

A systemic evaluation of a nurture group in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Nurture groups are seen in a variety of school establishments and are considered an effective provision for children with additional social, emotional and behavioural needs. According to an HMIE report (2009) that reviewed the impact of nurture groups in primary schools in Scotland, providing a nurture group environment within a school allows children to integrate more effectively into the mainstream curriculum with reduced or no support in future years. Previous research in this area has considered the benefits and challenges pupils face when a school adopts the nurture group intervention. Embedded within these studies are aspects of school systemic processes that also impact on the success of a nurture group. This study takes a uniquely systemic perspective to evaluate a nurture group in a primary school in Scotland. Furthermore, a systemic evaluation will assist the best course of implementation for schools that may be considering the nurture group intervention. A solution-focused meeting was adopted to gather qualitative data and content analysis revealed 15 categories. Each category was discussed and during this process of analysis four key internal systems emerged: parental involvement, communication, selection process and training. This study highlights a number of systems that need to be in place for both the longevity and effective running of a nurture group.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009 Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HMIE) reviewed the impact of nurture groups in Scottish primary schools. Consequently, the Scottish Government aimed to further promote nurture groups and nurture approaches across early years, primary and secondary settings as part of the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2010). It is out with the scope of this paper to present a full account of a nurture group. However, Cooper and Whitebread (2007) provide a full overview of the theory and principles underpinning the nurture group intervention.

To date, evaluations of nurture groups have focused on their effectiveness at the individual child level. Hence, there is a need to consider systemic evaluation in order to explore the broader factors that lead to the success of this intervention. There are a range of approaches to systemic evaluations and this study adopted a stakeholder evaluation approach that involves the exploration of different people's real world experiences to reveal significant issues (Boyd et al, 2007).

Within a school there are a number of systems; a quality assurance system, a curriculum system, the management of pupil behaviour, a classroom system, and support systems for staff, pupils and parents. The ethos, development, and success of the school are reliant on the interplay and effectiveness of these internal systems. A systemic evaluation is an exploration of these internal systems to establish what works well and where improvements are required.

While previous research has evaluated nurture groups at the individual level, they have noted particular systems that have had an impact on the success of a nurture group. Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) found that communication between mainstream class teachers and the nurture group staff was limited to one-way communication in the form of feedback, rather than communicating in a manner that afforded an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of how a pupil's needs could be met in the mainstream classroom.

According to Binnie & Allen (2008) a challenge of the intervention is organising liaison time with class teachers. Class teachers commented that while liaison between mainstream teachers and nurture group teachers was planned, communication was not consistent (Sanders, 2007). Further, the importance of a system of

supervisory support and advice for nurture group staff, in addition to a need for support from the wider school community (and home) was highlighted by Garner & Thomas (2011). This need was linked to the difficulties around the understanding and communication between the mainstream teaching staff and the nurture group staff, which impacted on the successful reintegration of pupils into their mainstream class. Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) also found that the working relationship between the nurture group teacher and teaching assistant was important in providing each other with support, working collaboratively on planning and monitoring, and being good role models for the children.

The system to support staff to complete the required training for those running a nurture group has not been explored by previous research but its importance has been noted. Shaver and McClatchey (2013) highlighted the challenges faced by the cost of the training. Additionally, nurture group teachers have highlighted that the teaching assistant working in partnership with them needs to know the key principles underpinning the nurture group (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005) and this comes through available training. Additional training was also noted by Binnie and Allen (2008) as being

beneficial to the ongoing continual professional development of staff in the nurture group.

The interplay between systems that inform the selection process for nurture groups has been touched on in previous research. Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) explored the factors that contributed to the effective running of a nurture group. The composition of the group was highlighted as an important factor in the outcomes for the group, in addition to the systems that inform the decision of who attends the nurture group. However, pupil selection was also highlighted as a barrier to the intervention (Binnie & Allen, 2008).

The interaction between the school system and the family system is frequently reported as important. The relationships built between nurture group staff and parents can become a strong link in which to engage parents with the school (Shaver & McClatchey, 2013). Taylor and Gulliford (2011) found that the role of the nurture group staff and their perceived status and power impacted their confidence to create and develop communication systems between home and school.

Sanders (2007) reported that teachers felt that the success of the nurture group was a result of a holistic approach to addressing pupils' needs, driven by the school's management team. Furthermore, teachers felt the educational psychologist provided an important role in supporting nurture group staff, assisting in quality assurance and managing the initiative within the Local Authority. While nurture groups have had a positive impact on pupils (HMIE, 2009) further enquiry is needed to discover whether it is the intervention, the process, or both, that impacts on this outcome (Bywater, 2012). Previous research has considered the benefits and challenges that arise for pupils where their school adopts a nurture group intervention. Embedded within these studies are aspects of systemic processes that could also impact on the success of the intervention, however no previous research has focused solely on a systemic evaluation.

This study takes a uniquely systemic perspective to evaluating a nurture group by using a solution focused meeting process to explore both the success of nurture groups, and the best course of implementation for schools new to the intervention. While focus groups have been used previously, this study explored an alternative approach by adopting a solution-focused meeting.

In light of the literature review and the researchers' desire to use a solution focused approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the nurture group, the research project aimed to investigate the question; how can a solution focused meeting assist in evaluating the effectiveness of a nurture group within a mainstream primary school? This article reports on one aspect of a larger project that aimed to address this research question. Thus, this article will focus on reporting the evaluation of the nurture group and will not address how the solution focused meeting assisted the evaluation process.

METHOD

By embracing an inductive approach, the researchers' used two solution focused meetings (SFM) to gather qualitative data. This evaluation wanted to avoid a typical evaluation process where strengths and pressures are acknowledged, but evidence of the steps that people can take to make a change to the current situation are not explored. By contrast, a SFM goes beyond the evaluation of strengths and pressures enabling participants to generate a shared action plan. In addition, a SFM enables participants to interact with each other and allows the facilitator to contribute to the discussion (Alexander & Sked, 2010). Another benefit of adopting a SFM is that each person has an 'equal voice' (Alexander & Sked, 2010) and therefore aims to reduce the influence of a person's status, providing a forum for equal contributions.

As social constructivists the researchers felt this method of gathering data was well placed to not only allow the gathering of meaningful data, but also to allow the researchers to be reflexive and consider the perception and construction of their own reality and its impact on collaborative working. Furthermore, how the researchers constructed knowledge influences the questions they pose while facilitating the SFM. It is important to note that while a consistency in perspective may support a greater depth during the data analysis, it could be argued that the researchers' epistemological stance might indicate a bias toward the selection of SFMs as a method of data collection. However, the researchers felt that they addressed this because a solution-focused approach advocates the deconstruction of the 'expert' position in favour of empowering all participants (Hobbs, 2006).

PARTICIPANTS

A mainstream primary school, situated in a relatively deprived area of a small Scottish authority participated in the study. The Nurture, Support and Development Group within the school was based on the principles of nurture groups, as defined by Boxall (2002) and is subsequently referred to as a nurture group. The staffing of the group was complex; the current nurture group teacher had not undertaken any nurture training. The one teacher who was trained was not directly involved with the nurture group but she liaised regularly with the Deputy Head Teacher and the current nurture teacher regarding the children in the nurture group. However, it is important to note that this teacher did not take part in this study. The first SFM was attended by the teacher and the auxiliary staff member who run the nurture group, eight class teachers and the Deputy Head Teacher (DHT). The second SFM included the teacher from the nurture group, seven class teachers, two of whom had not attended the previous meeting and the DHT. The research concentrated on the school systemic processes impacting on the nurture group and therefore it did not seem appropriate to invite parents for this study.

PARTICIPANTS

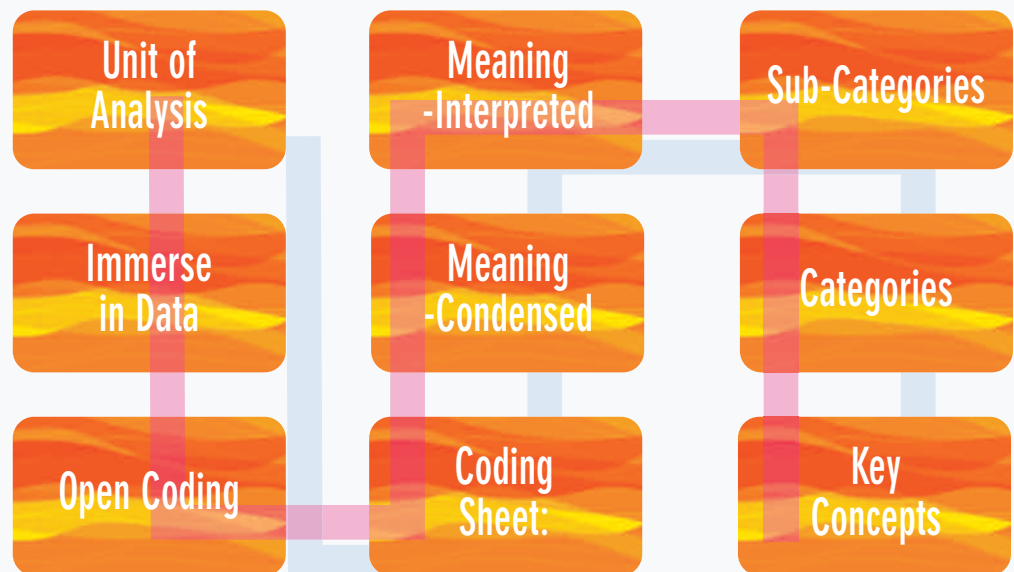
This study followed guidelines provided by The British Psychological Society's code of ethics (2009) and HCPC (2008) standards of conduct, performance and ethics. Furthermore, due to the educational context in which this study took place the BERA (2011) guidelines were adhered to. Both SFMs took place within the nurture room and the meetings took place four weeks apart. After sharing a description of the purpose and process of the SFM, the group members were encouraged to generate a list of strengths and pressures of the nurture group intervention, which were scribed by one of the researchers. The concerns highlighted by the participants were reframed and considered under the heading, *the main issues are how to...* On completing this task, each person was given the opportunity to vote for what they individually perceived to be the main issues. Each participant had five votes. The votes were counted and the top three issues identified were used as the foundation to collectively consider possible ideas to address these issues and make steps to change. These ideas became the action plan. The researchers alternated the role of facilitator and scribe.

Both meetings followed the same format and both meetings were audio recorded and transcribed. Due to the dual role undertaken by the researchers of facilitating/scribing and researcher, it was decided that audio recording allowed for later analysis. Transcription of the audio recordings was chosen to analyse the evaluations and to consider the interaction between participants as they co-constructed their reality of the situation.

ANALYSIS

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis (see Figure 1). During the process of reading, open coding was used to note thoughts in the margin of the text. These memos were collated onto a coding sheet adapted from Graneheim & Lundman (2004). By condensing the meanings of the memos (by further defining the initial interpretations of the original memos) the researchers were able to extract the manifest content and then interpret the meaning to access the latent content. At this stage sub categories were generated, that were then subsequently grouped into categories. These categories were then grouped further creating high order categories resulting in the emergence of four key concepts. While it would be desirable to return to the participants for feedback about the coding and final themes, time prevented this respondent validation. However a summary report was made available to the school.

Figure 1:
The process
of analysis



FINDINGS

The systemic evaluation of the nurture group revealed 15 categories. During this process of analysis, four key systemic concepts emerged: parental involvement, communication, selection process and training. The key issues arising from these four concepts are considered below.

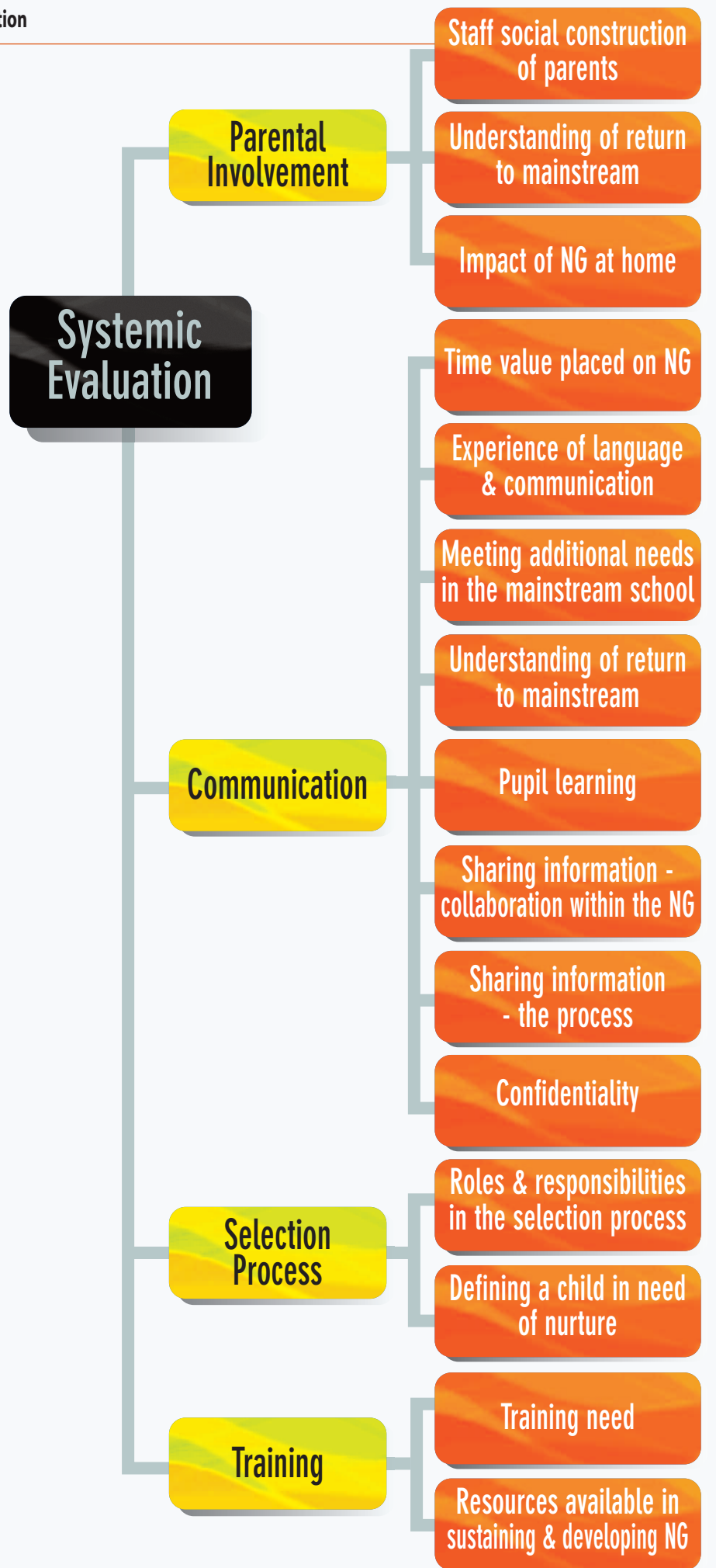
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parents were not involved with this nurture group. The nurture group staff and mainstream teaching staff had constructed the parents as the cause of the child's needs. They provided an example of a parent being allowed to view their child through the glass pane in the door.

Furthermore, the transition between nurture group and the child's mainstream class are acknowledged by the nurture group principle of 'transitions are significant in the lives of children'. The perceptions of teaching staff (and parents alike) regarding a child's readiness for full reintegration into their mainstream class are important, as this can impact on how the children perceive the transition. Interestingly the adopted language used when describing a pupil leaving the classroom is followed by a sense of entering the nurture group. However, the language used during the SFMs to describe the transition from the nurture group back to mainstream, was about leaving the nurture group with no sense of going anywhere.

COMMUNICATION

Good communication between the nurture group teacher and the teaching assistant is evident. Regular discussions formalise the observations made by staff on pupils' achievement in learning, and their social development. The SFM allowed nurture group staff to consider how they could use this level of communication to improve sharing information with the mainstream class teachers, on both learning progress and social, emotional and behavioural development strategies. As a result, class



teachers and the nurture group staff explored possibilities to achieve this. It was acknowledged that much of the communication occurred on an informal basis. Furthermore, staff acknowledged there was a lack of time to discuss learning targets and outcomes of pupils. Nurture group staff have attempted to include teachers in contributing to learning plans, but time is an issue in enabling this to take place on a regular basis. Despite acknowledging the barriers to regular communication between the nurture group staff and the mainstream teaching staff it was evident that staff try to overcome this (in part) by the 'professional dialogue' over coffee or a 'walk and talk' in the school corridor to gain an understanding of the progress being made by individual pupils.

It is evident this group developed individual ways of solving the problem of communication with teaching staff. However, due to the nature of a SFM process, participants were afforded an opportunity to explore ideas of how to increase communication with the class teachers. The group went onto discuss and negotiate what should be included in the new monitoring form. The differing views shared during the SFMs of what should be communicated to the mainstream class teachers demonstrated that for some class teachers, what was important to know was whether behaviour had improved, or specific learning targets had been achieved. Whereas the nurture group staff wanted to share progress regarding social behaviour and self-regulation abilities in light of certain learning experiences.

Initial discussions also indicated it was a one-way communication system, with the nurture group staff taking control of the process. Subsequent discussion through the SFM resulted in the acknowledgement and need for class teachers to have a greater role in communicating with the nurture group staff on their pupils' progress. This was particularly important when pupils were ready to return to the mainstream classroom. Presently there was a sense that pupils were being 'phased out' of the nurture group rather than it being communicated as a 'phased return' to their usual classroom.

SELECTION PROCESS

During discussion surrounding the school's process for selecting pupils for the nurture group intervention, it became evident that mainstream teaching staff found it challenging to select pupils based on a differing level of understanding of the purpose of the nurture group intervention. The Boxall Profile was viewed by staff as a tool that provided them with 'super information'. However, it appeared that the Boxall Profile assessment tool was in conflict with the staff's view of which pupils were in need of access to the nurture group.

The selection process was discussed and it emerged that while the class teacher is given a lead role in identifying need and carrying out the initial Boxall Profile, the selection process was not straightforward in this school. The current nurture group teacher perceived her role in the selection process as minimal due to the

greater knowledge held by the deputy about the child/family and knowledge held by the previous nurture teacher. These relational dynamics within the system could have an impact on the confidence staff have in making the most appropriate selection of children into the nurture group. This is exemplified in the following extract drawn from the findings, which reflects the current nurture group teacher's position within the system: ***"I think perhaps that the child should be in nurture but it ultimately isn't my decision."***

TRAINING

The current staffing relationships within the nurture group are very strong, evidencing good communication, planning and monitoring of progress. The nurture group teacher was not nurture trained and the nurture trained person was not directly involved with the nurture group; she had returned to a mainstream teacher role. The trained member of staff continued to be required to share her knowledge and still remains instrumental in key decisions concerning the nurture group. The dialogue demonstrated the current nurture group teacher's lack of confidence and uncertainty about making changes without the approval of the school's only nurture group trained member of staff. The SFM allowed the facilitator to explore the current staff's understanding of the official training needed to lead a traditional nurture group intervention. The discussion highlighted how the current staff members had been misinformed surrounding the lengths and commitment to formal training in the nurture approach. This misinformation had become a barrier to undertaking any form of formal training.

DISCUSSION

Four key concepts were extrapolated from the systemic evaluation; parental involvement, communication, selection process and training. The implementation plan of nurture groups originally proposed by Boxall (2002) differs from the actual implementation witnessed in this real world setting. While many nurture groups are the variant of the original design (Cooper, 2004) the mechanisms that support this nurture group have been impacted on by a lack of training. Therefore, staff do not have the knowledge about the intervention to successfully implement aspects of it. These four concepts are intertwined and therefore the impact of training has the potential to influence the selection process, communication and parental engagement.

In opposition to previous research undertaken by Taylor and Gulliford (2011), rather than striving to engage parents with the nurture group, this study found the nurture group staff actively avoided direct involvement from parents. Taylor and Gulliford (2011) described the importance of the initial consultation with parents in forging positive relationships. They further reported parents' preference for regular informal contact with nurture group staff (Taylor and Gulliford, 2011). Cooper and Tiknaz (2007, as cited in Garner & Thomas, 2011) suggested the process of parental

engagement relates to the wider school forms of communication. Interestingly, discussion regarding communication was focused on that which occurred within the school setting and no discussion of communication processes with external stakeholders arose.

The communication system between nurture group staff was reported to be satisfactory with a focus on improving the two-way communications with the mainstream teaching staff. Difficulties in organising a time to liaise was also highlighted in research by Binnie and Allen (2008). A process of adopting an electronic means of communication highlighted the staff's capacity to increase communication and ensure it was not limited to the nurture group feeding back to the teachers. This study found the teaching staff felt the nurture group staff were approachable which reflects the findings of other research (Sanders, 2007).

The selection process was highlighted as a challenge for the school and this finding replicated that of Binnie and Allen (2008). The circumstances were possibly further complicated through the complexities of roles within the school where the current nurture group teacher had not undertaken the nurture training and the nurture trained person was not directly involved with the nurture group, solely the selection process and for informal support. These staffing issues meant there was not a shared ownership over the decision of a child in need of nurture. Furthermore, communication with parents regarding the child's behaviour at home is an important aspect in establishing the allocation of a place in the group, but this was not discussed during the SFMs. In addition, the child's involvement in the decision to attend the nurture group or the methods of gaining the child's perspective was not discussed. The facilitators did not explore these issues directly and it could be argued that this is a limitation of the SFM process due to the facilitators' choice of response to the emerging discussions. There were discrepancies in the professional judgement regarding selection which conflicted with the results of the Boxall profile. This, and the conflicting opinions regarding the child's need perceived by teaching staff, could be explained through a lack of knowledge of the underpinning theory. This demonstrated a lack of shared understanding around the targeted purpose of nurture group and the wider processes that impacted on optimal partnership working within the school.

The limited nurture group training found in this study is not unique to this school. Syrnyk (2012, p.153) also found a "general lack of knowledge about the nurture approach prior to starting the role." However, the experiential learning already undertaken through running the nurture group should put the current nurture group staff in a good position to make links between theory and practice if training is undertaken. A three-day training course in the theory and practice of nurture groups is available through the Nurture Group Network (2013). An engagement with the course would be an opportunity to develop external support systems. Also, increased knowledge and understanding of the intervention could facilitate inclusion of appropriate staff within the selection process and progression in communication within the school setting.

Furthermore, an increase in awareness of the importance of parental engagement would also lead to the development of improved communication systems with parents. This could be the first step in developing relationships which impact on changing opinions and could lead to less blame and more understanding.

Further discussion around formal training highlighted just how time and financial constraints impacted on more teaching staff being trained in the nurture group intervention. Research has shown that the effectiveness of a nurture group is linked to a whole school approach (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 1998; Sanders, 2007). Therefore a school will get the best out of the nurture group if the six principles underpinning the approach are accepted and their complexity is fully understood by all staff and others concerned with the school (Cooper, 2009).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researchers were mindful that the 'voice on the table' may not represent the views of the whole group since there were a mixture of dominant characters, quiet characters and the positions within the school hierarchy influenced the contributions made by group members. An example of this was when one teacher said she did not wish to dedicate more time to meetings about the nurture group and the silence from the other teachers was interpreted as agreement. The researchers also aimed to be sensitive to the consequence of the meeting in terms of future relationships and the ability of staff to move forward by sending the minutes to all those involved. The credibility of the research could have been improved if the researchers had asked the participants for feedback on the interpretations generated from the meetings. When the researchers emailed the meeting minutes they did receive additions which were added to the minutes. However these additions were not included in the data analysis. Only one nurture group was studied and therefore these findings cannot be generalised. However, the findings are informative of systemic issues which professionals can be mindful of.

During analysis the nurture principles did not clearly emerge thus it may have been useful to have the six principles as a topic for discussion during the SFMs. Another topic which was covered superficially was the links between the nurture group and the parents and more widely, the parents' engagement with the school. It would also have been beneficial to have gathered the parents' perspectives regarding systemic processes.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study paves the way for systemic evaluations, future research may be well placed in focusing on the systemic mechanisms that directly support the success of nurture groups. This could be facilitated by carrying out multiple studies across a variety of nurture groups within primary schools. Furthermore, research that focuses on the implementation of nurture groups could map the effective practice within nurture groups on to the multiple systems

operating within the school, leading to a nurturing school ethos. In instances where there are plans to implement a nurture group, research into the readiness of the school and their expectations could be explored. Additionally, the implementation fidelity of this intervention could also be explored. Future research studies that focus on the views of parents and children within the nurture group may progress Taylor and Gulliford's (2011) research to explore the impact of nurture groups on improved family relationships.

Tying all that is known about the impact of early years experiences on development, further research into the links between nurturing approaches, and whole school practice, may serve this area of research well and support professionals in meeting the needs of all children and young people.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted a number of systems that need to be in place to allow a nurture group to run effectively, namely; adequate training, good communication systems across the school, parental engagement, and the involvement of parents, children and appropriate staff in the selection process. To ensure continued success of the nurture group intervention in meeting the needs of pupils, all levels of personnel within the school need to have an understanding of the purpose and rationale for the nurture group, and create and carry out monitoring and evaluation of the nurture group that is right for the school. If the whole school embraces the nurture group intervention, the nurture group principles can permeate mainstream classroom practice, developing the self-awareness, self-control, confidence and social development of all pupils within the school not just those accessing the nurture group intervention (Doyle, 2001).

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