A pilot study of the effectiveness of a nurture group in a secondary special school

Lisa Lyon

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK • Contact details: lisalyon33@gmail.com • Published on 28 April 2017

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ABSTRACT

Nurture groups (NGs) are an intervention intended to meet the needs of pupils identified as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). They are temporary, mostly part-time, and designed to provide pupils with the skills to successfully reintegrate into mainstream school (Boxall, 2002). Previous research has been focused on the effectiveness of NGs within primary schools; only more recently has research examined their effectiveness within the secondary sector. In primary settings NGs have been seen to be effective in improving pupils' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. This action research project aimed to explore the potential benefits of a NG within a specialist setting for pupils with SEBD.

This qualitative study combined the use of semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and observations of pupils, alongside examination of quantitative data gathered prior to the implementation of the NG, and throughout the year. The results go some way to corroborate findings from previous research projects, in that clear improvements in terms of behaviour and social skills were perceived to have taken place across the year. Parents and staff agreed that the pupils' social skills, and subsequently their readiness to learn, had improved. The limitations of the study, most noticeably the sample size and lack of control group, require that further investigation be undertaken, with a larger sample and adjustments to mitigate the limitations, enabling more robust evidence to be gathered.

INTRODUCTION

This pilot study took place in a community special school for pupils with SEBD. The pupils enter the school at various points during their secondary education usually having experienced significant upheaval within their previous education setting. A high proportion of pupils are looked after; all have either a Statement of Special Educational Needs, or an Education, Health and Care plan. More recently there has been an increase in the complexity of the needs of the pupils, and an increase in the prevalence of attachment behaviours. In response to this a NG was implemented in September 2014.

The effectiveness of NGs in primary schools is well established (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Reynolds, MacKay, & Kearney, 2009; Sanders, 2007; Shaver & McClatchy, 2013). While more limited research around their use at secondary level has been undertaken, there has more recently been an increase (Bennett, 2015; Colley, 2009; Cooke, Yeomans, & Parkes, 2008; Garner & Thomas, 2011; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014; Kourmoulaki, 2013). This appeared to support the findings in primary settings around the positive impact of NGs on improving pupils' social and emotional literacy. No research could be found that considered the effectiveness of NGs within a special school setting. NGs are unique in that they provide an opportunity for pupils to jointly develop both their academic skills and their social, emotional and behavioural skills. Structures, routines and staff are consistent allowing appropriate attachments to develop.

NGs were first established in 1970 by Marjorie Boxall, a local authority educational psychologist working in Inner London, in response to the growing number of vulnerable children in primary schools who were unable to cope with the demands and pressures of mainstream education due to significant emotional and behavioural difficulties (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). Boxall firmly believed the difficulties experienced by these children were a direct result of unmet needs in early childhood. She maintained that their inability to form positive relationships with adults, or understand appropriate conventions with respect to social interaction with peers stemmed from missed stages in their development, normally facilitated by the formation of nurturing relationships with a significant adult in infancy (Boxall, 2002).

While Boxall set up NGs for practical reasons, the intervention is based on several theories. Bowlby's work on attachment forms the most central of these theoretical underpinnings. In his trilogy Attachment and Loss (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), Bowlby considered the formation of attachment, separation and loss. An attachment, in this instance, is an affectional bond based on the need for safety, security and protection. It is this affectional bond, formed initially between child and caregiver, and present within secure attachments, that develops later in life into positive peer and adult relationships.

However, there are some aspects of Boxall's theoretical framework for NGs that cannot be explained by Bowlby's theory. Both Rutter (1995) and Garner & Thomas (2011) note that Bowlby did not accept that the cognitive processing of events could play a key role in lessening their long-term effects. This seems to contradict the premise of NGs and their efforts to reduce the impact of attachment behaviours through explicit, systematic teaching of social, emotional and learning skills. Sroufe (1988) suggested that attachment had no direct connections with cognitive development, which also brings into question how effective NGs would be in improving academic outcomes for pupils. Cooper (2004) and Garner & Thomas (2011) highlight the influence that Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning has had on the development of NGs and suggest this may provide some justification for the more educational elements of the model. Additionally, NGs can be seen to be founded on the principle developed by Maslow (1954) that cognitive learning can only take place when emotional needs are met and young people feel safe and secure (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000).

NGs aim to provide an environment in school that goes some way to replicating the home environment. There are always two key adults, mid-morning breakfast is a key part of the routine and pupils are taught explicitly how to manage their emotions and interact with peers. In this instance the NG differed from the provision within the rest of the school as pupils were supported in the classroom by the same two adults four mornings a week, rather than moving around different teachers for different subjects. They were also explicitly taught to develop their social and emotional skills through a range of activities, including weekly outdoor education sessions, focusing on relationships with peers, management of emotional responses, and resilience, for example.

METHOD

The impact of the NG was examined over the course of one academic year. Attempts were made to identify the level of its effectiveness and to answer the identified research questions: had pupils' behaviour and attitude to learning improved, could significant improvements in their social and emotional literacy be observed, did pupils themselves feel more confident and happier in school? Data gathered were then analysed to explore any commonalities of experience, and to consider the validity and reliability of the findings.

An action research framework was considered to be most appropriate for the study as the cyclical design, the concept of the involved practitioner, and the reflective element of the model meant that a useful examination of practice could take place. Furthermore, as the research takes place in the researcher's own school they cannot be regarded as 'disinterested observers' (Thomas, 2013) due to a vested interest in the project. This increases the importance of a reflective approach being adopted. A qualitative approach, such as action research, allows an insight into feelings and perceived impact of change from a variety of standpoints.

The NG was implemented in September 2014, it involved four pupils, three in Year Seven (Y7), aged 11-12 and one in Year Eight (Y8), aged 12-13; all the pupils involved were boys.

Baseline data provided a starting point to show how pupils had previously performed in school, allowing progress in behaviour to be measured. This was triangulated using data collected from the Boxall Profile and Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS) questionnaire.

These assessments were repeated at two further points, in March and July, enabling any shifts in feeling to be identified and examined in more depth. The results from the formal assessments were triangulated and reinforced through short semi-structured interviews carried out with pupils towards the end of the research project.

Structured observations formed the focus of the first part of the research and took the form of an 'interval recording' (Thomas, 2013), in that pupils were observed for five minute intervals over a period of 45 minutes (one lesson), either in their previous school (as three of the four pupils were transferring schools), or current class group prior to entering the NG, to observe how much time was spent on or off task. Observations were repeated in September, March and July, and took place in the NG and in mainstream classes. It was hoped this would provide an opportunity to draw conclusions about the impact of the structure and relationships present in the NG on the pupils' willingness and ability to engage in learning, and their ability to transfer this to mainstream classes.

Simple stratified sampling (Walliman & Buckler, 2008) was used to select six school staff not directly involved with the NG. This form of sampling involves dividing the population into specific groups sharing a particular characteristic (Bryman, 2012; Robson & McCartan, 2011), in this case their role in school. The staff (N=26) were divided into three groups: senior leadership team (SLT), teachers, and support staff, and a representative number from each group identified and surveyed. The staff were asked to anonymously complete an online survey in the format of a rating scale to gain their opinions about the impact of the NG. Respondents were asked five questions and were asked whether they felt that there had been a lot, a little, not much, or no impact. Three open questions were added to the questionnaire to allow respondents to provide more in depth answers, and to consider their opinions and beliefs without the constraints of a fixed question.

The same questions were given to staff directly involved in the NG, allowing an insight into any bias from those staff working directly with the pupils to be identified and mitigated. Questionnaires were also completed with parents/carers of the pupils to gain their views as to the effectiveness of the NG, and to see if experiences in school were replicated at home.

There was a need to keep in mind the power differential that existed between the researcher, being the Headteacher in the school, and the participants in the research, who were staff/pupils, and to recognise the impact this might have on the answers provided by those interviewed/surveyed. To counteract this, all opinions were triangulated by observations or quantifiable outcomes. The British

Educational Research Association (BERA) guidance stipulates that due regard should be given to dual roles and the impact that this may have on those involved (BERA, 2011). As the researcher was the Headteacher of the school in which the research was to be conducted, it was important that this be taken into consideration when gaining informed consent from the pupils involved. Therefore another member of staff was asked to discuss the research project with the pupils to gain their consent, so they did not feel pressured into agreeing if asked by the Headteacher.

RESULTS

Quantitative data

Figure 1 shows the results of the observations over the course of the year in mainstream classes, including the initial baseline data gathered in June.

It can be seen from these graphs that three of the four pupils made progress in their ability to maintain their attention in class over the course of the year, though the amount varied. The correlation between length of time in nurture and improved on-task behaviour was examined; the data indicated a strong positive correlation for three of the four pupils. **Table 1** shows these figures.

Figure 2 shows the improvements observed within the NG itself. Only one of the four pupils involved showed improvement. The correlation between time in nurture and improved on-task behaviour within the NG was not as high; indeed, in two cases a strong negative correlation can be seen. Some variation in performance between pupils is observed, however this is mainly within a modest range. This data does not allow any concrete conclusions to be drawn due to the discrepancies in performance between pupils. No pupil shows any significant improvement or decline in terms of their on task behaviour.

Data around attendance and behaviour were also gathered prior to the implementation of the NG, and over the course of the year. It is apparent from **Table 3** that all four pupils showed improvements in their attendance at school, and two of the four reduced the numbers of significant behaviour incidents in school. Furthermore, a steep decrease in the number of exclusions for Bob was apparent. As this was the Y8 pupil already attending the school, it was of particular interest, possibly indicating that the NG had been particularly effective for this pupil.

Table 1: Correlation between length of time in nurture and improved on-task behaviour in mainstream classes

Pupil	Correlation
Bob	-0.086
Paul	0.812
Steven	0.996
James	0.831

Table 2: Correlation between length of time in nurture and improved on-task behaviour within the group

Pupil	Correlation
Bob	-0.969
Paul	0.834
Steven	-0.895
James	-0.061

Figure 1: Observations of pupils in mainstream classes

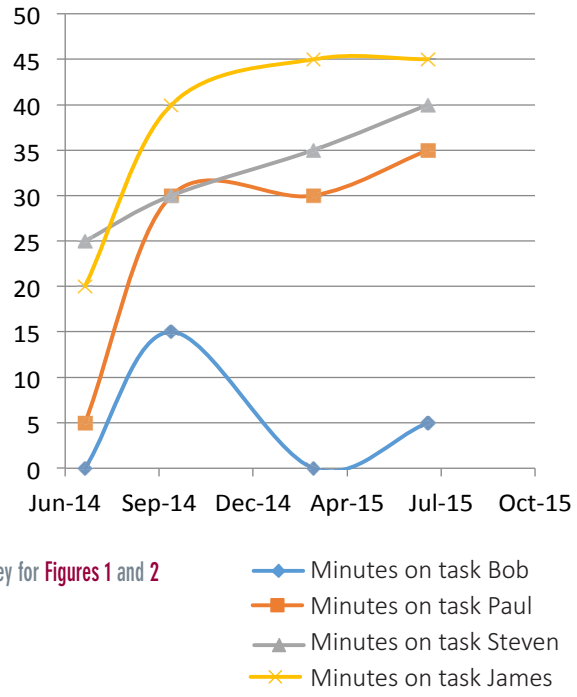


Figure 2: Observations of pupils within the NG

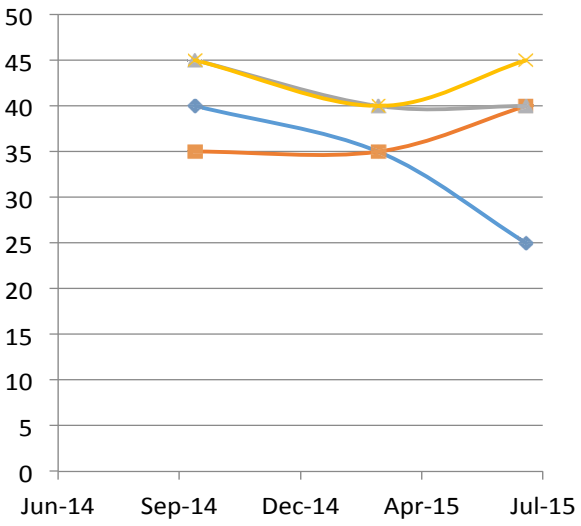


Table 3: Behaviour data

	Bob	Paul	Steven	James
Attendance 13/14	76.73	76.32	92.18	92.61
Attendance 14/15	85.68	88.06	94.69	98.41
Exclusions 13/14 (days lost)	26.5	2.5	0	0
Exclusions 14/15 (days lost)	7.5	0	0	0

Boxall Profile data demonstrated that all pupils made progress in terms of their social and emotional development. The rate of progress in many strands was not sustained over the course of the year, seemingly declining in the second half of the year. Improvements were more limited for all four pupils in the areas assessing barriers to learning. This may be accounted for by the nature of the input from NG staff, or could be attributed to the needs of the pupils identified as in need of intervention (see **Figures 3.1-8** and **Tables 4.1-4**).

Figure 3.1: Developmental strands – Bob

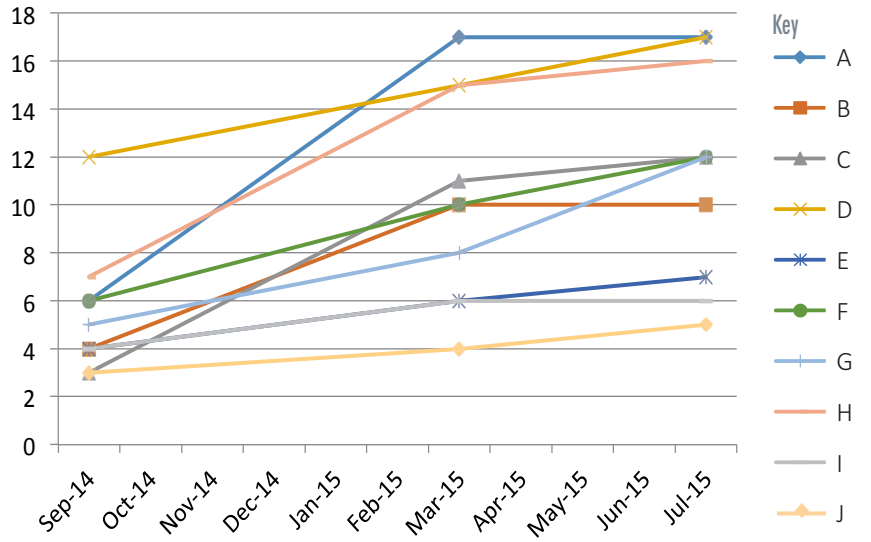


Figure 3.2: Diagnostic profile – Bob

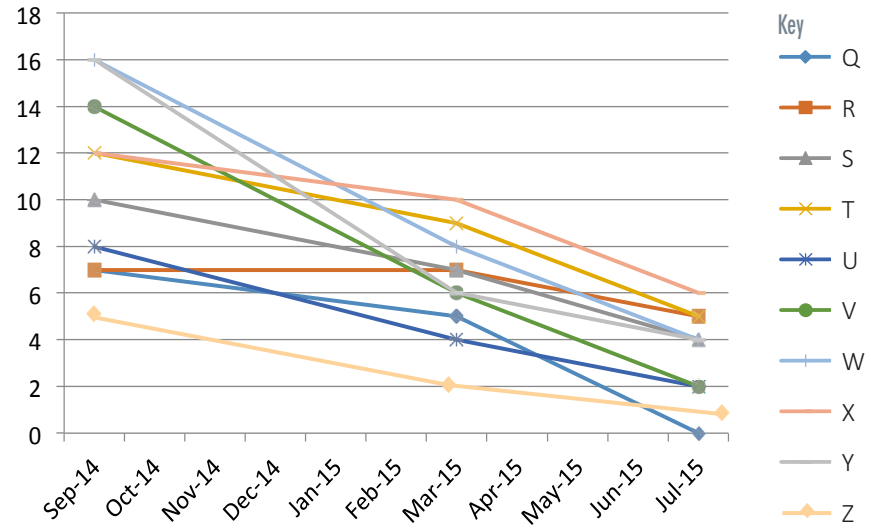


Table 4.1 Boxall Profile data – Bob

Development strands/ diagnostic profiles		Sep 2014	Mar 2015	July 2015	Indication range scores of competently functioning young people
Organisation of experience	A	6	17	17	16-20
	B	4	10	10	8-12
	C	3	11	12	8-12
	D	12	15	17	13-20
	E	4	6	7	5-8
Internalisation of controls	F	6	10	12	9-12
	G	5	8	12	12-16
	H	7	15	16	15-20
	I	4	6	6	5-8
	J	3	4	5	7-8
Self-limiting	Q	7	5	0	0-1
	R	7	7	5	0-2
Undeveloped behaviour	S	10	7	4	0-1
	T	12	9	5	0-2
	U	8	4	2	0-1
Unsupported development	V	14	6	2	0-2
	W	16	8	4	0-2
	X	12	10	6	0-2
	Y	16	6	4	0-2
	Z	5	2	1	0-1

Figure 3.3: Developmental strands – Paul

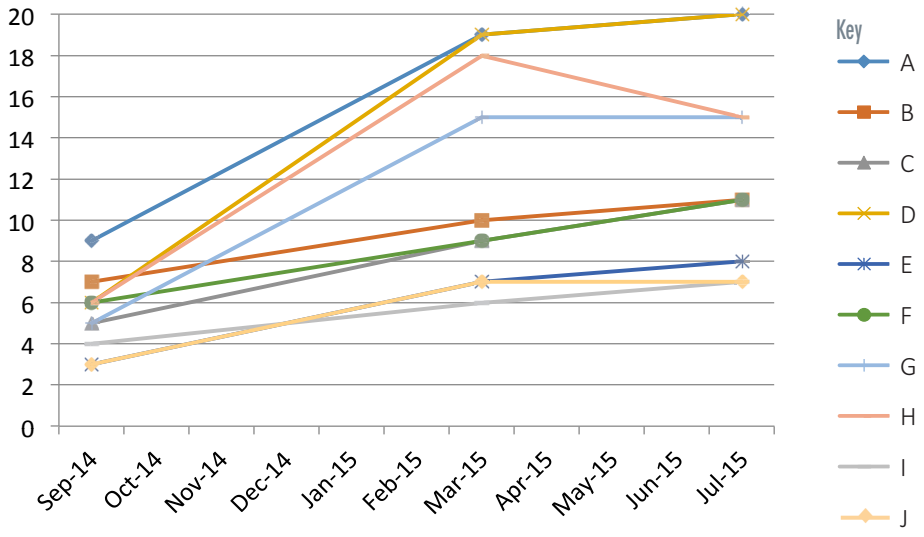


Figure 3.4: Diagnostic profile – Paul

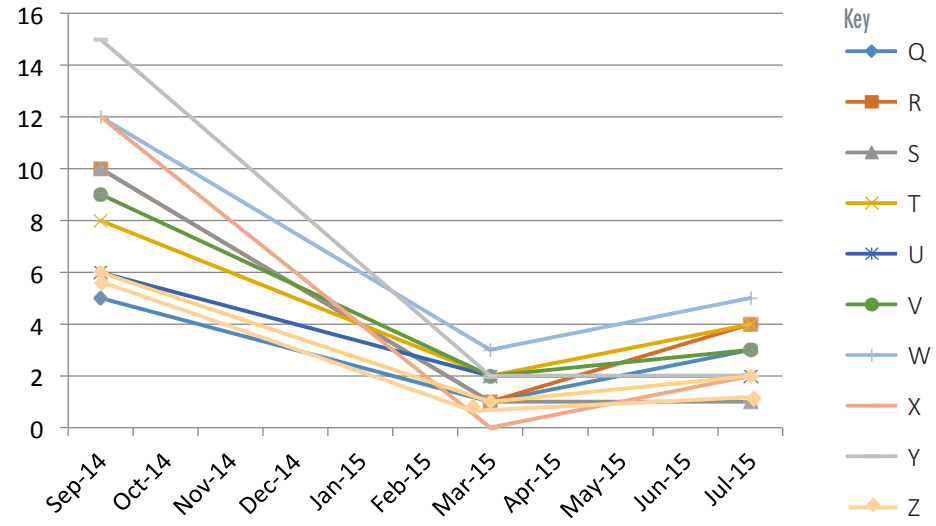


Table 4.3 Boxall Profile data - Paul

Development strands/ diagnostic profiles		Sep 2014	Mar 2015	July 2015	Indication range scores of competently functioning young people
Organisation of experience	A	9	19	20	16-20
	B	7	10	11	8-12
	C	5	9	11	8-12
	D	6	19	20	13-20
	E	3	7	8	5-8
Internalisation of controls	F	6	9	11	9-12
	G	5	15	15	12-16
	H	6	18	15	15-20
	I	4	6	7	5-8
	J	3	7	7	7-8
Self-limiting	Q	5	1	3	0-1
	R	10	1	4	0-2
Undeveloped behaviour	S	10	1	1	0-1
	T	8	2	4	0-2
	U	6	2	2	0-1
Unsupported development	V	9	2	3	0-2
	W	12	3	5	0-2
	X	12	0	2	0-2
	Y	15	2	2	0-2
	Z	6	1	2	0-1

Figure 3.5 :Developmental strands – Steven

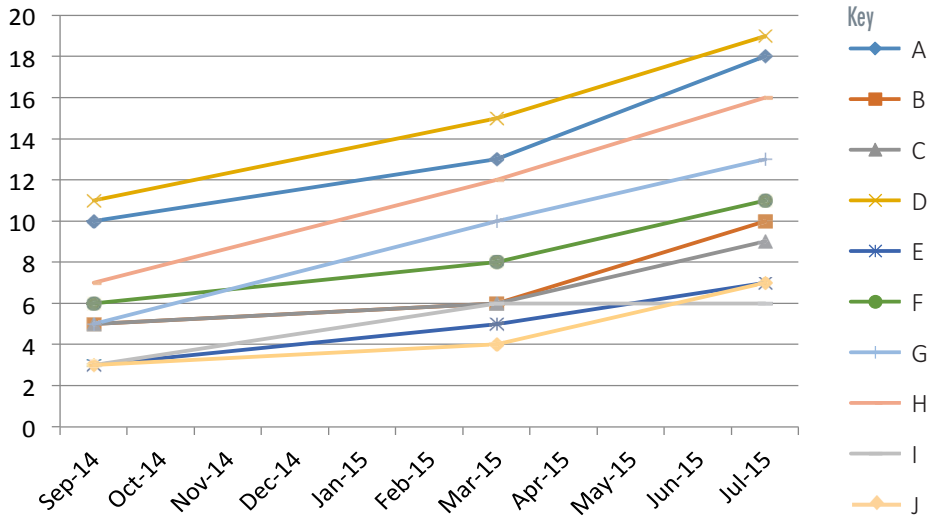


Figure 3.6: Diagnostic profile – Steven

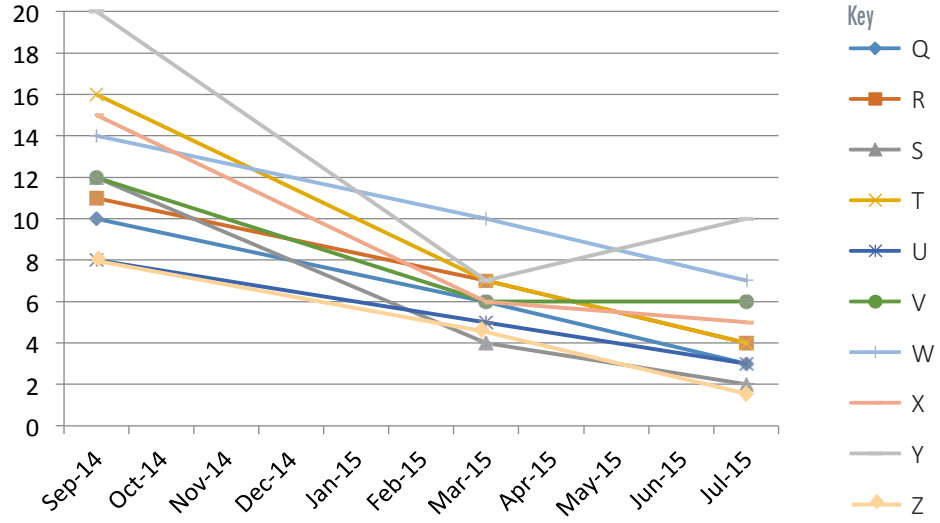


Table 4.2 Boxall Profile data – Steven

Development strands/ diagnostic profiles		Sep 2014	Mar 2015	July 2015	Indication range scores of competently functioning young people
Organisation of experience	A	10	13	18	16-20
	B	5	6	10	8-12
	C	5	6	9	8-12
	D	11	15	19	13-20
	E	3	5	7	5-8
Internalisation of controls	F	6	8	11	9-12
	G	5	10	13	12-16
	H	7	12	16	15-20
	I	3	6	6	5-8
	J	3	4	7	7-8
Self-limiting	Q	10	6	3	0-1
	R	11	7	4	0-2
Undeveloped behaviour	S	12	4	2	0-1
	T	16	7	4	0-2
	U	8	5	3	0-1
Unsupported development	V	12	6	6	0-2
	W	14	10	7	0-2
	X	15	6	5	0-2
	Y	20	7	10	0-2
	Z	8	5	2	0-1

Figure 3.7: Developmental strands – James

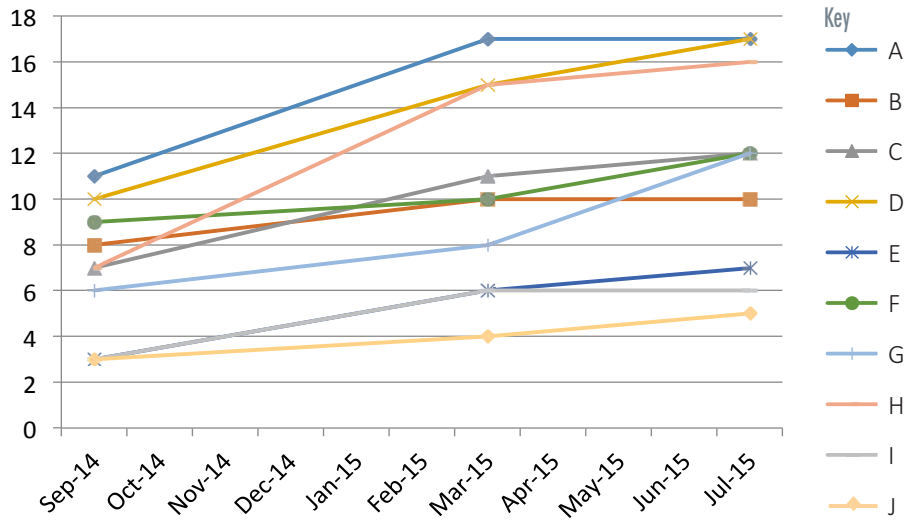


Figure 3.8: Diagnostic profile – James

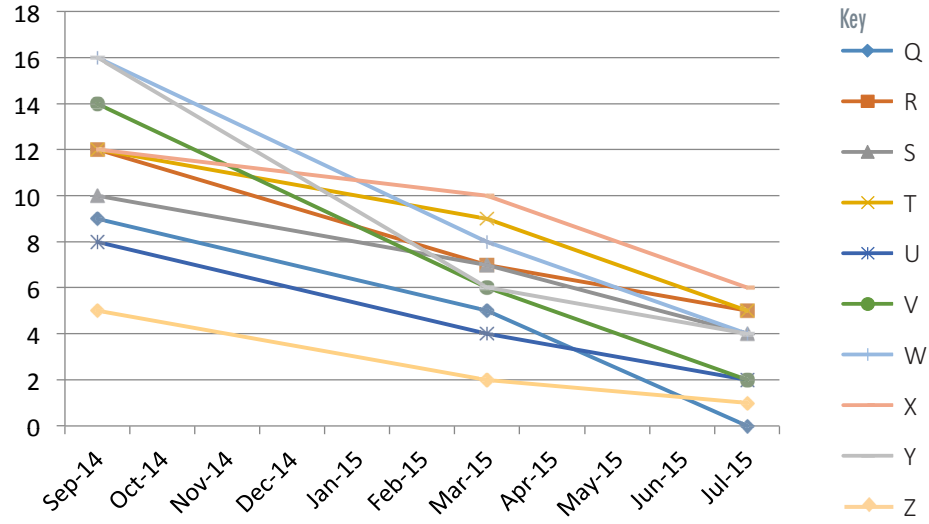


Table 4.2 Boxall Profile data – James

Development strands/ diagnostic profiles		Sep 2014	Mar 2015	July 2015	Indication range scores of competently functioning young people
Organisation of experience	A	11	17	17	16-20
	B	8	10	10	8-12
	C	7	11	12	8-12
	D	10	15	17	13-20
	E	3	6	7	5-8
Internalisation of controls	F	9	10	12	9-12
	G	6	8	12	12-16
	H	7	15	16	15-20
	I	3	6	6	5-8
	J	3	4	5	7-8
Self-limiting	Q	9	5	0	0-1
	R	12	7	5	0-2
Undeveloped behaviour	S	10	7	4	0-1
	T	12	9	5	0-2
	U	8	4	2	0-1
Unsupported development	V	14	6	2	0-2
	W	16	8	4	0-2
	X	12	10	6	0-2
	Y	16	6	4	0-2
	Z	5	2	1	0-1

Similar results were seen within the PASS data. While progress was seen for all pupils in most areas, one pupil (Paul) demonstrated a decline in three factors. This discrepancy could be attributed to normal adolescent behaviour, for example, negativity towards self, or could indicate a need for adjustments to the curriculum and specific teaching of different skills.

Figure 4.1: PASS data – Bob

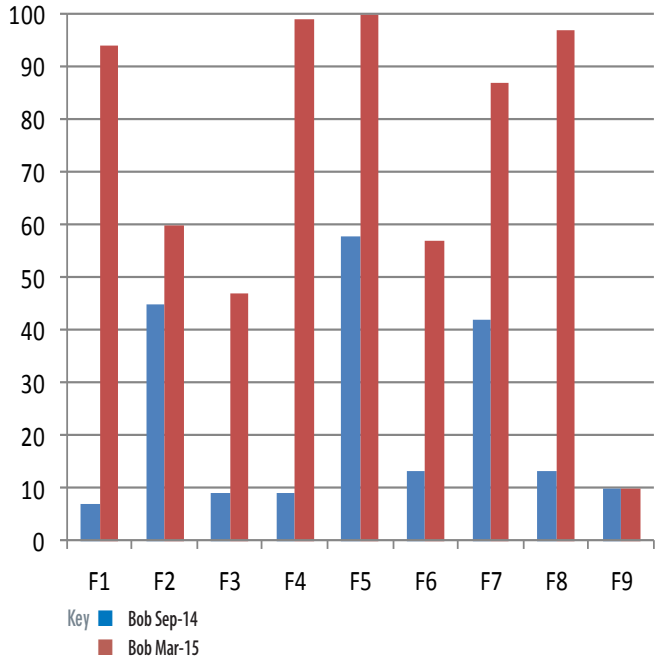


Figure 4.2: PASS data – Paul

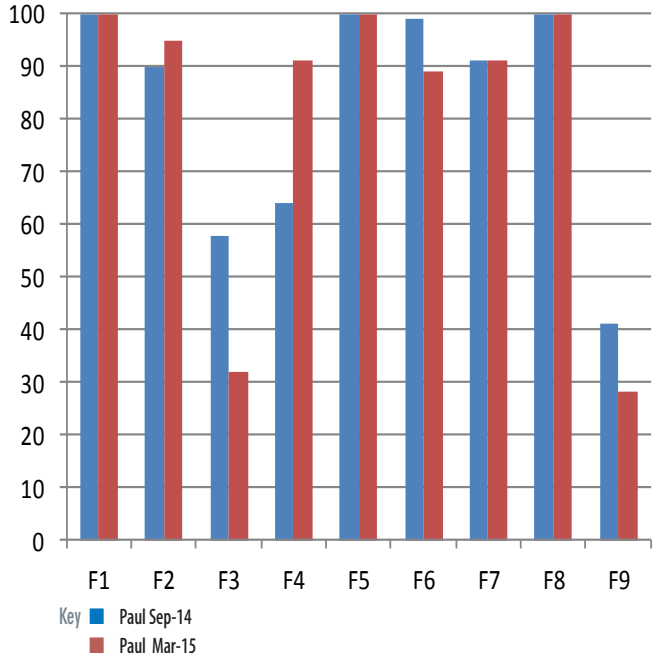


Figure 4.3: PASS data – Steven

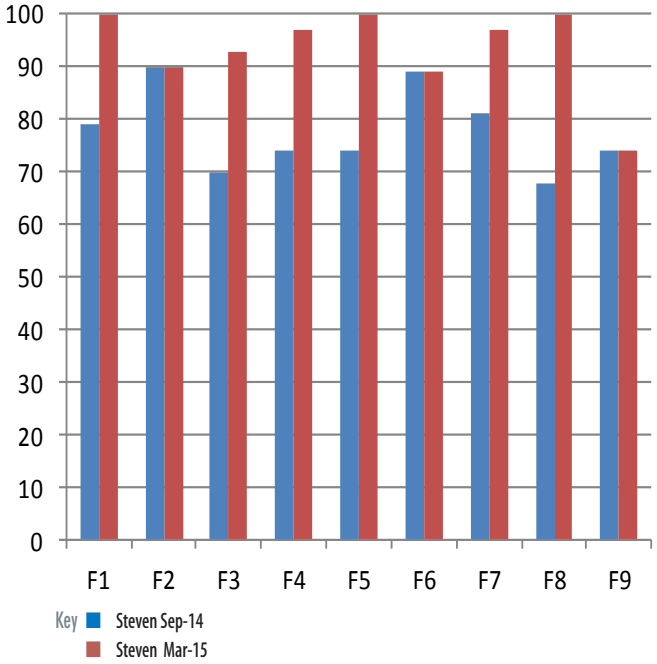
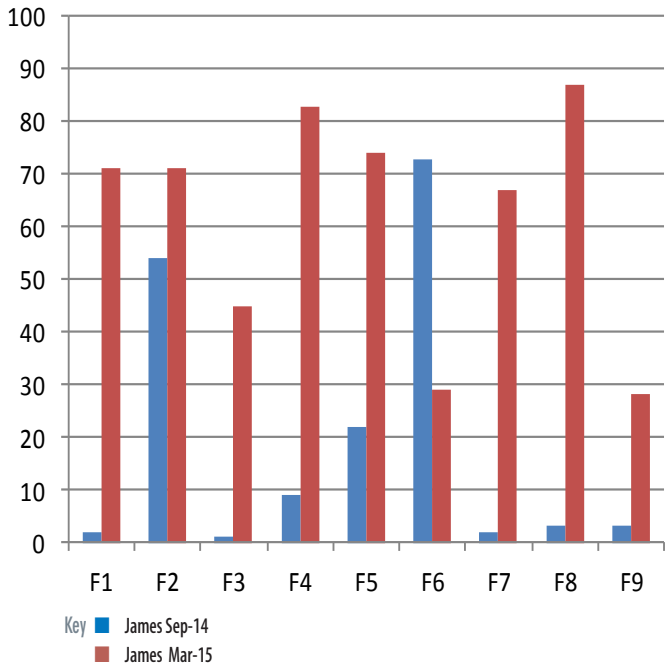


Figure 4.4: PASS data – James



Quantitative data

Parent questionnaires were undertaken in January 2015; all four parents/carers provided responses. All four felt that their child's behaviour had improved, that they enjoyed coming to school, and were making more progress because of the NG. When asked why they felt they had seen improvements, two clear themes emerged: the same classroom, and fewer pupils in the group.

Parent comments included:

'Because there are not so many in the class and have more 1:1 time. Being in one room for the morning.'

'Being in the same class with the same staff helps.'

'I think because he is in a smaller environment, there are less children. There is an expectation of behaviour.'

The pupils' opinions seem to support their parents' feelings. Pupil interviews took place in July 2015. Like their parents, they all felt that their behaviour and progress in learning had improved.

'Yes, I really do because when I started nurture I used to be in and out all the time' – Paul

'Yes, I think I have really made a lot of progress in my writing and spelling' – James

Moreover, they all said they enjoyed the NG and that it made them feel happy. When asked what they liked about the NG their responses included:

'It's a calm room and it's chilled out and the teachers in there really help you with your learning' – Paul

They all felt that the NG had helped to improve their behaviour in other lessons too. James added:

'People just help you with your learning and your anger problems.'

An anonymous online survey was sent to four staff members directly involved in the nurture unit and six working in the main body of the school; only one member of staff did not respond. There were five closed questions:

1. Do you think the nurture group has had a positive impact on the rest of the school?
2. Do you think the behaviour of the pupils in the nurture group has improved as a result of the nurture group?
3. Do you think that parents would agree that the nurture group has had a positive effect on their child?
4. Do you think the nurture group offers good value for money?
5. Do you think the nurture group has had an impact on pupils' academic progress?

And three open questions:

6. What do you see as the successes of the nurture group?
7. How do you think the nurture group has contributed to whole school ethos?
8. What do you think makes the nurture group different to the rest of the school?

In response to the questions around improved behaviour and improved progress, it can be seen that the majority of staff agreed that improvements had been seen as a result of the NG; thus corroborating the feelings of both parents and pupils. There was no difference in the responses of the nurture staff to those from the rest of the staff (**Figure 5**).

While all staff responded positively to Question 1, there is a marked difference in how much impact it was perceived to have had. Responses to Question 3 would seem to support parents' views that they had seen a positive change.

The responses from the three open questions, alongside other qualitative data, were analysed using the constant comparative method. This elicited two clear themes; environment and explicit teaching. **Figure 6** shows how these themes were widened out using network analysis (Thomas, 2013).

Staff comments supported parents' and pupils' beliefs that these were significant contributing factors. With regards to explicit teaching they commented:

'Nurture students are more resilient than other students and are much better at working together because they have [been] explicitly taught these interpersonal skills.'

'The NG has a more emotional approach to the students' learning, giving each student differentiated work.'

'The flexibility in approach to daily tasks has been used well to either settle pupils or to build on prior learning.'

'The students are overall more confident with both their learning and their social skills.'

And in respect of environment, comments included:

'They have a strong sense of belonging and pride in nurture.'

'Nurture is a quiet, working place.'

'A safe environment to learn and grow in.'

'Inclusive.'

Thus, it can be seen through the qualitative data that the NG is highly regarded by those whose opinion was sought. Limited criticisms of the NG were voiced. The framing of the questions, however, requires some consideration as it could be argued that the way in which they were phrased, particularly in the staff survey, did not permit criticism of the intervention. Indeed, the use of the word 'successes' in Question 6 introduced potential bias, as a presupposition had been made (Robson, 2011), particularly as it was not countered by any reference to shortcomings or areas for development.

DISCUSSION

Having considered all the data collected, further questions arose: what other contributing factors could account for the improvements shown by pupils, why was less progress made within areas relating to removals of barriers to learning, and to what degree do the findings of this study support/contradict the findings from other research projects?

The 'classic' NG runs for a period of three to four terms (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). The NG in this study ran for three terms. Paul made significant progress from starting point up until March when he seems to plateau, and indeed regress in some areas of the Boxall Profile. Cooper & Whitebread (2007) reported that improvements in social, emotional and behavioural functioning could be seen over four terms, with the most marked improvements in terms one and two. Hughes & Schlösser (2014) highlight the need for the long-term effectiveness of NGs to be researched further. Of the 13 papers they reviewed, only one study (of a primary school NG) provided any follow-up data; this seemed to suggest that the pupils who transition out of NGs need to be tracked in the longer term to enable the long reaching effects to be quantified; if indeed they are sustained.

It is noticeable that the areas within the Boxall Profile where pupils did not fall within the normal range were all focused within the diagnostic profiles. These strands relate to the pupils' attachment behaviours, and as such it could be argued that the NG has not been effective in its key purpose. However, all four pupils made significant progress from their starting point, even if this progress slowed down over the last few months.

Thus, the data from this research project would appear to support the findings of previous research, and corroborate the assertion that NGs do provide pupils with the structure and environment they need to improve their social, emotional and behaviour difficulties. Then again, it is

Figure 5: Responses to staff survey – closed questions

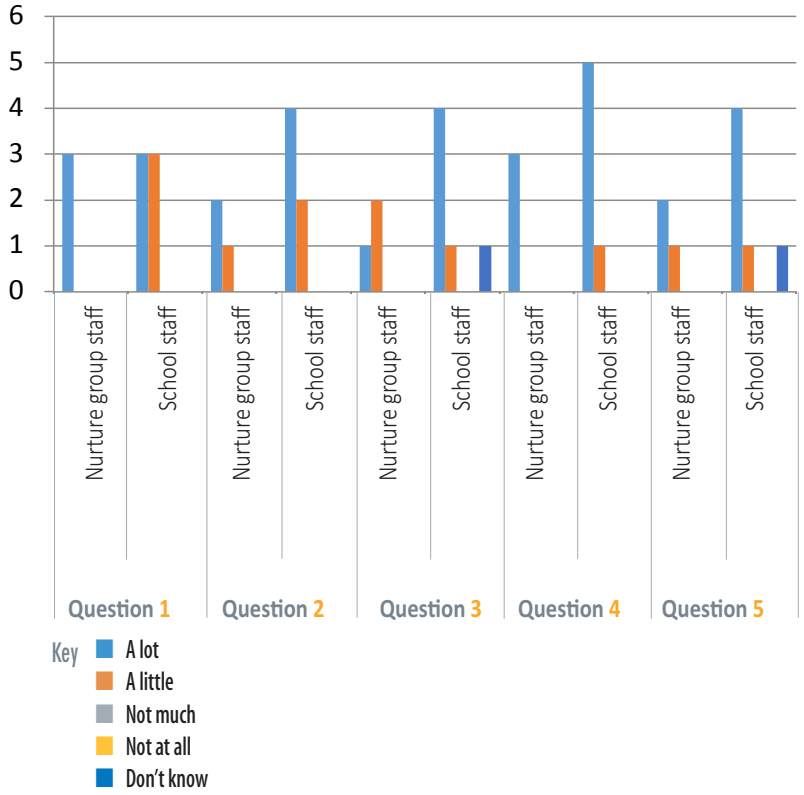
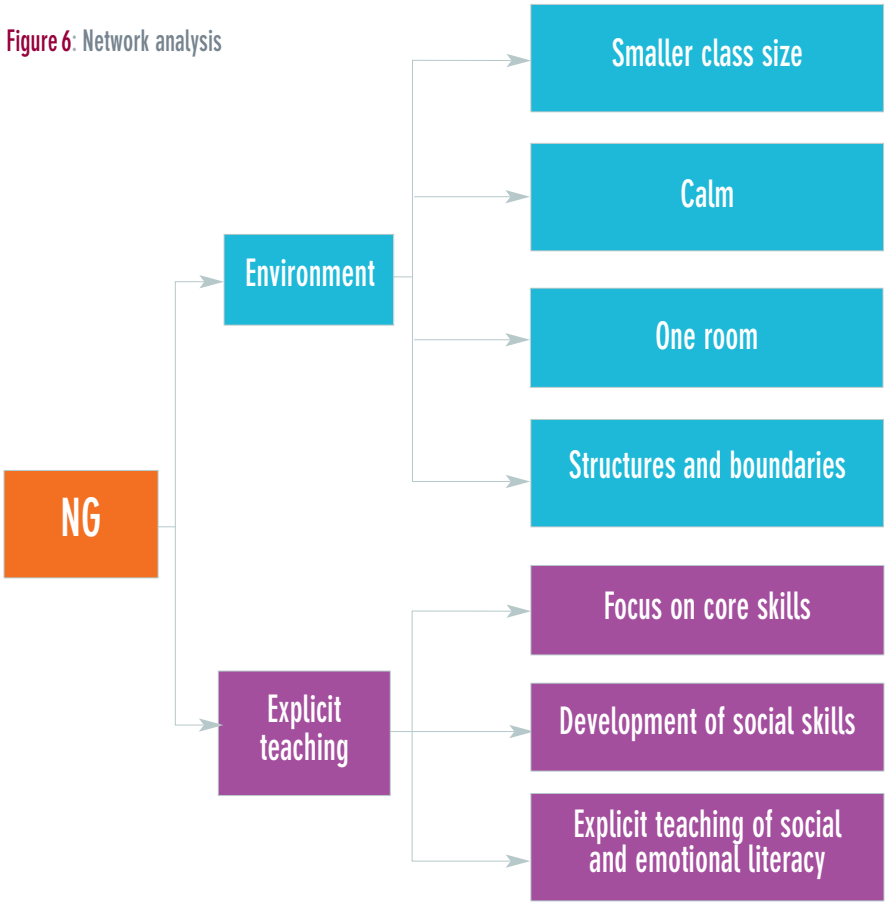


Figure 6: Network analysis



important to remember that this is a small-scale study of only four pupils, selected by virtue of the fact they were placed in the NG at the time of the study. Hence this limits the generalisation of its findings; which only show that the NG was effective for these pupils, in this school, at this point in time. In an attempt to mitigate the very small sample size multiple sources of data have been gathered. Equally, no control group existed that allowed comparison to take place between the pupils within the NG and other pupils transferring to the school and educated in the mainstream part of the school. Could progress of pupils be accounted for due to a change of environment rather than the NG itself? Certainly, for Bob this is not true. However, the evidence for the other three pupils is not sufficient to argue that this is not the case. While the existence of a control group would have strengthened the outcomes, this was not feasible in a small-scale study with a sole researcher.

CONCLUSION

The issue of how to effectively support pupils with SEBD has been an area of much discussion for many years. As has been demonstrated, NGs have played a key role in part of this provision since the 1970s. This pilot study attempted to provide some information within the apparent gap in research in specialist settings and sought to answer the identified research questions; had pupils' behaviour and attitude to learning improved, could significant improvements in their social and emotional literacy be observed, did pupils themselves feel more confident and happier in school? The results demonstrated improvements in respect of behaviour, and social, emotional skills for all four participating pupils. However, the extent of improvement varied from pupil to pupil.

The study itself has various limitations; as previously discussed the very small number of participants and the lack of a control or comparison group do not allow for any findings to be generalised. Equally there are issues around the subjectivity of the study. As mentioned earlier interview questions show some bias regarding the successes of the initiative and equally respondents are likely to be more positive about a new initiative than negative. There is a perceived weakness with the baseline data, the initial observation took place for three of the four pupils in a mainstream primary class and therefore the data is not comparable to that recorded in a secondary NG. More important is the comparison between observed behaviour over time within the NG and the mainstream classes of the secondary school.

Of importance is the fact that the participants in the research, their parents/carers and staff in the school all perceived that the NG had had a positive impact, thus providing an answer to the third research question. This confirmed the findings reported in the earlier research around NGs, and moreover, suggests that NGs could be effectively employed to support pupils with SEBD within a specialist setting, and not just within mainstream primary and secondary schools. However, this is a small-scale study of one NG that, while operating according to the 'classic' model in accordance with Boxall's initial NGs, is still unique in that the prior experiences of pupils, and the skills and attributes of the staff involved in the intervention cannot be replicated. Thus, the findings cannot be generalised and caution must be exercised in maintaining that similar successes would be seen, even within the same school the following year.

Further research is required to reinforce the findings of this research project. A larger scale study, encompassing several nurture groups across several specialist settings, would be beneficial, as this would assist in triangulating further the outcomes of this study, which indicate that NG principles may be successfully applied in a special school setting. Other researchers, Garner & Thomas (2011) and Kourmoulaki (2013), have raised the issue of the effectiveness of NGs being better supported through the introduction of nurture principles across the whole school, as it ensures the return to mainstream classes is less challenging for pupils. They found that nurture staff felt that there was a lack of understanding of the aims and practices of the NG that did not support pupils within their mainstream classes. This element might also be considered within further research.

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