Improving our practice: a small-scale study of a secondary nurture group

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ABSTRACT

Since 2008 a nurture group (NG) has been running in my school: a maintained secondary academy in England. Specially selected pupils from Year 7 take part in structured nurturing activities for two terms before returning full time to their mainstream class.

As the NG teacher aiming to improve our practice I collected quantitative and qualitative data relating to four consecutive years of NG pupils, comparing them in each case with the same number of similar pupils who did not attend the NG and addressing the following research questions:

- 1. Does the NG improve pupil motivation and achievement?
- 2. Do pupils who attend the NG tend to achieve better academic results than peers with similar backgrounds and academic records who have not attended the NG?

I also aimed to obtain a view on the value that the NG added to the school.

Overall the research indicated that learning levels, along with levels of motivation and classroom focus, were positively influenced by attending the NG.

It would appear that the NG is likely to have been an effective use of resources.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2008 a nurture group (NG) has been running in my school, an English maintained secondary academy. Specially selected pupils attend English and humanities lessons in their mainstream classes for the first two terms of Year 7 while also participating in structured nurturing activities. By Easter, all pupils return full time to their mainstream classes in a gradual reintegration programme.

The research reported here was undertaken as part of my MA in Education in 2013. From September 2012, there were pupils in both Key Stages 3 and 4 who had attended the NG. This provided the first opportunity to study the impact of the NG throughout the school. Informal feedback from staff reported improved classroom performance. As the Special Educational Needs teacher I had responsibility for the NG where we also had the involvement of an Assistant Head Teacher. I aimed to address the following research questions with an overall aim of improving our practice:

- 1. Does the NG improve pupil motivation and achievement?
- 2. Do pupils who attend the NG tend to achieve better academic results than peers with similar backgrounds and academic records who have not attended the NG?

I was also interested in getting an overall impression of the value that the NG added to the school

METHODOLOGY

Research Strategy

The research philosophy behind the study followed an interpretivist, phenomenological approach (Gray, 2004) rather than a positivist approach. There were no hypotheses and the study involved two small samples of pupils over a four year period. My role was as a full participant or insider researcher and I used multiple methods to analyse the 'phenomenon'. There were action research elements to the study, as specific information was gathered to analyse a particular issue after which action for change would ensue (Bell, 2010).

My own situation as an insider researcher fitted well into this particular approach as I had been working and studying the motivation and achievement within the group informally on a regular basis over the five years that the group had then been in existence. Gray (2004) describes the approach as analysing the relationship between attitude and behaviour, incorporating the use of observation supplemented by 'some interview data for clarification'.

The action research approach was appropriate, since as Bell (2010) points out it can be used to analyse 'any innovation or stage of development in an institution', The investigation is planned in advance; evidence is collected systematically, observation used, plus other methods, although no method is excluded. Using a variety of methods was key to my research approach. Gray (2004) describes action research as a 'close collaboration between researcher and practitioners; the emphasis is on promoting change, attitudes and perspectives of practitioners are analysed'.

The study compared NG pupils and a group of pupils who had similar Key Stage 2 results and ability scores on entry to Year 7 but who had not taken part in a NG. Gray (2004) outlines an action research case study that sought to raise the achievements of special needs pupils with low exam scores; in this case a control case study and experimental case study were analysed following implementation of changes to the teaching programme. This approach was similar in many ways to my own study and research aims

Reliability was enhanced through triangulating different methods of data collection: Boxall profiles; observations and questionnaires to staff and pupils enabling me to cross-reference results and

check that findings were supported. In addition, I wanted to ensure that the whole process was as valid as possible. I asked colleagues to check for bias in the questionnaires, I checked the results of all qualitative data with the participants (except the Boxall profiles) to ensure that the results reflected precisely what they had written. The final draft was shown to colleagues to confirm that they considered that the information collected would be useful and relevant.

Data Analysis

The information gathered within the NG i.e. Boxall data and parental comments provided feedback on how the social and behavioural skills of NG pupils improved and so partly addressed Research Questions 1 and 2. A comparison of data between the NG and a similar group was helpful to fully answer the questions. Attendance data were collected from both groups while Boxall profiles were undertaken solely with NG pupils. The questionnaires were used to help answer Research Question 1. The academic data comparisons: English target levels and the percentages above or below target in the most recent progress checks were used in relation to Research Question 2. Reflections on the findings overall were taken into account when considering if the NG was likely to have been value for money.

Once the qualitative data were collected and ready to analyse, I tried to follow Denscombe's four key principles (Denscombe, 2010) to ensure I was committed to: 'grounding' conclusions, the careful reading of results, avoiding the introduction of 'unwarranted preconceptions' and comparing carefully with the quantitative data. I checked that the triangulation procedure had been used to ensure reliability and validity of the qualitative data. I started with broad categories, as suggested by Bell (2010) to sort out the main features of the quantitative and qualitative data displayed in various statistical formats, including tables and bar charts. From this, I drew conclusions, substantiated by the data.

I ensured that the BERA guidelines were followed (BERA, 2011). I obtained informed consent to ensure that all parties involved were willing participants with no pressure on them to be involved. Parents received letters requesting their help to which they responded. I told the pupils about the research that would help the school improve the NG and let them know afterwards that their responses had been helpful and that they had done well. I was always aware of the principle that participants should not be put at any risk or harm as a result of the research, e.g. experiencing social difficulties so I ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Finally, I was continually aware that the aim of research should be to produce information that will be of use to fellow professionals.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Nurture group data

a. Boxall graphs analysis

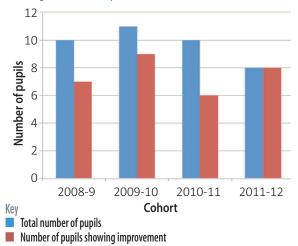
Boxall profiles were undertaken at the beginning and the end of a pupil's time in the NG to analyse social, emotional and behavioural strengths. The developmental strands indicate a pupil's strengths and the diagnostic describes behaviour that impacts on learning. There were considerable changes to scores in each year (Figure 1).

In the 2008-9 cohort, all seven pupils outside the average range showed some improvements during the year although the results varied between slight and marked. An improvement in attention and decrease in disengagement was noted, also more constructive participation and the acceptance of constraints, e.g. tidying up when asked. Four pupils showed improvements in emotional security. The following year, two pupils showed slight but important improvements, particularly in the areas of attention, participation and engagement to take their scores to within the average range. Two pupils diagnosed as autistic also showed improvements in attention, accommodation to others and being biddable. Two pupils, one diagnosed with attachment disorder, displayed high diagnostic scores. By July, they had improved in attention and had decreased scores in negation towards self and others, insecure sense of self and rejecting attachment. Three pupils showed extremely high scores in negation towards self and others. In all cases, although difficulties still existed, the scores for positive participation and maintaining internalised standards increased in July. There was a corresponding decrease in negativity towards others and in plunging in, grabbing and disregarding others.

In the 2010-11 cohort three pupils showed slight but important improvements in both areas (two to within the normal range on the developmental strands), particularly in accepting constraints, constructive participation and negation towards self and others. The remaining three pupils initially presented very low scores in both areas. Their improvements were marked. There was a sharp rise in constructive participation, connection of experience, purposeful attention, emotional security and accepting constraints among all three. Negation towards self and others sharply decreased. These three pupils have since been diagnosed as having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

In the 2011-12 cohort all pupils showed improvements in both sections of the profile, particularly in the key areas of attention and constructive participation. They also showed a corresponding decrease in disengagement. In one case a pupil whose behaviour was causing considerable concern showed weak scores in both sections in October. However in May he showed improvements in all areas: an increase in purposeful attention; constructive participation; emotional security; accepting constraints; accommodating to others and making constructive responses. There was a corresponding decrease in self-negation, undifferentiated attachment, negative attitude towards others and insecure sense of self.

Figure 1: Number of pupils showing overall improvement on the Boxall Profile (both diagnostic and developmental strands).



The results suggested that a regular assessment of pupils' social and emotional strengths could improve opportunities to practise emotional resilience, positive participation and feelings of self-worth. The smaller group size, in addition to the personalised support, could also help prevent as Seith (2010) says, the chance of 'failing miserably' once pupils reach Year 7.

b. Parental comments

Parents/guardians of current NG pupils were emailed fortnightly to update on progress, to check if there were any issues to discuss and to ask if any improvements had been noted in social, emotional and behavioural skills. Comments were received regularly and were positive.

They included:

- ...she really enjoys her (nurture group) classes, she feels safe there and enjoys the tasks that are set for her; a second carer said:
-we think he has settled in very well; he is excited about going to school which is a pleasure to see...he does speak highly of his group.

Another parent said:

....he seems very happy, talking all the time about school.

Parental feedback was also overwhelmingly positive as noted in the Quality Mark report, awarded by the Nurture Group Network (NGN) in March 2012, when parents were interviewed by the training manager of NGN:

Parents and carers are very appreciative of the impact that (the nurture group) is having on their children.

Comments from parents included:

(The nurture group) has totally changed her...she's confident, pleasant to be around...

Another parent said:

The support we receive is amazing...we are kept informed every step of the way...he takes it all in his stride now and he's much more relaxed.

The parental comments showed that progress in social, emotional and behavioural skills in the nurture group often continued into the home environment. They supported Hepburn's assertion that self-confidence, an ability to manage behaviour and motivation could be improved through attendance at a NG (Hepburn, 2008).

Nurture Group and Comparison Group

a. Attendance data

The attendance figures (Table 2) indicate similar or improved levels for the NG cohort compared to the comparison group. It was important to remember that one reason for possible inclusion in the group could have included a deteriorating attendance at primary school and we expected attendance rates to decrease amongst many of the cohort. However, this was not the case. Possibly, improvements in attention, active participation and engagement with peers led to an increased understanding of the curriculum, making and keeping friendships and so an ensuing willingness to attend school. The results would suggest that a majority of NG pupils were motivated, or increasingly motivated to attend school throughout Key Stages 3 and 4. It also tied in with an aim of the Academy Improvement Plan to improve pupil attendance to 96%. The maintenance of the attendance figures through the Key Stages may demonstrate that the principles of nurture had become embedded in the school ethos. However, NGs are likely to be more successful in schools where both staff and pupils are nurtured and motivated pupils will continue to require a nurturing model in mainstream if they are to continue to attend school (Warin, 2017).

Table 2: Attendance data

	Nurture group cohort: end of Year 7	Nurture group cohort to present	Comparison group cohort: end of Year 7	Comparison group cohort to present
2008-9	93.7%	91.3%	94%	89.4%
2009-10	93.7%	92.5%	83.8%	93.0%
2010-11	95.9%	97.5%	95.6%	93.8%
2011-12	95.1%	93.2%	92.4%	94.06%

b. Pupil questionnaires

In total 27 pupils who attended a NG and 27 pupils who remained in their mainstream class answered the questionnaire (note that some pupils did not answer all questions). Results are reported in **Figures 2 to 11**.

The pupil questionnaires provided interesting reading: many of the responses seemed to suggest that motivation was improved. It could be seen that a higher percentage of the NG cohort considered they had increased confidence, tried harder and felt better about school since Year 7. More pupils than those in the comparison group felt that their behaviour had improved since Year 7. In addition, a higher percentage than the comparison group were proud of their achievements so far and the entire nurture group cohort were sure they would achieve their full potential, more so than the comparison group. The evidence supports the findings of the Ofsted national survey (July 2011) that being part of a nurture group makes a considerable difference to behaviour and social skills (Ofsted, 2011).

Figure 2: How have you felt about school since you were in Year 7 (n=52)?

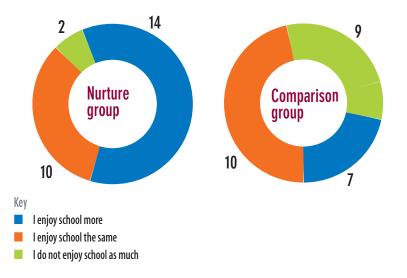


Figure 3: How confident do you feel since Year 7 (n = 48)?

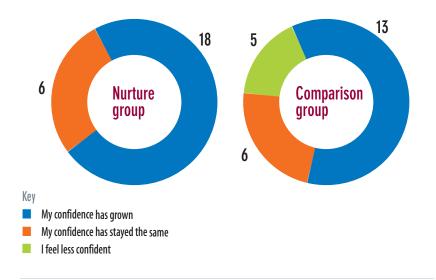
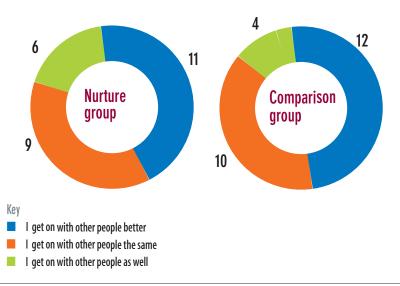
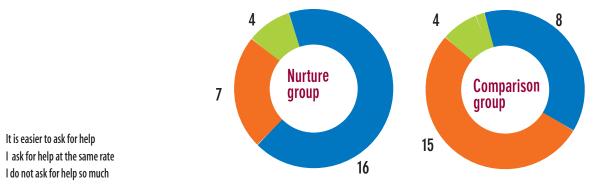


Figure 4: How have you got on with other people since Year 7 (n = 52)?









Key

Key

I try harder than before
I try the same as before

I do not try as hard as before

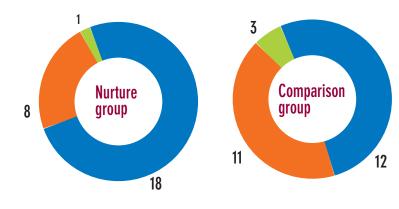


Figure 7: How much do you join in class discussions (n = 52)?

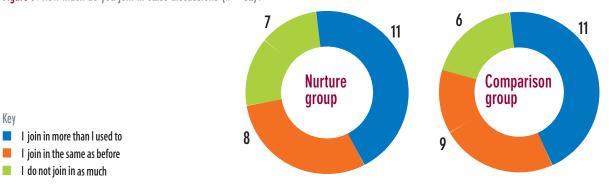
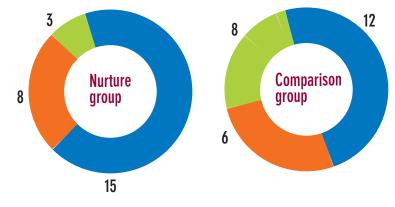


Figure 8: How many questions do you ask compared to Year 7 (n = 52)?





I ask the same rate of questions

l ask fewer questions

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Figure 9: How has your behaviour changed since Year 7 (n = 52)?

Key

Key
Yes
No

It has improved

It has got worse

It has stayed the same

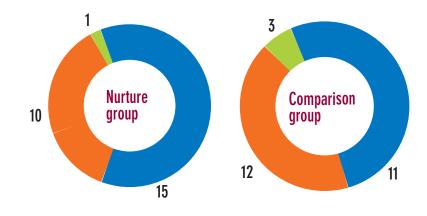


Figure 10: Do you think you will do as well as you know you can at school (n = 52)?

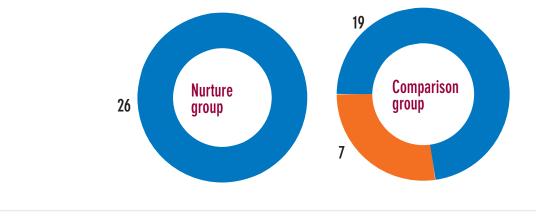
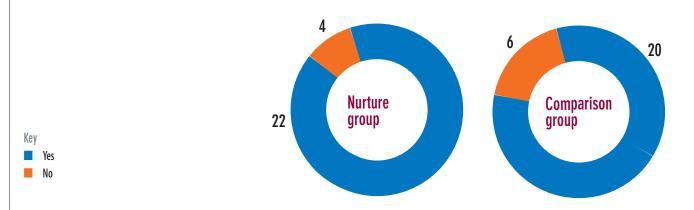


Figure 11: Are you proud of your achievements so far at school (n = 52)?



c. Staff questionnaires

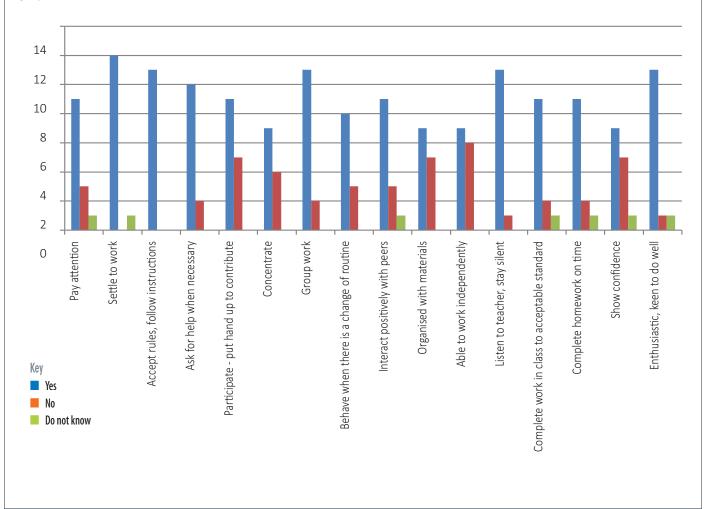
The staff questionnaires supported the responses in the pupil questionnaires to a large extent as can be seen in **Figure 12**. In every question, a majority of those questioned agreed that the NG cohort achieved the skills and abilities listed, to a greater extent and more frequently than the comparison group pupils.

Overwhelmingly, staff responded that the main skills that were clearly apparent in the NG cohort were the abilities to follow instructions, settle to work, listen to the teacher and accept rules. Homework was also felt to be a strength of the cohort: this tied in with a key aim of the Academy Improvement Plan to improve the completion of homework. Staff responses indicated that pupils who had been in the NG were taught effectively how to write homework down, complete to an acceptable standard and hand in on time. Pupils became aware during their time in the NG that there would be immediate follow up by staff if it was not done, contacting parents if necessary to ensure that late homework was handed in.

A majority felt that pupils would ask for help if necessary and were enthusiastic about the lessons, which supported the pupils' responses. Their results would seem to suggest that pupils' motivation was increased through attendance in the NG and backed up the observations during completion of the Boxall profiles while pupils were in the group.

In response to several questions, a minority of staff did reply that the NG cohort scored no higher than the control group, indicating that there were still areas to work on. Some indicated that there were still frequent issues interacting with peers (although group work was more effective than among comparison group pupils). This was supported by the NG cohort responses for getting on with others, which were no higher than the comparison group responses. Perhaps this indicated an area that needed to be worked on. In addition, some said that the NG cohort displayed no better concentration skills than their peers, a contrast to the perception of some of the NG cohort themselves. Perhaps it indicates a difference of opinion between staff and pupils of what "concentration" involved. Other minority negative responses about NG pupils included a lack of organisation of materials, an inability to behave when there is a change of routine and being unable to work independently, again areas to consider when planning academic and nurture activities.

Figure 12: In your opinion, do pupils in the nurture group cohort achieve the following more frequently and to a greater extent than those in the comparison group cohort?



d.Comparison of English target levels

To consider whether NG pupils achieved more than their peers, I looked at the numbers of pupils who were on, above or below their target levels in English (Table 3). The Year 11 NG contingent had a higher proportion of pupils on target as did the Year 8 cohort. Percentages were lower for Years 9 and 10. However, it must be remembered that both cohorts contained three pupils each who displayed behavioural difficulties due to outside circumstances, were frequent visitors to the pastoral office and received support from outside agencies. All these pupils contributed to the below target levels: those who had marked social, emotional and behavioural needs found it more difficult to maintain progress towards the target grade. Indeed, many pupils had managed to maintain progress and in English lessons were able to develop key skills essential for GCSE work.

e.Comparison of attainment checks

The same was true for the numbers of pupils who were above or below in three or more subjects (**Table 4**). Again, Year 11 and Year 8 were mainly on target in most subjects. However, more pupils were below in three or more subjects in the other two years studied. We expected pupils who attended the NG to fall further behind in terms of reaching target levels as the work became progressively more difficult. The results showed that the NG cohort did broadly maintain the same levels as the comparison group cohort. This backs up the observation by Mowat (2008) that pupils welcome the nurturing aspects but that there often still remains a wide gap in attainment.

Table 4: Percentages of pupils who were three or more subjects above target or three or more subjects below target in the Autumn Attainment checks 2012

Table 3: English target levels

	Nurture group cohort: Sept Year 7	Nurture group cohort to present	Comparison group cohort: Sept Year 7	Comparison group cohort to present
2008-9	L3-100%	60% on	L3-70%	37% on
	L4-0%	40% below	L4-30%	50% below
		0% above		13% above
2009-10	L3-84%	36% on	L3-100%	77% on
	L4-16%	54% below	L4-0%	11% below
		10% above		22% above
2010-11	L3-100%	27% on	L3-90%	45.5% on
	L4-0%	63% below	L4-10%	54% below
		0% above		0% above
2011-12	L3-80%	60% on	L3-66%	66.6% on
	L4-20%	40% below	L4-34%	22.4% below
		0%above		11% above

	Three or more subjects above target		Three or more subjects below target		On target in most subjects	
	Nurture group cohort	Comparison group cohort	Nurture group cohort	Comparison group cohort	Nurture group cohort	Comparison group cohort
2008-9	0%	0%	20%	12%	80%	88%
2009-10	20%	12%	50%	22%	30%	66%
2010-11	0%	0%	60%	30%	40%	70%
2011-12	0%	0%	10%	0%	90%	100%

DISCUSSION

The view noted by Lord (2006) that it is easier for pupils to feel dissatisfied, that often there needs to be a greater than average effort to keep up, was supported in my findings. Targeted help after Year 7 was also recommended in the Quality Mark report provided by NGN in March 2012: 'Provide a similar provision for pupils who would benefit from it in Years 8 and 9.'The staff results suggested that certain skills and abilities were not fully learnt while pupils were in the NG e.g. working independently, behaving when there is a change in routine. This was an opportunity, in addition to specific activities in the NG, to work with the more needy pupils later in Key Stage 3. This would have a different emphasis and would aim to encourage behaviours that could avoid exclusions: it would certainly be a cheaper alternative for those for whom alternative provision cannot be found or where such provision breaks down. For these pupils, it would be beneficial to work in close conjunction with outside agencies where appropriate.

Was the group value for money? Although pupils were not achieving more than their peers, most maintained progress and seemed to be more motivated than the control group. Pupils who we expected to become disengaged and possibly persistent absentees continued to attend school. The anecdotal evidence from staff and pupils themselves that there was increased motivation and participation in lessons was borne out by the analyses.

Some of the NG activities linked directly to aims in the Academy Improvement Plan which would seem likely to enhance its value overall for the school. One example of this was that the Academy Improvement Plan emphasises moral and spiritual teaching and this occurred naturally in the NG for example during 'Blob Tree' sessions (Wilson & Long, 2009). In addition, specific social, emotional and behavioural skills were written in lesson plans in the form of Boxall targets, which linked directly to National Curriculum targets.

NGs also offered 'value added' throughout the school in terms of professional development, as having learnt from colleagues what has worked for the NG cohort, I was in a better position to support staff, both through the activities emphasised in nurture time and through extra sessions with Years 8 and 9 pupils.

CONCLUSION

Impact of research

One recommendation in the Quality Mark report provided by NGN noted: 'evaluate the impact of the NG to secure sustainability in the future.'

Overall, the research showed that pupils who attended the NG on the whole were motivated and achieved as much as their peers. They attended school regularly at a stage when struggles with academic work and lack of self-esteem could lead to disenchantment and absence from school. Clear improvements were identified in pupils' behaviour, particularly their attention, participation and accepting constraints. The pupils also showed a higher degree of motivation, satisfaction with their achievements so far and expectations of future achievements while the questionnaires to parents also indicated that there was a continuation of the improvement outside school. Motivation was improved. Achievement was on a par with peers, a sign of success when a decline might normally be expected in the cohorts during progress through secondary school.

The research had a positive impact on pupils' opportunities in the NG. The aim was to build on areas of motivation and achievement identified to further extend pupils' social, emotional, behavioural and academic success. Pupils were subsequently encouraged to work independently and more collaboratively with peers. Improvements in relationships with peers, as identified by pupils and staff, had been shown to require further input. Group work exercises were more neatly dovetailed to the task in hand, e.g. time to allocate roles within the group. Pupils were able to practise in social skills sessions, not just in academic lessons. Opportunities for speaking, including Assessment for Learning activities were incorporated into the planning. Changes in routine were incorporated to support pupils developing skills in concentration and emotional maturity.

The impact of the research provided further benefit to pupils as a decision was taken to provide support in future years, both within the classroom, to build on the skills they developed in the NG, and for certain pupils a continuation of the nurture sessions several times per week. This lessened the chances of skills developed being lost.

The existence of the NG enhanced the Academy Improvement Plan and enabled professional development of staff. Taking all the findings into account it is likely that the NG did provide value for money although this is always a difficult concept to prove.

Reflexions on the research

It occurred to me during the research process that there were several changes I could have made. The comparison group pupils were selected from those with similar academic backgrounds and I assumed that it would be easy to compare cohorts. However, several staff told me that it was very difficult to compare groups, even with similar academic backgrounds as similarities and differences varied not only between groups but between individual pupils. If I were to undertake this exercise again I would prefer to compare one pupil directly with another. After discussion with colleagues, I created a slightly altered template of the staff questionnaire which would facilitate this in the future.

Time limitations meant it was impossible to carry out interviews but they would have provided a useful opportunity to expand on answers to the questionnaires.

Undertaking this research project has benefited me professionally and personally. The research helped me hone my teaching and gave me more focus when planning lessons. I became much more aware that certain skills are learnt well, for example, the time spent developing speaking and listening skills, is clearly well spent. It was gratifying to find out that most NG cohort pupils were proud of their achievements, were more confident and behaved better than previously. However, I realised that I needed to incorporate specific activities: nurture time provided an excellent opportunity to practise in a small group environment. I also aimed to support pupils in the classroom and in extra sessions. Closer collaboration with outside agencies ensured that the foundations that were laid in the Year 7 group could be revisited and reinforced in targeted activities.

It proved interesting and worthwhile to work out ways in which to compare pupils progress and to decide which data would be effective in discovering pupils' levels of motivation and achievement. I also learnt a considerable amount about research methodology and I look forward to undertaking further surveys in school leading to further refinements and improvements to benefit individual pupils and the school as a whole.

Further actions and recommendations

The research demonstrated clear ways in which we can measure the impact of the NG. Previously, it had seemed necessary only to complete the Boxall profiles twice a year and complete the tick lists with pupils in Years 8 to 11. It was now apparent that a more rigorous study was needed to encompass quantitative and qualitative data comparisons with a similar group. Most importantly, for our school pairs of pupils matched for academic attainment and similar backgrounds were seen as preferable in making comparisons. The views of mainstream staff provided invaluable feedback as did the analysis of attainment checks and English target levels. It was decided that the information would be collated and presented to governors on a regular basis to help review the

question of whether the group continues to provide benefits and potentially value for money.

The governors received a copy of the results and expressed a wish for the group to continue. Unfortunately, increased financial pressure on the school budget meant that the NG had to be ended the following summer. However, many principles of nurture continue and are now embedded in the school ethos.

The pastoral system is more attuned to the needs of all pupils, especially those who are vulnerable. My own lower ability classes, although larger in number than in the NG, are allowed time to reflect on their feelings and motivation. Difficulties are discussed and achievement celebrated. More time is spent on organisation and homework planning. Group work rules are explained and activities working with other pupils practiced. Presentations are encouraged. Pupils are praised for achievements, including pupils of the week in Year assemblies. It is hoped, budget constraints permitting, that a nurture type group will be able to be run in the near future as it has proved so valuable and in principle has the backing of governors.

FINAL CONCLUSION

Membership of a NG appears to have impacted on pupils who attended it. There is a greater sense of achievement and motivation than among those who receive the more traditional forms of support, i.e. in class support and tuition. Progress in many areas is identified by staff who work closely with the pupils once they have returned to mainstream. Certain identified skills could be further developed in group sessions. Pupils would benefit from continued support once they have left the group and for a few, a continuation of nurture type sessions in Years 8 and 9. The NG has added value to aspects of the whole school, contributing to the Academy Improvement Plan.

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APPENDICES		
Pupil questionnaire Circle as appropriate		
l am in Year 8 9 10 11		
	t end (Nurture group)	
Tick the statement which most applies to you. Since starting at (Name of school)		
My confidence has grown My confidence has stayed the same I feel less confident	Tick the yes or no box I think I will do as well as I possibly can at school	Yes 🗌
I find it easier to get on with other people I get on with other people the same as before I find it more difficult to get on with other people	I am proud of my achievements so far at school	No Yes No
☐ I find it easier to ask for help ☐ I ask for help at the same rate as I did before ☐ I find it more difficult to ask for help	If I could change one thing at school to help m would be	e it
I join in class discussions more I join in class discussions at about the same rate I join in class discussions less		
I ask more questions I ask the same amount of questions I ask fewer questions	This is because	
My behaviour has improved My behaviour has stayed the same My behaviour has got worse		
I enjoy school more I feel the same about school as I did before I do not enjoy school as much	One thing that has helped me at school is This is because	
I try harder than before I try about the same I do not try as much as before		

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