



# The International Journal of Nurture in Education

## In this issue:

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Nurture group implementation  
in Montreal

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School functioning and  
developmental trauma

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Whole-school approaches  
and ethos

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Reducing school exclusions  
and youth violence

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*Supporting Adolescents  
& Teenagers with Stress  
& Anxiety* book review

## The International Journal of Nurture in Education

Publisher: nurtureuk

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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 are first seen by the editor who will decide whether or not the article will be considered for review.

They then go through a rigorous double-blind review process where both the author and the reviewer remain anonymous throughout the evaluation.

More information on the review process can be found at: <https://www.nurtureuk.org/research-evidence/international-journal-of-nurture-in-education/#guidelines>

### Author guidelines

The call for papers for the Volume 9 of the International Journal of Nurture in Education will be open from 7 November 2022 to 6 February 2023. A guide for authors wishing to submit their research is accessible at: <https://www.nurtureuk.org/research-evidence/international-journal-of-nurture-in-education/#guidelines>

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Published by The Nurture Group Network Limited Charity Registration No. 1115972

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## Dr Patty Cloran

Patty is a doctoral student in psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Prior to completing their PhD, Patty worked as a consultant for the inclusion of neurodivergent students in childcare centres, elementary schools and high schools across the province of Quebec.

## Dr Larissa Cunningham

Larissa is an educational psychologist working in Glasgow. They are passionate about nurture and early years and are part of these two strategic City Lead Groups within Glasgow. Before moving to Scotland, Larissa worked as an educational psychologist in Portsmouth and led on their Attachment Aware Schools project.

## Dr Karen O'Farrell

Karen is an educational psychologist working for Southampton City Council and currently holds a specialism role for Post-16 within the psychology service. After being a primary school teacher for many years, she completed her doctoral training in educational psychology at the University of Southampton.

## Dr Jana Kreppner

Jana's research focuses on the role of social experiences in typical and atypical development. They have expertise in the long-term impact of early institutional deprivation on development, as well as in children and young people's experiences within families (eg, attachment, parenting) and schools (peers, friends, school community).

## Dr Brettany K Hartwell

Brettany (Bee) is a practising educational psychologist (EP) and an academic tutor for the EP doctoral training course at the University of Southampton. They are interested in evolving research and practice across many areas of learning and wellbeing, especially compassionate, collaborative and community-focused change.

## Andrea Janet Middleton

Andrea previously worked in primary school settings where they piloted and led several nurture groups and whole-school pastoral support offerings. They hold an MA in Education from Edge Hill University and have published research papers on various aspects of nurture practice. They are currently working as a lead consultant for nurtureuk's Violence Reduction Unit projects in London and Kent.

## Dr Maria Pace

Maria is an education officer at the National School Support Services within the Ministry of Education, Sports, Youths, Research and Innovation in Malta. They previously worked as a primary school teacher and as a nurture group teacher. Their research interests include the wellbeing of children, emotional literacy, nurture approaches in schools, student voice and inclusive education.

## Dr Mélina Rivard

Mélina is a psychologist, professor and researcher in the Department of Psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Their research focuses on autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability and the evaluation of community-based early intervention programmes.

# Welcome

**It is with great pleasure that I introduce the eighth volume of the *International Journal of Nurture in Education*.**

As we move tentatively into a context where the most significant of Covid-19 restrictions appear to be behind us, an awareness of the subsequent ripples continuing to impact upon both learners and practitioners is now developing. The following months and years look like being a challenging time for children and young people who have experienced traumatic disruption to their development and learning. The adults who support them are also facing many challenges as a result of the pandemic, whilst also needing to develop their practice in light of the needs of children and young people.

Within this environment, combined with increasingly hostile effects of national and international events, the need for nurturing approaches remains paramount and it is my belief that our belief in, and passion for, nurture is an important vision which sustains and bonds us together as a community of practitioners.

To help support us and develop our practice I am very pleased to present five new articles from colleagues within the nurturing community.

Patty Cloran and colleagues in Canada have contributed two articles to this volume which examine the implementation of nurture groups in their country. The first article offers us a deep exploration of the implementation of nurture group practice and helps us to understand the ways in which practice is developing, as well as the facilitators and challenges to implementing nurture group practice in the light of Cooper and Whitebread's (2007) work examining different manifestations of nurture group practice.

Their second article adds to the growing evidence of the effectiveness of nurture group practice in developing the social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) competencies of children and young people. Their research examines the profiles

of nurture group participants in two settings in Montreal and gives us a clear understanding of their development following a year of work within a nurture group.

Maria Pace reports on research carried out in Malta looking at the role of practitioners leading nurture practice in primary and secondary school settings. This research builds on previous research in other countries, identifying the experiences of nurture practitioners and the characteristics which are central to their role.

Karen O'Farrell and colleagues present us with an examination of an English secondary school which has been awarded nurtureuk's Nurturing Schools Award, and the relation between the nurture group and whole-school practice. This article adds to the growing understanding of the way in which the effectiveness of nurture group practice is closely linked to wider school practice and ethos. Using data gathered from both pupils and staff in the school, this case study offers us some key principles relating to whole-school values and systems, leadership, and practical implementation of nurturing practice, through which to understand successful school approaches to nurture.

Andrea Middleton offers an insight into some of the valuable work being carried out by nurtureuk as part of two regional Violence Reduction Unit projects. Data was gathered from lead school practitioners involved in these projects to understand their perspectives on the impact of the practice on their settings and the young people and families involved. The findings offer strong support for these projects, as well as providing a common thread through all of the articles in this volume of the *International Journal of Nurture in Education* in which the importance of relationships between pupils, their families and practitioners is emphasised.

This volume of the journal is also the first to offer a book review, which I hope that you find useful. We would like to include book reviews in future volumes and I would welcome expressions of

interest from anyone who would like to review a publication for the next edition of the **International Journal of Nurture in Education**. Equally, if you have a recently published book which you think would be of interest to our readers, please do contact me.

Readers may notice some minor additions to articles in the journal and changes to the journal website, as we aiming to improve the searchability of the journal and therefore increase article reach and recognition for article authors. We are hoping to register the **International Journal of Nurture in Education** with the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) very soon and hope that this will result in an improvement in articles being clearly identified in library catalogues.

Please do remember that at the **International Journal of Nurture in Education** we are committed to nurturing authors. For authors who submit an article we offer constructive feedback and timely review process and a direct conversation with the editor – I look forward to receiving your articles for Volume 9, to be published in 2023.

### **Tristan Middleton**

Editor of the International Journal  
of Nurture in Education

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## **References**

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

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# Classroom as a secure base and safe haven: Nurture Group implementation in two Montreal schools

Patty Cloran, Mélina Rivard and Andrew Bennett

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Keywords: nurture groups, implementation, attunement, attachment

Submitted: 1 December 2021 Accepted for publication: 4 February 2022

## Abstract

Nurture Groups (NGs) are a school-based intervention for children who missed out on healthy early attachment experiences and who, as a result, present with marked impairments in social, emotional and behavioural functioning upon school entry. Researchers have consistently found that students are significantly more likely to exhibit improvements in school functioning by attending a NG. However, broad theoretical guidelines and a paucity of research on fidelity of implementation to the classic NG model make it difficult to know which elements of NGs are most responsible for its positive outcomes. To begin to address gaps in the research, the overarching objective of the present study was to produce a systematic and concrete description of NG implementation in two Montreal, Quebec-based schools. Overall, results revealed only modest departures from the classic model in organisation, resources and teaching practices within this NG variant. A subsequent companion study will evaluate student outcomes in response to this variant model.

**Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

## Classroom as a secure base and safe haven: Nurture Group implementation in two Montreal schools

In the 1960s, educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall introduced the idea of NGs in response to the growing number of children who were struggling to meet basic grade-level behavioural and academic expectations in the inner-city elementary schools of London (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007; Lucas, 2019). The rationale for these groups was based primarily on the belief that children who miss out on healthy early attachment experiences develop negative internal working models of the self (eg, as unworthy, unwanted, defective) and of others (eg, as unavailable, unresponsive, rejecting) and, consequently, are less prepared to cope with the emotional and practical demands of

school life (Boxall & Lucas, 2010; Geddes, 2017). Given this emphasis on the compromising effects of a negative working model of attachment, NGs were designed to offer reparative attachment experiences within the school setting (Bennathan, 2012). More specifically, Boxall sought to provide children with the opportunity to re-experience early nurturing care in a safe, predictable environment wherein the development of a secure and trusting relationship with a secondary attachment figure (ie, the teacher) would act as a vehicle for improved self-regulation, self-worth and overall school functioning.

Boxall's conceptualisation of NGs came to life in the 1970s, with Sylvia Lucas becoming the first nurture teacher. Through interactions between Boxall, Lucas and other early collaborators, NGs

were formalised into the *classic* model known today (Lucas, 2019). Operationally, the classic NG is described as a short-term intervention provided by a teacher and a teaching assistant to four to eight-year-olds in class groups of 10 to 12 students (Bennathan, 2012; Boxall & Lucas, 2010). The intervention runs for four-and-a-half days per week in the children's community schools and provides a structured intervention involving academic, social-emotional learning activities and opportunities for play (Colley, 2017; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007). Importantly, children are not held to grade-level standards and staff are non-judgmental in their responses to students' learning limitations. NGs offer a balance of educational, domestic and play experiences aimed at supporting the development of the children's relationships with the staff and with each other (Colley, 2017). There is an emphasis on the adults engaging with the children in reciprocal, shared activities (eg, meals/reading/talking about events and feelings) that staff use as opportunities to show interest in the children's external and internal worlds (Doyle, 2003). The classic NG combines standard classroom features with homey décor and furnishings (eg, couch, dining table, play area). In order to maintain a sense of belonging to their homeroom, students remain on their mainstream class list and present themselves each morning for attendance. Additionally, students participate in lessons in their mainstream class for one afternoon per week. Typically, children attend the NG for three to four school terms before returning to their mainstream class on a full-time basis. A return to their mainstream class is treated as a gradual transition process to facilitate student adjustment and begin to transfer attachments from NG staff to the mainstream class teacher (Bennathan, 2012).

Today, nearly five decades after the establishment of the first NG, more than 2,000 schools across the United Kingdom have adopted NGs as part of their response continuum for vulnerable and mistreated children (nurtureuk, 2019). Moreover, researchers focusing on the intervention's efficacy have consistently found that students who participate in a NG programme for at least two terms are significantly more likely to demonstrate improvements in school functioning than students who remain in their mainstream classrooms (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014; Seth-Smith et al, 2010; Shaver & McClatchey,

2013). Unfortunately, the increasing popularity and institutional support for NGs has not yet inspired investigators to systematically address the question of *implementation fidelity* (ie, the degree to which a NG reflects the theoretical origins and organisational features of Boxall's classic model) despite this issue having been identified as a key research need (Balisteri, 2016; Fraser-Smith & Henry, 2016). There is also a paucity of research explicitly linking positive student outcomes to specific, measurable practices within NGs (Bennett, 2015; Kearny & Nowek, 2019). This gap in the literature likely reflects a lack of clearly defined expectations for NG personnel.

The limited specificity of NG pedagogical guidelines is readily illustrated by consideration of the *Six Nurture Principles for Learning*, intended to inform daily classroom practices: (1) learning and achievement is enhanced through meeting social, emotional and cognitive needs, (2) how we communicate impacts on mental health, learning and achievement, (3) nurture cultures promote reflective practices, (4) self-esteem and a sense of identity are key to positive mental health and wellbeing, (5) feeling emotionally safe is essential for mental health, learning and achievement, and (6) celebration of diversity enriches the community and enhances learning (Nurture International, 2021). Although these principles readily evoke associations to foundational concepts in child development, they do not lend themselves to easy or uniform operationalisation. Similarly, NG curricula is of necessity linked to the national or regional educational guidelines for the countries in which the NG is located (eg, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Canada, New Zealand) and, as such, varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007).

As a result, school boards in different countries have implemented versions of NGs and adjusted some of their organisational elements to meet the needs of the communities they represent (Bégin et al, 2020; Bishop, 2008; Cooper, 2004). This way of responding to the lack of specificity in NG operationalisation has led to the emergence of several 'local variants' over the years that depart from the classic NG model (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Middleton, 2021). Without greater clarity around the explicit practices that comprise an effective NG, it is difficult for school

board stakeholders to reliably replicate its most essential ingredients (Breitenstein et al, 2010). Thus, the goal of the present study was to provide a detailed account of NG implementation in two Montreal-based schools in order to describe how NGs outside the UK are being operationalised, as well as to begin to connect specific practices within NGs to the meaningful improvements in school functioning demonstrated by students who have graduated from an NG.

## Research to date: NG implementation and fidelity

To date, there are no published studies that have investigated fidelity to both the organisational and interventional features of classic NGs. However, one study indirectly measured organisational fidelity to the *Procedures for the Operation of Secondary Nurture Bases* established by the Glasgow City Council Education Services (2017). Grantham and Primsore (2017) interviewed personnel from seven secondary-level NGs to evaluate the following: (a) adherence to intake and discharge procedures, (b) staff training, (c) referral protocols, (d) student ages, (e) pre- and post-intervention measures, (f) number of terms a student remained in the programme, (g) frequency of meetings between leadership team and classroom personnel, and (h) parental involvement. Overall, considerable variability in organisational fidelity emerged across NGs. These results are not surprising given recent evidence that contained class groups bearing the name 'NG' often differ in the extent to which they adhere to the theoretical and practical underpinnings of Boxall's classic NG (Bennett, 2015; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Middleton, 2021).

Also not surprising, given the absence of concrete, uniform expectations for NG personnel, is that only a few studies have specifically examined teacher behaviour within the NG classroom. One example is the research of Colwell and O'Connor (2003) which found that, relative to their mainstream counterparts, NG teachers demonstrated significantly more positive verbal and non-verbal communication in response to student behaviour (eg, showing interest, nurturing students' ideas, providing attuned, informative and spontaneous praise, etc.) and significantly less negative verbal and non-verbal communication (eg, fewer

controlling lessons, less bland praise and fewer demeaning behaviour management practices). In addition, the style of communication used in NGs was more 'relational' (Hibbin, 2019), conveying feelings of warmth and acceptance and facilitating a classroom climate in which the students felt safe, valued and supported (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003). In a related study, Bani (2011) found that specific verbal praise was used twice as often relative to non-verbal praise by NG teachers. The authors hypothesised that the use of verbal praise was effective because it was 'personal, genuine, contingent and descriptive (mentioning desired behaviour) and provided specific information, where the pupil understood why they are being praised' (Bani, 2011, p. 62). In response, children were more likely to maintain positive behaviour.

Another study related to NG classroom practices (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017) evaluated the implementation of a key component of nurturance and secure attachment relationships known as 'attunement' (Schore, 2001). Attunement strategies examined in this study included being attentive, encouraging initiatives, receiving initiatives, developing attuned interactions, guiding and deepening discussion (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017; Kennedy, Landor & Todd, 2011). Results revealed a significantly higher frequency of attunement strategy implementation in NGs relative to mainstream classes, suggesting that NG staff are more responsive to the social, emotional, behavioural and academic needs of their students.

## Context of the study

In Quebec, a bilingual province in Canada, there is clear indication that a growing number of children would benefit from a secure attachment base outside the home (Hélie & Clément, 2016). However, despite rising rates of verified cases of abuse and a public education system that is well positioned to support the development of children, there are no ministry-endorsed specialised programmes aimed at supporting students who are at risk because of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties. Inspired by the widespread adoption of NGs in the UK, one Montreal-based school board independently set up two full-time NGs that have been in continuous operation for the last 12 years.

These classes were developed based on the founding principles of classic NGs and adapted to the context of the province's education system and resources. As such they represent a NG variant; more specifically a NG-Variant 2 which adheres to the 'important principles of the classic model but differs in structure and/or organisational features' (Cooper et al, 2001, p. 88). The Montreal NG classes target students in Grades 1-3 (ie, six to nine years) with very significant SEMH difficulties, for whom school personnel strongly suspect an insecure or disorganised attachment style and/or who have a documented history with child protection services. As the school board covers a large geographical area, students are assigned to the NG that is closest to the neighbourhood in which they reside (ie, a point-of-service model). A formal research partnership was established with the Montreal NG teams to document NG implementation outside the UK. A companion study will investigate student outcomes in response to this NG variant model.

## Research Objectives

A mixed-method study design with four main objectives was employed to document intervention implementation. The first objective was to develop a systematic programme description reflecting the operationalisation of these Montreal NG variants. Next, to determine whether the reported description was consistent with day-to-day implementation, the second and third objectives were to evaluate organisational and personnel fidelity to the variant model. In the context of this study, 'organisational fidelity' refers to the implementation of intervention supports (eg, provision of resources, staff training, etc.) whereas 'personnel fidelity' refers to the implementation of the intervention itself (ie, teacher behaviour). Specifying the degree to which intervention implementation matches an intervention's conceptualisation enhances the validity of an outcome study, and the strength of this relationship is the best estimate of implementation quality (Breitenstein et al, 2010). The final objective was to investigate perceived facilitators and barriers to NG implementation.

## Ethics

The present study was carried out in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical*

*Conduct for Research Involving Humans of the Canadian Panel on Research Ethics*, whose research ethics committee approved this study. Ethical approval was also granted by the Research Ethics Committee for Student Projects at the University of Quebec in Montreal, as well as by the Montreal school board's own internal ethics committee. NG teachers, teaching assistants and special education technicians, as well as the NG clinical director and the assistant director of student services, were made aware of this study by means of an informational flyer shared with the school board's director of student services. Interested candidates were invited to contact the lead author. Informed consent was obtained from all NG team members prior to the commencement of the observations. Consent forms outlined (a) the general objectives of the study, (b) experimentation procedures, (c) advantages and risks, (d) data confidentiality, and (e) the right to withdraw consent at any time without any prejudice. Additionally, the contact information of each author and of the ethics committee was made available in case of comments, questions, or complaints. The participants were also informed of the authors' aim to publish the study in a peer-reviewed journal once completed. At the end of the study, all participants were debriefed on the results.

## Methodology

When a comprehensive programme description is not readily available, the use of a Logic Model is recommended (Chen, 2015). A Logic Model can be understood as a graphical representation of the relationship between a programme's inputs, outputs and intended outcomes (Knowlton & Phillips, 2013). Inputs are defined as resources dedicated to, or consumed by the programme, outputs are direct products of programme inputs (eg, activities provided, people reached) and outcomes are the benefits resulting from the programme (eg, improved school functioning). As the NGs in this study are NG-variants (ie, adhering to the principles of the classic model but differing in some organisational features linked to the particular needs and resources of a Montreal school board), a Logic Model offers a comprehensive means of describing the ways in which these groups depart from Boxall's classic NG. Other benefits of a Logic Model include: (a) helping staff gain a common understanding of

how an intervention works, (b) helping staff to understand their individual responsibilities, and (c) identifying indicators of success, or specific practices that can be linked to improvements in student school functioning (Chen, 2015).

To develop the programme description (ie, objective 1), the Montreal NG team was engaged in a participative four-step process. In Step 1, the NG clinical director and the classroom teams from both NGs completed a Logic Model template based on their experiential history in the program. The result of this activity was three independent Logic Model drafts. In Step 2, the models were compared via a collaborative discussion process among NG personnel that was facilitated by the lead researcher. In Step 3, the lead researcher presented a single, common version of the Logic Model that integrated the elements that were found to be consistent across drafts and that reflected the team's discussion to reconcile areas of divergence. The NG personnel had the opportunity to review, discuss and request additional edits. In the last step, a final version of the Logic Model was presented and a consensus was reached among team members.

To evaluate the degree to which intervention supports and resources outlined in the Logic Model were made available to the NGs and/or implemented by the NGs (ie, organisational fidelity; objective 2), record reviews of one full school year, as well as ten monthly site visits in each NG were conducted. For the evaluation of personnel fidelity (ie, objective 3), the Montreal team identified the following pedagogical practices in their Logic Model as being key differentiators between NG teacher and mainstream teacher behaviour: being attentive, encouraging initiatives, receiving initiatives, developing attuned interactions, guiding discussion, deepening discussions and constructive behaviour support (Table 1). Apart from constructive behaviour support, the other six strategies, based on the work of Kennedy, Landor and Todd (2011), are commonly referred to as 'attunement strategies' and have been a focus of Montreal NG staff training since the inception of the program. These strategies are rooted in attachment theory and considered ways by which adults create a secure base and safe haven for children (Ainsworth et al, 2015; Whelan & Stewart, 2015). Not surprisingly, they have been found to

promote attuned interactions between caregivers and children in two meta-analyses (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Fukkink, 2008).

As the implementation of attunement strategies by NG and mainstream teachers in the UK has been previously investigated by Cubeddu & MacKay (2017), the same methodology was employed in the present study to allow for comparison. Two 60-minute observations in each NG class and in six different mainstream classes of corresponding grade levels (ie, grade 1 to grade 3) across a one-month period were conducted by two trained research assistants. Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was conducted for 7 of the 16 hours of total observation time. The mean IRR across seven hours of reliability verification was 87% with no single category falling below 80%. A structured observation form provided by the authors was used for data collection. No single strategy was recorded more than once in any 60-second period to ensure the recording of distinct episodes of strategy implementation. As NGs are characterised by favourable staff-to-student ratios, observations focused solely on teacher behaviour rather than classroom support staff behaviour to avoid unfairly biasing results toward NGs (ie, more staff and fewer students should yield more opportunities for strategy implementation). It is worth noting that each NG had eight students compared to, on average, 12 students per mainstream class. Under normal circumstances, approximately 20-25 students would attend a mainstream class in Quebec schools. However, given that this study took place at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, many families favoured remote schooling options over in-class learning.

The data collected across observations was used to answer the following questions about NG and mainstream teaching practices:

- a) Did the total occurrence of strategy implementation differ significantly between the NG and the mainstream teachers?
- b) Did the occurrence of each individual strategy differ significantly between the NG and mainstream teachers?
- c) Did the total occurrence of strategy implementation differ significantly between the two NG teachers?

- d) Did the occurrence of each individual strategy differ significantly between the two NG teachers?
- e) Did the total occurrence strategy implementation differ significantly between the six mainstream teachers?

Lastly, a questionnaire was completed by each NG teacher, special education technician and teaching assistant to better understand the factors that were perceived to facilitate and limit personnel fidelity, whereas the NG clinical director and the school board's assistant director of student services reported primarily on variables related to organisational fidelity.

**Table 1**

**Description of constructive behaviour support and attunement strategies, adapted from Cubeddu & MacKay (2017)**

<b>Being attentive</b>	Looking interested with friendly posture; giving time and space for the child and each other; wondering about what the child is doing, thinking or feeling; enjoying watching them.
<b>Encouraging initiatives</b>	Waiting; listening actively; showing emotional warmth through intonation; naming positively what you see, think or feel in regard to the child or to the child's actions; using friendly and/or playful intonation as appropriate; saying what you are doing; looking for initiatives.
<b>Receiving initiatives</b>	Showing you have heard and noticed the child's initiative; receiving the child's overture/approach/initiative with receptive body language; being friendly and/or playful as appropriate; returning eye contact, smiling, nodding in response; receiving what the child is saying or doing with words; repeating/using the child's words and phrases.
<b>Developing attuned interactions</b>	Receiving and then responding to the child's overtures or initiatives; checking to see if the child is understanding you; waiting attentively for your turn; having fun; giving a second (and further) turn on the same topic; giving and taking short turns; contributing to interaction/activity equally; cooperating – helping each other.
<b>Guiding</b>	Extending, building on their response; judging the amount of support required and adjusting; giving information when needed; providing help when needed; offering choices that they can understand; making suggestions that they can follow.
<b>Deepening discussion</b>	Supporting goal setting; sharing viewpoints; collaborative discussion and problem-solving; naming difference of opinion; investigating the intentions behind words; naming contradictions/conflicts (real or potential); reaching new shared understandings; managing conflict.
<b>Constructive behaviour support</b>	Feedback to students that clearly delineates/describes the rules, routines and rituals of the classroom; feedback to the child that offers a simple explanation for the rules/routines/rituals; concrete and discrete behavioural feedback; feedback that provides children with clear direction about what they are expected to do rather than just labelling the inappropriate behaviour they are currently demonstrating (eg, I need you to stop talking to Timmy and start your worksheet); use of a holding environment (ie, the physical and interpersonal classroom environment that promotes the child's maturation and development) and restorative language management.

## Results

### Objectives 1 & 2: Programme description and organisational fidelity

The result of a stepwise collaboration between NG team members was a comprehensive programme description in the form of a Logic Model (Figure 1, objective 1). The availability and frequency of resources reportedly provided by the school board as organisational supports to the nurture classes was found to be consistent with actual implementation. Specifically, this included the cost of the programme, the availability of materials,

technology, physical space, classroom staff to student ratios, specialised door-to-door transportation as well as before and after school daycare services. This also included the frequency of psychotherapy offered to students and families by the NG psychologist, parent meetings, communications with health and social services, case consultations provided by specialists (eg, speech and language pathologist, occupational therapists), intake and discharge support, staff supervision and training by the NG clinical director and whole-school workshops delivered to mainstream teachers about nurturing practices.

**Figure 1**  
Quebec-based nurture group logic model for a single classroom

Inputs		
<b>Personnel</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time classroom personnel: 1 teacher, 1 teaching assistant, 1 special education technician</li> <li>• Part-time personnel: 1 programme director, 1 psychologist, 1 vice principal, 1 principal</li> </ul>	<b>Cost</b> \$250,000 CAD	<b>Technology</b> iPads, computers
	<b>Materials</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmental curriculums (eg, socio-emotional)</li> <li>• Academic curriculums and learning materials</li> <li>• Classroom and home decor furnishings</li> <li>• Food availability</li> </ul>	<b>Consult staff</b> Speech and language therapist, Occupational therapist, Social worker, etc.
<b>Equipment/physical space</b> One classroom, one domestic space, one relaxation area		<b>Specialised bus and driver</b>

Outputs		
<p><b>Class organisation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 teacher, 1 teacher assistant, 1 special education technician</li> <li>• 8 students, 6-9 years</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weekly supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8x student psychotherapy sessions by programme psychologist</li> <li>• 2x family psychotherapy sessions by programme psychologist</li> <li>• 3x school progress meetings w/guardians by NG classroom personnel</li> <li>• 2x meetings with social services for students by NG classroom personnel and programme psychologist</li> </ul>	<p><b>Intake support per student:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x intake meeting with school of origin</li> <li>• 1x intake meeting with guardian(s)</li> <li>• 1x observation in school of origin</li> <li>• 1x case review by programme director with the NG team</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transport and daycare</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily door-to-door specialised transportation for all NG students from their domicile to the NG host school, round-trip</li> <li>• Before and after school daycare services provided by the school hosting the NGs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Annual supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6x NG classroom personnel act as liaison to health services for students</li> <li>• 2x NG classroom personnel act as a liaison to health services for guardians</li> <li>• 2x NG classroom personnel accompany student and guardian to medical appointment</li> </ul>	<p><b>Discharge support/ student</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x discharge meeting with guardian(s)</li> <li>• 1x discharge evaluation/ report</li> <li>• 1x meeting with school of origin</li> <li>• 5 days of reintegration support</li> <li>• 3-5 days of post-reintegration support</li> </ul>
<p><b>Consistent implementation of core intervention elements by teachers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being attentive</li> <li>• Encouraging initiatives</li> <li>• Receiving initiatives</li> <li>• Developing attuned interactions</li> <li>• Guiding</li> <li>• Deepening discussions</li> <li>• Constructive behaviour support</li> </ul>	<p><b>Other supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 hours of bi-weekly supervision and training for classroom personnel</li> <li>• 10 workshops offered to mainstream school board staff on nurturing and trauma-informed practices</li> <li>• 6 case consultations with multidisciplinary professionals per class</li> </ul>	

Outcomes		
Reduced SEMH difficulties	Improved student-teacher relationship	Improved self-concept
Improved executive functions	Re-integration into a general education setting	

**Objective 3: Evaluation of personnel fidelity**

The Chi-square goodness of fit test was employed to compare observed frequencies with expected probabilities. All analyses were conducted using the  $\chi^2$  test function on GraphPad Prism Version 9.1.2 for Mac (San Diego, CA: GraphPad Software).

**Analysis 1: Did the overall frequency of strategy implementation differ significantly between NG and mainstream teachers?**

A total of 417 strategy implementations were observed for the two NG teachers across four hours of observation. In comparison, 326 strategy implementations were recorded for the six mainstream teachers across 12 hours of observations. When expected frequencies were adjusted to account for the fact that there were more mainstream teachers than NG teachers (ie, six and two, respectively), results revealed a significantly higher frequency of constructive

behaviour support and attunement strategy implementation by the NG teachers ( $\chi^2=383.90$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ).

**Analysis 2: Did the frequency of each individual strategy differ significantly between the NG and mainstream teachers?**

The  $\chi^2$  goodness of fit test was performed separately for each of the seven strategies. The observed frequencies represent the sum of both observations for each category. When expected frequencies were adjusted to account for the fact that there were more mainstream teachers than NG teachers (ie, six and two, respectively), results revealed a significantly higher implementation frequency of each individual strategy by NG teachers. The most striking differences were observed for 'deepening discussions' ( $\chi^2=70.21$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ) and 'constructive behaviour support' ( $\chi^2=123.6$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

**Table 2**  
**Observed and expected frequencies of overall strategy implementation by NG vs mainstream teachers**

Being attentive	NG teachers (two teachers)	Mainstream teachers (six teachers)	Significance
Observed frequencies	417	326	$\chi^2=383.90$ , $df=1$ , $p<0.0001$
Expected frequencies	185.8 (25%)	557.30 (75%)	

**Table 3**  
Observed and expected frequencies for each individual strategy by NG vs mainstream teachers

	NG teachers (two teachers)		Mainstream teachers (six teachers)		Significance
	F <sub>o</sub>	F <sub>e</sub> (25%)	F <sub>o</sub>	F <sub>e</sub> (75%)	
Being attentive	52	25	48	75	$\chi^2=38.8$ , df=1 p < 0.0001
Encouraging initiatives	56	24.75	43	74.25	$\chi^2=52.61$ , df=1 p < 0.0001
Receiving initiatives	57	29.75	62	89.25	$\chi^2=33.28$ , df=1 p < 0.0001
Developing attuned interactions	35	13	17	39	$\chi^2=49.64$ , df=1 p < 0.0001
Guiding	92	47.25	97	141.75	$\chi^2=56.51$ , df=1 p < 0.0001
Deepening discussion	25	6.5	1	19.5	$\chi^2=70.21$ , df=1 p < 0.0001
Constructive behaviour support	100	39.50	58	118.5	$\chi^2=123.6$ , df=1 p < 0.0001

**Analysis 3: Did the overall frequency of strategy implementation differ significantly between the two NG teachers?**

The total frequencies recorded during observations were 104 and 106 for NG 1 and 112 and 95 for NG 2. When the sum of observed frequencies in each

NG were tested against expected probabilities (ie, equal frequencies of implementation), the difference was insignificant ( $\chi^2=0.02158$ , df=1, p = 0.8832). In other words, the total occurrence of constructive behaviour support and attunement strategy implementation was similar across NGs.

**Table 4**  
Observed and expected frequencies of overall strategy implementation by each NG teacher

	NG 1	NG 2	Significance
F <sub>o</sub>	210	207	$\chi^2=0.02158$ , df=1 p = 0.8832
F <sub>e</sub> (50%)	208.5	208.5	

**Analysis 4: Did the frequency of each individual strategy differ significantly between the two NG teachers?**

The  $\chi^2$  goodness of fit test was performed separately for each of the seven strategies. The observed frequencies represent the sum of both observations for each category. The expected

probability represents the assumption that strategies are implemented equally by NG teachers. Results revealed insignificant differences between NG teachers. In other words, the occurrence of each individual strategy was comparable across NGs.

**Table 5**  
**Observed and expected frequencies of individual strategy implementation by NG teacher**

	NG 1		NG 2		Significance
	F <sub>o</sub>	F <sub>e</sub>	F <sub>o</sub>	F <sub>e</sub>	
Being attentive	25	26	27	26	$\chi^2=0.07292$ , df=1 p = 0.7815
Encouraging initiatives	30	28	26	28	$\chi^2=0.2857$ , df=1 p = 5930
Receiving initiatives	27	28.5	30	28.5	$\chi^2=0.1579$ , df=1 p = 6911
Developing attuned interactions	17	17.5	18	17.5	$\chi^2=0.02857$ , df=1 p = 0.8658
Guiding	48	46	44	46	$\chi^2=0.1739$ , df=1 p = 0.6767
Deepening discussion	12	12.5	13	12.5	$\chi^2=0.04$ , df=1 p = 0.8415
Constructive behaviour support	49	50	51	50	$\chi^2=0.04$ df=1 p = 0.8415

**Analysis 5: Did the total frequency of strategy implementation differ significantly between the six mainstream teachers?**

When the sum of observed frequencies in each mainstream class were tested against expected probabilities (ie, equal implementation), the  $\chi^2$

goodness of fit test revealed a significant difference ( $\chi^2=29.11$ , df=5, p < 0.0001). This implies that the total occurrence of constructive behaviour support and attunement strategy implementation varied significantly across mainstream teachers.

**Table 6**  
**Observed and expected frequencies of overall strategy implementation by mainstream teacher**

	Mainstream 1	Mainstream 2	Mainstream 3	Mainstream 4	Mainstream 5	Mainstream 6	Significance
F <sub>o</sub>	46	80	73	48	36	43	χ <sup>2</sup> =29.11, df=5 p < 0.0001
F <sub>e</sub> (16.67%)	54.33	54.33	54.33	54.33	54.33	54.33	

**Objective 4: Facilitators and barriers of NG intervention fidelity**

Classroom personnel, the NG clinical director and the assistant director of the school board’s department of student services each felt strongly that a solid theoretical understanding of NGs (ie, ‘why we do the things we do’) facilitates implementation fidelity (8/8). Other facilitating factors included effective communication between team members (5/6), supervision (6/6), training (6/6) and a skilled and dedicated NG clinical director (6/6). Importantly, classroom personnel reported being extremely satisfied with the quality and consistency of supervisory support from the clinical director (6/6). Respondents also reported that supervisory support allows for continuous skill development (5/6) and emotional support to staff (6/6), and helps them better understand the reasons underlying each child’s SEMH difficulties (6/6). One staff member remarked that the supervisor ‘allowed us to work at our best as we always felt prepared for the challenges faced and we know someone is there for us if we need it.’

Barriers to NG implementation were identified as student absenteeism (5/6) and inconsistent parental availability/engagement (6/6). Perhaps unique to this study, the Covid-19 pandemic was reported as an additional barrier to NG implementation fidelity (6/6). Three main difficulties emerged from the pandemic: (1) social distancing requirements limited the teams’ ability to meet students’ proximity-seeking needs (6/6), (2) facial masks made it difficult to quickly identify and meet students’ emotional needs (eg, reading or exchanging facial expressions) (5/6), and (3) facial masks muffled voices and made it hard to understand and be understood by students (eg, degree of distress, empathic tone) (5/6).

The assistant director of student services and the NG clinical director identified several ways organisational fidelity can be compromised. First, the ideal NG classroom size required to meet students’ unique needs (ie, space for domestic activities, space to contain behavioural dysregulation, space for traditional teaching activities) may be limited by a host school’s space availabilities. Secondly, the ability to provide round-trip door-to-door specialised transportation for NG students is dependent on the transportation company’s resources. Moreover, the coordination of transportation routes can be complex given that students are coming from different municipalities across a wide geographical area (ie, point-of-service model). Lastly, it was reported that considerable discussion time is required to obtain special permission from the relevant unions within the school board to be able to give priority to qualified candidates over candidates who have accumulated greater seniority but who do not necessarily have the specialised training/ orientation necessary to work within NGs (2/2).

**Discussion**

To date, the research base addressing implementation in NGs is limited and it remains difficult to determine whether the various NGs that have been shown to improve student social-emotional-behavioural functioning used a set of interventions of comparable form and fidelity. The present study sought to bridge this research gap by comprehensively evaluating the implementation of two Montreal-based NGs. The Logic Model (Figure 1) developed by NG personnel revealed a measurable programme description that was found to be quantitatively representative of the NGs’ practical realities. At an organisational level, the resource-intensive nature of NGs in this study

resembled a hospital-based child psychiatry day programme to a greater degree than it did a mainstream classroom. In terms of classroom practices, constructive behaviour support and attunement strategy implementation were reported as being the principal pedagogical and treatment interventions differentiating NGs from mainstream classrooms. This was confirmed by classroom observations in which NG teachers were found to use a significantly higher overall frequency of constructive behaviour support and attunement strategies relative to mainstream teachers of corresponding grade levels. This also held true when the frequency of each individual strategy was analyzed separately; suggesting that NG staff are significantly more sensitive and responsive to students' emotional needs, helping them feel valued and held in mind. Apart from the element of constructive behaviour support implementation unique to the present study, results are consistent with those of Cubeddu and MacKay (2017).

A closer inspection of individual strategies revealed that the routine provision of constructive behaviour support to students most clearly differentiates the Montreal NGs from mainstream classes. This suggests NG staff are more intentional in the prevention, co-regulation of emotion and response to dysregulation – a particularly important finding considering that SEMH difficulties are among the leading reasons students are removed from their mainstream classrooms (Hemphill et al, 2014). After constructive behaviour support, use of the deepening discussion strategy differentiated NGs most significantly from mainstream classes. Deepening discussion involves sharing viewpoints, collaborative conversations, naming differences of opinion and reaching new shared understandings (ie, connection). However, it is worth noting that deepening discussion had the lowest frequency of implementation when compared to the other strategies in both NG and mainstream classes. The relatively limited use of this strategy is not a reflection of teachers' disinterest in their students' opinions or internal worlds. Instead, it likely reflects the significant amount of time teachers would need to be separated from the whole NG group in order to provide undivided attention to a single student. In mainstream classes with higher staff-student ratios (ie, 1:12 in mainstream compared to 3:8 in NGs for this study), it may not be possible

for teachers to systematically practice deepening discussions with each individual student while also managing the larger group and meeting curriculum standards. Across 12 hours of observations, this strategy was only observed once in mainstream classrooms, compared to 25 occurrences across four hours of observations in NGs. The lower staff-student ratios of NGs likely provides teachers and support staff the opportunity to individualise interaction to a greater degree than would otherwise be possible.

It is also worth noting that overall and individual strategy implementation did not differ significantly between NG teachers, implying that the Montreal-based NGs delivered an equivalent intervention that was consistent with their programme description (ie, Logic Model). However, when the overall frequency of strategy implementation was compared across the six mainstream teachers, a statistically significant difference emerged. The finding of greater homogeneity in attunement strategies among NG teachers as compared to mainstream teachers is not unexpected given that these strategies are intentionally taught, monitored and reinforced by the NG clinical director, whereas such specific training and support is rarely provided to mainstream teachers.

## Limitations and future directions

The NG programme description and implementation assessment revealed two noteworthy departures from Boxall's classic NG. The classic model was designed to accommodate students aged four-eight years in groups of 10-12 in their neighbourhood school supported by one teacher and one teaching assistant. The Montreal-based NGs accommodated students aged between six and nine years in groups of eight with one teacher and two support staff. As students generally did not remain in their neighbourhood schools but instead were transported to a different school that was the host site for the NG – daily visits to their homerooms were not an option. Second, although designed and intended to adhere to the 'Six Nurture Principles for Learning' (Nurture International, 2021), it is possible that the Montreal NGs operationalised or emphasised these principles in slightly different ways or proportions than is the case in more classic NGs. It was evident that the Montreal NGs implemented constructive behaviour support and attunement strategies in

a routine way and at much higher frequency than in matched traditional classrooms, but the extent to which these findings generalise to other classic NGs is hard to specify. Moreover, the resources unique to these Montreal NGs (eg, weekly play therapy) may not reflect NG implementation in other jurisdictions. In addition to the small-scale nature of this study, the generalisation of the results may have been constrained to some degree by the social distancing and facial masks regulations necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, NG staff reported that the pandemic consistently made it more difficult to meet students' proximity-seeking safe-haven needs, as well as and to convey and interpret emotional tone (ie, to be as attuned as they would have been under normal circumstances).

Implementation fidelity strengthens the validity of outcome studies and it is the best estimate of implementation quality (Breitenstein et al, 2010). The absence of data linking specific classroom practices to student outcomes limits the conclusions that can be drawn from research in support of NGs as an effective school-based intervention for at-risk students. For this reason, future research evaluating student progress in social-emotional-behavioural functioning as result of placement in a NG would benefit from the systematic inclusion of fidelity measures. Further, by informing and guiding intervention, measures of implementation fidelity could increase implementation reliability across NGs, as well as improve programme efficacy, staff training and supervision (Fixsen et al, 2005).



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# Reaching and teaching students: Using Nurture Groups to improve school functioning

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Keywords: nurture groups, implementation, attunement, constructive behaviour support

Submitted: 8 December 2021 Accepted for publication: 11 February 2022

## Abstract

In the 1960s, educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall developed Nurture Groups (NGs) in response to the growing number of children who were deprived of healthy nurturance in early life and who, as a result, were failing to cope with the demands of school. To date, research on this intervention model has consistently shown that students who attend a NG for at least one school year are much more likely to demonstrate improvements in school functioning than other at-risk students who do not. However, the conclusions that can be drawn about the beneficial effects of NGs are somewhat limited by the heterogeneity in practices among groups bearing the NG name and by the absence of data explicitly linking positive student outcomes to specific practices within NG classrooms. Both these limitations could be addressed by a more systematic effort to consider the question of implementation fidelity. Thus, the objective of the present study was to measure student progress in NGs for which detailed information about the intervention's implementation fidelity was available. In two NGs known to implement relatively high frequencies of nurture-based interventions (ie, attunement strategies and constructive behaviour support), results revealed statistically and clinically significant improvements in social, emotional and behavioural functioning following a nine-month period of intervention. More research relating NG efficacy to implementation procedures is needed in order to better understand the most effective ingredients of this intervention.

**Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

## Reaching and teaching students: Using Nurture Groups to improve school functioning among Montreal children with developmental trauma

According to van der Kolk (2005, 2014), the term 'developmental trauma' distinguishes the experience of multiple and/or prolonged exposures to one or more developmentally adverse interpersonal events in early life (eg, abandonment, neglect, verbal/emotional abuse, physical or sexual abuse) from other forms of acute (eg, motor vehicle

accident, a hurricane) or chronic stress (eg, receiving regular invasive medical treatment for an illness, growing up in a war-torn area). Among the many later problems associated with developmental trauma, such as reductions in brain integrity, autoimmune disorders, obesity, diabetes, alcoholism and depression (Afifi et al, 2014; Felitti et al, 1998; Gilbert et al, 2015; Kaffman, 2009), marked relational difficulties in childhood is one of the earliest signs (Bowlby, 1973). In the absence of protective factors, the effect of having been routinely mistreated or neglected by a primary

attachment figure is associated with the development of an insecure or disorganised style of attachment (Bowlby, 1973; Geddes, 2017; Swarbrick, 2017) and, consequently, a host of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties (van der Kolk, 2015).

In the 1960s, educational psychologist, Marjorie Boxall, introduced Nurture Groups (NGs) in response to the growing number of children who were deprived of healthy nurturance in early life and who, as a result, were failing to cope with the demands of school (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). Boxall's idea was to recreate the interpersonal experiences missing from infancy onwards in the school setting. By providing the safety, attunement and reliable structure required for children to feel contained and cared for, students can begin to form secure, trusting relationships with secondary attachment figures (ie, teachers and teaching assistants) (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000; Bowlby, 1969). The development of a secure style of attachment with school personnel gradually allows for a broadening of the child's rigid 'internal working model'; the cognitive framework comprising mental representations for understanding self and others (Bowlby, 1969). Importantly, the adaptive revision of negative internal working models of the self (eg, damaged, unworthy, unwanted) and of others (eg, dangerous, rejecting, unreliable) leads to improvements in school functioning via the child's increasing responsiveness to adult co-regulation and scaffolding and willingness to take academic risks (Cairns & Cairns, 2016).

Research on this model has shown that students who attend a NG for at least one school year are much more likely to demonstrate improvements in school functioning than other at-risk students who remain in a mainstream classroom (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014). However, the conclusions that can be drawn about the beneficial effects of NGs are limited to a degree by the heterogeneity in practices among groups bearing the NG name (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Middleton, 2021) and by the absence of data explicitly linking positive student outcomes to specific practices within NG classrooms (Kearney & Nowek, 2019). Both these limitations could be addressed by a more systematic effort to address implementation fidelity which essentially asks the

question 'to what degree is the NG intervention being delivered as intended?' (Balisteri, 2016; Breitenstein et al, 2010; Fraser-Smith & Henry, 2016). Outcome studies on NGs with records of implementation would help to: (a) gain an understanding of how NGs in different regions are being operationalised, (b) identify the key ingredients responsible for positive student outcomes, (c) adjust NG practices to optimise success, and (d) provide an indication of implementation quality (Breitenstein et al, 2010). As an initial step toward addressing these issues, the present study sought to measure improvements in school functioning among students in two Montreal, Quebec-based NGs for which documented measures of NG implementation were available.

## Research to date

Systematic reviews conducted by Bennett (2015) and Hughes and Schlösser (2014) have found that NGs are effective at reducing the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties of students. For example, in two investigations of classic NGs, significant improvements were reported on the 'peer problems, prosocial behaviour and hyperactivity' sub-scales of the *Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SQD-t; Cooper et al, 2001; Seth-Smith et al, 2010). These same studies also revealed significant improvements among NG students on the 'developmental' strand (ie, measuring cognitive and social-emotional development) and 'diagnostic' strands (ie, measuring behaviours that interfere with social and academic performance) of the Boxall Profile®. Cooper and Whitebread (2007) reported similar findings in a national research study examining the combined effectiveness of the different models of NGs, including the classic model, the part-time model and 'NG variants' that deviate somewhat from the theoretical and/or practical underpinnings of classic NGs. A total of 359 students in 34 schools with NGs were compared to a representative sample of 187 students in mainstream classes. Results revealed significant improvements on the SQD-t and Boxall Profile® among NG participants relative to mainstream students. However, the heterogeneity in practices among the NGs considered by Cooper and Whitebread (2007) makes it difficult to isolate the components of the NG experience that were most responsible for the positive outcomes (Hughes & Schlösser, 2014).

## Research objective and context of the study

The objective of the present study was to measure student progress in NGs for which there exists detailed information about the NG's implementation practices. This was the case for two Montreal-based NG variants that underwent a comprehensive implementation assessment conducted by the authors of this study and whose results are summarised in Table 1. The following excerpt from Cloran et al (2022) highlights the ways in which these groups diverged from the classic NG model:

'Inspired by the widespread adoption of NGs in the UK, one Montreal-based school board independently set up two full-time NGs that have been in continuous operation for the last 12 years. These classes were developed based on the founding principles of classic NGs and adapted to the context of the province's education system and resources. The NG targets students in grades 1-3 (ie, six to nine years) with very significant SEMH difficulties, for whom school personnel strongly suspect a disturbed attachment between the child and their primary caregiver(s) and/or who have a documented history with child protective services. As the school board covers a large geographical area, students are assigned to the NG that is closest to the neighbourhood in which they reside (ie, a *point-of-service* model). As such, daily visits to students' homerooms were not an option.'

The observation and recording of teaching practices was conducted using the methodology devised by Cubeddu and MacKay (2017) and revealed significant differences between NGs and mainstream classrooms of corresponding grade levels. Consistent with the findings of Cubeddu and MacKay (2017), NG teachers employed attunement strategies, a key component of nurturance and secure attachment (Schore, 2001), significantly more frequently than mainstream teachers of corresponding grade levels. Specifically, NG teachers implemented the six strategies identified by Kennedy, Landor and Todd (2011) which have been found to promote attuned interactions by two meta-analyses (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Fukkink, 2008). These included being attentive, encouraging initiatives, receiving initiatives, developing

attuned interactions, guiding and deepening discussions. In addition to the relatively high frequency of implementation of strategies aimed at developing attuned interactions, NG teachers also differed from mainstream teachers in terms of the frequency of 'constructive behaviour support' (ie, a strategy of co-regulation or scaffolding). Constructive behaviour support was often labelled by the Montreal NG staff as 'firm-caring' and described as involving proactive and intentional adult efforts to increase environmental predictability and security (eg, routines, rituals, frequent reminders of the classroom expectations and rules, explicit acknowledgment of pro-social behaviours) and manage student dysregulation in a very particular and consistent way (ie, non-judgmental, affect neutral approach, neutral emotional tone, concerted attempt to look beneath the surface behaviour to try to understand the emotional trigger).

## Ethics

The present study was carried out in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans of the Canadian Panel on Research Ethics*, whose research ethics committee approved this study. Ethical approval was also granted by the Research Ethics Committee for Student Projects at the Université du Québec à Montréal, as well as by the Montreal school board's own internal ethics committee. Legal guardians were made aware of this study by means of an informational flyer shared with them by the school board's director of student services. Interested parents/guardians were invited to contact the lead author. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of the observations. Consent forms outlined the: (a) general objectives of the study, (b) investigative procedures, (c) advantages and risks, (d) data confidentiality, and (e) the right to withdraw consent at any time without any prejudice. Additionally, the contact information of each author and of the ethics committee was made available in case of comments, questions, or complaints.

**Table 1**  
**Program description of two Montreal-based NGs (Cloran et al, 2022)**

NG organisational supports	
<p><b>Cost</b> \$250,000 CAD</p>	<p><b>Technology</b> iPads, computers</p>
<p><b>Equipment/physical space</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One traditional classroom space</li> <li>• One domestic area</li> <li>• One relaxation area</li> </ul>	<p><b>Materials</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmental curriculums (eg, socio-emotional)</li> <li>• Academic curriculums and learning materials</li> <li>• Classroom and home decor furnishings, food</li> </ul>
<p><b>Class organisation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time classroom personnel: 1 teacher, 1 teaching assistant, 1 special education technician</li> <li>• Part-time personnel: 1 NG director, 1 psychologist, 1 vice principal, 1 principal</li> <li>• 8 students, ages 6-9 years</li> </ul>	<p><b>Transport and daycare</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily door-to-door specialised transportation (eg, minibus) for all NG students from their domicile to the NG host school, round-trip</li> <li>• Before and after school daycare services provided by the school hosting the NGs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Weekly supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8x student psychotherapy sessions by NG psychologist</li> <li>• 2x family psychotherapy sessions by NG psychologist</li> <li>• 3x school progress meetings w/ guardians by NG classroom personnel</li> <li>• 2x meetings with social services for students by NG classroom personnel and NG psychologist</li> </ul>	<p><b>Annual supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6x NG classroom personnel act as liaison to health services for students</li> <li>• 2x NG classroom personnel act as a liaison to health services for guardians</li> <li>• 2x NG classroom personnel accompany student and guardian to medical appointment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intake support/student</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x intake meeting with school of origin</li> <li>• 1x intake meeting with guardian(s)</li> <li>• 1x observation in school of origin</li> <li>• 1x case review by NG director with the NG team</li> <li>• 2x meetings with social services for students by NG classroom personnel and NG psychologist</li> </ul>	<p><b>Discharge support/student</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x discharge meeting with guardian(s)</li> <li>• 1x discharge evaluation/report</li> <li>• 1x meeting with school of origin</li> <li>• 5 days of reintegration support</li> <li>• 3-5 days of post-reintegration support</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other supports</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 hours of bi-weekly supervision and training for classroom personnel</li> <li>• 10 workshops offered to mainstream school board staff on nurturing and trauma-informed practices</li> <li>• 6 case consultations with multidisciplinary professionals per class</li> </ul>	

Table 1 (continued)

Mean frequency of NG teacher interventions/60-minute interval as compared to mainstream teachers		
	NG Teachers (N=2)	Mainstream teachers (N=6)
Being attentive	13	4
Encouraging initiatives	14	4
Receiving initiatives	14	6
Developing attuned interactions	9	2
Guiding	23	10
Deepening discussion	6	0
Constructive behaviour support	25	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>31</b>

## Participants

Consent was obtained for five of the eight students in one NG and seven of the eight students in the other group. As no significant NG implementation discrepancies emerged between the two NGs (Cloran et al, in press), students were evaluated as a single group (N=12) for the pre- and post-intervention comparisons. To better understand the characteristics of NG students and their families, legal guardians completed the Developmental History Checklist for Children (DHCC; Dougherty & Schinka, 1989) and the school-age Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The DHCC provides information about a child's developmental, educational, medical, familial and socio-demographic history, while the CBCL evaluates students on eight empirically-based syndrome scales: (a) anxious/depressed, (b) withdrawn/depressed, (c) somatic complaints, (d) social problems, (e) thought problems, (f) attention problems, (g) rule-breaking behaviour, and (h) aggressive behaviours.

The CBCL also provides composites scores for internalising and externalising syndromes, as well as for total problems. The 'internalising grouping' (ie, problems arising within the self) is comprised of the 'anxious/depressed', 'withdrawn/depressed' and 'somatic complaint' syndrome scales,

while the 'externalising grouping' (ie, problems arising within the interpersonal environment) is comprised of the 'rule-breaking' and 'aggressive behaviour' syndrome scales. The total problems score is an overall representation of a student's SEMH difficulties. Exposure to developmental trauma was assessed via the Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) questionnaire. To minimise family burden, NG teachers completed an adapted ACE questionnaire developed for school personnel which has been found to produce developmental trauma prevalence estimates consistent with those of caregiver reports (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Students in the NGs were, on average, aged seven years, five months at the time of admission (from a range of six years, six months to eight years, ten months). Legal guardians identified students as being primarily Caucasian, with one black student and one mixed-race student. Among nine boys and three girls, one student was in Grade 1, six students were in Grade 2 and five students were in Grade 3. On the CBCL, legal guardians rated students especially high on the 'attention problems', 'rule-breaking behaviour' and 'aggressive behaviour' scales, as well as on the 'externalising syndrome' and 'total problems' composites (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
Average student percentile score on CBCL (pre-admission)

Syndrome Scales	Percentile
Anxious/depressed	88th
Withdrawn/depressed	90th
Somatic complaints	73rd
Social problems	92nd
Thought problems	88th
Attention problems	95th
Rule-breaking behaviour	95th
Aggressive behaviour	97th
<b>Internalising syndromes</b>	<b>90th</b>
<b>Externalising syndromes</b>	<b>98th</b>
<b>Total problems score</b>	<b>97th</b>

**Table 3**  
Household and caregiver characteristics (Legal Guardian Report, pre-admissions)

<b>Child custody</b>	Both biological parents	7
	Single biological parent	4
	Adoptive parents	1
<b>Economic status</b>	Poverty level	3
	Lower class	6
	Middle class	3
<b>Biological father education</b>	Some high school	5
	High school diploma	3
	Trade school diploma	2
	Some college	1
<b>Biological father occupation</b>	Unskilled worker	2
	Skilled worker	7
	Other	3
<b>Biological mother education</b>	Some high school	5
	High school diploma	1
	Some college	3
	College diploma	3
<b>Biological mother occupation</b>	Unskilled worker	2
	Skilled worker	4
	Unemployed	4
	Other	2

The DHCC (Table 3) revealed that many biological fathers did not hold a high school diploma and were primarily employed in unskilled (eg, factory worker) or skilled jobs (eg, carpentry, clerical). Similar characteristics were noted for biological mothers. Of the 12 families in this study, three reported benefiting from the province’s social assistance programme (ie, poverty-level), six families self-identified with ‘lower class’ socio-economic status and three families with ‘middle class’ status.

On the adapted ACE questionnaire for school personnel (Table 4), NG teachers rated students on 10 questions at the time of discharge based on factual knowledge acquired over the course

of students’ participation in the NG (eg, guardian disclosure, direct staff knowledge of ACE exposure, etc.). Results revealed that students had experienced, on average, more than four different types of adverse childhood events. Inspection of each individual ACE item revealed that two thirds of the NG students (ie, 8 out of 12) were characterised by each of the following: (a) past or present involvement by child protective services, (b) divorced or separated parents and/or (c) a caregiver with a substance abuse problem. Half of the NG students had unmet basic needs as observed at school (eg, nutrition, clothing, or hygiene) and the majority of students had at least one caregiver with mental health issues.

**Table 4**  
**Student exposure to adverse childhood events**  
**(N=12)**

Adverse event	N=12
Has this child ever been homeless or highly mobile?	3
Has this child ever had a Youth Protection involvement or government placement?	8
Has this child ever had unmet basic needs that interfere with school adjustment?	6
Have this child's parents been divorced or separated?	8
Has this child experienced the death of a primary caregiver?	0
Has any member of this child's family ever been incarcerated?	2
Does this child have a caregiver with a mental health problem?	10
Does this child have a caregiver with a substance abuse problem?	8
Has this child ever witnessed or been the victim of domestic violence	5
Has this child ever witnessed or been the victim of community violence?	2
<b>Average ACE score/student</b>	<b>4.33</b>

## Procedures and instruments

To measure student progress in response to specific practices within the NGs, five instruments were administered approximately two weeks after student admission and again within the last two weeks preceding their discharge from the NG. On average, the time between intake and discharge measures was just over nine months, the equivalent of one full school year in the Quebec education system.

The Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning, Second Edition (BRIEF-2; Isquith et

al, 2015), the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001), Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) and direct observations of student behaviour were completed by the NG teacher, while the Piers-Harris 3 Scale of Self-Concept (Piers et al, 2018) was completed by students with the support of a teaching assistant.

The BRIEF-2 is a questionnaire rating executive functions (ie, the set of the mental processes that allow individuals to learn, work and manage daily life), a strong predictor of academic, social behavioural and emotional functioning (Isquith et al, 2015). The Behaviour Regulation Index (BRI), composed of the 'inhibit' and 'self-monitor' scales, measures the student's ability to regulate and monitor behaviour effectively. The Emotion Regulation Index (ERI), composed of the 'shift' and 'emotional control' scales, reflects the child's ability to regulate affective responses and shift thinking patterns to adjust to changes in environment, people, plans, or demands. The Cognitive Regulation Index (CRII), composed of the 'initiate', 'working memory', 'plan/organise', 'task-monitor' and 'organisation of materials' scales, measures the child's ability to control and manage cognitive processes in order to problem solve and complete tasks effectively (eg, school work). The Global Executive Composite is a composite summary score of all BRIEF-2 scales.

The STRS measures the overall quality of a teacher's relationship with a particular student based on perceived closeness, conflict and dependency (Pianta, 2001). This scale was developed with specific reference to 'attachment theory' (Settani et al, 2015) and is the most commonly used measure of teacher-student relationship (Toste et al, 2012). The 'closeness' subscale measures the degree to which a teacher experiences affection, warmth and open communication with a student. The 'conflict' and 'dependency' subscales measure the extent to which a teacher perceives a student to be hostile or over-reliant, respectively.

The Piers-Harris 3 is a brief, self-report measure of self-concept (ie, perception of one's own behaviour and attitudes) that can be used to assist in the diagnosis of externalising and internalising disorders (Piers et al, 2018). Test items are simple descriptive statements, written at a Grade 1 reading level (eg, 'I am an important

member of my class', 'I sit alone at lunch', etc.). The Piers-Harris 3 is comprised of six scales: (a) behavioural adjustment, (b) freedom from anxiety, (c) happiness and satisfaction, (d) intellectual and school status, (e) physical appearance and attributes, and (f) social acceptance. When combined into a composite, the six scales provide a total score (ie, an overall measure of general self-concept). Higher scores indicate a higher or more positive self-concept (ie, self-esteem or self-regard), whereas lower scores are associated with a poorer self-concept.

Partial-interval recording is a method used to measure the occurrence or non-occurrence of a behaviour during a specified time interval (Cooper et al, 2019). In this study, partial interval recording was employed in 15-minute time samples by the NG teacher to measure the frequency of behaviours that interfere with school functioning. Challenging behaviours included externalising (eg, aggression, bullying, hyperactivity, difficulty managing emotional behavioural arousal) and/or internalising behaviours (eg, withdrawn or shut down, prominent symptoms of anxiety).

Like the CBCL completed by parents, the Teacher Report Form (TRF) was completed by NG teachers and provides six syndrome scales, composites scores for internalising and externalising grouping of syndromes, as well as a total problems score (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001).

## Results

Student scores were analysed using a series of two-tailed matched-paired t-tests to compare mean scores at NG intake and discharge. Each measure was analysed separately with an alpha of .05, of which .025 was used to detect improvement and .025 was used to detect decline.

As measured by the BRIEF-2, students experienced significant improvements on the Behavioural and Emotional Regulation Indices ( $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as the Global Executive Composite ( $p < .001$ ) (Table 5). In addition, the three scores which did not reach statistical significance, 'self-monitor' and 'initiate' scales and the Cognitive Regulation Index, all moved in a positive direction.

**Table 5 Mean t-scores on BRIEF-2 (N=12)**

Scale	Intake	Discharge	Significance
Inhibit	67.83	57.50	*
Self-monitor	65.33	58.42	NS
Behavioural Regulation Index	68.92	58.92	**
Shift	68.42	57.58	**
Emotional control	74.17	60.25	**
Emotional Regulation Index	73.33	58.33	***
Initiate	56.58	51.17	NS
Working memory	60.17	48.58	**
Plan/organise	60.17	49.92	**
Task-monitor	60.17	49.50	**
Organisation of materials	54.58	45.00	*
Cognitive Regulation Index	56.25	49.33	NS
Global Executive composite	67.17	54.08	***

Note. Significance levels from matched-pairs t-tests ( $df = 11$ ).  
 \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; NS: not significant

The results of the STRS revealed significant improvements on the 'conflict' subscale ( $p < .05$ ) and in the overall quality ( $p < .05$ ) of the NG teacher relationship to students (Table 6). Noteworthy improvements in the 'closeness' and 'dependency' subscales were also observed. Reduced conflict and dependency combined with higher closeness scores suggests that the teachers felt more connected and effective in their ability to support their students (Pianta, 2001).

Changes in the self-perceptions of NG students over time were measured by the Piers-Harris 3 (Table 7). Following the NG intervention, students reported significant improvements in their 'overall self-concept' scale, as well as in the 'social acceptance' and 'intellectual & school status' scales. The scales that did not meet significance (ie, 'behavioural adjustment', 'freedom from anxiety', 'happiness & satisfaction' and 'physical appearance') moved in a positive direction.

**Table 6**  
Mean percentile scores on the STRS (N=12)

Scale	Intake	Discharge	Significance
Closeness	44.83	54.17	NS
Conflict	78.67	53.83	*
Dependency	67.67	57.67	NS
Overall quality	26.67	46.42	*

Note. Significance levels from matched-pairs  $t$ -tests ( $df = 11$ ).  
\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; NS: not significant

**Table 7**  
Mean  $t$ -scores on the Piers-Harris 3 (N=12)

Scale	Intake	Discharge	Significance
Behavioural adjustment	40.33	42.50	NS
Freedom from anxiety	42.83	44.17	NS
Happiness & satisfaction	44.75	48.33	NS
Intellectual & school status	43.17	47.08	*
Physical appearance	49.33	53.50	NS
Social acceptance	41.67	49.67	*
Overall self-concept	41.25	48.17	*

Note. Significance levels from matched-pairs  $t$ -tests ( $df = 11$ ).  
\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; NS: not significant

On the syndrome scales of the TRF (Table 8), teachers reported significant improvements on the 'withdrawn/depressed' ( $p < .05$ ), 'social problems' ( $p < .01$ ), 'attention problems' ( $p < .01$ ) and 'aggressive behaviour' scales ( $p < .001$ ). Somatic complaints increased slightly, whereas scores on the remaining scales of 'anxious/depressed', 'thought problems' and 'rule-breaking behaviour' all went down, despite not reaching statistical significance. Results also revealed significant improvements on the internalising syndrome ( $p < .05$ ) and externalising syndrome

( $p < .001$ ) scales as we all the total problems score ( $p < .001$ ). Teacher-reported improvements in SEMH difficulties measured by the TRF were consistent with the results of direct observations of externalising and internalising challenging behaviours ( $p < .001$ ). Upon NG entry, students engaged in behaviours that interfered with school functioning for approximately 60% of the day, on average (ie, roughly four hours in a 6.5-hour school day). By NG completion, the frequency of problematic behaviour decreased to 17% (ie, roughly one hour per school day).

**Table 8**  
Mean T-Scores on the TRF (N=12)

Scale	Intake	Discharge	Significance
Anxious/depressed	62.67	56.92	NS
Withdrawn/depressed	60.17	55.83	*
Somatic complaints	51.33	52.58	NS
Social problems	66.08	59.50	**
Thought problems	65.17	59.42	NS
Attention problems	65.25	57.83	**
Rule-breaking behaviour	67.83	63.83	NS
Aggressive behaviour	69.25	61.00	***
Internalising syndromes	69.67	60.83	*
Externalising syndromes	63.42	53.17	***
<b>Total problems score</b>	<b>70.42</b>	<b>60.92</b>	<b>***</b>

Note. Significance levels from matched-pairs *t*-tests ( $df = 11$ ).  
\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; NS: not significant

## Discussion

An investigation of participant characteristics underscores the difficult and complex realities of many NG families. The majority of legal guardians in this study reported a low or poverty-level socio-economic status and were employed primarily as manual labour workers. Nearly half of guardians did not complete their secondary education while most others did not complete a post-secondary education degree. Students in the NGs had already experienced, on average, more than four ACEs by their early elementary years. For

example, most students in the Montreal NGs had a history of child-protective services involvement and a legal guardian with mental health and/or substance abuse problem. In addition, half of the students were identified by NG personnel as routinely having unmet basic needs (eg, food, hygiene, clothing and sleep). These findings are particularly concerning given the dose-response relationship between ACEs and lifelong mental and physical health difficulties (Felitti et al, 1998). Unfortunately, guardian and teacher reports of school functioning provide strong indication that exposure to developmental trauma had already

led to a clinical level of maladjustment by the time students were referred to the NG. Reflective of this possibility are indications that NG students were, on average, at the 97th percentile on the total problems score of the TRF; a very reliable measure of SEMH difficulties (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). While internalising syndromes were elevated relative to same-age peers, it was their self-regulation (eg, rule-breaking and aggressive behaviours) that was the most problematic area of functioning for NG students at intake.

By the end of a single school year in a NG, students were rated as being within the normal range on all scales of the TRF. This finding is striking given the severity of SEMH difficulties apparent at NG intake. Consistent with the findings of Seth-Smith et al (2010) and Cooper et al (2001), students demonstrated the greatest improvements in the areas of socialisation, attentional functioning and aggressive behaviour. Marked reductions in social difficulties is a particularly encouraging finding given that socio-emotional literacy and interpersonal skills are explicitly taught and reinforced in NGs. In addition to the didactic component of the NG, it is also possible that being part of a class of similarly challenged peers combined with NG personnel's welcoming, non-judgmental approach fostered feelings of safety and belonging among students that, in turn, encouraged them to take interpersonal risks and to begin to develop meaningful connections. Consistent with these possibilities, students reported significant increases on measures of perceived social acceptance and school status. NG participation also seemed to have robust effects on self-control with improvements observed in several related areas of emotional, behavioural and cognitive regulation. For example, teachers observed significant improvements in task monitoring and completion, sustained attention, working memory, planning, organisation, behavioural inhibition, tolerance to change and emotional control. Although of a lesser magnitude, students also showed signs of improvement in their ability to self-monitor (ie, awareness of the impact of one's behaviour on other people and outcomes) and independently initiate tasks.

As research investigating NG effectiveness has been criticised for failing to include direct measures of student comportment (Hughes &

Schlösser, 2014), the present study complemented parent and teacher ratings of child functioning with classroom observations. Overall, the results of direct observation were consistent with the improvements in school functioning reflected by the TRF and BRIEF-2 scores. On average, the proportion of class time NG students were engaged in some form of social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (eg, withdrawal, teasing, arguing, etc.) decreased from approximately four hours to one hour per school day. This finding should be emphasised as it may help teachers set realistic expectations and establish a safe haven/secure base along with proactive supports (eg, preparing students for changes in routine or for the unexpected, rehearsing upcoming social circumstances that they will likely find challenging, etc) with NG students when they re-integrate into mainstream classrooms following graduation from their NG placement.

Statistically significant and clinically meaningful improvements in school functioning following nine months of intervention appear to be at least partially linked to the specific practices within these NGs. NGs in this study were known to implement six attunement strategies, a key component of nurturance and secure attachment (Schore, 2001), three times more frequently than mainstream teachers of corresponding grade levels (Cloran et al, in press). Given the relationship between attunement, secure attachment and self-regulation (Cairns & Cairns, 2016), it is reasonable to conclude that the NG teacher's awareness and responsiveness to student needs fostered improvements in school functioning (Geddes, 2017). Persistent efforts by the NG teachers to provide students with attuned interactions and thereby co-create connection may have also contributed to improvements in the overall quality of the student-teacher relationship (ie, from the 1st percentile to 34th percentile), as well as to student-rated improvements in overall self-esteem (ie, from the 18th to 42nd percentile, on average). Consistent with Bowlby's theory of attachment, these positive changes may be indicative of a shift in the child's underlying relational template wherein adults begin to be seen as trustworthy and dependable, and the self is experienced as progressively more capable and worthy of affection (ie, an adaptive revision of children's IWMs).

NGs in this study also differed from mainstream classrooms in terms of the frequency of constructive behaviour support (Cloran et al, in press). As antecedent interventions (eg, scaffolding and co-regulation) have demonstrated efficacy at reducing both severe and high-frequency problematic behaviours (Lavigna & Willis, 2012), it is likely that the frequency of constructive behaviour support in NGs (ie, five times more frequent in Montreal NGs vs mainstream settings) contributed to student improvement in emotional and behavioural regulation. Other practices which may have contributed to the effectiveness of these NGs include counselling sessions offered to students (weekly) and their families (monthly), frequent communication with health and social services to initiate and/or coordinate community support, as well as four hours of bi-weekly clinical supervision and training for NG personnel.

### Limitations and future directions

This study had a few noteworthy limitations. First, despite the significant improvements in school functioning experienced by NG students, the small sample size limits the generalisation of the results. To build on the findings of this study, investigators seeking to link student outcomes with specific NG practices should aim to achieve a sample size that would allow, at a minimum, for power calculations to be performed. Furthermore, this study did not investigate whether improvements in school functioning were maintained post-intervention. As such, it is impossible to determine the extent to which the improvements demonstrated by students were transferable and stable in mainstream settings. As longitudinal studies are an identified research need in the NG literature (Bennett, 2015), systematic follow-ups would provide an indication of NG effectiveness over time.

Finally, data collection for this study took place at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. External variables unique to this unprecedented crisis may have indirectly impacted NG effectiveness. For example, a recent study evaluated the impact of Covid-19 on 3,000 parents of children under the age of 18 years in Canada and found: (a) declines in mental health, (b) increased alcohol consumption, (c) increased suicidal thoughts/feelings, and (d) increased distress related to not being safe from physical, emotional and domestic violence (Gadermann et al, 2021). These findings suggest that problematic household dynamics among NG families could have been aggravated during this study, which in turn, may have had led to more adverse effects on NG participants (ie, worsening of SEMH difficulties). Additionally, NG personnel reported that the pandemic consistently made it more difficult to meet students' proximity-seeking needs and to convey and interpret emotional tone (ie, to be as attuned as they would have been under normal circumstances). A comparison of studies conducted during and following the Covid-19 pandemic may reveal some of the ways in which implementation and outcomes were impacted in NGs.



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# Characteristics and experiences of Nurture Group and Learning Support Zone educators in Malta

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Keywords: Nurture Groups (NGs), Learning Support Zones (LSZs), teachers, Learning Support Educators (LSEs)

Submitted: 16 June 2021 Accepted for publication: 3 August 2022

## Abstract

Nurture Groups (NGs) and Learning Support Zones (LSZs) started to operate as a pilot project in state schools in Malta in 2008. There are more than 60 NGs and LSZs in primary, middle and secondary schools in Malta, out of a total of 89 state schools, with more than a hundred educators supporting children and young people through the nurture approach. This small-scale study aimed to present and discuss the experiences of eight educators (teachers) and learning support zone educators (LSEs) working in NGs and LSZs in schools in Malta. Using semi-structure interviews, the study also described personal characteristics that the participants feel they need to have in their role as NG or LSZ educators, their experiences and the challenges they face. Findings from this study suggest that the role of a NG or LSZ educator is a role that brings about positive change. Also, participants suggested that a NG or LSZ educator needs to have several positive personal attributes. Findings in the current study suggest that there is the perception of a lack of understanding on the nurture approach from mainstream educators.

**Data availability statement:** Due to the nature of this research, the data cannot be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

## Characteristics and experiences of Nurture Group and Learning Support Zone educators in Malta

### Introduction and research context

A Nurture Group (NG) is a special class that runs within a mainstream school and is generally intended for children or young people whose behaviour puts them at risk of exclusion (Syrnyk, 2012). In Malta, NGs, as they are called in primary schools, and Learning Support Zones (LSZs), as they are called in middle and secondary schools, started to operate as a pilot project in 2008. Now there are more than 60 NGs and LSZs in schools in Malta, with 120 educators supporting children and young people through the nurture approach.

In Malta the nomenclature for teaching assistant is learning support educator (LSE), so in all the country's NGs and LSZs there is a teacher and an LSE supporting children or young people. I, the author, have insider status due to my experiences as a NG teacher and currently as an education officer supporting NGs and LSZs.

The NG is made up of between 6 and 12 children or young people, and the role of the teacher and LSE is to build positive relationships between themselves as NG staff and between the children or young people, based on attachment principles and support for vulnerable children (Billington, 2012).

## Literature review

NGs provide an effective intervention in improving the emotional wellbeing of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Hughes & Schlösser, 2014). The aim of a NG is to provide a carefully structured approach where there is a balance of learning, teaching, affection and structure within a home-like atmosphere (Davison & Duffy, 2017). Teaching approaches within a NG involve attunement principles, and the physical environment is designed to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people (Cubeddu & Mackay, 2017).

The nurture approach is based on the Attachment Theory (Balisteri, 2016) and, as stated by Geddes (2018), this theory is a core aspect of practitioners', professionals' and researchers' understanding of the issues affecting learning and performance in a classroom. As noted by Middleton (2019) and Balisteri (2016), Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory offers a unique insight into the roots of how children with difficulties benefit from a NG experience, as it recognises that communication implicit in behaviour is based on unmet needs. For children who benefit from the nurture approach, school is often their first experience of a consistent safe place where they are known, acknowledged, respected and feel safe with adults who are reliably and predictably present. It is perhaps their first experience of feeling noticed as having their own identity and a responsiveness to their feelings and experiences (Geddes, 2018).

There has been ongoing research into NGs since their introduction by Marjorie Boxall in the 1970s (MacKay, 2015). The focus has included social emotional learning (SEL) programmes implemented in NGs – such as research by Lyon (2017), Bennett (2015), Burns, MacDonald & Ferguson (2018) and Colley & Seymour (2021); the voices of children and young people who benefit from NG settings – such as studies by Pyle & Rae (2015) & Edmunds (2021); and the voices of educators who work in NGs – such as Billington (2012), Cubeddu & Mackay (2017), Davison & Duffy (2017), Middleton (2018), Middleton (2020), Syrynk (2012), Balisteri (2016), Lucas (2019), Gibb & Lewis (2019), Middleton (2019), Macpherson & Phillips (2020), and Kombou & Bunn (2021). For example, Macpherson & Phillips (2020) noted in a study of primary educators on their views of

NGs, that primary teachers believe that there is a reduction in undesirable behaviours exhibited by children attending NG provisions. However, there needs to be more training on knowledge and understanding of how best to facilitate social and emotional development within the NG.

Teachers and teaching assistants working in NGs have an exacting role that serves as a model for positive relationships and healthy social interactions in an often-demanding educational environment (Davison & Duffy, 2017). Middleton (2019) noted that nurture practice begins at the very point when an educator 'listens' to the inner voice of the pupil and responds to their cries through the creation of connection, safety and trust. Likewise, in their study of how NG practitioners make sense of their relationship with children attending the NG, Gibb & Lewis (2019) noted that several factors lead to a successful practitioner-child relationship.

Balisteri (2016) explored the teacher-child relationship in NGs, and noted that the overall relationship quality between teachers and students improved over time both during their mainstream class and in the NG. Research with NG educators also puts forward that these educators perceive themselves as vehicles for positive change (Billington, 2012, and Syrynk, 2012). Also, research from Cubeddu & Mackay (2017) noted that NG educators practise attunement principles significantly more than teachers in mainstream classes. Syrynk (2012) noted that NG educators felt that they are trusted by the children in their care, that they are open, trustworthy, secure role models and that they feel that they hold the following characteristics: inner strength, calmness, empathic nature, self-awareness, and objectivity. Billington (2012) noted the challenge that there was lack of teamwork between NG educators and other staff members, with NG staff feeling that other educators are envious of the NG educators' work.

Middleton (2018) pointed out that the nature of specialised work that NG educators undertake can greatly impact their personal lives, but it was suggested that having a shared belief, friendship and leadership among NG educators, as well as supervision, can present positive outcomes. A small-scale study by Middleton (2020) with teaching assistants working in a NG suggested

that a strong belief in the nurture approach, friendship and the feeling of being listened to, recognised, included and supported by the school leadership team had a positive impact on NG educators' work. However, there were negative implications if NG staff were not listened to, nor included or supported by the school leadership team.

Middleton (2019) explored the need for NG educators to be supported in their wellbeing as due to the nature of their job, these educators can experience several stressors that might negatively affect wellbeing. In a study by Kombou & Bunn (2021) on resilience in NG staff, the authors acknowledged that the role of an NG educator is a highly motivating one, but also demanding, and staff can experience isolation. Lucas (2019) noted from her experience as a NG teacher that it is essential that educators working in a NG do not lose sight of what makes NGs unique – that it is about children learning at their present developmental level, and it is not about therapy.

## Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted in this research. While there have been studies on and with NG educators from different countries, it was felt that there was a need to do this research with NG and LSZ educators in Malta to understand their experiences of working within the Maltese educational context and the opportunities and challenges they face.

In view of this, the NG and LSZ educators were asked the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of NG and LSZ educators working in Malta?
- What characteristics do NG and LSZ educators feel are of importance in their role?
- What strengths and/or challenges do NG and LSZ educators experience in their role?

The research took a small convenience sample of NG and LSZ educators in Malta. Out of the eight participants who took part in an individual semi-structured interview, four were working in a NG and four were working in an LSZ. Four participants were teachers and four were LSEs, and five were female and three were male. Their experience working in a NG or LSZ ranged from one to eight school years.

While in other countries, NG educators tend to support children and young people for at least two full days a week, NG and LSZ educators in Malta support children for less time (Cefai & Cooper, 2011). A child or young person who is referred to a NG or LSZ in Malta, will receive support for about 90 minutes per week. However, NG and LSZ educators in Malta also provide other types of support, which can be in-class support sessions, whole-class support, and whole-school support. In-class support is support in the student's own class which provides a link between the skills learnt in the NG or LSZ and the mainstream class. Whole-class support is a scheduled session in a mainstream class where particular social and emotional learning topics, such as values or emotional literacy, are taught. Whole-school support includes events such as special assemblies and celebrations of diversity and awareness days.

Tracy (2010, p.839) noted that quality qualitative research needs to adhere to eight criteria: a worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical considerations, and meaningful coherence. As an insider of NGs in Malta, through my previous and present roles as educator, I felt the need to be self-reflexive and so throughout the whole research process ensured that I would not put my ideas and biases in the research, but rather listen to the participants' views of their experiences to ensure multivocality. To achieve this, I gave the participant interviewees the transcribed interviews, and sought their agreement to continue. As there was this particular need to research nurturing approaches in Malta, this report covers a worthy topic; however, due to the small-scale nature of the study the findings cannot be generalised.

To engage in this research project, I ensured that ethical considerations were in place. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Board of the Ministry for Education in Malta. Participants took part in the research voluntarily, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the duration of the research project and following publication. For safeguarding reasons, all of the participants' names were changed. Though this project was a small-scale study, through the use of individual semi-structured interviews, the research gave detailed information about the experiences, characteristics, and challenges of NG and LSZ educators.

I chose individual interviews as a research tool because I wanted to analyse whether the views and experiences the educators gave during the interviews were similar or diverse amongst the participants and whether they were in line with research undertaken outside Malta. My choice of research tool resonated with the literature on the experiences of NG educators working in other countries. After the eight interviews were conducted and recorded, they were transcribed and coded, and then thematic analysis was used in order to capture the meanings attributed by participants to their experiences (Willig, 2013), helping to make sense of their actions.

## Findings

As a result of coding the transcripts through thematic analysis, five themes emerged from this research, which are:

**Theme 1:** Everyday experiences

**Theme 2:** Support for NG and LSZ educators

**Theme 3:** Characteristics of NG and LSZ educators

**Theme 4:** Strengths and opportunities

**Theme 5:** Challenges

**Table 1**  
How the five themes link to the research questions?

Research question	Themes linked to research question
<b>Research question 1:</b> What are the experiences of NG and LSZ educators working in Malta?	<b>Theme 1:</b> Everyday experiences of NG and LSZ educators <b>Theme 2:</b> Support for NG and LSZ educators
<b>Research question 2:</b> What characteristics do NG and LSZ educators feel are of importance in their role?	<b>Theme 3:</b> Characteristics of NG and LSZ educators
<b>Research question 3:</b> What strengths and/or challenges do NG and LSZ educators experience in their role?	<b>Theme 4:</b> Strengths NG and LSZ educators experience <b>Theme 5:</b> Challenges NG and LSZ educators experience

**Table 2**  
**The five themes, the associated codes and relevant quotes from participants**

Theme	Key words/codes	Meaningful extract
<b>Theme 1: Everyday experiences</b>	Understanding their difficulties	“You need to care every day. The children who come to us have social problems and family difficulties... You are the only support that they have at school.”
<b>Theme 2: Support for NG and LSZ educators</b>	Progress, understanding	“This year I had a lot of foreign students who were referred to the NG. They passed through a lot of trauma. I used to send for them and tell them that I understand their situation. I encouraged friendships through the sessions. I got to know about their culture. Now I have seen a lot of progress.”
<b>Theme 3: Characteristics of NG/LSZ Educators</b>	Empathy, attunement, working under pressure, characteristics of a nurture educator	“It is important that the educator is self-reflective even on his lifestyle to that lifestyle compliments your attitude during the sessions.”
<b>Theme 4: Strengths and opportunities</b>	Appreciation of NG and LSZ educators work, positive change, rapport with students, educators and SLT (senior leadership team)	“It is very positive when students observe the human side in your work.”
<b>Theme 5: Challenges</b>	Burnout, lack of awareness on the nurture approach	“You need support when teaching children who have experienced a lot of challenges and trauma in their life, and this might affect you when you listen to their challenges and problems.”

### Theme 1: Everyday practices

The participants mentioned a number of experiences that they go through when they are teaching and supporting students who benefit from NG or LSZ support. One educator mentioned the need to practice empathy in her role on a daily basis, and she related a story of a boy she supported:

“There was a boy who was exhibiting very challenging behaviour; he even hurt this teacher. He was engaged in a lot of challenging behaviour and was on the brink of being excluded from school. But once you try to understand his situation, why he is acting in that way, you realise that he feels abandoned, even by his mum, and that resulted in a lot of anger.”

Angele

One participant, who at the time of the study was a LSZ teacher, highlighted the need for continuously supporting young people on a daily basis:

“Every single day we support, all the time, during every lesson. Young people who attend our programme need to be shown love and patience, as you would not achieve anything otherwise.”

Francesca

## Theme 2: Support for NG and LSZ educators

Participants also described individual experiences with students that they supported in the NG or LSZ, and how through long-term support they were able to observe positive change in these particular students. One NG educator mentioned how she supported students who were refugees as part of her everyday practices:

“This year I had a lot of foreign students who were referred to the NG. They passed through a lot of trauma. I used to send for them and tell them that I understand their situation. I encouraged friendships through the sessions. I got to know about their culture. Now I have seen a lot of progress.”

Denise

Another noted an experience of a boy who was transferred to the school where he was a NG teacher:

“I am thinking about a boy who came from another school. He was considered to be a problem in every school that he went to, but the problem was that this boy was not accepted by adults at school. They built a wall... but if you look at the other side of the wall of the student you see that the problem was not the boy and the problem could be solved. If you see from where the problem is coming, you start from that it is easy to understand from where the problem is coming from and be able to support.”

Blake

A NG LSE recalled how she supported a boy with externalised challenging behaviours:

“He was described as arrogant and that he answers back. When I started to work with him, through in-class support, and I supported his teacher and his LSE, they started to realise that there was a deeper level, that he was not able to express his emotions, he had complex emotions that were beyond his age and he could not regulate these emotions. So we did a breakdown of things and till the end of the year, though he still experienced some defiant behaviours, we saw an improvement in this boy’s behaviour.”

Emma

## Theme 3: Characteristics of a NG/LSZ educator

In this particular study the participants mentioned the diverse attributes a NG or LSZ educator should have, namely: “being empathic”, “able to work in a team”, “being a good role model”, “building a good rapport with the children/young people”, “being patient”, “being understanding”, “being perceptive”, “being firm caring and calm and able to work under pressure”. One of the educators related how previous experience in his role as educator helped him as a LSZ teacher:

“Before I worked in a learning zone, as a teacher I tried to reach out to the students not only during the lessons but also during break time. That laid groundwork for building a good rapport with them.”

Harry

Another educator mentioned the characteristic of being attuned with the child:

“You need to see the situation from the student’s point of view and if you do, you see that the difficulty goes way back. The problem is a barrier that hinders him from functioning in class.”

Blake

One participant mentioned the need to be understanding of the child's experience and empathic as a characteristic of a NG/LSZ educator:

"You need to understand their (the children's) problem, understand what they're feeling, so to help them better. And at the same time you need to show love and be firm. These go together, to be able to prepare them for class and for life."

**Denise**

Another educator who took part in this study noted the need of being nurturing in the role of a NG or LSZ educator:

"You need to practice these characteristics every day because we meet so many children with difficulties that automatically you need to practice these characteristics. And the children themselves, they come to you as you are the only support that they have at school."

**Francesca**

## Theme 4: Strengths and opportunities

Participant educators in this study mentioned that the rapport with the children and young people who attend the NG/LSZ was one of the strengths of the service:

"It is very positive when students observe the human side in your work."

**Harry**

Being an agent for positive change for the student was also perceived as a strength by the participants in this study:

"You see a positive change...I mean even parents come up to us and tell us, 'Thank you, because through your support my son has made an improvement'."

**Angele**

Some participants who felt that they were accepted and their work was appreciated by the senior leadership team (SLT) and educators mentioned the relationship with other educators as a strength:

"Luckily enough the head of school understands us and helps us. Even when we tell her that we need to buy something, she readily supports us."

**Gavin**

"The teaching staff at school they understand us, they accept us to the full."

**Clara**

## Theme 5: Challenges

While some participants felt that other staff members and school leaders accepted their role as NG or LSZ educators, other participants in this study suggested that there is lack of acceptance and support in this approach, thus perceiving relationships with other staff and the SLT as a challenge, generally due to lack of knowledge and awareness of the nurture approach:

"I believe that though teachers have challenges in class like the curriculum and timetabling and syllabus, most of them do not understand that if a child has challenges that do not allow him to function well in a classroom school, he cannot focus on the maths lesson for example."

**Blake**

"Some teachers do not understand that you need to pull out a student for some time, to come to the learning zone, to stop from academic work and focus more on things that help him grow as a person."

**Gavin**

Two participants in this current study also mentioned burnout and challenges with regards to mental health and wellbeing in their role as a NG or LSZ educator:

“I have a full day at work, I get tired. Most of the young people we support have mental health difficulties we need to address, support them, and sometimes you feel you are not prepared to support them in a holistic way.”

Francesca

“In certain situations you need to remain calm, or else if you are angry you might end up with even more challenging situations.”

Clara

## Discussion

The function of the NG and LSZ in Malta is to support children and young people who are at risk of exclusion (Syrnyk, 2012) and is based on attachment principles (Billington, 2012) & (Geddes, 2018). Similar to Davison & Duffy's (2017) findings, the participants in this study suggest that NG or LSZ educators create a home-like atmosphere through the rapport they build with the children and young people, and they engage in a number of SEL programmes, as stated in research by Lyon (2019), Bennett (2015), Burns, MacDonald and Ferguson (2018), and Colley & Seymour (2021).

Due to the diverse practices that take place in NGs and LSZs in Malta – such as the fact that they take students for shorter periods of time each week and engage in other practices such as in-class, whole-class and whole-school support – it could be suggested that their everyday running is different to that of other countries. However, a number of similarities were noted in this study when compared with previous ones, especially with regards to the characteristics of NG and LSZ educators and the strengths and challenges they experience. Such similarities can be seen in the use of language related to their characteristics, such as being an agent of positive change (Billington, 2012; Syrnyk, 2012) and ensuring that the NG and LSZ educators build positive relationships (Davison & Duffy, 2017; Gibb & Lewis, 2019; Balisteri, 2016). Syrnyk (2012), through her research with educators, mentioned a number of person-centred support approaches, which were also similar to

the views expressed in this current study. Similarly, Cubeddu and Mackay's study (2017) some participants in the study differentiated between the characteristics of NG and LSZ and their mainstream counterparts, suggesting a lack of teamwork between mainstream educators and NG or LSZ educators (Billington, 2012).

## Conclusion and recommendations

This study presented the views of eight NG and LSZ educators in Malta and discussed the characteristics they required and the experiences and challenges they faced. While this research is subjective to the voices of these eight participants, it supports previous research of educators working in the NG-specialised setting, including Billington (2012), Middleton (2018) and Syrnyk (2012).

When discussing the qualities and traits required, the participants mentioned positive attributes that focused on the nurturing approach and the experiences that they face in their role as a NG or LSZ teacher or LSE. All the experiences mentioned in this study present support centred around a child or young person, and acknowledge how these educators engage in listening to the child or young person and observing their behaviour to build a trusting relationship. Participants also noted that they try to focus on the positive characteristics of each child and young person and then work with them to improve their social and emotional well-being through social and emotional learning.

Participants had diverse views of the strengths, opportunities and challenges that they experience in their role as NG or LSZ educators. Some saw relationships with other educators or SLT members as a strength, while others saw this aspect as a challenge. They all noted that they have a good rapport with the children and young people who are supported through the NG or LSZ.

While NGs and LSZs function with a different approach in Malta, the views of educators in this research suggest that the NGs and LSZs in this country present similar positive outcomes to their foreign counterparts. They all promote nurture approaches and engage in social and emotional learning to support children and young people.

Following this study, a number of recommendations for the NG and LSZ service in Malta could be suggested. As suggested by the participants, there needs to be more acceptance of the nurturing approach in schools, which could be achieved through more NG and LSZ training and awareness for mainstream teachers and SLT members. At present, NG and LSZ educators are supported by the Maltese State Schools Support Services, and this needs to continue to ensure that they all maintain positive mental health wellbeing in their role as educators.

NGs and LSZs in Malta support a number of students who exhibit social, emotional and behavioural challenges, through NG and LSZ sessions and whole-class, whole-school and in-class support. These sessions and support must continue as they are helping students with diverse needs, including those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities, those who are at risk of poverty, and those with emotional and behavioural challenges. This suggests the need for the continuous professional development and training for NG and LSZ educators, and awareness of other educators and education leaders on the nurture approaches implemented by the NG and LSZ settings.



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# How the implementation of a secondary school nurture group relates to whole-school approaches and ethos: a case study

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Keywords: nurture group, secondary school, whole-school approach, case study

Submitted: 8 December 2021 Accepted for publication: 11 February 2022

## Abstract

Nurture Groups (NGs) have been widely implemented with vulnerable young people in mainstream primary schools to support the development of secure relationships and so promote a sense of wellbeing and readiness for learning. Success of the intervention within the primary school environment has led to increasing interest in the applicability of NGs to secondary schools. Within this single-school case study, the experiences and perceptions of NG and non-NG pupils and school staff were explored through individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis of the data produced three main themes and nine sub-themes, developed across the three stakeholder groups. Findings suggested that the successful implementation of secondary NGs is related to whole-school approaches and ethos. Secondary NGs can provide extensive support for vulnerable pupils and support a positive approach to whole-school wellbeing. Recommendations for developing secondary NG practice include: embedding NG practice into whole-school culture, adopting a more flexible approach to how NGs are organised and how they operate, and considering the particular needs of Year 11 pupils.

**Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

## Introduction

The mental health of children and young people is a priority within education and health policy (DoH & DfE, 2018). In addition, the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing is an area of current concern with, for example, young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) experiencing increased levels of anxiety and reduced levels of wellbeing (DHSC, 2021). Guidance within 'Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools' (DfE, 2018) highlights a need for schools to consider how to provide a 'safe and calm environment where mental health problems are less likely' (p.6) for all pupils in response to increasing social, emotional and mental health

(SEMH) needs. One school-based intervention – Nurture Groups (NGs) – has consistently been identified within government guidelines and policy as an appropriate and effective approach to supporting vulnerable pupils with SEMH needs (DfES, 2005; Ofsted, 2011) and is highlighted as an intervention where the development of best practice should be targeted (DfE, 2019). Furthermore, the promotion of a whole-school nurturing ethos has been recognised as a useful and preventative approach to help improve the SEMH of children and young people (DfE, 2018).

Based on attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992; Bowlby, 2005) NGs support the development of effective 'internal working models' (IWMs) through the experience of nurturing and trusting

relationships (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). A healthy IWM (mental template of relationships based on experiences with a primary caregiver) supports the appropriate organisation of a child's behaviour (especially their social interactions) through the way it shapes expectations of themselves and others.

The stability of IWMs has been an area of interest within developmental psychology (eg, Fraley, Roisman & Haltigan, 2013; Jones et al., 2018) with the emergence of two theoretical perspectives: 'prototype' and 'revisionist' (Fraley et al., 2013). Both perspectives propose that IWMs can be updated through exposure to new interpersonal experiences, but they do not agree on whether that change leads to full or partial replacement of IWMs (Fraley et al., 2013). Either way, the notion that IWMs are continuously 'updated' and 'revised' in response to current social interactions suggests that through new experiences of rewarding and trusting relationships, an individuals' IWM can become more positive and secure.

## Nurture Groups and existing research

NGs are a short-term, psychosocial school-based intervention, built on six guiding principles underpinning the organisation and ethos of the approach (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006; see Figure 1). There is now an increasing evidence base pointing to the successful impact of NGs (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cheney, Schlösser, Nash & Glover, 2014; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Ofsted, 2011, Ruby, 2019). This growing literature has identified positive outcomes for primary-aged children who have additional needs relating to their social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and subsequent ability to effectively access learning. The research into primary NG practice has inspired an increasing interest in the application of NG practice within secondary schools, which is supported further by growing evidence relating to the plasticity of the human brain beyond early childhood (Blakemore, 2008; Kolb, 2013). In relation to the period of adolescence, evidence indicates that significant development and reorganisation of the brain occurs throughout this time (Crews, He & Hodge, 2007; Giedd, 2004). It has been shown that adolescents are more

susceptible to changes in IWMs than adults (Allen & Tan, 2016). A 'second window of opportunity' (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006) is, thereby, presented in adolescence within which new pathways in the brain that promote positive social interactions may be developed through exposure to environmental change.

**Figure 1**  
The six principles of nurture  
(Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006)

**Children's learning is understood developmentally**

**The classroom offers a safe base**

**The importance of nurture for the development of self-esteem**

**Language is a vital means of communication**

**All behaviour is communication**

**The importance of transition in children's lives**

Research into secondary NGs remains limited, although initial findings have been promising. For example, Grantham and Primrose (2017) reported a positive impact on the development of social and emotional skills and a decrease in behavioural needs. These findings concur with results from two previous studies carried out by Cooke, Yeomans & Parkes (2008) and Cooper & Whitebread (2007).

Grantham and Primrose (2017) were also interested in assessing the fidelity of NG provision across secondary schools. Using a qualitative approach, several recurring themes were identified relating to factors which both promoted the successful implementation of NG provision (such as support from senior management and staff training) and which presented as barriers to the successful implementation of NG provision (such as timetabling, whole-school understanding of NG provision and lack of parental involvement). The authors noted that the qualitative findings were

taken only from school staff, so further research needs to include the voice of pupils and parents.

Whilst acknowledging important gains for NG pupils, such as increased motivation, levels of self-esteem, happiness and confidence, research has also identified challenges to the application of NG principles to the secondary school environment, suggesting that adaptations to the typical primary approach may be needed (Garner & Thomas, 2011; Colley, 2009; Kourmoulaki, 2013; de Montjoie Rudolf, 2015).

Concerns around the transference of NG skills to the wider school environment have been highlighted by two further studies seeking the views of NG pupils, parents and school staff (de Montjoie Rudolf, 2014; Kourmoulaki, 2013). Both studies identified an increased sense of belonging and improved social and communication skills for NG pupils, but Kourmoulaki (2013) also identified inconsistent levels of communication between pupils, staff and parents, which was considered to hinder successful reintegration into mainstream classes. De Montjoie Rudolf (2014) concluded that whole-school culture might need to be addressed in order to support the transference of skills beyond the NG environment.

Collectively, findings from existing research into secondary NGs suggest a need for a more detailed understanding of secondary school NGs and how they may fit into whole-school culture. Capturing staff and pupil understanding of NGs using a detailed case study approach may enable a rich picture of the interrelating factors which impact on successful NG outcomes (eg, Colley, 2009; De Montjoie Rudolf, 2014; Garner & Thomas, 2011; Kourmoulaki, 2013). Furthermore, identifying the views of non-NG pupils in addition to NG pupils may help to develop a deeper understanding of how NGs function within the whole school.

## Method

A critical realist epistemology provided the framework for this single-school case study through an in-depth exploration of pupil and staff perceptions and experiences (Easton, 2010). A qualitative, inductive single case study design was used in order to capture and learn from the experiences of a school with the Nurturing Schools Award (Nurture UK, 2019).

## The present study

The present study took a positive psychology approach (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) involving a case study of a NG provision within a school holding the Nurturing Schools Award (Nurture UK, 2019). Case studies support the development of analytical insights through an in-depth inquiry (Thomas, 2015). Sometimes criticised for lacking both rigour and the potential to generalise findings (Yin, 2009), single case studies are not always viewed as a valid way to create and offer generalisations, although it is argued that a single case study promotes a detailed and interactive exploration, allowing something to be seen in its entirety (Thomas, 2015). Indeed, some researchers highlight the need to carefully consider the context within which interventions are used to understand the wider mechanisms through which change occurs and to engage in more 'realistic evaluations', rather than having an explicit focus on measuring outcomes (Byng, Norman & Redfern, 2005; Greenhalgh, Kristjansson & Robinson, 2007).

The research aim of the current study was exploratory and intended to consider the experiences and perceptions of pupils (NG and non-NG) and staff to try to understand the interrelating factors which may impact upon NGs within a whole-school context. The research question was: How might NGs operate successfully as part of a whole-school approach to supporting wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools?

## The case study Nurture Group

The case study school was a mainstream secondary comprehensive and sixth form situated in the south of England with approximately 850 students on roll. The proportion of pupils supported by pupil premium funding was below the national average and the proportion of pupils with identified Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) was above the national average.

The headteacher was reported by staff to place wellbeing at the centre of the whole-school ethos. The NG is run as the focus of their Inclusion, Wellbeing and Support system. The inclusion manager and the deputy inclusion manager undertook the national NG training programme in the autumn term of 2016. This focused on the development of a whole-school nurturing

approach, with the aim of promoting healthy outcomes for children and young people. As a result, the school developed their inclusion, wellbeing and support space into a NG base and centred their provision on the six principles of nurture. The NG does not run in the same way as the 'classic' primary NG model. It provides both a drop in during break, lunchtimes and in between lessons for pupils, as well as individual and group timetabled support throughout each day. A Year 11 tutor group runs at the beginning of each day for identified pupils, which is centred on NG provision. Pupils receiving ongoing NG support are all referred to NG and assessed using the Boxall Profile® for Young People (Bennathan, Boxall & Colley, 2010). Monitoring of progress is achieved using individual rating scales, developed in liaison with the school's educational psychologist.

## Participants

Opportunity sampling was used to recruit participants, using the knowledge of the deputy inclusion manager to inform for suitability. The first author requested that pupils were representative of all year groups and that staff members represented different roles within the school. It was hoped that a variety of different perspectives and experiences would support the emergence of a rich and detailed understanding.

In total, 11 NG pupils (some currently and some previously accessing the NG), 12 non-NG pupils and 9 school staff members took part in the study. The 23 pupils (9 females and 14 males) were aged between 11 years 10 months and 16 years 2 months (NG pupils  $M = 13.7$  years,  $SD = 1.62$ ; non-NG pupils  $M = 13.6$  years,  $SD = 0.91$ ). Twenty-one pupils were White British, one was White and Black African and one was Black Caribbean. Ten pupils (5 NG and 5 non-NG) were in receipt of pupil premium funding.

The school staff members interviewed had been employed by the school for between 2 and 31 years ( $M = 10.5$  years). They represented a mix of staff from the senior management team (3), subject teaching staff (3) and learning support staff (3). All three support staff had some involvement with the NG (one had a main role within NG, one spent time within NG as part of her Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) role and another had links to the NG through providing SEND pupil support).

## Measures

Semi-structured interview scripts (Appendices A and B) designed to capture perceptions, experiences and understanding, were developed for NG pupil and school staff interviews. The intention was for an in-depth understanding to emerge through responses to open-ended questions which the researcher could further explore using additional probes (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006).

A focus group (FG) approach was used to elicit pupil perceptions beyond those attending NG for which a discussion schedule was developed (Appendix C) made up of open-ended questions and suggested probes to allow the researcher to follow up on areas of interest within the group discussion (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

## Procedure

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (Study ID 40936). Pseudonyms were assigned to pupil participants during the transcription and write up of this research and staff members were kept anonymous to maintain confidentiality. The school deputy inclusion manager acted as gatekeeper, identifying and approaching potential participants and sending information letters to parents. Informed written consent (opt-in) was gained from parents and school staff. In addition, pupils gave their assent before the start of each interview or FG.

NG pupil and staff interviews took place in The Nook, a small, separate room within the NG area. Individual NG pupil interviews lasted approximately between 15 and 30 minutes and included a warm-up picture-sorting activity, and individual staff interviews lasted approximately between 20 and 40 minutes.

FGs were held in a quiet room and lasted for around one hour. The two FGs were split by age, one consisting of mainly younger pupils (11-13 years) and the other also including pupils from Year 10 and 11 (14-16 years). This was intended to help the pupils feel comfortable and enable them to fully engage with the discussion and share their own experiences (Nind & Vinha, 2014).

Each FG began with a metaphor activity to aid engagement and to help pupils feel more relaxed within the context of the group and stimulate discussion (Nind & Vinha, 2014). A post-it note recording activity was also used during the FGs to generate written recordings of responses to the question: 'How do you think the NG supports pupils at this school?' This supported all FG pupils in being able to share their thoughts and ideas and enriched the descriptions and interpretations produced (Fonteyn, Vettese, Lancaster & Bauer-Wu, 2008; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell & Britten, 2002). All interviews and FGs were audio-recorded and the first author noted any reflections post-interview/FG within a reflective journal.

## Data analysis

Transcribed audio data was analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) following the six steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author listened to the audio recordings and re-read the transcribed interviews/FG discussions for each stakeholder group to become fully immersed in the data. Initial codes were noted on the interview scripts before preliminary themes were developed for each stakeholder group (see Table 1 for developing themes). These were then reviewed through the creation of thematic maps. A process of combining, dividing or eliminating themes then took place in order to produce a single thematic map (see Figure 2) that was reviewed by all authors.

**Table 1**  
Developing themes for each stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Theme	Sub-theme
Nurture group pupils	Relationships/ sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support of teacher-pupil relationships</li> <li>• Friendship opportunities</li> <li>• NG pupils feel invested in</li> <li>• NG pupils feel included</li> </ul>
	Nurture group staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Availability</li> <li>• 1:1 support</li> <li>• Kindness and trust</li> </ul>
	Transferability of skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to remain in mainstream lessons</li> <li>• NG staff communication with subject teachers</li> <li>• Long-term goals (motivation)</li> <li>• NG supporting difficulties at home</li> </ul>
	Safe space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drop-in</li> <li>• Supporting a positive start to the day</li> <li>• Family feel</li> <li>• Academic support</li> <li>• Calm environment</li> </ul>
Non-nurture group pupils	Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buddy system</li> <li>• Opportunities to talk to staff</li> <li>• Peer-peer support</li> <li>• Support with friendships</li> </ul>
	How pupils experience the whole-school environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes a lack of communication</li> <li>• Some stigma attached to NG</li> <li>• Timetable impacting on friendships</li> <li>• Lack of opportunity for (older) pupils to talk about difficult feelings</li> <li>• Pressures in Year 11</li> <li>• Projection of school image</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued)

Stakeholder group	Theme	Sub-theme
	<b>How NG is understood by pupils</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible</li> <li>• Respected</li> <li>• A safe space</li> <li>• NG staff viewed positively</li> <li>• NG as a place to talk through difficulties</li> <li>• Supporting difficulties with home</li> <li>• Supporting academic needs</li> </ul>
	<b>Skills of NG staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting SEMH (e.g anxiety)</li> <li>• Support through trauma</li> <li>• Support to cope with difficult feelings</li> </ul>
<b>Staff</b>	<b>Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buddy system</li> <li>• Pupil ambassadors</li> <li>• Restorative approaches</li> <li>• Links to ELSA support</li> <li>• NG pupils supporting each other</li> <li>• Pastoral team supporting relationships</li> <li>• Expectations on behaviour in NG</li> </ul>
	<b>Staff understanding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole-school training on NGs</li> <li>• Nurture principles embedded into school policy</li> <li>• Joined up approach of staff</li> <li>• Staff visits to NG</li> </ul>
	<b>Whole child</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupil wellbeing valued</li> <li>• Specialist staff</li> <li>• Headteacher invests in pastoral side</li> <li>• School is inclusive</li> </ul>
	<b>Skills taught in NG</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling pupils to return to mainstream classes</li> <li>• Positive impact on behaviour (self-regulation)</li> <li>• Considering perspectives of others</li> <li>• Peer modelling</li> </ul>
	<b>Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links to families</li> <li>• Links to local community</li> </ul>
	<b>Nurture Group staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedication</li> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Availability for pupils</li> <li>• Modelling values and relationships</li> <li>• Positive outlook</li> </ul>

To minimise the risk of researcher bias and for clarity of the themes and sub-themes, a second coder (a voluntary research assistant) coded a random selection of the NG pupils and staff interview scripts (seven in total) and the FG scripts using a blank coding manual. The main author checked the extent to which the second coder

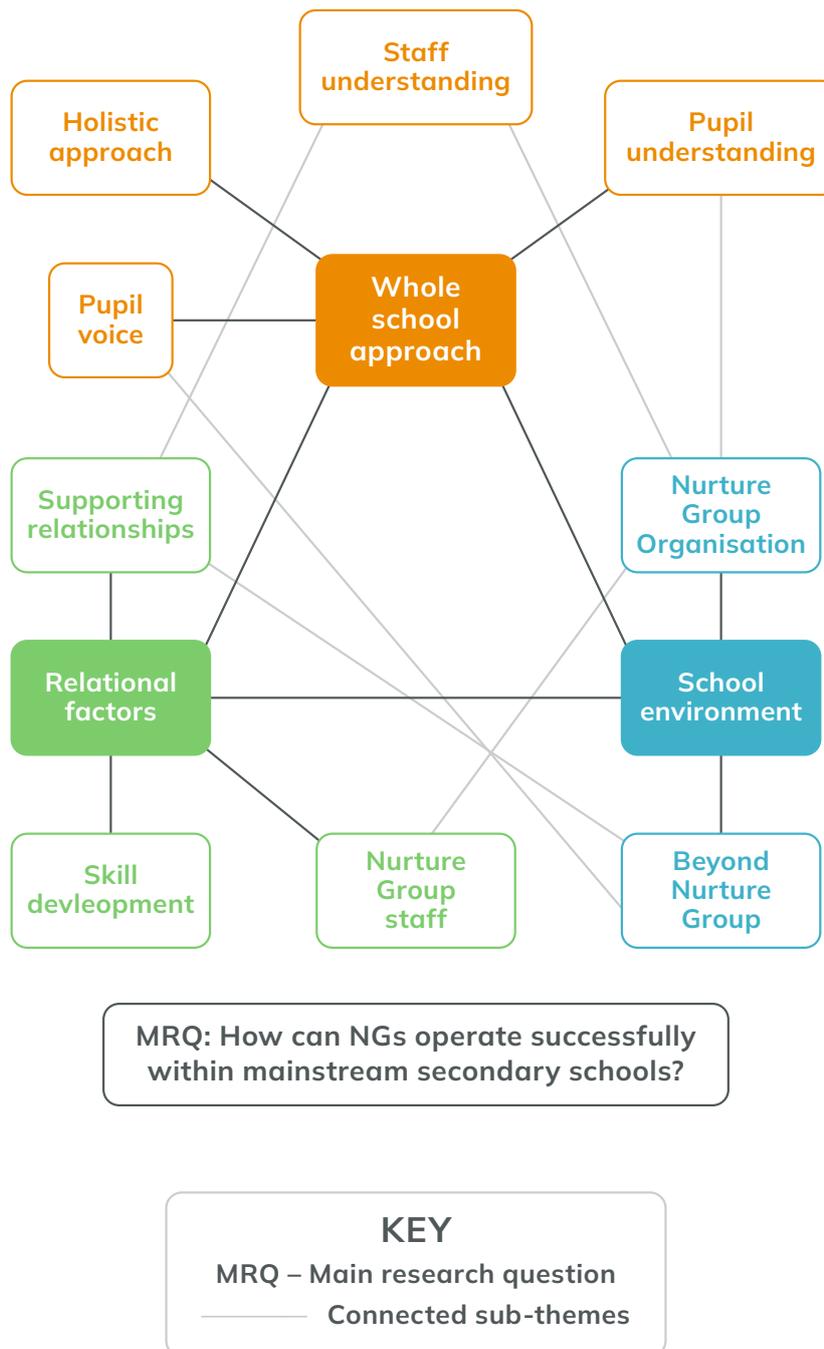
had allocated the same text extracts to the same themes and sub-themes. The level of agreement was considered to be acceptable and was also confirmed through joint discussion. This helped to support the transparency of the analysis process (Thomas, 2006).

## Findings

Three main themes and nine sub-themes were identified through the process of TA in relation to the entire dataset (see Figure 3). The following section will present the nine associated sub-

themes as they relate to the three main themes in response to the research question: 'How might NGs operate successfully as part of a whole-school approach to support wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools?'

**Figure 2**  
Final thematic map



## Theme 1: Whole-school approach

The whole-school ethos was identified to be largely inclusive and one that incorporated the six principles of nurture. Four sub-themes were identified: 'staff understanding,' 'pupil understanding,' 'holistic approach,' and 'pupil voice.'

### Sub-theme 1: Staff understanding

Analysis suggested that NG practice was understood, supported and valued by school staff and this was influenced by the status given to a NG approach by senior management, with the influence of whole staff INSET training and the embedding of NG principles within whole-school policy documents. One participant described how the NG staff had supported other staff:

"...they've managed to successfully get the staff trained up in the nurture principles and put that into policy where it never appeared before."

Staff 1

Staff from across the school understood the needs of pupils referred to the NG. A connection was made to possible challenges for those children whose home lives impacted on their ability to engage and learn in the classroom.

"So it's just, it's just like their safe place and if they haven't got that at home, if something's lacking then it can be made up here. Because before they can learn anything you've got meet their basic needs..."

Staff 6

### Sub-theme 2: Pupil understanding

Responses from both NG and non-NG pupils evidenced some knowledge of the approaches taken in NG and the needs of the pupils who access it and an understanding of how the NG environment supported these:

"So the people in here can teach them how to calm down and help them repair their relationship and things like that."

FG 2

"I don't know, it's just a really warm and good environment up here. Like it's different, completely different to the rest of the school which is good."

Charlie, Year 9

This view was not wholly supported, with some pupils in the second FG suggesting that Nurture Groups might not feel accessible or welcoming to all pupils. However, this may have been a greater reflection on the need to have a range of people and places for pupils to go to talk about concerns or difficulties, rather than a sense that NG itself created a sense of exclusion.

### Sub-theme 3: Holistic approach

Staff interviews gave rise to a sense that the school invested in the 'whole child'. One staff member talked about links with outside agencies who provided counselling for pupils, and another commented on the emphasis the headteacher placed on inclusivity and pastoral support:

"I think its ethos is that inclusive ethos and that's very much the Head's ...stamp that he has put on it since he has been Head."

Staff 7

Pupils across the school were encouraged to engage in extra-curricular activities and this sat alongside high academic and social expectations:

"...I think we comfortably push our students, we expect a lot of them, but in all rounds, not just academic, like taking part in school socially, behaviourally. Like friendship groups – we expect a lot of them and we help them... go through that."

Staff 4

### Sub-theme 4: Pupil voice

This sub-theme arose largely from the non-NG pupils within the FGs, particularly the older (Year 11) pupils, in response to pupils considering whether all pupils were listened to. Although staff talked about the importance of pupil voice within the school there was a feeling amongst some older pupils that the school's priority was to project a certain image rather than to actually hear and

respond to its existing pupils. This related to a sense of academic pressure felt by the Year 11 pupils which was different to their experiences lower down the school:

“The second you get into Year 11 there’s just a lot of pressure.”

FG 2

“If they actually took the time to listen, so they could know how we feel and actually care.”

FG 2

In summary, the whole-school approach theme, related to the way in which NG practice and theory appeared to be well understood, valued and accepted by both staff and pupils across the school. The investment from the leadership team appeared to drive this and helped to embed the NG within wider school approaches and policy. For some Year 11 pupils, however, there appeared to be a feeling that outside of the NG, the wider school approaches were not always supportive of their needs, with academic targets taking precedence over SEWB.

## Theme 2: Relational factors

This theme related to the influence NG had on peer relations and staff-pupil relationships and how this was enabled. Three sub-themes that all arose strongly across the three stakeholder groups – ‘supporting relationships,’ ‘skill development’ and ‘NG staff’ – were identified.

### Sub-theme 1: Supporting relationships

The NG supported pupils to maintain existing and/or to develop new friendships. The way in which the NG pupils spoke about being in the NG suggested that relationships with others, both pupils and staff, were the foundation of NG provision:

“Because it’s helped, I don’t know really, like my friends come up here and they get supported as well and we then support each other and then it’s built on friendships.”

Charlie, Year 9

There was also a sense that the NG encouraged supportive peer relations between different year groups, particularly with older pupils looking out for younger ones.

“I get along really nicely with them, they’re all good friends; then the other ones, like the year 11 tutor group, they’re really nice. I made some friends there.”

Rowan, Year 7

Non-NG pupils appeared to have an understanding that the NG enabled friendships through the development of social interaction skills.

“Because it can make you more confident, so you meet more people and make more friends.”

FG 1

### Sub-theme 2: Skill development

This sub-theme reflected the role of the NG in developing emotional literacy, social skills and self-regulation skills. NG pupils felt supported in being able to successfully transfer such skills to situations outside of the NG environment, helping the development and maintenance of positive peer and staff relations and reintegration into mainstream lessons:

“It’s just... allowed me to get new perspectives on stuff that before I was a lot more negative about...”

Jacob, Year 11

“They kind of teach you how to be a good friend. So, like, you might just talk to somebody on a regular basis, but they tell you how to grow the relationship and how to communicate with each other outside of school and things.”

FG 2

Some staff members appeared to have a particular understanding of how NG pupils were able to use the skills they had learnt through their time in NG:

“I think it the NG is very good at building empathy and I think that’s a hugely important trait or characteristic to build.”

Staff 9

One staff member, involved in running the NG provision, reflected an understanding of her role and an intention to support NG pupils in being able to function successfully within mainstream lessons:

“But you know we are not mental health nurses, our aim is to keep them in a mainstream class and so finding ways that makes that possible for that individual child... So we are giving them strategies and tools and ways that they can manage themselves and manage their strong feelings.”

**Staff 8**

### Sub-theme 3: NG staff

This sub-theme related to the sense that NG staff were valued throughout the school, by staff and pupils alike, and were recognised as skilled in their understanding of and approach to working with vulnerable pupils. There was a strong feeling from the NG pupils that the NG staff were key to the NG provision:

“I don’t know, it’s strange how they do it, it’s kind of really comforting but I don’t know how they do it, it’s really nice.”

**Rowan, Year 7**

“Definitely the staff, they make it the way it is. Without them I think even... yeah it’s a nice room and it’s a nice school, but without them I don’t think the school would be the same.”

**Imogen, Year 10**

‘Post-it’ notes from the FG task also suggested that the NG staff were considered skilled in their role of supporting vulnerable pupils, always finding a way to help and providing a good level of trust. Some comments included: “You can talk about issues you may have that you can’t tell your parent” (FG 1) and “They can help with trust” (FG 1).

The non-NG pupils and school staff identified a particular sense of respect and gratitude for the work the NG staff did, which reflected a real and ongoing need for their support:

“Because I think there is an increasing number of students that need that kind of help; the traditional sort of pastoral system with tutors and just Heads of Year would not be able to deal with the kind of depth that is needed.”

**Staff 7**

## Theme 3: School environment

This theme arose in relation to both how the NG environment was organised and how this might link to, support, or fit in with, the wider school environment.

### Sub-theme 1: NG organisation

There was a strong sense from the NG pupils that the calm and relaxed atmosphere was important and supportive of their needs:

“It’s very relaxed and if you’ve had a hard day and you want to talk to someone they’re very open in there; they won’t judge you for what you say.”

**John, Year 8**

“It’s like my safe place to go.”

**Charlie, Year 9**

Availability, due to the drop-in nature of the NG at certain times of the day, was also important to pupils – “it’s just sort of whenever I feel like I need it I can come in and talk” (Jacob, Year 11) – and the fact that it was accessible before and after school was valued by staff.

### Sub-theme 2: Beyond NG

Although not directly related to the NG, the buddying system appeared to link to the influence the NG had on supporting peer relations across year groups, helping to create a whole-school environment within which peer relations are valued. It was therefore included as a sub-theme to help build a picture of how the school tried to develop an environment within which all pupils could feel supported.

Non-NG pupils in both FGs talked about the buddying system positively, suggesting it helped to support problems with friendships and with academic work.

“The school do have a buddying system to, say if you have an argument with your friends, you can talk to them, they’ll try and help sort it out...” (FG 1).

Staff members also identified the school’s pastoral system as an area of strength:

“I think that the starting point is the tutor system so you know the students have a tutor all the way through, the same tutor, so that tutor gets to know them very well. We have peer group mentoring so older students supporting younger ones.”

**Staff 7**

## Discussion

This single case study aimed to explore how a NG might operate successfully as part of a whole-school approach to support wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools. By seeking the views of non-NG pupils, in addition to NG pupils and staff, this study makes a unique contribution to NG research. Three main themes were identified: whole-school approach, relational factors and school environment. The findings suggest the NG is mostly perceived to be well embedded into the whole-school system, with pupil and staff understanding of the NG approach highlighted as a key factor. Factors relating to relationships both within and outside of NG were also considered key to the success and impact of NG provision. Further factors influencing the success of the NG included how it is set up and run and how it complemented systems from the wider school environment. The findings are discussed below in relation to the themes identified and relevant literature, theory and practice.

Prior research has identified the need for a whole-school approach, particularly with regards to staff awareness and understanding of NG provision, in order to support successful implementation of NGs within secondary schools (Grantham & Primrose, 2017; de Montjoie Rudolf, 2014). The current study provides evidence that, when a NG is embedded into the whole-school system then a positive

influence on both staff and pupil understanding of NGs can be developed. The six principles of nurture were evident throughout the case study school, displayed not only within NG, but also, for example, in the school’s reception area. Staff were also encouraged to understand and respond to these principles within their own classrooms. A whole-school nurturing approach may help to create an atmosphere whereby NG support is both viewed and experienced positively. Within the case study school, staff were able to understand and articulate the impact of social and emotional needs on learning and pupils were able to understand and accept the different needs of their peers.

Previous research into secondary NGs (Kourmoulaki, 2013) suggests the increased sense of safety and security experienced within NG limits the generalisability of skills developed to the wider, less predictable nature of the whole-school environment. Shared staff responsibility for pastoral care has been identified as one factor which may protect against this (Wright, 2010). Within the current study, the school promoted a sense of understanding around inclusive practice and pastoral care. Analysis of staff interviews revealed a sub-theme of ‘staff understanding’ in relation to what NGs entail, the theory upon which they are founded and how they support vulnerable pupils. This concurs with findings from Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) that identified staff understanding as one of the pre-requisites for the success of secondary NGs. In addition, a further sub-theme identified the holistic approach taken by the school, where the ‘whole child’ was valued and an array of pastoral support was recognised. One member of staff talked about the investment in pastoral staff roles and another described the way in which she might refer to the support received within NG when teaching pupils in mainstream lessons, helping them to generalise the skills they had learnt.

Colley (2012) described relationships as key to successful engagement in education. This current study identified relational factors as a main theme during analysis, with peer relations and staff-pupil relations being supported by NG intervention. The success of pupils being able to transfer their skills to outside of NG contrasts with the finding reported by Cunningham et al., (2019) where a continued feeling of loneliness for primary NG pupils, in areas such as the school playground,

was identified. The NG pupils within this case study school reported being able to generalise their increased levels of confidence in developing new friendships both within and outside of NG. Pupils talked about mixing with different pupils at break times and reflected that they had been taught new skills which supported them in socialising with others and participating in extracurricular clubs. The impact of the buddy system embedded within the school also impacted positively on the generalisation of skills.

The trustworthiness, skill and popularity of the NG staff was identified as significant to NG success, with pupils also acknowledging the popularity of NG staff across the whole-school environment. For the NG pupils, the emotional support they received through the relationships they built with NG staff appeared central to the positive impact they experienced through the NG provision. Interestingly, for the older non-NG pupils, it seemed there was a gap in school provision that centred on their SEWB. Kourmoulaki (2013) identified a similar theme, with pupils feeling that, as academic demands increased within higher year groups, emotional needs became less important to school staff. Whilst pupil perceptions here are important, it is likely that alongside this apparent reduction of staff interest in SEWB, there is an increased contextual and time-dependent pressure amongst staff to reach targets and achieve academic results. The consideration of how best to use NGs and nurturing principles during the important exam periods of Years 11 and Year 12/13 would be a pertinent area for future research. Year 11 pupils who accessed NG provision described the positive impact it had on their approach to school, helping them to express their feelings and relate to staff in a calmer way. The provision of a Year 11 breakfast club within the NG was well received by pupils and enabled a positive start to the school day. School staff also appreciated the early morning opening of NG provision. Access to similar provision for all Year 11 pupils may be a good consideration as well as ensuring such nurturing approaches were extended into sixth form provision.

It seemed the development of increased social confidence, skills and improved peer relationships

was supported by the complementary whole-school approach of using a buddying system. Viewed positively by both pupils and staff, this reflected the importance the school placed on developing a sense of community and belonging. This has previously been shown to impact positively on pupil wellbeing (Prati, Cicognani & Albanesi, 2018) which further supports the view that it is important for secondary NGs to be part of the whole-school community, supporting the development of positive relationships (Chiapella, 2015) rather than an 'add-on' intervention (Colley, 2012; Colley & Seymour, 2021). Indeed, a coherent approach which seeks to ensure that different parts of a school organisation communicate and work together has been shown to promote SEWB (Weare, 2015) and is recognised within government policy (Brooks, 2014; NICE, 2018).

Within the 'school environment' theme, a flexible approach to the organisation of NGs in secondary schools was identified as beneficial to their success. Previous research has identified the usefulness of secondary NGs in providing open access to vulnerable pupils who experience the NG base as a 'safe haven' (Garner & Thomas, 2011). This 'safe haven' may mirror the 'safe base' provided within securely attached relationships during early childhood (Bowlby, 2005). NGs, therefore, can provide an opportunity to respond to the developmental needs of secondary NG pupils, restoring missed childhood experiences, to support the development of the social and emotional foundations for learning (Colley, 2012; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). Within the case study school, flexibility of the NG organisation was a key identified theme. In particular, pupils viewed the NG as a safe space and referred to the accessibility of the NG room as key to the support it provided. Whilst this may bring into question the fidelity of this secondary NG, previous research has identified that the implementation of secondary NGs may vary between schools and is dependent on pupil need and local demographics (Grantham & Primrose, 2017). In addition, it is suggested that fidelity to the NG principles is of importance (Chiapella, 2015) and this is supported through maintenance of the National Nurturing Schools Award within the case study school.

## Implications for schools

This study provides an example of how NGs can function effectively within a mainstream secondary school, where support for SEWB is valued and seen as a worthy investment of precious school time and resources. Several recommendations have been identified to support secondary schools when considering the development of NG practice:

- a NGs require support and investment from the senior management team to ensure that NG staff are suitably trained and supported to deliver the approach.
- b The underlying theory and approach of NGs should be shared across the whole-school staff to aid consistent understanding and to help create joined-up thinking in relation to the SEWB of vulnerable pupils.
- c The NG should be built upon the six principles of nurture. It is beneficial for these to be made part of wider school policy and classroom approaches.
- d Secondary NGs may need to adopt a more flexible approach than the classic primary school model. For example, incorporating a drop-in system as part of NG provision may assist the transferability of skills supported within the NG itself.
- e The NG should be developed as part of the whole-school community. Consideration of how peer relationships are supported within whole-school approaches (eg, through a buddying system) is also important and will help to support NG pupils in transferring their skills outside of the NG.
- f Secondary schools should consider how they can best support Year 11 pupils through a period of heightened academic pressure and upcoming transition. The use of a carefully attuned approach, for example, through a Year 11 tutor group planned upon nurturing principles, may be an effective way to offer this support.

## Strengths, limitations and directions for future research

Previous research into secondary NGs has sought the views of NG pupils, school staff and parents, yet hasn't purposefully tried to understand how a NG is viewed by other pupils within the school. The richness of the data gathered in this study should support readers in developing a deep and authentic understanding of the key interacting factors and causal mechanisms associated with effective NG provision.

Although expanding on the paucity of research on secondary NGs, this study has certain limitations. Being a single-school case study, the findings relate to a particular school with a particular demographic and cannot, therefore, be assumed as generalisable to other mainstream secondary schools. Findings do, however, correlate well to some of those identified in a study by Colley and Seymour (2021), for example the importance of whole-school approaches and training and the embedding of the six principles of nurture into whole-school practice to support successful NG practice in secondary schools. It is hoped, therefore, that the findings of this study will still help to provide some insights for other schools when considering whether a NG approach may be suitable, and responsive, to their own particular needs. Additionally, this study was interested in qualitative data only and, as such, presents the perceptions and experiences of pupils and staff. It would have been interesting to also include additional quantitative measures, perhaps identifying how many non-NG children accessed the NG base.

Future research could explore further the experiences of older children (eg, Years 11-13) to develop a greater understanding of the need for additional emotional support at this crucial time of adolescence. In relation to secondary NG research, a multiple case study comparing NGs across different secondary schools would help to further understand how secondary NGs may work and to consider more closely the impact of school investment in NG provision and the potential significance of a whole-school approach. A study using Boxall Profile® for Young People data would also be a helpful addition to current research on secondary NGs.

## Conclusion

The use of a single case study approach within this research has led to an in-depth understanding of how a NG can be set up and run within a mainstream secondary school as part of a positive and whole-school approach to wellbeing. The insights gained from NG pupils, school staff and non-NG pupils has allowed a picture to emerge which suggests NGs are an effective intervention to support the SEWB of vulnerable adolescents. In particular, skills taught within the NG that support the development of positive peer relations and pupil-staff relations, can be transferred to the wider school environment when there is a shared understanding of the NG approach developed throughout the whole-school. NGs appear to provide significant support for pupils when they exist within a whole-school culture where SEWB is prioritised (Coleman, 2019). It is hoped that schools can be supported to develop this understanding to maximise the positive impact that secondary NGs can have during an important 'second window' of opportunity for positive prosocial development within the period of adolescence.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the staff and pupils who kindly participated in this research and Rachel Peppiat (voluntary research assistant) for her interest and support.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Nurture group pupil interview script

- 1 How would you describe your school to someone else?
- 2 Tell me about school – what is it like?
- 3 Tell me about the NG (or its name) – what is it like?
  - a How long have you been attending the NG?
  - b What sort of things do you do in the NG?
  - c How would you describe the NG to others?
- 4 What can you tell me about whether being in the NG helps/ has helped you at school?
  - Tell me about a time when the NG has/ hasn't helped? Tell me about it (further prompt – tell me more about it...)
- 5 Tell me about the other people in your NG
  - How do you get along with other young people in the NG?
  - And how do you get along with the staff in the NG?
  - What else can you tell me about this?
- 6 How do you get along with other young people outside of the NG?
  - Tell me about a time when you talked with (hung out with/socialised with/played with/ worked with...?) What was it like? What happened?
  - Tell me about your friendships at school. Who are your friends? What are they like?
  - What sort of things do you do with your friends?
- 7 What do you like about the NG? What is the best thing about the NG?
  - Tell me about a time when...
- 8 What do you not like so much about the NG? What doesn't work so well?
  - Tell me about a time when...
- 9 How has being in the NG helped you in other areas?
  - Tell me about a time when...
- 10 What are your views about how the NG could be improved?

### Appendix B

#### Staff interview script

- 1 Tell me about your role at school.
  - How long have you worked here?
- 2 How would you describe this school to colleagues at other schools?
  - What is it like?
  - What are the pupils who come here like?
  - What are your colleagues like?
  - How would you describe the leadership team?
- 3 Is there anything you consider to be particularly 'special' about this school?
- 4 Do you think the school has a particular ethos?
  - How would you describe that?
- 5 What do you know about pupil relationships within the school?
  - Are you able to comment on the quality of those relationships?
  - How do you think this compares to other schools?
- 6 Can you tell me about whether this school supports pupil relationships?
  - How?
    - Can you tell me about school policies which relate to bullying/peer conflict?
    - Are these effective?
- 7 What can you tell me about how the school supports pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs?
  - Do you think this approach/these approaches are well-embedded into the school?
  - Why might that be?
  - Do you think all/most staff feel informed about support for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs within the school?
- 8 What can you tell me about the NG?
  - Which children might attend the NG?
  - Are you able to describe what you think the aims of the NG are?
  - Do you think the NG is a useful intervention for pupils?
    - If so, why, or how?

- Do you think the NG has an impact on peer relationships?
  - If yes, why or how?
  - Can you tell me more about this?
- 9 If the school did not have a NG, what other support systems or interventions might be needed/would you like to see?
- 10 Is there anything you think should be changed or improved the NG?
  - Can you say more?

Thank you for your time. Is there any other information you would like to share about school? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

## Appendix C

### Focus group discussion schedule

- 1 Tell me about your school. What is school like?
  - a How would you describe what your school is like to others?
- 2 Tell me about the young people at your school.
  - What are they like?
  - How do they all get on with one another?
  - Why do you think that is?
- 3 What about friendships at your school, what are they like? (Why?)
  - How, does your school support friendships and positive relationships between pupils?
  - Give me an example of when the school supported good positive relationships/ friendships. (What did you think about this?)
  - What effect does this have?
- 4 What areas do you have where you can meet up with friends at school? – *Generate a list*
  - Tell me about these areas. What are they like? And what is it like to be there?
  - Do you think all students enjoy these social areas? Why?
- 5 What do you know about how your school provides for children with particular/extra needs? – *Talk in pairs and feed back*
  - Can you tell me more about this?
  - What examples can you give me?
- 6 What do you know about the NG (name) at your school?
  - Tell me about the NG (name).
  - Do you know anyone who goes to the NG?
  - Have you ever been into the NG room?
  - What do you think it is like to be part of your NG (name)?
- 7 How do you think the NG helps pupils who attend it? – *Talk in pairs and feed back*
  - What examples can you give me? – *Post-it recording activity*
- 8 How do you think the NG affects friendships?
- 9 What else do you think your school could do for its pupils?
  - What could you do?

# The nurtureuk Violence Reduction Unit programme: Exploring a model for reducing school exclusions and instances of youth violence through nurture practice

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Keywords: nurture groups, nurture practice, violence reduction, school exclusions

Submitted: 21 January 2022 Accepted for publication: 15 June 2022

## Abstract

Previous research exploring the causative risk factors of youth violence have determined that a combination of individual, relationship, community and societal factors contribute to the occurrence of this complex phenomenon. Viable solutions must address all of these levels to be effective and to sustainably prevent instances of youth violence. Nurture practice is an evidence-based solution that has been shown to effectively identify and address the social, emotional and mental health needs of young people in schools – thereby reducing distressed behaviour and exclusions – and increasing wellbeing. This study uses a focus group methodology to collect the observations of project leaders from schools actively engaged in the nurtureuk Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) programmes, piloted in London, and in Kent and Medway, to gain insight into their experiences of the programme at its mid-point, and to assess implementation progress and effectiveness. Thematic analysis of the transcribed narrative accounts indicate that the range and structure of programme offer is meeting the needs of participating schools and that some positive impacts have been observed on the ground. These results suggest that nurture practice may be well placed to offer a viable and sustainable model for preventing exclusions, thereby reducing instances of youth violence.

**Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

## Introduction

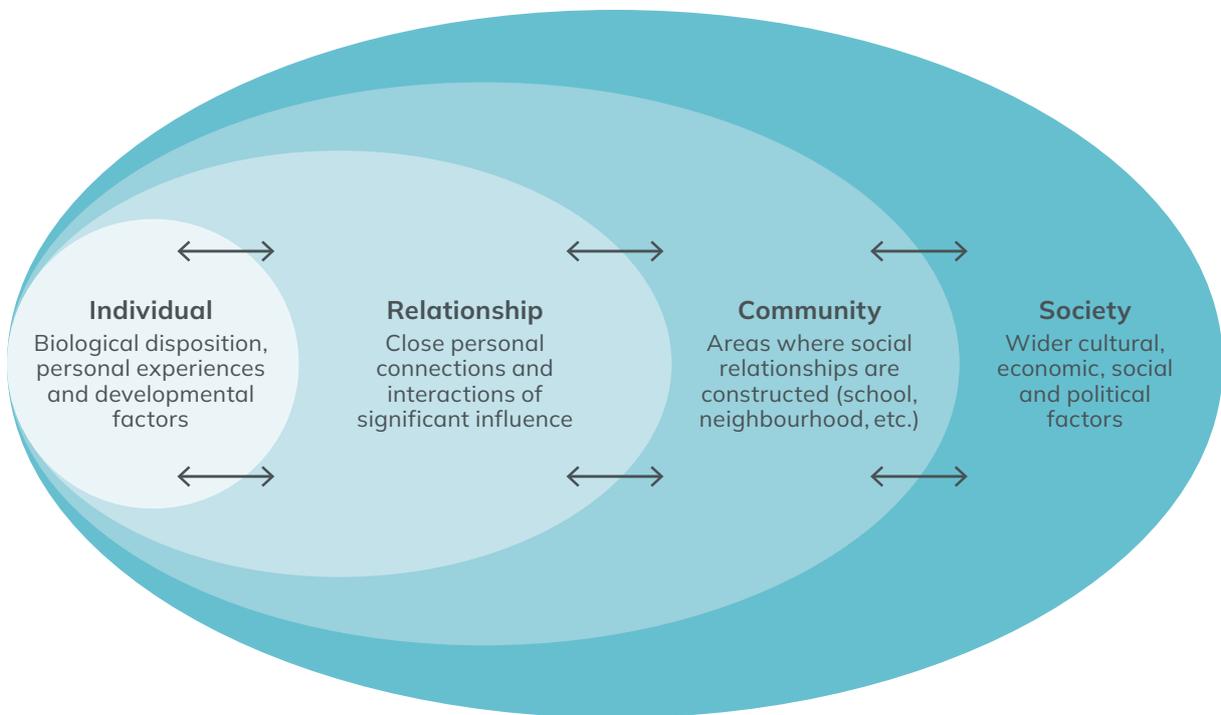
According to the World Health Organization (WHO), youth violence is a serious worldwide health problem which can be defined as acts of violence (bullying, physical fighting, sexual and physical assault, and homicide) involving children, adolescents and young people between the ages of 10 to 29, all of which contributes to the global burden of death, injury and disability (WHO, n.d.; Rez et al, 2001). Previous research has reported that worldwide, both the main victims and perpetrators of violence are themselves adolescents and young adults (Rez et al, 2001;

Krug et al, 2002). Based on Brofenbrenner's 'ecology of contexts' approach (Brofenbrenner, 1979, p. 131), the WHO developed a public health model (Figure 1) for identifying interconnected risk factors for violence and antisocial behaviour, which it published in its *World Report on Violence and Health* (WHO, 2002). The model describes the risk factors as occurring within each of the four levels of a young person's life – individual, family, community and societal – recognising that these factors influence the lives of young people and have significant effects on their behaviour (Rez et al, 2001). A public-health approach is a long-term and sustainable outlook that provides a holistic view in

understanding the roots of serious violence, thereby offering the opportunity to identify and develop effective solutions to address the wide-ranging causative factors (Fraser & Irwin-Rogers, 2021).

**“We owe our children – the most vulnerable citizens in any society – a life free from violence and fear. In order to ensure this, we must be tireless in our efforts not only to attain peace, justice and prosperity for countries, but also for communities and members of the same family. We must address the roots of violence. Only then will we transform the past century’s legacy from a crushing burden into a cautionary lesson.”**  
 Nelson Mandela (Krug et al, 2002, p. ix)

**Figure 1**  
**Ecological model of integrated levels of influence related to violence and antisocial behaviour**



**Note.** This model depicts overlapping spheres illustrating the factors situated within interconnected levels of influence occurring within a young person’s environment. Adapted from WHO, 2002, *World Report on Violence and Health*.

**Youth Violence in the UK**

It is estimated that in England and Wales in the period of 2007-2018, the total social and economic costs of serious youth violence was between £6 billion and £11 billion, with figures increasing significantly year-on-year (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020). These statistics capture some of the devastating adverse effects that instances of

youth violence have on individuals, communities and on all the services connected to them. In response to the rising levels of serious youth violence, the Youth Violence Commission (YVC) was established by the UK government in 2016 with the following aims: to identify the root causes of youth violence, to identify solutions to address the risk factors identified, and to drive changes in policy and practice (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020). Following extensive evidence gathering and consultation with a range of stakeholders, the YVC published an interim report in 2018 setting out its recommendations to create change. The YVC’s findings and recommendations resulted in both the regional and national government adopting a

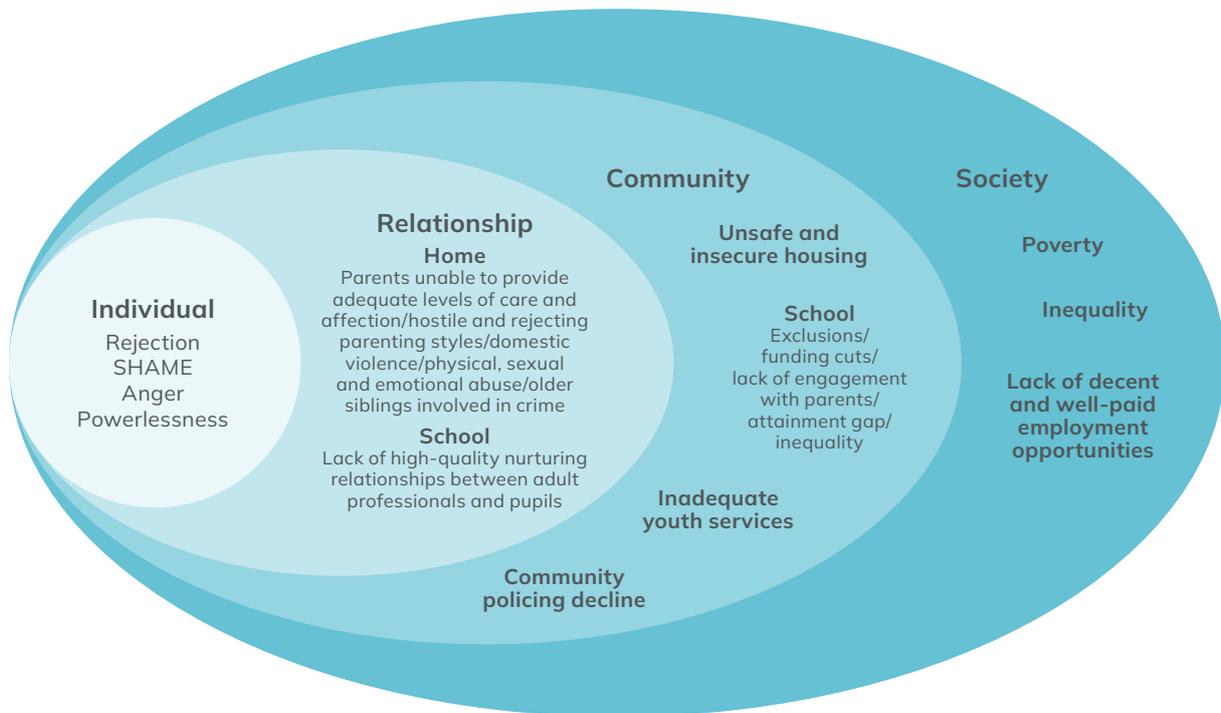
public health approach to address the causes and responses to violence, and in the establishment of 18 regional Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) as the vehicle to drive the changes (Mayor of London, 2021). Inspiration and insight for the VRUs were drawn from the experience of previous successful violence prevention work done in Scotland, where the world’s first VRU was founded in 2005 (Hassan, 2020).

The YVC, in collaboration with researchers and academics, undertook a review of the existing body of evidence pertaining to the causes of youth violence, gathering and analysing new data generated from a national survey of over 2,200 young people, and compiling expert evidence following a series of sessions. In 2020, published its final report detailing its findings and recommendations for action (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020). Using the WHO ecological model once again as a conceptual framework for orientation purposes, by reflecting the four levels of influence on the lives of young people, the findings of

the YVC final report on the identified factors contributing to youth violence are summarised in Figure 2.

The report highlighted several significant factors including the recognition of emotions, most notably shame, as a fundamental and significant factor in violent behaviour (Thomas, 1995; Gilligan, 2003); exposure to adverse childhood experiences which are implicated in the likelihood of both future violence perpetration and victimisation (Fox et al, 2014; Duke et al, 2010); and the lack of the formation of high-quality, nurturing relationships between young people and adult educational professionals at schools, from the early years and beyond (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020). One of the most significant risk factors identified by the YVC as contributing to youth violence was the disengagement and exclusion (including fixed-term exclusions, suspensions, permanent exclusions, and ‘off-rolling’) of young people from mainstream education (McLean Hilker & Fraser, 2009; Perera, 2020; Timpson, 2019).

**Figure 2**  
A multilevel depiction of the causes of youth violence in the United Kingdom



**Note.** An ecological view of the risk factors for increased likelihood of young people perpetrating or becoming victims of serious violence identified in the Youth Violence Commission Final Report (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020).

## Literature Review

### Exclusions as a factor in youth violence

It is reported that since 2015 there has been a 60% increase in the number of pupils permanently excluded from England's schools – an alarming average of 42 exclusions per day and 410,000 suspensions in the year 2017-2018 alone (Partridge et al, 2020). A recent literature review undertaken by the Department for Education (Graham et al, 2019) mirrored the findings of a study undertaken by the RSA in 2020 (Partridge et al). It revealed that certain vulnerability factors (individually and/or combined) increased a young person's risk of exclusion, including having special education needs or disability (SEND), having social emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, having grown up in poverty, having been in care or looked after, and having experiencing trauma and challenges in their home lives.

A national survey conducted in 2017 (Sadler et al, 2018) determined that children with a mental health disorder are five times more likely to have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), a reality that is sadly reflected in the youth justice service, which reports that between 60-90% of the youth offending population in England and Wales have speech, language and communication needs (Simak, 2018). The resulting distressed and challenging behaviour these figures represent have been cited amongst the reasons for sharp rise in exclusion rates across the educational pathway beginning in primary school (Timpson, 2019), and are implicated in the causative factors of youth violence (Department for Education, 2018). In its 2017/18 annual report, the Inspectorate of Prisons for England and Wales revealed that 89% of children in prison at that time were excluded from school before their detention (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2018). Earlier research conducted in Scotland found that pupils excluded from school at the age of 12 were four times more likely than their peers to be jailed as adults (McAra & McVie, 2010).

The Pinball Kids report (Partridge et al, 2020) identified the importance of relationships between school staff and pupils and concluded that exclusions were 'one of the clearest manifestations of the breakdown in relationship between a

young person and the other members of their school community' (Partridge et al, 2020, p. 5). The researchers highlighted that practices that invested in building trusting relationships between influential actors in children's lives were the most promising of interventions in preventing exclusions. They further identified the conditions necessary for a reduction in exclusion within schools including: the formation of strong relationships with trusted adult(s) in school; the engagement of parents as partners in their child's education; assessment of SEND and SEMH needs and appropriate support throughout the school journey; and for schools to have an inclusive ethos where all young people are known to them (Partridge et al, 2020).

### Nurture Practice as a restorative solution for challenging behaviour

In the literature, the term 'nurture practice' is generally described as an approach based largely on an understanding of attachment theory, child development theory and the impact of trauma and early adversity, and takes into account current advances in the fields of developmental psychology and neuroscience (Education Scotland, 2018). Using the healing potential within trusting, attuned and connected relationships, nurture practice empowers adults in school to allow children and young people to engage with missing early nurturing experiences, thereby supporting the development of social and emotional skills whilst also supporting behaviour, wellbeing, attainment and achievement (nurtureuk, n.d.; Education Scotland, 2020). Nurture practice encompasses the whole school community (including children/young people, staff and parents), is firmly rooted in the six principles of nurture, and can be applied at both the universal and the particular level within the school environment (Education Scotland, 2020).

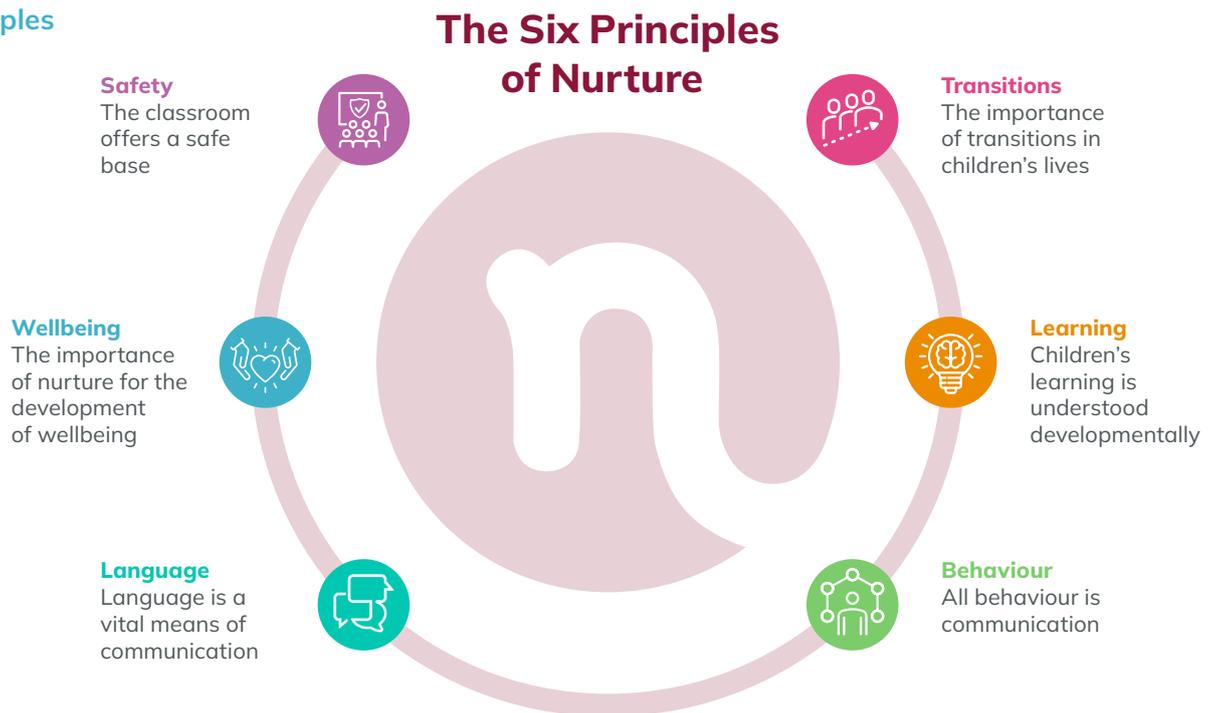
Nurture practice is based primarily of the theory of attachment first devised by the British psychiatrist and psychotherapist, John Bowlby, in the 1950s (Boxall, 2010). Attachment theory acknowledges that to grow up mentally and relationally healthy, a young child needs to experience a responsive, warm, intimate and continuous relationship with a secure attachment figure in their early years, who then becomes a safe base from which the child can explore the environment and the wider world (Bowlby, 1988; Schaffer, 2003). The theory also acknowledges the link between attachment

and the development of emotional literacy skills in childhood and suggests that a child's ability to self-regulate (control and management of impulses and strong emotions), to develop empathy and to acquire social skills (building reciprocal connections with others, listening and sharing) is significantly influenced by their attachment history (Cassidy, 1994; Nanu, 2015). Previous research has established that trauma experienced in childhood can negatively impact a young person's social, emotional and cognitive development (Thomas, et al, 2019). A trauma-informed approach in schools reflects an awareness of both the context and role which educational professionals play in hindering or facilitating healing for young people who have experienced trauma (Harris & Fallot, 2001). Adopting this approach in schools ensures that the young people in the environment feel physically and emotionally safe, prioritises the building of relationships and understands the ways in which trauma responses can manifest in distressed behaviour, thereby effectively reducing trauma symptoms and leading to positive behaviour change (Hickle, 2020).

Nurture practice originated with the establishment of the first Nurture Group (NG) in the late 1960s by the educational psychologist, Marjory Boxall,

in Hackney, London. These school-based groups were developed for young children who had seemingly experienced 'some disruption or distortion' (Lucas, 2019, p. 8) in their key early development experiences and so were unable to meet the expectations and demands of the mainstream class. The Nurture Group is a 'targeted psychosocial intervention' (Middleton, 2021, p. 37) and is designed to provide a safe base (Boxall, 2010) and to bridge the gap between the child's home and school by facilitating the opportunity for recreating the missed early experiences through trusting, supportive and nurturing relationships with specially trained teachers and staff (Education Scotland, 2018). Drawing on the documented observations and direct experiences of the early Nurture Group teachers and educational psychologists, The Six Principles of Nurture (see Figure 3) were conceptualised over a period of approximately 20 years of nurture practice (Lucas, 2019). The principles are based on perspectives of organisational and group theory (Saad & Kaur, 2020) and in their essence are relational and holistic, capture the ethos and atmosphere of a nurturing early developmental environment and encapsulate all the essential components that made Nurture Groups successful.

**Figure 3**  
The Six Principles of Nurture

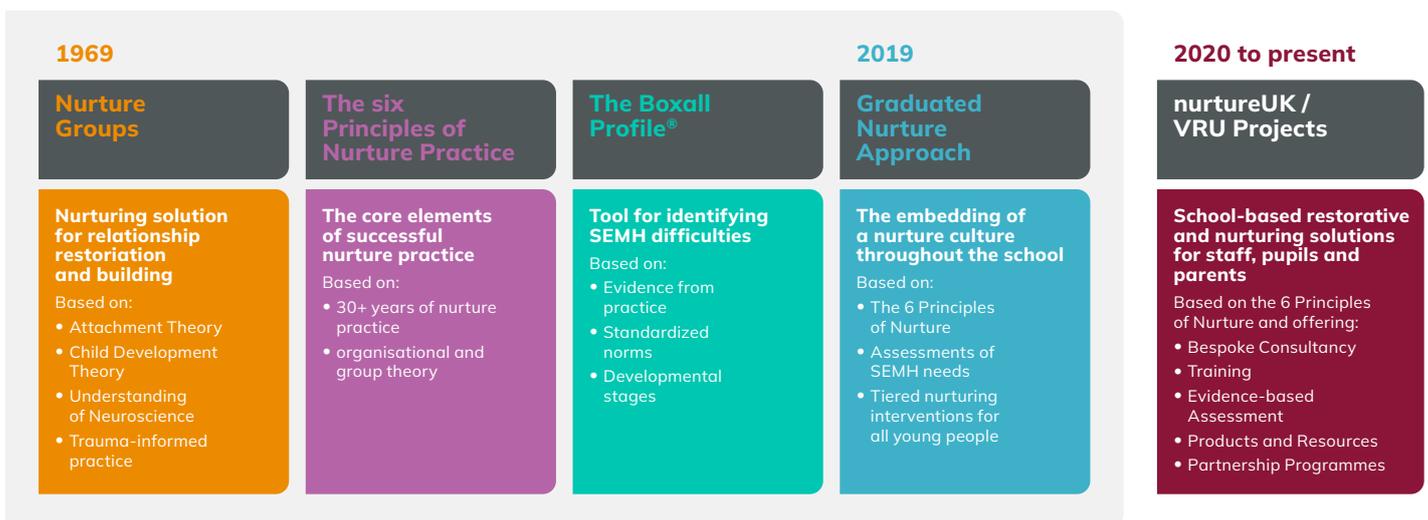


The Boxall Profile® originated from Nurture Group practice (Lucas, 2020) and is a practical tool that allows teachers and other educational professional to assess specific areas of need by identifying developmental gaps in a child's social and emotional skills that cause distressed behaviour (Ruby, 2020), and is considered to be one of the most frequently used assessment tools in schools across the UK (Ruby, 2021). A model for a whole-school nurture approach was proposed by Mackay et al (2015) and further developed into the graduated approach to nurture, offering nurturing solutions for the full range of SEMH needs of children within a school community, ranging from universal applications of nurture practice to addressing the needs of the most severe level of difficulties. A growing body of evidence confirms that when nurturing principles have been applied throughout schools – and when nurturing attitudes and practices are adopted by all school staff in a wider approach, and in response to local need

– positive impacts for all children, including reduced exclusions, are observed (Middleton, 2021; March & Kearney, 2017; Colwell & O'Connor, 2003; Doyle, 2004).

A present-day example of the expansion of understanding and application of nurture practice is the recent partnership programmes developed between nurtureuk and two Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). The Nurturing London Project, in partnership with the Mayor of London's VRU, nurtureuk is working with 31 schools, (primary and secondary schools, alternative provision and further education colleges included), across 15 boroughs in that city. Similarly, the Nurturing Kent and Medway Project is a partnership programme between nurtureuk and that region's VRU, working with nine secondary schools to support them in embedding a nurturing culture throughout their settings (nurtureuk, n.d.; Simpson, 2020).

**Figure 4**  
A visual representation of the evolution of nurture practice from 1969 to the present day



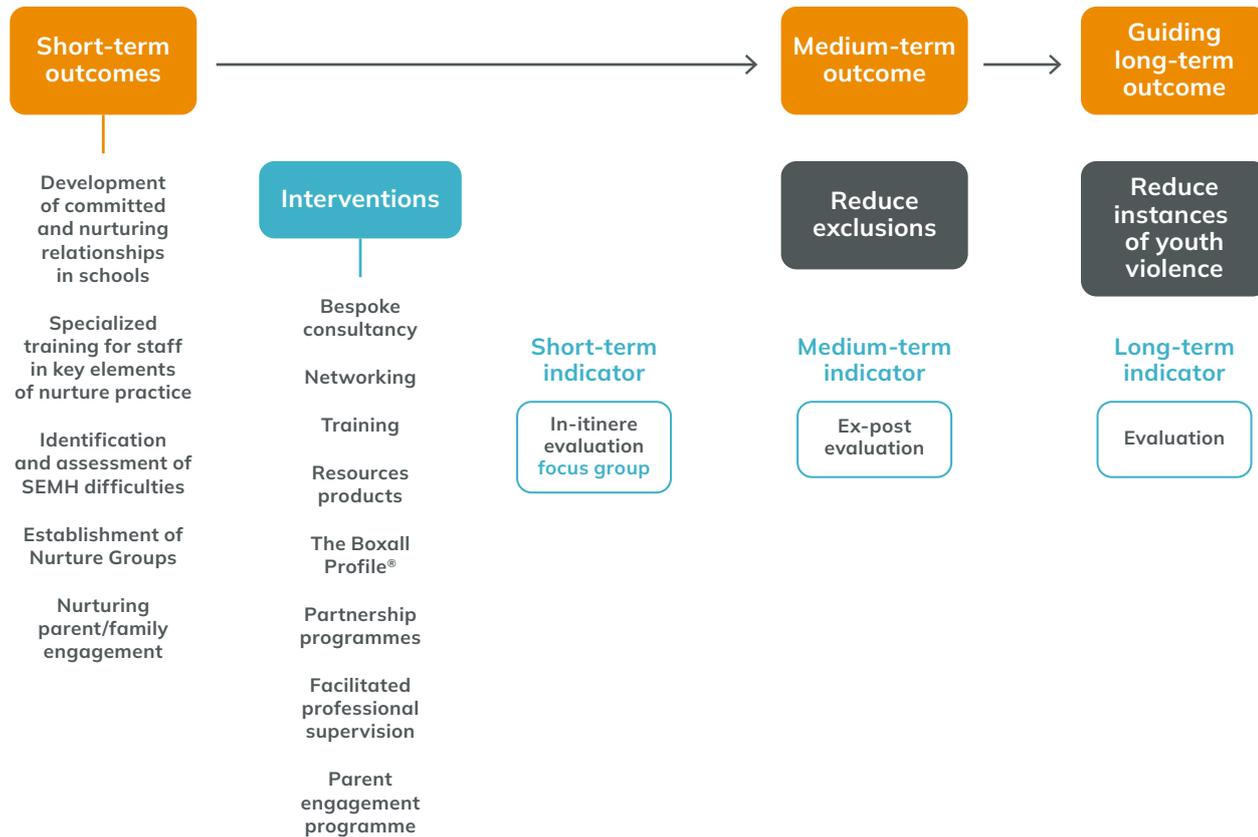
Theory of change is a methodology used to evaluate complex community initiatives focused on social change and, when used within the context of a specific project, can be applied to articulate the underlying rationale and to support the planning, implementation and evaluation of the initiative (Anderson, 2005). The theory of change underpinning the nurtureuk VRU programmes

(see Figure 5) is based on the evidence-based understanding of the underlying causes of youth violence and proposes an 'ecological' (Ward et al, 2013, p. 1) response. Using bespoke consultancy, training and nurturing solutions to restore and build trusted relationships in school through a greater understanding of attachment, child development and trauma-informed practice –

and underpinned by the Six Principles of Nurture practice – the nurtureuk VRU programmes aim to reduce instances of school exclusion and youth

violence in local communities. A summary of the full programme offer structure is set out in Appendix 1.

**Figure 5**  
Pathway of change towards guiding outcomes for nurtureuk VRU programmes



### Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore the observations and perceptions of school staff actively participating in the nurtureuk VRU programmes piloted in London and Kent and Medway from 2020 to 2022 and to gain insight into their experiences of the programme at its mid-point. The findings would allow for the assessment of the short-term project indicator outcomes and would provide a means to monitor implementation progress, evaluate effectiveness of the solutions offered and to identify areas for development for the remainder of the project implementation.

### Research approach

A critical realist epistemological position, which aims to find and report the experiences, meaning and reality of participants, was adopted for the

purposes of this study (Bhaskar, 2008). A focus group is an interdisciplinary qualitative research technique for information gathering, using non-standardised data collection procedures, and based on informal discussion among a group of people selected on the basis of specific characteristics, outlined according to the research objectives (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). This technique is attached to a phenomenological approach concerned with the lived cognitive experiences, or subjective understanding, of the participants’ own experiences (Petersma, 2000).

### Participants

All 40 schools engaged in the nurtureuk VRU programmes were invited to participate in the study by means of a research recruitment flyer emailed each of settings’ Project Leaders. An opportunity sample consisting of a total of nine

participants, representing eight schools (four from London and four from Kent and Medway), volunteered to participate in the study, with seven participants attending the virtual focus groups and two participants submitting written responses electronically. The primary inclusion criteria for participants prescribed that they be school

leaders with direct responsibility for implementing the project in their settings. A range of different school settings, including mainstream primary, mainstream secondary and alternative-provision secondary, were represented by participants holding a variety of professional roles.

**Table 1**  
**Participant roles and setting types**

Participant roles	Setting type	Number
<b>Senior leadership</b>		
1 Operations executive	Alternative Provision, Secondary	3
2 Deputy headteachers	Mainstream, Secondary	
<b>Head of department</b>	Mainstream, Secondary	1
<b>Inclusion leadership</b>	Mainstream, Secondary	1
<b>Safeguarding lead</b>	Mainstream, Secondary	2
<b>SEMH lead</b>	Mainstream, Secondary	1
<b>Nurture lead</b>	Mainstream, Primary	1
		<b>n=9</b>

## Data collection

The validity of the focus group method of data collection as traditionally conducted for group interactions occurring in the same physical location is well reported in the literature (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan & Krueger, 1993, as cited in Matthews et al, 2018). However, recent advances in digital communication technologies mean there is a growing use of online video-conferencing facilities for qualitative data collection (Matthews et al, 2018). As this study was seeking to explore the experiences and opinions of participants located in different regions of the country, this online video-conferencing method for data collection aligned well with the aim of this research. Organisation and allocation of participants to a group was arranged according to their indicated availability to attend one of three facilitated virtual focus groups of 1½ hours duration, held between July and August 2021. Group 1 consisted of three participants; Group 2 consisted of three participants; and Group 3 consisted of two participants. A discussion outline containing six salient and open-ended questions was designed

to include aspects considered most relevant for the cognitive objectives of the study and were provided to participants prior to their attendance. The six questions for discussion were:

- 1 How well do you think this project meets the needs of the children/young people in your school?
- 2 Does being part of the VRU project give you/ your colleagues the knowledge and confidence to be able to support the children/young people in your school more effectively?
- 3 To what extent, if any, has the relationship you/your school has developed with your lead consultant helped you to understand and adopt nurturing practices as part of this project?
- 4 Have you seen any visible changes in the school or witnessed any positive impact on the children/young people as a result of the training or resources that staff have been offered as part of this project?

- 5 How has the Covid pandemic changed or altered (positively and negatively) your school's practice in terms of the relationships with your students, parents, families and the wider community?
- 6 What obstacles or challenges, if any, have prevented you or your school from benefiting more from the project?

Participants accessed their allocated focus group session via webcam. All focus groups were audio and video recorded with Zoom® software and saved to digital files. The audio from each focus group session were transcribed verbatim for later analysis, whereafter the digital files were deleted.

## Ethical considerations

This study was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines for educational research as set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018) and was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of nurtureuk. Voluntary participants were sent a brief description outlining the purpose and objectives of the study, whereafter written informed consent was obtained. Participants were notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any time until data reporting. Confidentiality was maintained by the anonymisation of all participant data and in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018, all raw data collected in the form of transcripts, research notes, etc., were stored securely for the duration of the study. Each focus group session was moderated by a facilitator and an assistant; both remained visible to the participants via webcam for the duration, and all participants reaffirmed their consent to participate verbally at the start of the session. On conclusion of each session, the moderator remained online for an additional period of time to allow individual participants the opportunity to address any issues or concerns. The findings of the study, in the format of an executive summary, will be distributed to all focus group participants by email upon completion.

## Analysis

Deductive thematic analysis was conducted for the purposes of this study to process the information collected from the transcripts of the focus groups. This was achieved by searching across the data set to observe patterns strongly linked to the data and to recognise repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following data familiarisation, the thematic analysis of the transcript data was conducted manually using an 'In Vivo' coding approach using the words of participants as an open code (Saldaña, 2016). The initial coding information was generated from thematic patterns emerging from the data. A second round of coding highlighted convergences and divergences on the same theme and allowed for the initial codes to be grouped thematically. Coding information was then sorted, similar codes merged and duplications eliminated. Themes were then reviewed and revised with four distinct themes and 12 sub-themes generated from this process and conceptualised in the form of a reading grid. Reliability and consistency of the data findings was achieved by obtaining feedback from colleagues working in the VRU team, the programme manager and from extended engagement with the research throughout data collection and analysis. Dependability was achieved by the use of memo writing to record and reflect on the data analysis process, and the consistent engagement of the programme manager in the review of data collection and analysis.

## Findings

The findings of the data analysis have been presented as thematic maps, with a visual representation of themes and sub-themes identified from the data set. Guided by the emergent concepts, each theme and sub-theme has been summarised and interpreted and is presented in narrative format below.

**Box 1**  
**Thematic map in relation to Theme 1: Meeting needs**

Theme	Sub-themes
Meeting needs	<b>1.1 Pupils</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme is meeting needs of pupils, including the most vulnerable</li> <li>• The Boxall Profile® is effective in identifying needs</li> <li>• Impact is observed in improved behaviour and attendance and fewer exclusions</li> </ul>
	<b>1.2 School</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philosophy and principles of programme fits school vision</li> <li>• Value of the project</li> </ul>
	<b>1.3 Staff</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased interest and discussion amongst staff have led to reduced exclusions</li> <li>• Change of attitudes has resulted in better engagement</li> <li>• Positive impact observed in nurturing interventions resulted in wider application of nurture practice by staff</li> </ul>

**1.1 Pupils**

Participants reflected that taking part in the programme met the current and long-term needs of their pupils, including more vulnerable pupils with long-term support needs.

“...the project provides a fantastic opportunity for our school to be able to support our students and assess their needs in greater depth.” (FGP3)

The Boxall Profile® was helpful in assessing the needs, at the right time, for groups of children requiring additional support, and in the planning of targeted solutions for these pupils.

“The part of the project I feel is most beneficial is the Boxall assessment. I feel that this opens up a wider range of interventions we will be able to use in order to support all students’ needs on a variety of levels.” (FGP3)

“Already it is clear that it will provide us with effective measurement, identification and review frameworks [which] will allow us to measure the progress and effectiveness of applied interventions.” (FGFP8)

Positive impact was reflected in individual pupil behaviour with a reduction in verbal abuse towards staff, improved attendance and fewer permanent exclusions reported since the start of the project.

“We have used [nurturing practice] in a small area to begin with and have seen a reduction in verbal abuse towards staff.” (FGP5)

“Two boys who were looking at permanent exclusion now come in... and are doing so well.” (FGP7)

**1.2 School**

At the start of the project, it was not clear whether the project was needed, but the philosophy and principles of nurture had been found to fit the vision and school context and had provided a structure to offer long-term support.

“The philosophy and principles of [the programme] meet the needs of our school context and has led to a review of how we approach inclusion and supporting all learners, but especially our most vulnerable.” (FGFP9)

Participants value the opportunity to be involved in the project knowing that it meets the needs of their pupils.

“We knew by looking at the criteria [of the programme] it 100% meets the needs. We knew the value and feel really blessed to have this... it fits with us.” (FGP1)

### 1.3 Staff

Participants observed that increased interest and discussion amongst staff members – particularly around nurture and attachment theory in relation to specific students – had prevented exclusions that might have otherwise have happened.

“It’s prevented two boys from permanent exclusion... The staff all looked at the six principles to decide what were our strengths and weaknesses. It’s allowed for staff discussion around nurture and attachment theory.” (FGP7)

There were changes observed in relation to the attitude of some staff towards pupils, in that staff appeared more positive towards pupils with more complex needs. Staff appeared more willing to engage with these pupils in their classes and were more willing to plan for, find solutions and work with them.

“Staff who wouldn’t have them in their class before are now outside with them and able to give [them]

praise... staff are excited – they want to work with them.” (FGP7)

“Many colleagues [now] think again about how they plan lessons and engage with our learners to help them access the learning and connect with school...” (FGFP9)

Improvements in the behaviour of pupils attending targeted nurturing interventions has been observed by teachers and school leadership. Looking ahead, if impact became more visible, nurture practice would expand and be rolled out more widely departments throughout the settings.

“The Head[teacher] is impressed and wants to push it out further next year using [nurture practice] in bigger groups.” (FGP5)

“Come September there will be a team of teachers, one in each department – they volunteered – this will then be rolled out in every department. If the impact is shown, then more will be allowed.” (FGP5)

### Box 2 Thematic map in relation to Theme 2 – Relationships

Theme	Sub-themes
Relationships	<b>2.1 Partnership with lead consultant</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert knowledge guides, supports and motivates</li> <li>• Understanding context</li> <li>• Provision of coaching, support and guidance</li> <li>• Pivotal in understanding six principles</li> <li>• Ideas and planning</li> </ul>
	<b>2.2 Connection</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships forged with other schools through networking</li> </ul>
	<b>2.3 Parents</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship changed by pandemic</li> </ul>

#### 2.1 Partnership with lead consultant

Participants observed that lead consultants (LCs) have shared their passion, their expert knowledge and their personal experiences of nurture practice to guide, support and motivate participants to implement changes and develop nurturing strategies and plans for their schools.

“[We] couldn’t be without [the LC] – she’s instrumental! You can tell she’s doing it because she believes in it – she’s amazing!” (FGP1)

“[The LC] has listened intently to our ideas and projects and has provided us with support and guidance.” (FGP4)

The LCs' familiarity with the specific context of the school allowed them to find tailored training and strategy solutions to best meet the needs of the staff and students in each setting.

"[They] understand our school context and works with us to provide access to the best training to support key members of staff in delivering programmes and support for all our learners." (FGFP9)

"What [the LC] suggests is so relevant to our children. She's tweaked what we do and made it so much better. [She] has given me confidence!" (FGP7)

Lead consultants helped to develop the knowledge and confidence of staff by providing invaluable coaching and acting as a 'sounding board' for thoughts and ideas during virtual meetings.

"Gave us lots of ideas; whatever is asked gets delivered and more! [They] put things into intelligent, practical terms." (FGP6)

Participants describe the relationship forged with LCs as pivotal in terms of understanding the principles of nurture and how to best employ them throughout their settings. The opportunities to connect with LCs through regular virtual and face-to-face meetings helped developed partnerships and allowed for the sharing and generation of practical ideas for and step-by-step implementation of plans.

"The relationship with our consultant has been pivotal in developing our understanding of nurturing principles and how we can employ them." (FGFP8)

The meetings with the LC have generated a range of practical ideas that help to identify next steps and adapt strategies to support pupils more effectively.

"[They've] always got good ideas and she has really helped to adapt strategies." (FGP5)

"Gave us lots of ideas; whatever is asked gets delivered and more! [They] put things into intelligent, practical terms." (FGP6)

## 2.2 Connection

Monthly networking events were considered to be a helpful opportunity to connect with colleagues from other schools, to share ideas and resources, and to discuss common strengths and challenges.

"[The meetings] have given us a lot more knowledge and contacts... the networking meetings are amazing!" (FGP7)

"The networking events have been really helpful to share ideas, resources and pitfalls." (FGP4)

## 2.3 Parents

Due to staff taking on more pastoral duties during school closures in lockdown, including home visits, etc, participants reported that the more nurturing engagement with families during this time resulted in parents having an improved understanding of the work done in schools, improved communication and improved home-school relationships.

"... the pandemic has improved the relationships with our parents and students. I feel that this is because things have had to change to keep everyone safe... it has given families a greater understanding of the work that goes on within a school setting... it has brought about a greater sense of community and working together." (FGP3)

"The Boxall Profile® helps to structure conversations with parents." FGP6

"Parents are more forthcoming and it's helped break down barriers. It's changed a lot of parents' attitudes." FGP5

**Box 3****Thematic map in relation to Theme 3: Knowledge development**

Theme	Sub-themes
Knowledge development	<b>3.1 Staff training</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to specialist training sessions expanded and developed knowledge</li> <li>• Wide range and structure of training developed knowledge and confidence</li> </ul>
	<b>3.2 Addressing pupil needs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Boxall Profile® gives insight allowing targeted intervention</li> </ul>
	<b>3.3 Resources/products</b>
	<b>3.4 Self-reflection</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The six principles generated and facilitated discussion</li> </ul>

**3.1 Staff training**

The access and convenience of virtual training for staff on specialist subjects including attachment theory, youth violence and trauma, was valued. The training complemented existing knowledge, provided additional knowledge and increased the confidence of staff to meet the needs of pupils.

“It has added to already experienced staff’s knowledge and confidence and it’s definitely getting stronger.” (FGP6)

“[The training has] made it possible to address needs – particularly around youth violence and drugs. It has given us a lot more knowledge.” (FGP7)

Training events were considered to cover a wide range of subjects, were well-structured, and the resources provided to accompany training sessions were of an excellent standard and helpful in intervention work. Specialist trainers, particularly those with teaching expertise, inspired staff and helped them to develop their knowledge and confidence.

“The training events have been well-structured and resourced.” (FGP4)

**3.2 Addressing pupil need**

The Boxall Profile® was considered to be one of the most beneficial aspects of the project as it allowed deeper insight into pupils’ needs, thereby allowing for more targeted intervention. Individual staff members as well as whole-staff groups

(e.g. teaching assistants) were trained in use of the Boxall Profile® and there was wide usage of the online platform to assess and measure the needs of individual children and young people (CYP) including those with SEND and larger groups of CYP, including whole-school groups).

“... we have trained all TAs, set them up on the [Boxall Profile®] online platform and they have then completed profiles and started intervention work. This has opened up a wider range of intervention work and resources to use as well as new assessment and measurement tools.” (FGFP8)

**3.3 Products and resources**

The products and training resources offered as part of the project provided staff the opportunity to try a wider range of solutions during interventions that supported various levels of student needs.

“[The] Bereavement Box is an amazing resource that we’ve used for pupils who have suffered bereavement.” (FGP1)

**3.4 Self reflection**

The six principles of nurture practice generated discussion and facilitated opportunities for wider self-reflection amongst staff, although this was not always considered to be an easy process.

“The staff all looked at the six principles to decide what were our strengths and weaknesses. It’s allowed for staff discussion around nurture and attachment theory.” (FGFP6)

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### 4.1 Obstacles and challenges

Workload pressures caused by the demand of role changes during the pandemic, and limited staff resources impacted the staff’s ability to engage fully with the project.

“The school closure has not helped. Changes in school, dealing with children’s issues – everything is new for everyone! Workload pressures and very busy timetables [have been an obstacle].” (FGP5)

“We wanted to do everything, but not it’s not possible – we haven’t got the staff resources.” (FGP7)

The pandemic and school closures disrupted timetables, thereby affecting the staffs’ ability to integrate new knowledge learning, and delayed the implementation of actions, ideas and strategies generated from the programme.

“The only major obstacle has been time to implement the project.” (FGFP8)

Due to a lack of time to attend training and develop confidence in adapting new ways of working, staff can be resistant to adopting a new understanding of complex needs and it can be difficult to get them on board with nurturing practice. This is a result of their already extremely demanding workloads and the lack of staffing resources to allow them to attend training.

**Box 4****Thematic map in relation to Theme 4: Obstacles and challenges**

Theme	Sub-themes
Obstacles and challenges	<b>4.1 Obstacles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engagement affected by demands due to the pandemic</li> <li>Time to implement knowledge</li> <li>Staff attitudes to adopting nurture practice affected by heavy workloads</li> </ul>
	<b>4.2 Challenges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mental health and wellbeing of whole school community</li> <li>Time needed to expand nurture practice</li> </ul>

“[The project lead] struggles to give the team confidence. [She] feels like she’s hitting a brick wall. Mainly because it’s new [and] they are busy with complex roles and needs. Time is needed in order to properly take it in and lean and they haven’t got this.” (FGP5)

**4.2 Challenges**

The pandemic disrupted and weakened social existing support mechanisms which negatively affected the whole school community. Pupils and parents were impacted by bereavement and increased anxiety resulting in more safeguarding referrals being made by school staff. Staff felt that they lack the specialised training but felt pressurised to address the deeper needs of families in addition to fulfilling their teaching roles, negatively affecting their wellbeing.

“Safeguarding referrals are through the roof!” (FGP6)

“Teachers have had to become counsellors and deal with the socio-economic needs as well as teach. Training is needed for the staff in order to help more.” (FGP5)

More time is needed to broaden existing nurture practice into the wider school, which can be achieved by school leaders prioritising opportunities for staff to attend training.

“We need more time... trying to expand it across the whole school – it’s a challenge!” (FGP2)

“Getting leadership to give time [due to] lack of funds [for] staff training and the resistant teachers.” (FGP6)

**Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that at this point in programme delivery, the range and structure of project offer is currently meeting the expectations of the participating schools. Schools recognised the value of joining the programme as the philosophy of nurture corresponded to their vision of meeting the needs of all pupils, and was opportune as they previously lacked the support and resources to realise their vision.

As the project is still in the early stages of implementation in schools due to the effects of the pandemic, evaluation of impact by staff is limited, but the initial signs are positive. Staff report improvements in outcomes of some individual pupils and observe their progress in engagement and in developing emotional literacy skills and resilience, which has protected them against possible exclusion. Since the implementation and development of nurture practice, changes in staff attitudes towards pupils has been observed, with some staff appearing more positive towards and more willing to engage with pupils who have more complex needs. As staff have developed their knowledge and skills around nurture practice through training, they feel more confident to identify pupils in need of additional support and feel more capable of applying solutions that will have positive impact. Engagement with the project until now has established the foundations for further developing nurture practice in schools, including expanding nurture practice into all learning departments, and planning for the establishment of on-site Nurture Groups.

The need for the early identification of SEMH difficulties among pupils is well recognised in the

literature (Department for Education, 2018). Doing so allows for both the understanding it provides to inform the nature and level of support and intervention, and the ability to detect undiagnosed needs. The pandemic has created a changed educational landscape, demanding the need for schools to 'think beyond conventional and recognised categories of vulnerability' (Daniels et al, 2020, p. 8) Staff in schools participating in the project are more able to identify and assess the needs of all pupils, including the most vulnerable and those more at risk of exclusion, and they are more confident in their ability to support them. The Boxall Profile® is a beneficial tool that is being used to identify needs in greater depth, to measure progress and to assess the effectiveness of interventions attended by pupils after assessment. Many staff members participating in the project, including teachers and teaching assistants, have already been trained in the use of The Boxall Profile® Online and are using the tool to complete profiles for individual pupils with SEND, groups of pupils and in some cases throughout the whole school.

The importance of supportive relationships in developing a safe base that offers the capacity to respond to challenges and to explore solutions has been discussed earlier in this paper. This does not only apply to young people, but also to the significant adults in their environments who exert influence over them. Access to knowledgeable, experienced and passionate experts in the form of the nurtureuk lead consultant (LC) is valued by schools. Regular virtual and face-to-face meetings provide coaching, guidance and support and also offer opportunities to generate and share ideas that facilitate developing and adapting practical strategies to address pupil need. In the context of this project, the relationships developed between school project leads and their LC have found to have been instrumental in the staff's development of understanding of the six principles of nurture and how they can be implemented throughout the setting. The understanding of the unique context of each school is further recognised as being pivotal to the successful implementation and development of nurture practice within the schools. The self-audit conducted at the start of the project, with the support of the LC, is a meaningful process that facilitates self-reflection and highlights strengths and weaknesses in practices. It also generates wider discussions amongst staff about inclusion,

nurture and attachment. Connections established with other schools taking part in the project through regular networking meetings are valued as they allow for the recognition of common challenges and facilitate the sharing of ideas and resources.

It is not only long-term changes in behaviour amongst young people, but also changes in behaviour amongst the significant figures who influence young peoples' lives, that ultimately should lead to a sustainable reduction in violent behaviour (DIZ, 2010). A wide range of well-structured training opportunities increased the knowledge and confidence of staff – in particular, training focused on attachment theory and trauma-informed practice available to all staff allows them to deepen their knowledge and develop their skills. Training further increases awareness in staff and facilitates a different understanding of the contexts of pupils' lives. Some staff report feeling more empowered to identify the underlying needs of their pupils that may be reflected in challenging behaviours, allowing for alternative approaches to be considered. With persistent disruptive behaviour still cited as the most common reason for both fixed-term and permanent exclusions by schools in England (GOV. UK, 2021), training and knowledge-development that allows for implementing restorative solutions that reach the root of the needs, and in doing so prevent further escalation, is imperative.

It is not yet possible to assess the impact of the pervasive disruptions and changes that the recent Covid-19 pandemic caused in the lives of children and young people, but as many were unable to attend school, suffered bereavement and increased stress due to family hardship, the consequences are already being reflected in the increase of safeguarding referrals initiated by school staff. The increased needs of pupils and their parents caused by psychological effects of the pandemic weighs heavily on school staff, and the increased demand for support has weakened already vulnerable available support systems. School staff are recognised as the principal agents of change in that they constitute the point of contact for the development of nurturing practice, with the ensuing benefits circulating onward to pupils and parents. Acknowledging the established link between teacher wellbeing and pupil outcomes, it is alarming to note the

record levels of stress, burnout and anxiety among staff reported due to increased workloads and responsibilities since the pandemic began (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). Expectations that already overwhelmed staff should find the capacity for additional training and additional responsibilities to support the needs of their pupils is not practical or sustainable and must be an important consideration throughout the remainder of the project. The recommendations of existing research to address this issue include the increased funding for schools to appoint trained mental health professionals in all primary and secondary schools (Irwin-Rogers et al, 2020), but this aspiration is not likely to be realised for some time.

## Limitations

Although the study provided essential informative insight into participant's experiences of an ongoing project, caveats regarding the methodology must be taken into consideration. The study presented the views of a limited sample size of project leaders, which may have resulted in some sampling bias. Recruiting a larger sample size that included participants with more varied roles and responsibilities throughout the settings would have enhanced the study, and triangulating data using case studies from participating schools would have increased the validity and rigour of the findings. Several disadvantages of focus group methodology are acknowledged in the literature (Smithson, 2000) which may also affect the validity, meaningfulness and generalisation of the study results, eg, potential moderator bias and self-selection of participants.

Additionally, the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and its effects upon both the methodology of the study and on the participants taking part in the programme require acknowledgement. The use and effectiveness of virtual focus groups, as opposed to face-to-face participation, has been discussed in the literature (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021), however consideration must be given to how this adaption may have affected outcomes. Participants also described some significant changes in their working environments and roles during the pandemic, which may have influenced their experiences of the programme and affected the outcomes of this study.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to gather the observations of a sample of participants from settings actively engaged in the nurtureuk Violence Reduction Unit programmes, to gain insight into their experiences of the programme at its mid-point, and to assess implementation progress and effectiveness. Results based on a small sample size reveal some positive impacts of the programme thus far and highlight areas for discussion and development for the remainder of the programme delivery.

A review of the literature has determined that the causative factors influencing the prevalence of youth violence are complex. Existing research has established that solutions aimed preventing this phenomenon can only be sustainable and successful if the individual needs of each young person are addressed with an accompanying understanding of the context of their social environments. In order to affect changes in behaviour that lead to violent outcomes, risk factors within the whole ecology of their environments must be minimised, and protective factors increased. Research highlighted in this study confirms that nurture practice addresses the risk factors at an individual level through its ability to identify the underlying causes of distressed behaviour and address them at an early stage. Anecdotal evidence from more than 50 years of nurture practice, together with outcomes from small scale studies suggests that it can be effective in reducing instances of exclusions (Bennett, 2015). The link between the exclusion of CYP and poor outcomes, including becoming the victims and/or perpetrators of violence, has also been highlighted in the literature review. The nurtureuk VRU programme builds upon the successful violence prevention work, using nurture practice, that started in Scotland 15 years ago. The evidence from that work clearly establishes that the development of nurturing relationships between CYP and the significant adults in their school and home environments buffer them from developmental disruption caused by adverse experiences and provide the framework from which to develop the cognitive skills and emotional resources necessary to for their physical, social and emotional wellbeing, thereby changing the conditions that may lead to violent behaviour and exclusion.

This study provides unique preliminary insight into the application of nurture practice as a viable and sustainable model for violence reduction and makes an original contribution to the expansion of nurture practice that can be corroborated in further investigation and future research.

## Acknowledgements

I dedicate this work to my parents, Joan and Rodney Maddocks, whose nurturing hands inspired my practice; and to my brother, Noel Maddocks, whose untimely passing inspired my journey to nurture for a more connected and peaceful world.

## Disclosure statement

Nurtureuk employed the author over the course of the study as an independent consultant. In accordance with my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that I am a consultant to nurtureuk who may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper.



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## Appendix 1

### nurtureuk Violence Reduction Unit programmes offer structure

<b>Project duration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two-year delivery</li> </ul>
<b>Participation</b>	<p><b>Nurturing London VRU programme</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 31 educational settings across 13 boroughs (13 x primary schools; 8 x secondary &amp; sixth form schools; 8 x secondary schools; 2 x further education colleges; 1 x all-through provision, 2 x alternative provision settings/pupil referral units)</li> </ul> <p><b>Kent &amp; Medway VRU programme</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nine secondary schools</li> </ul> <p>Senior leaders from borough Behaviour and Inclusion teams designate schools to participate in the programmes, based on various criteria, including: school exclusion data, community youth violence data, SEMH pupil need, etc.</p>
<b>What the educational settings provide to ensure the programme's success</b>	<p>The oversight of the programme from the senior leadership team, with one staff member appointed as project leader (PL) who is responsible for co-ordinating the programme roll-out and for managing programme progress throughout the setting</p>
<b>What nurtureuk provides</b>	<p><b>Bespoke consultancy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each setting is assigned a highly experienced nurtureuk <b>lead consultant (LC)</b> who acts as a consistent guide for the PL's and staff through the two-year programme framework, providing a solution-focused approach to creating an inclusive school environment. LC's aim to model best practice in different scenarios and ensure all nurturing approaches are provided in each settings individual context.</li> <li>• The LC works with PLs in each setting to complete a facilitated <b>self-audit</b> of the settings current nurturing practice, designed to act as a benchmark and to track progress throughout the programme delivery.</li> <li>• Using information from the audit, alongside additional data from the setting, including baseline attendance, attainment and exclusions, etc, the LC designs a <b>bespoke consultancy package</b> tailored to each settings specific needs and goals and aimed at reaching the programme's short-term outcomes.</li> <li>• The package consists of <b>10 days of time-flexible, virtual or in-school consultancy</b>, as well as variety of options of <b>nurturing solutions</b> (see below).</li> <li>• Regular <b>progress meetings</b> are held between the LC and PL during programme delivery to determine progress, review each settings Action Plan, evaluate the success of implementing the principles and to plan for providing further support, if necessary.</li> </ul> <p><b>Nurturing solutions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A wide range of <b>training</b> course options.</li> <li>• A selected range of <b>products</b> to support nurture practice.</li> <li>• Monthly <b>networking meetings</b> where participating schools can connect, share and develop knowledge on specialist subjects relating to the programme.</li> <li>• Specialist <b>partnership programmes</b> to deliver targeted training and support for staff.</li> </ul>

# Book review

## Supporting Adolescents & Teenagers with Stress & Anxiety: A practical guide

Authors: Tina Rae, Jody Walshe and Jo Wood

Publisher: Hinton House Practical Therapeutic Resources

Publication Country: United Kingdom

Year of Publication: 2022

ISBN: 978-1-90653-197-3

Reviewer: **Tristan Middleton**

This book is primarily a resource for school-based practitioners working with adolescents and teenagers, offering a range of ideas and resources to use when supporting the social, emotional and mental health needs of these young people. The publication offers support for work with individuals, groups and a whole-school approach.

The introduction provides a clear explanation of stress and anxiety, relating these to the needs of adolescents and teenagers, with additional consideration of the context of a world which has been subject to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first section gives a rationale for the approach and provides readers with a theoretical understanding that underpins the approach, as well as giving guidance on how the book can be used. Within this section the authors explain that the approach incorporates learning from a range of therapeutic techniques including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy and Motivational Interviewing. A key aim of the authors' approach is to use a positive psychology approach to normalise anxiety and stress amongst adolescents and teenagers, to enable these young people to develop successful coping mechanisms.

The second part of this book offers guidance on leading 12 different sessions, including a brief

introduction, the session aims and a range of photocopiable resources and worksheets. Each session is divided into a number of activities, for which there is guidance about the resources needed, aims and how to run the session. The particular strategies employed and whether the activity is suitable for individuals, small groups or whole groups are indicated for all activities. The sessions have a range of foci, including, understanding stress and anxiety, relationships, loss and bereavement, exam stress and the future.

There is a final section where additional resources are provided as appendices. The book is clearly indexed and finding particular resources is easy to achieve.

Not only will this book provide practitioners with an understanding of the needs of teenagers and adolescents, but also it will be very useful for practitioners who want to have a programme to follow, and equally for those who would like to dip in to the book to access individual resources. For those practitioners who are working within the context of secondary nurture groups, such as teachers, SENCOs and teaching assistants, this book could provide original approaches to planning nurture group support. As such, this book could be a useful addition to school bookshelves as a planning, reference and CPD resource.





## About nurtureuk

nurtureuk is the national charity dedicated to using nurturing approaches to improve children and young people's life chances. We give education professionals the proven tools, training and support they need to implement nurture in schools and remove barriers to learning. We also work with policy makers to make nurture a cornerstone of education in the UK.

Nurture gets to the heart of a child's challenges and supports children and young people to build connections and resilience. It is a highly effective way of supporting improved behaviour and increased attendance in schools, leading to better attainment and reduced exclusions.



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