

Knitting and nurturing: a qualitative account of staff reflections on knitting with pupils

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ABSTRACT

The data in this study comes from autoethnographic practitioner-written responses to interview questions and interviews with colleagues working in a secondary pupil support department. Knitting beside and with certain female pupils had been trialled over the course of an academic year. The aim of this study was to explore staff perceptions of the impact of this activity on pupil stress levels and learning. Thematic analysis was carried out on the data and several themes were constructed. The themes that describe the overall data set are soothing, closeness, readiness to learn, and engagement. The theme of engagement also subsumes sub-themes of staff enthusiasm, creation and gender. The descriptions given relate only to the situations directly involving crafting and not in transference to other contexts. The methodology and context also prohibit any attempt to generalise these findings.

INTRODUCTION

The setting of this small-scale descriptive study is a pupil support department in a fairly large Scottish secondary school.

The practitioner/researcher runs some nurturing sessions for two-year groups of pupils once a week as best fits our organisation's needs and aligns with Mackay's pyramid model of nurturing structures (Mackay, 2015). Primarily though, the researcher works with pupils with more complex additional support needs or learning difficulties, where arguably all practice aligns closely with nurture principles.

It is generally considered an important quality of practitioners to maintain a calm demeanour (Bombèr, 2007; Syrnyk, 2012). The genesis for this study involved reflections on ways that calm could be communicated. Initially, this was an attempt at performing some calming activity close by a pupil to gauge if this was a helpful addition to the variety of behavioural tools and strategies we employ with our more complex young people.

Background

Reynolds, MacKay, & Kearney (2009) suggest the need for research on the features of nurture groups (NGs) that prove most crucial. Bennathan, Boxall & Colley (2010) outline the lack of prescription in nurture training giving practitioners the flexibility to put the 'principles into action', as best meets the needs of their young people and organisations.

Chiappella (2015) outlines themes of change from practitioner interviews in secondary NG. These include the theme of 'behaviour for learning'. Lucas, Insley & Buckland (2006) define practitioners interpreting behaviour as communication as one of the principles of nurture (as cited in Boxall & Lucas, 2010). It is possible to argue that nurture principles are central to all work with pupils with more complex additional support needs, irrespective of the theoretical paradigm seen to underlie this approach.

In our setting for example, learning is individualised to address needs and develop from where pupils are, taking account of interests, where possible. The classroom, and indeed department, offers a safe base with familiar adults, pupils and routines. Creating experiences for pupils to develop in confidence and self-esteem is central. Language skills are worked on – through direct social skills and self-awareness work and through modelling between staff and pupils, with a key focus on relationships. Transition preparation is a vital part of our work, both in the transition to secondary and to post-school destinations with a focus on much planning and support. When dealing with difficult behaviours we adopt a low arousal approach (McDonnell, 2010).

Managing arousal

Programmes in mindfulness, yoga and progressive muscle relaxation would suggest themselves as valuable tools in addressing anxiety and working towards emotional self-regulation for a range of young people. Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt & Miller (2015) report benefits in their meta-analysis on mindfulness intervention studies with children and adolescents. They report that studies involving clinical samples showed a greater effect size, which may suggest it could be more helpful for young people with support needs. Tomas & Atkinson (2016) assessed the helpfulness of mindfulness programme Paws.b on attention with some encouraging results in the mainstream primary. Davis (2012) recognise literature showing adaptations made to some mindfulness adult interventions to make them more suitable for children. These tools and adaptations of them seem valuable for nurture work with the caveats of ensuring engagement, flexibility and accessibility.

Literature from a variety of disciplines explores relaxation interventions for young people but is beyond the scope of this paper. For example: Powell, Gilchrist & Stapley (2008) report on an intervention involving massage, yoga and relaxation with suggested benefits. Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova (2016) on the impact of Mandala Art Therapy on school anxiety; Chan, Sze, Siu Lau & Cheung (2013) on a Chinese mind-body exercise compared to progressive muscle relaxation for self-regulation problems in children with autism and Kao (2006) on relaxation resulting from Chinese calligraphy writing. Such interventions seem more tactile and 'hands on' but still fairly structured and prescriptive.

Some research has looked specifically at knitting as a therapeutic tool. Riley, Corkhill & Morris (2013) surveyed 3,545 knitters from around the globe and found positive emotional and cognitive gains related to frequency of knitting. Clave-Brule, Mazloun, Park, Harbottle & Birmingham (2009) surveyed service users receiving hospital treatment for eating disorders and found several interesting ways that knitting had been seen to be useful. Corkhill & Davidson (2009) in their qualitative work with those suffering from chronic pain identified themes of esteem, rhythmic movement and stimulation from knitting.

Corkhill (2014) refers to knitting as 'a bilateral, rhythmic, psychosocial intervention'. Some specific attributes of the activity she highlights are the hand motions, position and how it facilitates or obviates the need for eye contact. As a former physiotherapist she describes how bilateral sequences of moving have played a part in approaches following brain trauma. The other neurologically important area she describes is the fact that knitting involves the crossing of the body's midline. This, she suggests, may reduce the amount of attention available for other concerns. Calm and meditative effects are also reported. Corkhill (2014) points to documented benefits of meditation, including the work of Davidson et al. (2003). Davidson and colleagues found potential benefits for the immune system following a meditation course, in addition to increases in electrical activity in brain areas linked with positive emotion (left-sided anterior). The suggestion that trying knitting may yield similar benefits could be justified by Kaimal, Ray & Muniz (2016) who found participation in an art activity linked to reductions in the hormone cortisol.

Corkhill's website *Stitchlinks* (www.stitchlinks.com), dedicated to therapeutic knitting invites narratives of knitting experiences. The education section includes anecdotes about its success in creating calm, benefits for ADHD, memory and life skills. The aim of this small study was to access staff perceptions on their experiences of trialling knitting beside pupils who can be resistant to more routine behaviour support strategies.

In particular, there were three main objectives:

- How might knitting or crafting support learning?
- What role did it play in managing pupil stress?
- How did the knitting or crafting affect relationships?

METHOD

Knitting was introduced in our department when the researcher brought in some needles. There were already boxes of wool in the craft cupboard and the researcher decided to experiment with doing this beside one pupil to start with. Other members of the team also got involved. The boxes and the knitting were left on tables in the social area in our corridor and a few more pairs of needles were procured. This continued throughout the course of the academic year, but in a flexible way, as an additional tool or distraction to call upon.

Some of the pupils we work with need 'time outs' or breaks and follow a highly personal and specialised timetable. Knitting was used during these times and flexibly throughout. Certain other calming activities, such as Hama beads, have also often been used to help calm and focus in preparation for the next learning activity and this continued. Staff developed the activity flexibly, with pupils wanting to join the knitting, sometimes at lunch. Activities also involved the introduction of weaving, finger knitting and making friendship bracelets from time to time.

Data collection

Permission to collect data for this study was sought in the first instance via e-mail from the acting headteacher, in addition to verbal permission from the head of department. Written informed consent was sought from two sets of parents/carers, outlining the nature of the interviews to be conducted. While data collection did not directly involve any pupils per se, this consent would cover any potential reflections that pertained to their children given by the participants. Informed consent and acknowledgement of the right to withdraw their contribution was given in writing by the staff participants.

Methodological approach

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six female staff members, researcher included. This autoethnographic element provides a degree of reflexivity in the process of data collection and analysis and is possibly closely aligned with what Anderson (2006) describes as analytic autoethnography. It means that the author of this study is also a participant and their reflections make up part of the data collected. The researcher wrote answers in response to the interview schedule prior to interviewing participants. It was included in the analysis as interview 5.

Interviews

One group interview of two participants, I.1 (a teacher and a support for learning assistant) took place in our department after school. Another three support for learning assistants were interviewed during non-contact time during the school day. Ethical considerations concerning taking up the time of colleagues or them feeling subtly pressured to take part were addressed through reminders that this was voluntary and they need not take part should they not want to. Interviews 1 & 2 lasted just under 30 minutes. The other two interviews were briefer with one just over, and one under five minutes. One member of staff who was also closely involved with this project had left the school so the data set lacks this contribution. All staff had been involved with the knitting at various points in the year with one participant with less direct involvement but who had been part of the group at times.

Interview schedule

This was intended for flexible use.

- Can you tell me a bit about your experiences of knitting near or beside pupils?
- Tell me about anything you noticed or felt about the way you relate to pupils when doing this?
- Describe any potential you noticed for this to impact on learning.
- Can you recall anything you noticed about what pupils did when you were knitting?
- If a classroom assistant from another school asked whether they should do this what advice would you give them?
- Have you any other ideas of ways you could use this or any other method to enhance learning, relationships or reduce pupils stress levels?
- Do you feel there are any drawbacks or negatives with this approach?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

An element of respondent validation (Bryman, 2008) was sought by showing an early draft of overarching list of themes and sub-themes to some participants who agreed this was representative. Some sub-themes have since been altered, however.

Analytic approach

The analytic approach was a thematic one as discussed by Braun & Clarke (2006) which helps to provide a level of rigour but without particular theoretical constraints. Once transcribed from the audio recording, the data set was read fully. A set of initial codes were produced. These were applied to the data manually, using coloured pens and highlighters with the set of codes being expanded on. All data was coded, sometimes more than once with the surrounding context, including a miscellaneous category and a few codes that did not make the final analysis. A Word document of the transcription was cut and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet under the code headings. These columns were checked for similarities and differences – see Patton (2003); internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity – and to see if themes could be constructed from groupings of codes. This was an iterative process, while trying to retain the possibility of this description being data driven, the aims were looked at again to try and address them. Some initial sub-themes were abandoned and some codes were re-grouped into another theme.

The initial codes interpreted from the data were constructed into themes as indicated in **Table 1**.

Table 1: The initial codes interpreted from the data were constructed into themes as follows

Codes	Overarching theme	Subtheme/Interviews relating
Mindfulness Calming Quiet Feel good Repetition/mechanical Distraction Pressure	Soothing	Described in I.1; I.2; I.3; I.4; I.5;
Conversation Close proximity Relationship Social inclusion Sharing	Closeness	Described in I.1; I.2; I.3; I.4; I.5;
End product Enjoyment Gender Staff satisfaction Reflection Suggestions	Engagement	Staff enthusiasm (Staff satisfaction, reflection, suggestions, enjoyment). Described in I.1; I.2; I.4; I.5; Creation I.1, I.2, I.5 Gender I.1 & I. 2
Frustration Skills Patience/readiness to learn	Readiness to learn	Described in I.1, I.2, I.3, I.4, I.5

RESULTS

Soothing

All talk detailed the calming and feel good effects of this work. This ranged from discussions on this as an alternative to mindfulness meditation similar to the descriptions by Corkhill (2014),

- ‘...cos I think for, you know for some kids maybe to meditate it’s, you know it seems like oh it’s a really difficult thing, what do I do? What do I do?...’ (I.1);
to comparisons with mindfulness colouring in books:
‘and it’s a nice thing just to, you know, get in your hands if it’s not too complicated and it’s a repetitive motion then it can be a bit like these colouring in stress, you know those kind of things nowadays?’ (I.2).

As outlined above the mechanical, physical nature of the process was considered by some (I.1 & 2) as being key to being calming. All interviews focused on therapeutic aspects of the atmosphere created: ‘...actually is a relaxing and just chill out factor...’ (I.2); ‘... because it’s so calm and it’s quiet – I guess that’s the beauty of it...’ (I.3); ‘...very relaxing and therapeutic’ (I.4); ‘helped to create a calm and soothing environment...’ (I.5).

The researcher's own response also centred on how this enabled her to be 'present' for the pupil rather than rushing on to the next thing.

Also contributing to this theme were reflections surrounding ease and the removal of pressure or demands from pupils (I.1, I.4, I.5)

'...and you're not, there's no great expectations of anything, you're just sitting doing a bit of knitting and if you put it down and go to do something else it's not a big problem...' (I.1)

The researcher felt additionally that this low pressure environment could be advantageous for staff as well as pupils:

'...It offers some protection from having our buttons pushed by pupils and gives us space to engage in mechanical activity...'

Closeness

The closeness interpretation derived from literal descriptions of physical closeness needed at times for the teaching:

'...you know, they allowed you to show them by using the knitting needles and taking their hand and say the right way to wind the wool round and stuff like that, so it did give you a probably a closer bond in a way for that bit of time you were working with them.' (I.2)

Relationships were further seen as being enhanced or facilitated through this work:

'... it's a good chance to get to speak to the pupils...' (I.4)

One participant also felt that the fact that you do not need to speak was an advantage:

'... it's that you're not having to speaking all the time and it can get annoying – you just don't speak unless you need to ask about colours – or that kind of thing...' (I.3)

This participant went further to suggest that it could be helpful in building relationships, particularly if a new member of staff were to work with a pupil:

'...if it was someone they didn't know I think that would still be ok – eh if – and if they were just getting new to them that kind of thing...' (I.3)

These accounts reflect the different interaction styles of the participants and show that the tool of the knitting can provide opportunities for both easy conversation and also remove the need for any conversation. What seems clear, whether by pupils accepting closer contact through guided hand-over-hand instruction, or just being around the adult is that there is an ease to the interactions which is potentially beneficial.

Engagement

The data this theme describes is comprised as three separate sub-themes. The first of which is:

Staff enthusiasm

During the interviews staff offered much material and suggestions for taking crafting work further (I.1&2):

'...I mean we were taught to knit in schools by auxiliaries when I was in primary school...' (I.4)

Some members of staff, referred explicitly to pupils enjoying the experience (I.2&5) and one participant in particular (I.2.) described how much satisfaction she gained from this experience:

'...it's lovely, it's really a lovely achievement for them and for you as well because you think well I've passed on something.'

Staff pleasure or satisfaction, can arguably enhance the building of relationships and increase positive interactions.

Creation

Interviews 1, 2 and 5 explicitly referred to the growth of the end product. This is seen both in terms of engaging pupils and keeping their interest and focus throughout the activity:

'...you feel more relaxed but you've also got an end product which probably is more enticing for them to do it in the first place – does that make sense?' (I.1)

Staff views here suggest that the process of seeing something creative evolve sparks a curiosity and engagement and level of satisfaction while giving the chance to experience a calmer atmosphere.

Gender

Again, this sub-theme relates to engagement and is at a purely descriptive level. Only two interviews touched on this sub-theme, but, it is an important part of the overall description of this small project that concerned female pupils only. Staff suggested that this is something boys could benefit from too:

'...it would be interesting to try that it's all been females, it's all been the females that we've tried it with, it's a thought that might be something, I don't know whether males would find it harder or whether they would eh find it relaxing or any kind of therapeutic so that would be one that I would say we maybe might investigate...'

Readiness to learn

The topic of frustration was coded many times throughout the interviews (I.1, I.2, I. 3, I.4) Talk centred on coping with things when they went wrong with the knitting and in a sense developing skills surrounding problem solving:

'you know getting them to realise that this is really it's not a big problem we can easily sort that...' (I.1)

The need for patience (pupil and staff) was described, in addition to mentioning of the development of life skills (I. 1 & I.2).

DISCUSSION

The following discussion further addresses the research aim: to access staff perceptions on their experiences of trialling knitting beside pupils who can be resistant to more routine behaviour support strategies. Importantly, the sub-theme of gender in the practitioner talk is also an important contextual limitation of these findings.

How might crafting support learning?

The theme of readiness to learn would suggest that crafting could support pupils in certain skills that developed frustration tolerance, if they were directly involved in the knitting, or crafting as some pupils were. This articulates with Boxall Profile area A: giving purposeful attention and J: maintaining internalised standards. Interview 1 and 5 also gave accounts of its usefulness as a tool to aid transitions between learning activities (Boxall & Lucas, 2010). The social nature of the closeness and enhanced relationship theme could potentially

help pupils experience success in things like turn taking, asking for help and having positive interactions with others – Boxall areas B: participates constructively; H: accommodates to others; V: avoids or rejects attachments (Boxall & Lucas, 2010)

What role did it play in managing pupil stress?

The reflections of this team suggest that the activity was a calm and soothing one. Staff reflections generated some theories surrounding the reasons for this, including simple focus and repetition. This may be similar to one aspect of the suggested interpretations of Kao (2006) in a study on Chinese calligraphy, namely *'First the act of brushing causes heightened attention and concentration on the part of practitioners and results in their physiological slowdown and relaxation'* (Kao, 2006).

It could be that the bilateral movements described by Corkhill (2014) and the crossing of the midline of the body does indeed have a neurological impact on attention or affect.

One participant (I.1) found the reduction in tension interesting if a pupil was not engaged directly in the knitting:

'For some strange reason even if the pupil hasn't joined in with the knitting it seems to have a calming effect that either one or two people are just sitting knitting...' (I.1)

Whether the calmness experienced by the knitters is indeed communicated vicariously to on-lookers is a point of speculation, as there could be something soothing about the stillness or the sound on a sensory level. This links to the very early inception of this trial in the attempts to create and communicate calm.

The soothing nature of the activity could help further enhance pupil feelings of safety, a principle of nurture work, and reduce anxiety, which is an arguable precursor for all meaningful learning and would help support the enhancement of a low arousal environment (Lucas et al., 2006; McDonnell, 2010). Certainly, the theme of engagement would suggest that a level of curiosity and interest surrounding the end product of the knitting or crafting may facilitate motivation.

Conversations related to mindfulness and stress colouring books (I.1., I.2, I.5). Similar to adaptations described in the literature on mindfulness for children described by Davis (2012), this kind of activity might provide a way in to this kind of work. While the ultimate goal for pupils is to work towards better self-regulation of emotion, this tentative step in providing access to a calming, social activity as described by the 'soothing' and 'closeness' themes may facilitate a step towards being accepting of more directed or structured activities over time. The ultimate aim would be to equip young people with a tool box of soothing and calming activities, and the self-awareness to use them as needed, rather than by staff initiation.

How did the knitting affect relationships?

The reflective dialogues shared by the team gave rise to the researcher interpretation of closeness. Physical proximity was perceived in one case (I.2) and emotional distance in another (I.5) under the soothing theme. The ease of conversation and lack of pressure to engage in it was also a salient feature of discussions. Being part of a group positively and without expectation could again

facilitate small steps towards transferring this skill through building up a bank of positive experiences.

Limitations

There is little to be generalised from a very small study such as this one. It is hoped, however, that the descriptions might suggest other practical ways forward on the route to lowering anxiety, enhancing relationships and working towards increased self-regulation of emotion. Corkhill's website Stitchlinks (www.stitchlinks.com) outlines a range of suggestions for other bilateral activities.

A limitation is while staff perceptions have been positive, they pertain exclusively to the periods of time when pupils have been directly engaged in this particular process. If the ultimate aim is a tool towards self-regulation of emotion, then we would hope that further work would begin to see transferability of arousal reduction in pupils across a range of situations. Given that this has been one small tool in an arsenal of many, employed flexibly, it is hard to attribute any lasting gains – should they be measured – to approaches such as this alone.

Mercer (2007) has explored through personal experience the rich advantages in addition to challenges and limitations of what she terms 'intimate insider' research. She explores issues such as bias and how knowledge of the researcher and their position on things may impact on giving what might be considered the desired response. There is every possibility this may have been a limitation in this study, as a close team is aware of interests, positions and aims on a wide variety of issues and the team could have been trying to support the researcher.

Future research could aim to include pupils in collection of data and their views on the process and would hopefully also work as a teaching tool on the importance of stress management and wellbeing. Additionally, further work with boys, male staff members and the part-time NGs could be investigated.

CONCLUSION

This very small scale study looked at staff perceptions of how knitting can enhance a learning environment and reduce arousal levels. The themes of engagement, soothing, closeness, and readiness to learn were constructed during the data collection, analysis and interpretation process. This tool might be useful in reducing pupil anxiety and enhance relationships but is just one tool among many used by those working to help pupils move towards self-awareness, coping skills and self-regulation of behaviour. As such, any improvements in frustration tolerance in learning in other contexts, should they be measured quantitatively, could not be attributed to this tool. However, it may provide useful modelling and experiences of calm that might provide a first step and way in to building further relationship, learning and self-awareness skills. Ultimately then, this suggests knitting, crafting or similar calming repetitive activities may be particularly worthwhile exploring in NG as practitioners strive to work with pupils towards many of the Boxall derived targets.

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