such activity on other aspects of health and wellbeing, such as life satisfaction and so on. Moreover, the study did not include an attainment measure pre and/or post-test and so the impact on participants' attainment could not be determined. A recent study however, conducted in a similar local context, demonstrated the positive effect of enhanced nurturing approaches on attainment (MacKay et al., 2010). Future studies could incorporate this into their research design and explore the causal links between the two more explicitly.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this evaluation highlight the benefits of enhancing nurturing approaches in primary schools where a large number of pupils are facing poverty-related educational barriers. Beyond the core package that schools involved in this evaluation accessed, they were also exposed to a range of professional development opportunities and targeted nurture interventions. Combined, these efforts have benefited pupils' experience of the learning environment. This is in accordance with the most recent proposed model of nurture in education; particularly level 1 "nurturing schools and communities", that is intended to benefit all children, not just those who have needs which require access to a more intensive nurture group

setting. A follow up evaluation after some time may be beneficial to explore the extent to which the positive improvements found in this study have been sustained.

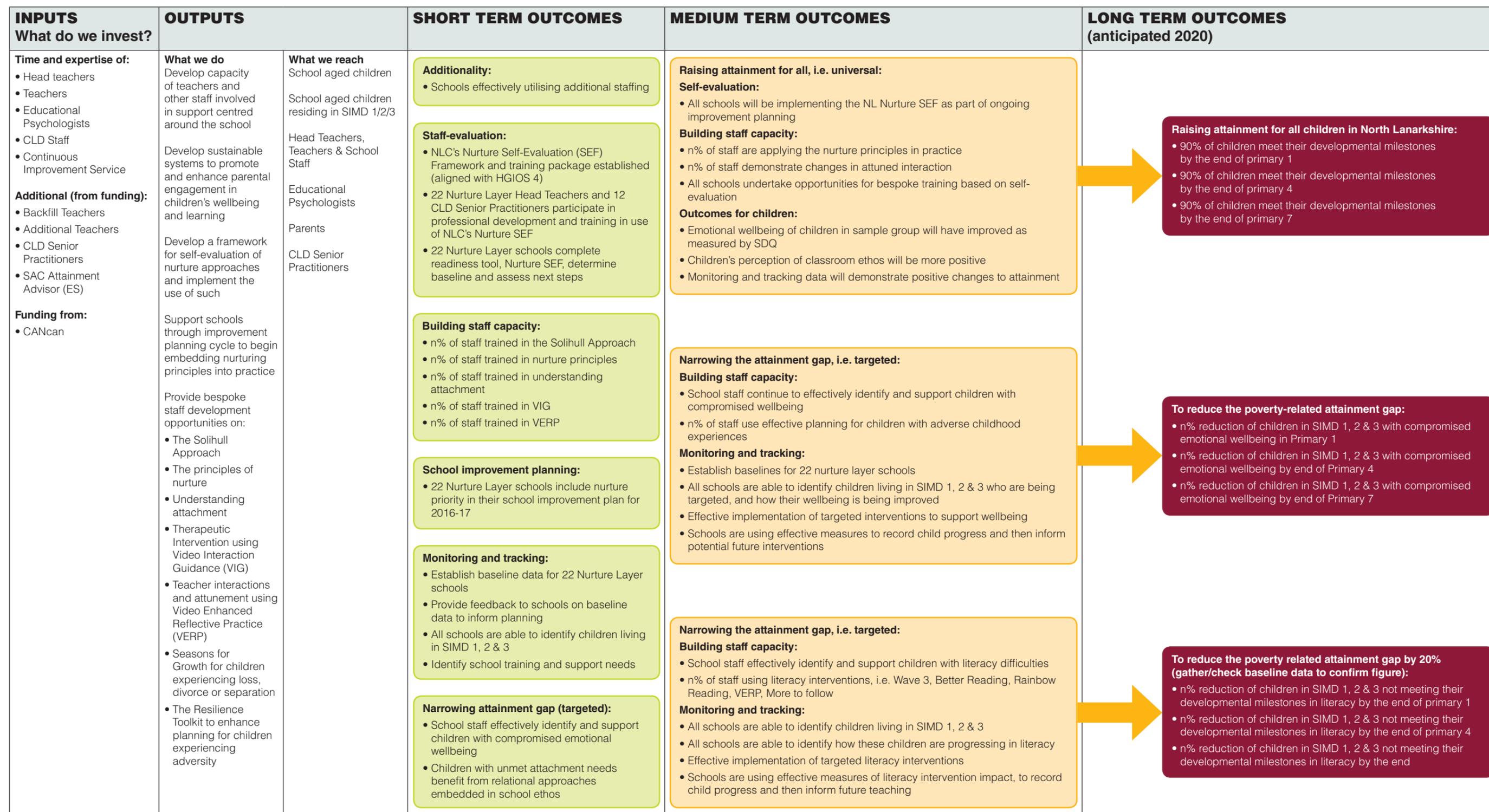
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# APPENDIX 1: CANcan Nurture Logic Model

“To raise attainment and narrow the poverty related attainment gap in North Lanarkshire”



# APPENDIX 2: Framework for implementation – nurture

(Adapted from Fixsen et al., 2009)

STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION	CORE COMPONENT	POSSIBLE TASKS	WHERE ARE WE NOW?	NEXT STEPS
<b>1. Exploration &amp; adoption</b> • Getting ready for change	<b>Readiness and commitment (needs analysis)</b> Develop capacity of teachers and other staff involved in support centred around the school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect data</li> <li>• Gather views</li> <li>• Readiness for change</li> <li>• Involve stakeholders</li> <li>• Evaluation measures</li> </ul>	Use a readiness checklist to assess readiness for change  Gather data from school – SIMD, exclusions, attendance, ASN referrals  Consult with stakeholders on their views on needs of school  Decide on evaluation measures to be used		
	<b>Developing a clear vision</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research evidence</li> <li>• Goodness of fit (evidence and data)</li> <li>• Linking to policies and practices</li> </ul>	Look at research evidence into nurture groups/ nurturing approaches  Decide on whether a NA and/ or NG best fits needs of your context  Carry out a SWOT analysis Link with school's current ethos, priorities, plans		
	<b>Implementation group (timeline, vision, etc)</b>	Set up an Implementation/ Steering Group (consider who to invite)		
<b>2. Installation</b> • Capturing hearts and minds	<b>Building knowledge, understanding and confidence</b>  Staff selection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify appropriate staff to support training, implementation, etc.</li> </ul> Pre and in-service training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness raising (all staff)</li> <li>• SMT involvement</li> <li>• In-depth training for implementation group</li> </ul>	Identify the key staff who will take forward training for staff – in whole school and targeted approaches  Arrange an awareness raising session for all staff on Nurturing Approaches  Ensure that all SMT have an understanding of a NA  Arrange for additional training for those who are more involved in the implementation of Nurture		
	<b>Organisational structures</b>  Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial, organisational, human</li> <li>• Physical capacity of school</li> </ul> Consultation and coaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who will coach</li> <li>• How will they coach</li> </ul>	Explore capacity within school to take NA/NG forward Consider how you can access additional funding for either a NA or NG  Apply for funding for staff/ resources/training  Decide on who is best to take coaching forward, eg. psychological service  Explore whether LA has a model for coaching and support  Consider whether action research might support implementation		

STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION	CORE COMPONENT	POSSIBLE TASKS	WHERE ARE WE NOW?	NEXT STEPS
	<p><b>Policies and procedures</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to check fit with school's current plans and procedures – keep, rebrand or let go of those that don't fit</li> <li>Include on school improvement plan</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure that a nurturing approach fits with current policies and procedures – adapt policies that are congruent with this approach and rebrand or get rid of those that don't fit with this approach</p> <p>Include the implementation of nurture on your SIP</p>		
	<p><b>Evaluation and measurement</b></p>	<p>Decide on what measures will be used to keep track of progress – individual pupil HWB measures, staff attitude, environment audit, parent questionnaires, attainment</p>		
<p><b>3. Initial implementation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Getting the ball rolling</li> </ul>	<p><b>Developing practice (focusing on the vision)</b></p> <p><b>Whole school</b> (vision, roles, tracking, procedures, evaluations)</p> <p><b>Nurture group</b> (identification and assessment, target setting)</p>	<p><b>Whole school</b></p> <p>Identify nurture principles that you will focus on</p> <p>Train whole staff in nurturing approaches</p> <p>Identify implementation group meetings/evaluation points, etc. in school calendar</p> <p>Develop classroom practice around nurturing approaches – discuss these at staff meetings, PRDs, etc.</p> <p>Decide on staff who will monitor progress and support implementation.</p> <p>Discuss and implement nurturing approaches to support pupils – discuss at staged intervention meetings, etc.</p> <p>Develop nurturing communities within the school – break time buddies, family support, groupwork.</p> <p>Discuss NAs and principles at staff meetings, assemblies</p> <p><b>Nurture groups</b></p> <p>Timetable NG staff time for assessment, NG classes, etc.</p> <p>Gather assessment data on children. Discuss children to be included in NG – set up appropriate selection processes</p> <p>Consider how to allow time for mainstream teachers and NG teachers to liaise.</p> <p>Liaise with parents/carers</p> <p>Set clear targets for NG children and review regularly.</p>		
	<p><b>Problem identification and solution finding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accept barriers/problems as part of process</li> <li>Provide opportunities to discuss these and find solutions</li> <li>Continue to gather evidence and data and ensure decisions are based around these</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure coaching/mentoring procedures take place to share successes/ problems</p> <p>Set up opportunities to share classroom experience – teacher learning conversations</p> <p>Set up networking opportunities for staff or embark on an action research group to monitor and evaluate practice</p> <p>Continue to evaluate and measure impact</p>		

STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION	CORE COMPONENT	POSSIBLE TASKS	WHERE ARE WE NOW?	NEXT STEPS
<b>4. Full implementation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making it natural</li> </ul>	<b>Gaining Momentum</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership – keep on agenda</li> <li>• Share aims with all</li> <li>• Update policies</li> <li>• Information sharing</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure the aims of the intervention are understood and shared by all staff, pupils, parents/carers and the wider community including partner agencies. Develop a communication/information sharing strategy.</p> <p>Key members of staff should model the approach – use the relevant language</p> <p>Keep on SMT agenda</p> <p>Update whole staff, pupils parent council on progress using a wide variety of communication channels.</p> <p>Development of an information sheet or information on the website on nurturing approaches for parents/carers</p>		
	<b>Continued training and support for whole school community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning rounds</li> <li>• Involvement of children/yp</li> <li>• Involvement of parents/carers</li> </ul>	<p>Follow up on whole staff training by providing more detailed, needs led training</p> <p>Provide opportunities for staff to observe others lessons (learning rounds), see observation profile</p> <p>Introduce nurturing approach and nurturing principles to children/young person and parents/carers.</p> <p>Highlight and share innovative practice</p>		
	<b>Monitor and review progress</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to gather evidence in relation to progress/ impact</li> <li>• Embed in systems – use language</li> </ul>	<p>Use action research or other evaluative measures to ensure that changes have had an impact</p> <p>Make changes and adapt where necessary</p> <p>Use language associated with a Nurturing approach</p>		
<b>Sustainability</b>	<p>Planning for short and long term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan for ongoing evaluation</li> <li>• Maintain and review systems</li> <li>• Ensuring planning for long term sustainability</li> </ul>	<p>Update evaluations in line with how NA is developing</p> <p>Use self-evaluation to ensure implementation is going well and look at next steps</p> <p>Discuss succession planning for different roles – eg. NG teacher, NA lead.</p>		

# SCOTTISH TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NURTURE GROUPS IN SUPPORTING AUTISTIC CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

Nurture groups (NGs) are recognised as an effective early practice for the development of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Early educators outline enhanced social and emotional development, academic attainment and secure attachments with peers and adults. Nevertheless, there is limited data reporting on the efficacy of this approach for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This small-scale phenomenological study reports Scottish primary teachers' experiences of NGs in promoting wellbeing in autistic pupils. Data were gathered through an online questionnaire. Results were mixed in that they suggest some significant progress in academic attainment, with slight improvements in emotional and social functioning. After the inclusion of pupils in NGs, continued positive impact appeared to persist with both difficulties in emotional expression and in forming secure attachments with peers and adults. This indicates that for good NG practice for autistic pupils there is a need for structural modifications and curriculum adaptations to create an 'autism-friendly' environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) constitutes a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder that becomes evident during early childhood. It is characterised by difficulties in 'social communication' and 'social interaction', accompanied by 'restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Recent research has suggested that approximately one in every 68 children is affected by ASD, with the ratio of males estimated to be about four times higher than females (Baio, 2014). There appears to be a diagnostic gender bias, meaning that girls who meet criteria for ASD are at disproportionate risk of not receiving a clinical diagnosis (Loomes, Hull, & Mandy, 2017). A wide range of comorbidities and feature severity are manifested in each individual with ASD generating a spectrum of difficulties (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007). Despite the fact that there are no specific cognitive reasons for the diverse behavioural representations of ASD (Happé, Ronald, & Plomin, 2006), there is an assumption that the social and the environmental context have a significant impact on the way these features are presented (Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2015).

There is a widely held belief that early years mark a crucial period for young children on the spectrum by significantly affecting the course of their lives (Jones, 2006). In fact, young children with ASD who receive the suggested early intervention increase the likelihood, later in life, of living independently, developing trusting and lasting relationships and securing employment (Howlin, 1997). Notably, the Scottish Government has introduced policies that give high priority to the principles of early intervention and promote the inclusion of children with Additional Support Needs (ASN) into mainstream classrooms (The Scottish Government, 2010). Current estimates state that approximately 70 per cent of children with ASD are taught in mainstream schools across the UK (Department for Education, 2012). However, research has shown that inclusive settings can present numerous challenges for young pupils on the spectrum due to their difficulties understanding the social world and forming attachment relationships (Davidson, 2015). Markedly, it has been shown that children with ASD are approximately 20 times more possible to be socially excluded at mainstream schools compared to their peers (Humphrey, 2008).

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The powerful impact of early attachment relationships on infants' lives was first described in John Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1980). Attachment theory is based on the premise that a consistent nurturing relationship with a sensitive caregiver, usually the mother, is essential for the child's subsequent psychological and interpersonal functioning (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). However, the development of unsatisfactory early attachment is argued to prevent children from developing competence and exploring the surrounding environment (Bowlby, 1980). In fact, studies investigating the quality of early attachment experiences between caregivers and children have found that negative experiences, such as separation, abuse, or neglect could lead to emotional detachment and social difficulties (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005). In accordance with this, Boxall (2002) stated that students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) who are unable to form secure attachments in early stages, experience difficulties in connecting with others, dealing with their own emotions and coping with the social demands of school life (as cited in Billington, 2012).

In contrast to children with SEBD, autistic children struggle to create attachment bonds due to neurodevelopmental difficulties. Historically, children with ASD were assumed to be incapable of building strong attachment relationships with caregivers, due to difficulties in communication and understanding social cues (as cited in Teague, Newman, Tonge, & Gray, 2016). The emergence of these symptoms in the first years of life coincides with the development of attachment relationships leading many researchers to perceive ASD as a disorder of social attachment since its early conceptualisations (as cited in Teague et al., 2016).

Based on an increasing body of research on attachment in ASD, findings indicate that difficulties in social communication and interaction influence the quality of attachment without impeding the formation of attachment relationships altogether (Grzadzinski, Luyster, Spencer, & Lord, 2014; Vivanti & Rogers, 2014). Recent studies give emphasis to the relationship between the attachment system and the early difficulties in social and emotional domains of ASD including emotion recognition, social communication, reciprocity (Cassel et al., 2007; Nuske, Vivanti, & Dissanayake, 2013) and Theory of Mind (ToM; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). These difficulties are considered to be central to typical processes underlying attachment formation (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991). Notably, it is supported that the concept of the 'internal working model' challenges the capacity in children with ASD who are unable to develop or have a delayed ToM and find it difficult to see the world from another perspective (Baron-Cohen et

al., 1985). Moreover, Hobson (2005) proposed that children with ASD lack the vital capacity to experience emotions, which may reduce the likelihood of forming supportive peer relations (Kelly, Garnett, Attwood, & Peterson, 2008). From their findings, Golding and colleagues (2012) proposed that children with insecure attachments feel less in tune with other children and find it hard to form and maintain friendships. Furthermore, mental health issues have been related to a high risk of insecure attachment pattern (Berry & Drake, 2010). Indeed, high levels of anxiety and stress have been found to increase the risk for disruptions to the attachment system (Hallett et al., 2013).

Taking into consideration the increasing number of autistic children attending mainstream schools and the social and emotional challenges that they face when interacting with Typical Development (TD) peers, it is essential that effective intervention practices are identified. Interventions designed to support the emotional and social development of children with ASD are diverse, with an extensive literature devoted to the evaluation of their effectiveness (Odom, Collet-Klingenberg, Rogers, & Hatton, 2010). Recently, an emphasis has been given to NGs that are rooted in evidence-based practices and constitute a school-based early intervention for children whose social, emotional and behavioural needs are too demanding to be met in a mainstream classroom (Davies, 2011). Based on the theoretical framework of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) NGs focus on building a secure base between primary-aged children and an adult figure in school (as cited in Bowlby, 1988). From the initial introduction of NGs in the 1960s by Marjorie Boxall, they were defined as essential provision in supporting young children who were most in need and who displayed complex and compound behaviour (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017). Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in the number of groups, while currently it is estimated that over 2,100 groups are in operation across the UK (<https://nurturegroups.org/what-we-do/faq>).

Thus far a wealth of literature has shown that NGs have a positive effect on the development of children with SEBD (Bennett, 2015; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014). Research has shown that NG provision can lead to improvements in the areas of cognitive and emotional development, behavioural management, social skills (O'Connor & Colwell, 2002; Seth-smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy & Jaffey, 2010) and academic attainment (Reynolds, MacKay, & Kearney, 2009). However, it is recognised that the main contribution of NGs is the promotion of strong and lasting attachment bonds between peers and caregivers through the delivery of a secure base in these children (Garner & Thomas, 2011).

## Research aims

Notwithstanding the general consensus that NGs are effective in meeting the needs of children with SEBDs, there is a limited number of studies reporting the effectiveness of this approach in individuals with ASD. One such study, reported that children with ASD often make good progress in NGs (Boxall & Lucas, 2010). However, they propose that this requires further assessment. Therefore, the aim of this study is to add to the literature of the NGs through a small-scale study by examining Scottish teachers' experiences of running NGs with autistic and non-autistic children. We assume that, since NGs proved to be suitable for children with SEBD, autistic children with corresponding difficulties could also benefit from these nurturing environments. The study was conducted with the following research questions in mind:

- What do the experiences of Scottish teachers tell us about similarities and differences of running NGs for autistic and non-autistic pupils?
- What are the methods they use to support autistic children compared to non-autistic children?
- How do Scottish teachers describe the efficacy of NGs in promoting wellbeing in autistic children?

## METHOD

### Design

The study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to generate sensible understandings (van Manen, 2007). A concurrent mixed-method design was chosen based on the pragmatic approach of collecting the most relevant information to exceed methodological transparency (Cameron, 2011). Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, analysed and mixed at the same phase of the research process providing complementary results (Bryman, 2014).

### Participants

The participants were recruited from the Nurture Group Network (NGN) of Scotland. A study advert was sent out via Facebook groups to invite Scottish primary teachers and teaching assistants (TA) to participate in the research study.

The participants consisted of six primary teachers and two TAs from mainstream and additional support needs (ASN) schools across Scotland. A purposive strategy was employed, thus enabling the researcher to select participants who have direct involvement with an NG provision (Palinkas et al., 2015). All participants met the following inclusion criteria: a) being a teacher or a TA, b) currently employed within a primary school in Scotland, c) currently running NGs and d) having experience of running NGs with both autistic and non-autistic pupils.

## Instrument

A self-administered online survey was constructed on the Qualtrics platform (the instrument can be made available on request to the authors), requesting responders to complete the questionnaire themselves (Meadows, 2003). The questionnaire consisted of 32 both close-ended and open-ended questions focusing on the areas of social interaction, emotional regulation, behavioural management and academic attainments. Items from the Social Skills Teacher Rating Form in TRIAD Social Skills Assessment (TSSA; Stone et al., 2010) have been used for the quantitative questions of the questionnaire to assess autistic pupils in three areas: (a) emotional competence, (b) self-control and management, and (c) social skills.

## Data collection

Data collection was completed over a period of one month. Through the qualitative element of open questions, it was intended to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences about running NGs for autistic and non-autistic pupils. At the same time, the quantitative elements investigated the efficacy of NGs in promoting wellbeing in autistic children. The two methods were operated simultaneously, following a concurrent embedded design.

## Data analysis

Qualitative elements of the questionnaire were analysed using thematic analysis. Following the Braun and Clarke's stages (2006), the analysis began by reading the documents many times enabling the selection of words that were deployed as codes. Then, by sorting and collating all data extracts, themes emerged. The themes were reviewed and assessed to check whether they produce a thematic map depicting relationships among themes and sub-themes. Once the thematic map was formed and themes' titles were defined, a more in-depth data analysis was conducted to get an insight into the exact meaning of each theme.

Respectively, a descriptive analysis was used to present the basic features of the quantitative data providing a simple description of the sample and the elements (Loeb et al., 2017). Quantitative data were analysed with the Microsoft Excel 2016 software. Notably, for each question, a coding scheme was designed that converted all data into a number. Afterwards, bar and pie charts, as well as tables were created for the current study to represent the demographic data of the participants and the changes observed in the performance of autistic children after attending NGs.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

The data gathered (**Table 1**) showed that the majority of participants (N=7) were female, with one male teacher (N=1) participating in the study. Moreover, the majority

**Table 1:** Demographic data of the participants

Participants	Gender	Status	Work experience in NGs	Pupils' age	No of ASD pupils
1	Female	Teacher	1-2 yrs	7-11 yrs	1-2 pupils
2	Female	Teacher	3-5 yrs	3-6 yrs	3-5 pupils
3	Female	TA	1-2 yrs	7-11 yrs	1-2 pupils
4	Female	Teacher	3-5 yrs	7-11 yrs	3-5 pupils
5	Female	Teacher	1-2 yrs	7-11 yrs	1-2 pupils
6	Female	TA	1-2 yrs	3-6 yrs	1-2 pupils
7	Male	Teacher	3-5 yrs	3-6 yrs	3-5 pupils
8	Male	Teacher	3-5 yrs	7-11 yrs	1-2 pupils

**Table 2:** Main domains, themes and subthemes for nurture teachers sharing their practice experiences

Participants	Autistic pupils' performance	Non-autistic pupils' performance	Shared experiences
Barriers faced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggle with interpersonal relationships</li> <li>• Social communication difficulties</li> <li>• Resistance to changes</li> <li>• Emotional expression difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trauma and social-interaction difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify emotions</li> <li>• Behaviour management</li> <li>• Form lasting friendships</li> </ul>
Aggressive outbursts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unexpected actions</li> <li>• Sharing materials</li> <li>• Frustration in social interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trauma increases stress</li> <li>• Negative impact on autistic pupils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical aggression</li> </ul>
Strategies and approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social communication interventions</li> <li>• Positive behaviour interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion-focused interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive behavioural interventions</li> <li>• Visual supports</li> </ul>
Academic progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-targeted area</li> <li>• High academic performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variation in academic performance</li> </ul>	

of participants were primary teachers (N=6) with two teaching assistants (N=2). Half the participants (N=4) reported work experience in NGs for one to two years and the other half (N=4) had work experience involvement for three to five years. Primary teachers (N=3) running NGs for more than three years reported that they have worked with three to five autistic pupils, in contrast with the others (N=5) who have involved one or two autistic pupils in their groups. Finally, a number of responders (N=5) reported that they worked with children aged seven to 11, whereas the rest of the participants (N=3) worked with children between the ages of three and six.

### Qualitative analysis

#### ***Nurture teachers share their practice experiences***

Participants were asked to express their experiences of running NGs with autistic and non-autistic pupils. The main overarching domains to emerge from participants' experiences were autistic pupils' performance, non-autistic pupils' performance, and shared experiences. These overarching domains subsumed four main themes including the barriers faced by children

who attend NGs, the aggressive outbursts that they experience, the strategies and approaches chosen for them and the academic progress they perform (see **Table 2**).

**Autistic pupils' performance:** The first theme to emerge from teachers'/TAs' experiences was barriers faced by autistic pupils. Notably, the majority (N=6) reported that autistic pupils struggle with interpersonal relationships, with half of them (N=3) stating issues of social isolation such as "play by themselves" and "isolation during lunchtime". One participant attributed this behaviour to their inability to read the social cues. The second sub-theme that emerged was difficulties in social communication. Participants (N=3) reported that pupils either struggle to follow verbal commands or display non-compliant behaviours as stated by one participant "they deny following the rules when things don't go their way". Additionally, a number of participants (N=2) recognised that autistic pupils have difficulties dealing with changes while another focused on emotional expression explaining "they find it hard to express how they feel and sometimes feel hard done by".

The second central theme was related to the aggressive outbursts of autistic pupils. The first sub-theme was the pupils' frustration due to unexpected actions. Mainly, one participant expressed that "sometimes they become angry when people enter their personal space or when other children try to bend the rules of games". The second sub-theme sharing materials mentioned by a couple of participants (N=2) explaining that "they become upset when attempting to share resources as they are unable to see why they need to". Additionally, a number of participants (N=4) observed that autistic pupils experience tantrums and aggressive behaviours during social interaction reporting that "often become easily annoyed or frustrated with others who are playing or interacting with them". Moreover, another participant expressed that autistic pupils affected by their peers, as shown here "outbursts from other children have been difficult at times for the ASD...their behaviour is due to that". Although most participants (N=6) reported aggressive behaviours from autistic pupils, two participants reported that aggressive outbursts had not been observed among them.

The third main theme that emerged was referred to the strategies and approaches used by teachers/TAs for autistic pupils in NGs. Social communication interventions were mentioned by several participants (N=3) emphasizing visually supportive strategies, as expressed by one participant here "when communicating with ASC [autism spectrum condition] pupils I use lots of visuals to support communication". Additionally, a couple of participants (N=2) reported the use of positive behaviour interventions such as "social stories".

Academic achievement was the final main theme that emerged from the analysis. Participants (N=3) reported that autistic pupils presented high academic performance. However, other participants (N=3) declared that academic achievement is a non-targeted area for them with expressions such as "I do not aim for academic achievements, in particular with those with severe symptoms" and another "I don't measure academic achievement specifically for the nurture group children". Contrary to this, one participant reported that academic achievement is measured, however, "not a lot is expected of them in terms of academia".

**Non-autistic pupils' performance:** Concerning the barriers faced by non-autistic pupils, only one sub-theme emerged from the collected data. Significantly, one participant explained that pupils who had previously experienced trauma confront difficulties with social interaction. From the second main theme of behavioural outbursts, the first sub-theme focused on those pupils that experience trauma. Notably, one participant reported: "ongoing trauma or difficulties can heighten their stress which leads to random

outbursts of aggression". With the second sub-theme participants referred to the negative impact that non-autistic pupils' outbursts have on autistic pupils. Particularly, one participant stated that "outbursts from other children have been difficult at times for the ASD child". As for the third main theme strategies and approaches, only one participant was different from the others and reported that for non-autistic pupils he uses emotion-focused interventions, such as "I use techniques that will enhance emotional wellbeing such as books for anxiety". Finally, participants (N=2) reported a variation in the academic performance of pupils. One of them explained that variations in academic achievements are related to children's mood, as shown here "Non-ASC pupils may go from a refusal to participate in anything, to being able to engage and complete work".

**Shared experiences:** A couple of participants (N=2) observed similarities in the barriers faced by autistic and non-autistic pupils during their attendance in NGs. The first subtheme that emerged was difficulty identifying emotions, as shown here by one participant "both autistic and non-autistic pupils have challenges in identifying emotions". For the second sub-theme form lasting friendships, one participant explained that "you could easily group together a child with autism and one without who may struggle to make friends and maintain friendships". The last sub-theme that emerged was behavioural management. Particularly, one participant reported that children struggle with challenges stating that: "both the autistic and non-autistic pupils struggle to maintain their behaviour when situations change, or they do not get their own way or they are not chosen to go first". Concerning the aggressive outbursts, only one participant stated that both autistic and non-autistic pupils have a tendency towards physical aggression explaining that they "can throw and hit things and hurt staff and the other children". For the final main theme strategies and approaches, half of the participants (N=4) reported that they use the same strategies for both autistic and non-autistic pupils. Notably one of them reported the use of positive behavioural interventions such as "social stories" and "positive reinforcements", while a couple of them (N=2) expressed their preference in visual supports such as "visual timetables, sand timers, visual clues, photographs".

### ***Need and rationale of nurture groups for ASD***

The data gathered from the participants revealed an interesting theme concerning the need and rationale of NGs for ASD. The main overarching theme to emerge from participants' perceptions was that NGs promote academic achievement and wellbeing in pupils who are in need. This overarching theme subsumed four main themes, the achievement of emotional regulation, forming interpersonal relationships, providing a physical

**Table 3:** Main themes and subthemes for the need and rationale of NGs for ASD

Promoting academic achievement and wellbeing	
Emotional regulation	Relieve anxiety Increase emotional expression Consistent environment
Interpersonal relationships	A two-way process
Physical environment	Non-threatening place Thriving learning environment Visually supportive environment
Academic attainment	Accessibility in mainstream classes New instrument to capture change Autism training for teachers

environment and promoting academic attainment (see **Table 3**). These main themes and subthemes are expanded with illustrations from participants.

The first theme to emerge from participants' experiences was the contribution of NGs in promoting emotional regulation to children who are in need. Significantly, some participants (N=2) reported that NGs increase the emotional expression of children while others (N=2) expressed that the nature of groups contributes to relieve anxiety and stress levels. Moreover, half of the participants (N=4) associated autistic children's emotional wellbeing with the consistency of the environment stated that: "including ASD children could increase their emotional wellbeing, a small group which is structured, consistent and predictable, with constant adults".

The second theme that emerged from the majority of participants (N=6) was the ability of children forming interpersonal relationships in NGs. Notably, participants reported that a two-way process is taking place with some (N=2) mentioning that teachers nurture a trusting environment and others (N=4) that such an environment enables young children to form relational attachments with peers and staff.

The third central theme that emerged related to the structure and design of the physical environment. More than half the participants (N=5) stated that NGs offer a non-threatening place that "makes children feel safe". Moreover, one participant added that NGs are considered as a supportive learning environment where children can "thrive, develop and learn". However, concerning the impact of the physical environment on autistic pupils, two participants reported the necessity for adaptations to meet the specific needs of these pupils. Indeed, one of them proposed the creation of a visually supportive environment, as shown here: "Nurture groups are not specifically designed to create an appropriate space for children with ASD, other strategies need to be in place as well – environmental factors, visual supports and communication supports must be in place to support ASC."

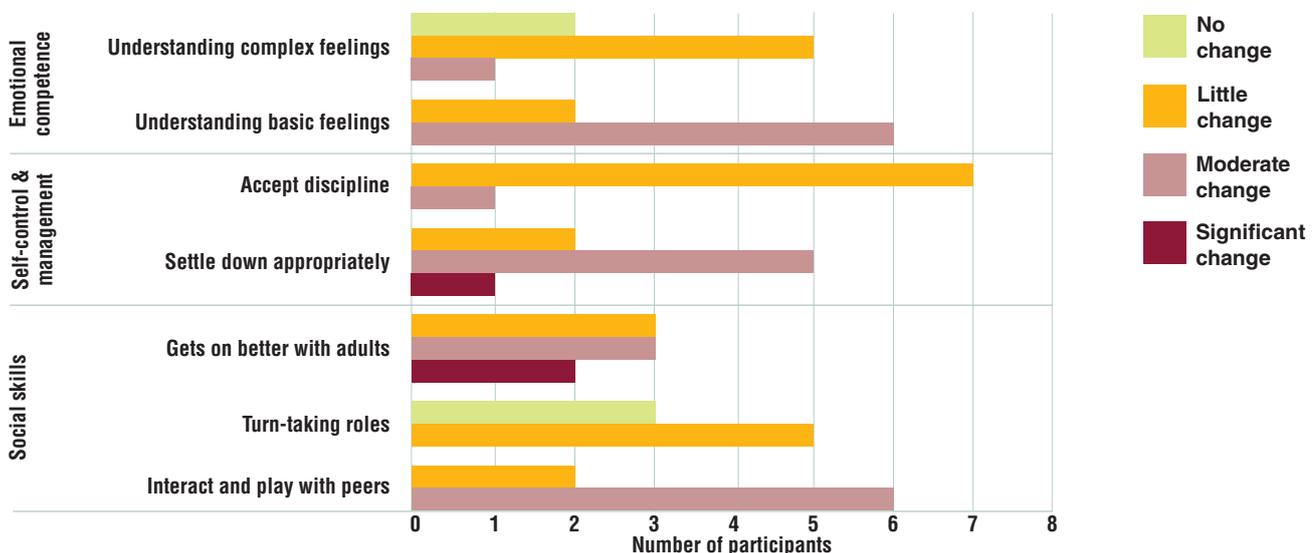
Finally, the last theme that emerged was the provision of academic attainment. Most participants (N=5) expressed that NGs offer accessibility to mainstream classes by "supporting transitions" and "accessing the curriculum in a modified setting". Nevertheless, despite that, almost all participants (N=7) reported that they use the Boxall Profile instrument for assessing performance, a significant number of them (N=5) claimed that the current instrument was not sensitive enough and stated that: "there are elements included which ASC pupils will never be able to achieve or improve upon since they are highly affected by their condition", while others (N=2) underlined the need for additional autism training stating that this would enable nurture teachers "to respond to autistic pupils' special interests."

**Descriptive analysis**

**Participants' perception about the efficacy of nurture groups in autistic pupils**

Participants were asked to evaluate the progress of autistic pupils' performance after attending NGs. The bar chart (see **Figure 1**) provides information about the level of change in the areas of emotional competence,

**Figure 1:** Changes in autistic pupils' performance



self-control and management and social skills (see also **Appendix 1**).

**Emotional competence:** According to participant responses, autistic children experience only “little change” in their emotional competence. Notably, the overwhelming majority (N=6) reported that autistic children experienced “moderate change” in understanding the basic emotions such as sad, happy and angry, while a couple of participants (N=2) noticed only “little change”. The statement understands complex feelings received ambivalent responses with many participants (N=5) answered that pupils had “little change”, others (N=2) reported “no change” in pupils’ performance, whereas only one participant declared that autistic children experienced “moderate change” in understanding complex feelings.

**Self-control and management:** The results illustrated that there have been “moderate changes” in pupils’ behavioural management. Markedly, the chart shows that more than half of participants (N=5) responded that autistic children have changed “moderately” when they are asked to settle down quietly and appropriately in nurture classrooms. In contrast, the statement accepts discipline had the lowest score with almost all participants (N=7) declared only “little change” contrary to one participant who stated that children had “moderate change” in their behaviour.

**Social skills:** The participant responses demonstrate that autistic children experience on average “little change” concerning their social skills. Particularly, significant improvements have been observed in the way that autistic children interact and play with their peers. The vast majority of participants (N=6) answered that the interactions among children have changed “moderately”, while only a few of them (N=2) stated “little change”. The most striking improvement in autistic pupils’ performance is their relationship with caregivers/adults. It is evident that opinions are split with some participants (N=2) mentioning “significant changes”, others (N=3) reported “moderate change”, and the rest (N=3) noticed only “little change”. Meanwhile, the social skill of turn-taking roles during playtime received the lowest score with more than the half (N=5) reported “little change” while the rest of the participants (N=3) observed “no change” in their autistic pupils.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study we have reported on Scottish teachers’ experiences of running NGs with both autistic and non-autistic children. Specifically, we reported perceptions of NGs’ effectiveness in enhancing autistic pupils’ wellbeing. To date, research on pupils with SEBD purports that NGs strengthen the ability of pupils in recognising, understanding and expressing their emotions (Cooper & Cefai, 2013). Therefore, we assumed that autistic

pupils would be able to enhance their emotional wellbeing in NGs, since they are designed to provide emotional development. In contrast to this, our findings indicate that autistic pupils continue to face difficulties expressing and identifying complex emotions. However, moderate changes have been reported in relation to understanding basic emotions supporting the results of Baron-Cohen, Spitz and Cross’s study (1993) who found improvements in recognising basic emotional expressions. Additionally, difficulties in forming and maintaining lasting friendships were also reported by participants for autistic pupils, which could be linked to their challenges in emotional expression. In fact, earlier studies confirmed the above assumption stating that difficulties expressing feelings of affection may reduce the likelihood of forming supportive peer relations thereby leading to a more impersonal perception of friendship (Hobson, 1986; Kelly et al., 2008). To further verify this view, participants reported that autistic pupils struggle with interpersonal relationships stating issues of social isolation due to their inability reading others’ mental states and thoughts. At the same time, studies have verified that NGs strengthen the socio-emotional skills of children who have experienced early traumatic situations by offering a secure base for building relationships (Seth-Smith et al., 2010). Henceforth, questions arise as to whether a nurturing environment, whose ultimate purpose is to create lasting relationships and bonds, could eventually benefit children with neurodevelopmental difficulties.

Additionally, participants reported that moderate improvements have been observed in the behavioural skills of autistic children following their inclusion in NGs. Of particular interest, positive changes in calming behaviours have been observed when children are asked to settle down after entering the nurturing classroom. However, we found that NGs had disappointing outcomes as they did not achieve positive changes in autistic pupils towards accepting discipline, while little changes have been reported in the way that autistic children interact with peers during play time. The only slight improvement in such behaviour could be explained by the difficulty of ASD pupils in interpreting social cues. Indeed, individuals with ASD are often unaware of the consequences of their actions and the impact of their behaviour since they struggle to understand the intentions of other people (Jones, Webb, Estes, & Dawson, 2013). In contrast to this, studies indicated that several interventions, including positive reinforcements, precise requests and clear behaviour rules, have reduced markedly the behavioural difficulties of children with SEBD (Fletcher-Campbell & Wilkin, 2003; Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). In the view of these, questions arise about the suitability of standard NGs to address the behavioural difficulties of ASD pupils.

Dodge, Dishion and Lansford (2006) proposed that aggressive pupils tend to associate with aggressive peers, increasing the risk of subsequent disruptive behaviour and violence. In accordance with this, our findings indicate increased levels of aggressive behaviour for both autistic and non-autistic pupils. However, we found that autistic children are affected by the aggressive behaviours by non-autistic classmates. This, in turn, leads them to manifest outbursts, tantrums, aggression and subsequent meltdowns, raising concerns about the coexistence of autistic and non-autistic pupils in NGs. Moreover, our findings indicate that the act of sharing personal belongings appears to trigger autistic pupils' outbursts. Our findings lend support to explanation given by Sandison (2016) that autistic pupils have difficulty in sharing materials and personal belongings because it interrupts their repetitive patterns and routines. Further to this, our findings revealed that autistic children, under the age of six, were reported to display the greatest challenge with the process of sharing and show high rates of aggressive behaviours compared to older ones (above seven years old). We speculate that this may be due to the fact that older children are likely to attend NGs for a longer period than younger children, with behavioural improvements being more apparent. This, however, requires further investigation.

Several studies have found that academic achievements have been significantly improved after an NG intervention (Hosie, 2013; MacKay, Reynolds, & Kearney, 2010; Seth-Smith et al., 2010). In the current study, this is not so clear-cut with reports that non-autistic peers exhibit variations in their academic performance. At the same time, our findings indicate high academic performance in autistic children during their participation within the NG. However, of some concern we found a shared expressed view of low academic expectations for autistic pupils, thereby supporting Nason's claim of running the risk of letting the difficulty become a liability for the child (Nason, 2014). As such, we propose that the autism diagnosis itself may place a barrier to academic achievement.

Of particular interest, our findings indicate factors that may be attributed to the reduced effectiveness of NGs in autistic children. Specifically, we found that the majority of participants viewed the Boxall Profile as not adequate for measuring progress in ASD pupils with one of them stating that the Boxall Profile contains elements that ASD pupils are not able to achieve because of their condition. However, this is not isolated to autistic pupils, since children with a range of difficulties may not be offered appropriate assessments tools to measure their progress (Cumming & Rodriguez, 2013). Indeed, the exclusion of these pupils from the traditional measures of achievement constitutes a common issue across the mainstream school settings (Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Morse, 2005). As a

result, the status of academic attainment for pupils with ASD and other difficulties is frequently unknown.

In addition, our findings reveal that the NG curriculum does not take into consideration the scattered ASD profile of skills, strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, an adapted curriculum and assessment tools are required to enable teachers to measure the performance of autistic children and allow for accurate assessment of the efficacy of NGs. Specifically, there is a high need for a unique 'autism curriculum', which will capture not only children's learning needs but will also address the social, emotional and communication needs of children and young people with autism to nurture their independence and wellbeing.

Along the same lines, our findings indicate that there are concerns that many nurture teachers are not appropriately qualified for ASD pupils. This raises a number of concerns as to autistic pupils' vulnerability when placed in NGs with non-autistic SEBD pupils supported by non-ASD trained teachers. Indeed, there is a high probability for autistic children to be included in nurturing classes where teachers have not received the appropriate training to support them effectively. Under these circumstances, continuous reviews should be conducted concerning the ongoing training of nurture teachers. It may be necessary to develop a set of the ASD qualifications required by teachers who support autistic pupils within NGs. Moreover, specific policy guidance and legislation should be put in place to make this a requirement of all NG teachers to deliver proper provision and efficient interventions. We propose that NGs that include autistic pupils should be made accessible and autism friendly. Therefore, nurture teachers should have an awareness of interventions such as the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH; Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2005) and specific strategies including visual supports in order to scaffold social communication and aid executive planning skills. Additionally, theory of mind, social rules and perspective taking should be supported with individualised social stories (Gray & Garand, 1993). These approaches play to the visual strengths while offering support for relational needs that are the main focus of NGs.

Equally important is the necessity for structural adaptations to meet the unique needs of ASD pupils. Research has shown that the predictability and consistency of a nurturing environment enables pupils to enhance their emotional wellbeing and alleviate the levels of anxiety (van Steensel, Bögels, & Perrin, 2011). However, the range of comorbidities that characterise pupils with ASD underlines the need for adjustments in the physical environment. Adaptations and modifications of the classroom organisation have been

proposed to increase autistic pupils' skill acquisition and lower their level of stress and anxiety. In fact, visual clarity is a key priority in setting up an accessible and supportive learning environment for pupils with ASD. Creating a well-designed nurturing classroom that has clearly defined workstations and visual cues may lead to increased independence and great social outcomes for pupils on the autism spectrum. Under these circumstances, more effort and work need to be done to establish an 'autism friendly' social environment within nurturing classrooms (Gregor & Campbell, 2001; Hinton, Sofronoff, & Sheffield, 2008).

### Research limitations

The findings of the current study should be interpreted with caution in view of a number of limitations, particularly the small sample size. In addition, the response rate was initially low, thus preventing generalisation from results. Another methodological limitation of the study is that it is based on the subjective experiences of teachers and as such these are open to bias. Moreover, the use of a second instrument, such as interviews, could have contributed to cross-validate the results and strengthen their credibility. Finally, a further limitation of the research lies in the fact that the demographic characteristics of autistic children such as cognitive development, comorbidities and gender, fall outside the scope of this research thus limiting a more in-depth investigation that could bring to the forefront more significant results.

### Future recommendations

The study raises a number of opportunities for future research, both in terms of theory development and concept validation. To begin with, more research will be necessary to refine and further elaborate the novel findings. Notably, quantitative and qualitative studies should be conducted to carry out a more in-depth research on the subject and to cross-validate the current results. Furthermore, given the limitations of this research, it would be valuable to explore on a larger scale the views of teachers and TAs in relation to their experiences of running NGs with autistic children. Third, since the investigation of the present study was limited to the Scottish context, future investigations would be valuable to explore the efficacy of NGs in autistic pupils across different local contexts. Furthermore, significant variables such as the cognitive development of autistic children, the comorbidities they might experience and their gender, should be examined thoroughly to determine effects on their performance. To conclude, although the current research has examined to some extent the ASD training of staff running NGs, this remains an area for further research. The findings of this study suggest that the qualifications of nurture teachers vary a great deal and there is potential for further development. Thus, future research would be valuable to examine nurture teachers' and TAs' training towards ASD and effective practices.

## CONCLUSION

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to explore the effectiveness of NGs for autistic pupils from the teachers' perspectives. A key finding demonstrates slight improvements in the areas of social and emotional development, which is of particular importance for autistic pupils. Importantly, mixed ASD and SEBD NGs groups indicate that aggressive behaviours in autistic pupils are intensified as a direct consequence of observing outbursts of their peers. Therefore, the study raises questions in the educational community about the use of interventions, such as NGs, that have not been adapted to meet the autism profile and as a consequence may not be adequately designed to support children with ASD. In fact, the use of interventions that have proven their effectiveness is significantly crucial for the ASD community, which has long been plagued by the implementation of unsupported and often controversial interventions (Simpson, 2005). Notably, as part of legislation under the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the field of education requires the use of evidence-based practices to support learning and emotional-social development of children (as cited in Lindgren & Doobay, 2011). Thus, the present investigation raises concerns about the participation of autistic children in non-adapted NGs and proposes that legislative modifications and adaptations of the nurturing environment might need to take place. However, it is possible that suggested adaptations and modifications to NGs may or may not be effective in providing an effective intervention for young autistic pupils. Further thorough research is necessary in this area.

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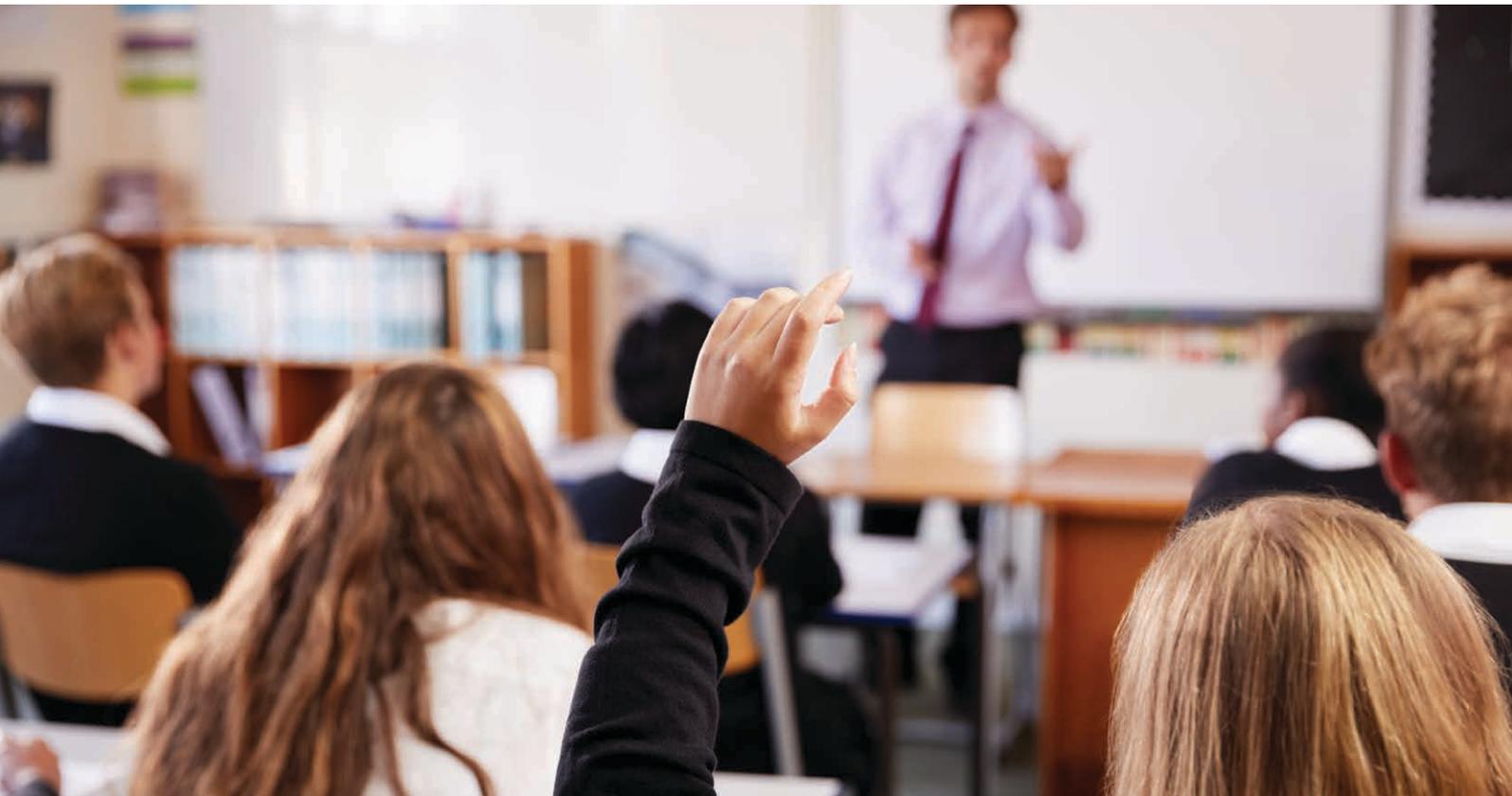
# APPENDIX 1: Raw quantitative data

<b>IMPROVEMENTS</b>	<b>No change</b>	<b>Little change</b>	<b>Quite a bit of change</b>	<b>Significant change</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>Emotional competence</b>					
Understands complex feelings	2	5	1	0	
Understands basic feelings	0	2	6	0	
Average of emotional competence					2.125
<b>Self-control and management</b>					
Accepts discipline	0	7	1	0	
Settles down appropriately	0	2	5	1	
Average self-control and management					2.51
<b>Social skills</b>					
Gets on better with adults	0	3	3	2	
Turn-taking roles	3	5	0	0	
Interacts and play with peers	0	2	6	0	
Average of social skills					2.325

<b>EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Total average</b>
Eye contact	2.25	2.125
Understands facial expressions	2.125	2.125
Understands body language	2	2.125
Uses facial expressions	1.875	2.125
Identifies own feelings	2.25	2.125
Understands basic feelings	2.75	2.125
Understands complex feelings	1.875	2.125
Considers others' feelings	1.875	2.125
	<b>2.125</b>	

<b>SELF-CONTROL AND MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Total average</b>
Accept discipline	2.125	2.509
Settle down appropriately	2.875	2.509
Stay on task more than 5m	2.625	2.509
Work on task until the end	2.625	2.509
Ask for permission	2.625	2.509
Accept changes	2.625	2.509
Not seek confrontation	2.625	2.509
Socially accepted behaviour	2.5	2.509
Maintain appropriate behaviour	2.5	2.509
Abide by rules	2.625	2.509
Stays in designated areas	2.5	2.509
Resolves problems with peers	2.25	2.509
Takes time to calm down	2.375	2.509
Control emotions when issues arise	2.25	2.509
	<b>2.509</b>	

<b>SOCIAL SKILLS</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Total average</b>
Gets on better with adults	2.875	2.325
Interacts and play with peers	2.75	2.325
Accommodate others in activities	2.5	2.325
Work with others	2.5	2.325
Ask and wait for answer	2.5	2.325
Self-reliant in hygiene and basic needs	2.5	2.325
Shares equipment	2.375	2.325
Maintains reciprocal friendships	2.375	2.325
Makes and accepts physical contact	2.375	2.325
Collaborative play	2.25	2.325
Asks permission to use objects	2.25	2.325
Shows empathy and comforts playmates	2.125	2.325
Uses verbal/non-verbal language	2	2.325
Copes with many people	1.875	2.325
Turn-taking roles	1.625	2.325
	<b>2.325</b>	



## **ABOUT NURTUREUK**

Nurture**uk** works tirelessly to promote access to education for all. With increasing numbers of children and young people affected by social, emotional and behavioural difficulties inhibiting their progress and limiting their life chances, nurture**uk** has developed a range of interventions and support to give disadvantaged children and young people the opportunity to be the best they can be.

Whether it is delivering certified training, supporting whole school or authority-wide nurturing schools or promoting evidence-based research, nurture**uk** is providing quality support and resources to make nurturing provision a reality for pupils across the UK and beyond.

If you need further information, please get in touch:

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