WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS IN A NURTURE GROUP SETTING: THE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a small-scale research project to identify the impact of working in a nurture group setting on two teaching assistants in an English primary school. This research uses a narrative inquiry approach to provide rich data from the stories through which the practitioners interpret, and make sense of, significant events in their professional experience. The research methodology includes sessions that reflect both a supervision approach, providing a safe space in which to be heard, and more directed narrative spaces.

Two themes from the research are the challenges of the nurture work impacting on both professional motivation and personal relationships, and the emotions being expressed through physiology. As a result of the collaborative nature of the research methodology further themes emerged. These were: an identification of the factors that impacted on the practitioners' resilience and the positive impact of the sessions and relationships within the research process.

The discussion provides potential implications for schools, which school leaders may choose to consider when designing nurture group provision, and for practitioners to address their own needs which arise from supporting children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, thereby developing more resilient and effective nurture group practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

The rationale for this small-scale research emerged from the researcher's experience of working as a nurture group practitioner and the resulting cognitive, ethical and emotional challenges. The researcher identified the need for greater understanding of the topic so that future planning for this type of provision may consider the impact on practitioners. This is in the context of a significant gap in research literature about teaching assistants (TAs) which extends beyond studies into their impact on learning and social and emotional development.

This research sought to identify the impact that working in a nurture group has on TAs' professional and personal lives. Subsequently it identified factors that influence the impact of this work and also the impact that the research process had upon the TAs who participated.

This research employed a narrative inquiry approach methodology working collaboratively with the research participants and allowing for understanding within the range of contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) experienced by both researcher and participants.

An important aspect of this research is that it focuses on TAs, who in the UK account for 26.4% of the workforce employed in state schools (Department for Education, 2014) and for whom the majority of their work involves direct pedagogical interactions (Blatchford et al., 2009). The definition of the TA role is very broad and there is no agreed national standard for their role, job description or level of training. However, it has been recognised that there has been a significant change in general expectations of the TA role from someone who helps and tidies in the classroom to a member of staff who directly contributes to teaching and learning

(Groom, 2006). Equivalent international terms for the role include: learning support assistant, teaching aide, para-professional educator and education assistant.

The research is situated within the specific provisions of a nurture group, which are an approach to supporting children whose social, emotional and mental health needs are unable to be met in a mainstream classroom. Nurture groups were first developed in London in the 1970s (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996) and have grown in use, to reach the recent number of 2,114 schools in the UK (The Nurture Group Network, 2015).

Methodologically a narrative inquiry approach has been used, as an approach that seeks to understand experiences through the meaning that is made of them, by those who live them, when shaped and ordered in a narrated form (Chase, 2011). This approach is based within an ontological framework in which humans make sense of the world through narrative construction (Bruner, 1991). Narrative inquiry is able to embody "theoretical ideas about educational experience as lived and told stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990 p18).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of research that identifies the effectiveness of nurture groups in supporting the needs of children who attend them (Bennett, 2015; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Gerrard, 2006; Lyon, 2017; Seth-Smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy, & Jaffey, 2010; Sloan, Winter, Lynn, Gildea, & Connolly, 2016).

While established texts about nurture group practice take for granted the model of a teacher and a teaching assistant staffing a nurture group (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996; Bishop, 2008) an increasing number of nurture groups are run by teaching assistants without a trained teacher. This approach to staffing nurture groups may well be the result of the challenging financial situation for schools and is reflected in more recent publications and guidance, for example, "Nurture groups: a handbook for schools" (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010), where the role of a teacher is not specified. Instead the focus is on accredited nurture group training for staff. Anecdotal evidence points to the view that a significant number of nurture groups are staffed by TAs without a teacher and the significant involvement of TAs in nurture group work is reflected in the attendance at Nurture Group Network training and conferences. However accurate data about the staffing composition of nurture groups in the UK is unavailable. The need for research into the views of TAs in nurture groups has been acknowledged by Syrnyk (2012).

The approach demanded when working in a nurture group implies a 'special pedagogy' (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016, p117). The focus of the nurture approach begins with a 'whole child' view (Syrnyk, 2012) and is defined by valuing the importance of developing positive attachment relationships (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), understanding behaviour as communication and understanding children's learning developmentally (Lucas, Insley, & Buckland, 2006). In short, nurture approaches have 'relationships at their core' (Warin & Hibbin, 2016, p13) and inhabit a different ethos and attitude to learners (Turner & Waterhouse, 2003) than implied by the 'standards agenda' (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), which is pervasive in shaping the schools' relational ecologies (Warin & Hibbin, 2016) and ethos. Nurture practitioners have also been found to have closer relationships with their pupils (Balisteri, 2016) and, as such, may often view themselves, and be viewed by other practitioners, as separate from the main staff body in a school.

While research into nurture groups has most often focused on outcomes for learners, it may be considered that there is a lack of recognition of the level of challenging behaviours experienced by nurture practitioners. A pilot study conducted by the Nurture Group Network (Scott-Loinaz, 2014) identified a range of challenging behaviours associated with young people in nurture group provision, including being aggressive, being unco-operative, having frequent outbursts, exhibiting dangerous behaviour, and being disruptive. The extent to which nurture practitioners experience physically and emotionally challenging behaviours, and the impact on nurture practitioners of this range of difficult behaviours, is broadly missing from current research evidence.

It is important to understand the current context of TAs in England to appreciate the perceptions that TAs working in nurture groups may be communicating. There is an unresolved situation regarding the professionalism of TAs in the UK. Two key events, the removal of government funding for higher level teaching assistant training in 2010 and the failure to take forward the draft professional standards for TAs that were commissioned by the government in 2014, have left the professional role of the TA without clear definition. TAs' salary levels and expectations for their qualifications are set by individual schools (National Careers Service, 2017) and there is limited opportunity for professional progression. Furthermore, shortcomings in training available for TAs have been identified (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Martin & Alborz, 2014). Nevertheless, the demands placed on TAs in schools continue to increase, with anecdotal evidence pointing to more TAs undertaking more and more activities previously regarded as the responsibility of trained teachers, including planning and teaching whole-class teaching sessions. Research has identified TAs as working on the margins (Howes, 2003), unsupported by government policies (Russell, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, & Martin, 2005) and they have also been identified by Mansaray as 'separate

and peripheral' (Mansaray, 2006, p68). This difficult professional situation for TAs was compounded with the publication of the Diss Report (Blatchford, Russell, & Webster, 2012) and the media reports following this, for example: 'They [TAs] appear to have a negative effect on pupils' results' (Stevens, 2013). Recent literature about TAs focuses on their efficacy and impact (Radford, Bosanquet, Webster, & Blatchford, 2015; Roffey-Barentsen, 2014; R. Webster, Russell, & Blatchford, 2015) and their role, skills and training needs (Clarke & Visser, 2017; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; Martin & Alborz, 2014; Takala, 2007). The research of Cockroft & Atkinson (2015) provides some information about facilitators and barriers to the TA role in supporting learning, however these are significantly focused within the teacher/TA relationship. Sharples, Webster, & Blatchford (2015) suggest that research into TAs' impact is narrowly focused on academic attainment and highlight the need for robust research into non-academic, 'soft' development. While there is a small body of research that focuses on resilience and emotions for teachers working with children presenting challenging behaviours (Chang, 2013; Doney, 2013; Zee, de Jong, & Koomen, 2016), with the exception of Syrnyk (2012) and Cockroft & Atkinson (2015) there is a significant gap in research focused on TAs in this field of work.

METHODS

Approach

The narrative inquiry approach was chosen as it allowed the researcher to capture the qualitative elements of the TAs' experiences across a passage of time (Alleyne, 2014). The contextual, or social and interactive (Dewey, 1957; Townsend & Elliott-Maher, 2016), importance of a learning situation and the nature of the data's situation within, 'an emotive or emotional and expressive register' (Alleyne, 2014, p40), could be fully appreciated through this approach.

The epistemological positioning of the narrative inquiry approach, which leads to the researcher engaging with the complexity and ambiguity of the data (Riessman, 1993), can be seen to challenge a normative view of knowledge and experience (Townsend & Elliott-Maher, 2016). The understanding within this approach is that settings and intentions are key to human conduct (Schutz, 1973). As such, rather than being a neutral listener, the identity and role of the researcher becomes an important and integral part of the research process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This researcher's experience and pedagogic values, after working in nurture groups for 10 years, were important within the research methodology. This alignment with the practitioners' experience not only served to reduce the likelihood of a patronising relationship (Hollway & Jefferson,

2000), but also to develop trust and a shared research purpose, as well as serving to provide recognition and affirmation of the practitioners' role. This is seen as leading to the data constituting a more open, honest and reflective narrative as a result of the development of a 'bond' (Webb, 2006) between the researcher and the participants. The importance of the relationship between the researcher and the practitioners (Creswell, 2003), representing a meeting of lives (Clandinin, 2013) led strongly towards a collaborative approach (West, 2010) to the research methodology and views of the practitioners as passive participants without acknowledging their expertise (Webb, 2006) was inappropriate. This approach implicates the practitioners as participants or co-researchers (May, 1997) within a co-composition space (Clandinin, 2013). This approach and the processes it employed had a significant impact on both the practitioners and the researcher (May, 1997). Through valuing the participants and re-framing their role as co-constructors there are ethical implications which are discussed below, and implications for lifelong learning (West, 2010), as both the researcher and participants, through seeking new understanding of a situation, learn through the research process.

During the planning for this research, a request to provide 'supervision' for the TA participants was made by the senior leaders in the school. There is a broad array of literature concerned with the concept of supervision, much of which is focused on supporting staff working within social work (Wonnacott, 2011) or counselling and therapeutic work (Guiffrida, 2015). There is some conflict of views between those who believe that supervision should include accountability and performance checks (Beddoe, 2010) and those who see supervision providing a safe reflective space outside performance indicators (Chappell, 1999). As the researcher is not trained in supervision approaches, it was important to identify and agree a shared understanding of the nature of the supervision offered to the participants. The supervision aimed to provide a safe, supportive space that allowed the TAs to reflect on their practice and where there was freedom to engage in frank and open discussion and explore sometimes difficult situations (Beddoe & Davys, 2016; Johnston, Noble, & Gray, 2016) and express distress that may have been brought up by their work (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). This space provided a compassionate (Carroll, 2007) and sympathetically aligned researcher who could support the practitioners through personal and professional validation (Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). The researcher was not seen as an expert in supervision, but as an 'egalitarian empowerer' (Chappell, 1999) and collaborator with the TAs,

enabling them to be open to their experience and specifically their nurturing work (Lambers, 2000) through offering a 'third-person' perspective from outside their work-system (Carroll, 2007).

The ethical context of this research is framed within a social justice (Chase, 2011) and human rights (Mertens, Sullivan, & Stace, 2011) approach, underpinned by empathy (Webb, 2006) and trust (Bond, 2004). Within the desire to conduct 'good research' (David and Sutton, 2004 cited in Webb, 2006), the research process itself was considered with regard to its usefulness to the practitioners and whether they would feel it was worth participating. Within this context the supervision element of the process was negotiated and scope for development of the process was implied. To maintain anonymity the participants chose pseudonyms to use in the research. Ethical boundaries were also supported through adherence to the researcher's own university ethics committee guidelines.

Data collection

The data was collected with two nurture group practitioners employed as TAs in a UK primary school. The practitioners chose their pseudonyms that are used throughout the research and this article. Data was collected over the period of one academic year within three cycles (**Figure 1**). Each cycle began with a 45-minute one-to-one 'supervision' session. This session was recorded, transcribed and the transcription was provided to the participant. The participant was asked to identify 'critical events' (Webster & Mertova, 2007) from the transcription prior to the Research Session (RS). At the RS, the researcher and participant shared the 'critical events' they had identified and the researcher prompted the participant to tell the story that surrounded the 'critical event', with the researcher sometimes prompting or asking around the subject of the impact of the narrated events on the practitioner. The RS was recorded,

transcribed and provided to the participant. A further 'supervision' session (SS) took place following the RS. This cycle was repeated three times across the academic year. As the research proceeded and the co-composition space (Clandinin, 2013) developed, on two occasions the participants requested that the supervision sessions took place with both practitioners together. Following the final SS the participants were also invited to write their own reflections about the research process and the impact it had on them.

The data has been analysed through an immersive and holistic approach (Merrill & West, 2009) where the aim is to work with the detail and narrative language (Riessman & Speedy, 2007), making choices of extracts from the narrative that represent the meaning of events (Elliott, 2005) in relation to the identified focus and summarising these for the reader, with a focus on the phenomenological, that is, evocative, powerful, unique and sensitive aspects (Van Manen, 1990, p58). The analysis was therefore approached inductively, as a result of the relational negotiations with the practitioners, reflecting the truth of the narrative inquiry space (Clandinin, 2013). This process began as the practitioners reviewed their transcripts and made choices about the critical incidents they chose to expand their narrative about and continued as the researcher immersed themselves in the transcripts reading and re-reading, allowing common themes to emerge, through the identification of words, language, statements, signifiers and patterns these created (Dunne, 2011). The 'relational responsibilities' (Clandinin, 2013, p201) were then addressed, with the researchers' findings sent to the practitioners asking for comment and approval.

RESULTS

Participants' narratives

The initial sense of the narrative communicated by the two participants which frames their professional experiences, is one of being separate from others who do not work within the context of nurture and of difficult experiences.

Figure 1: *Research cycle*

CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
Phase A: 45min Supervision Session	**Phase A:** 45min Supervision Session	**Phase A:** 45min Supervision Session
Phase B: Transcription shared with practitioners	**Phase B:** Transcription shared with practitioners	**Phase B:** Transcription shared with practitioners
Phase C: 45min Research Session	**Phase C:** 45min Research Session	**Phase C:** 45min Research Session
Phase D: Transcription shared with practitioner	**Phase D:** Transcription shared with practitioner	**Phase D:** Transcription shared with practitioner
Phase E: 45min Supervision Session	**Phase E:** 45min Supervision Session	**Phase E:** 45min Supervision Session

The participants describe their work as something that is distinct and different to the understanding of working in a school for those outside the profession. This is expressed in relation to people they meet socially:

"I usually just say, 'I'm a TA'. I don't tend to say about nurture because maybe people don't really know" (Lilly Supervision Session Cycle (SSC) 1)

and family members:

'He just doesn't get it, no matter how many times I explain it…' (Lilly Research Session Cycle (RSC) 2)

While the distance and difference is also expressed in relation to discussions with others within their school:

"'Oh yes, that's really good. Oh that will be so helpful,' and then it's like whoosh, now you're right on the outside". (Kerry RSC2)

'I almost feel like I'm always railroaded, I'm always round the outside of it.' (Kerry RSC2)

as well as their general understanding:

'…they don't know what we were dealing with on a day-to-day basis' (Kerry SSC1)

and describing colleagues as being:

'…. quite closed to the whole thing.' (Kerry SSC1).

This sense of distance and difference is viewed as being the cause of significant frustration:

'Oh, it just frustrates me, it really frustrates me.' (Kerry RSC2)

'I'm not being listened to, oh this is so frustrating.' (Lilly RSC3)

The context of working with children in a nurture group context is framed as being difficult:

'I am doing my best and trying to give him my all, I really am, but it's really difficult…' (Kerry RSC1)

With particular reference to difficulties related to the emotional challenges the work places on the participants:

'I just felt so het up and so anxious all the time.' (Lilly RSC3)

'I think within nurture things are disclosed that are quite… that can be quite tricky and obviously sometimes we are told things… that are quite hard to deal with…' (Lilly RSC3)

Within the initial research aims of focusing on the impact of working with children within a nurture group context three themes emerge from the data; the physiological impact of the work, impact on motivation and impact on personal relationships.

Physiological impact
The participants used a range of metaphors to describe the impact of their work with the children, some of which relate to physical impact:

'I'd had so many buttons pressed…' (Lilly RSC3)

'I was on my knees…' (Lilly SSC1)

and also exchanges with other colleagues:

'My face hit the floor and it was that thing of like, okay, take it on the chin. You've got to take that on the chin…' (Kerry SSC1).

When describing the impact of the permanent exclusion of one of the children with whom they worked closely, the metaphors included:

'When he left it felt like losing an arm.' (Kerry SSC1)

'I started to feel all right about him not being here and now it feels like the band aid has just been ripped off and I've started hurting all over again.' (Kerry SSC1)

The participants also included actual physical impact on them within their narrative. A key event that took place prior to the sessions was related by Lilly in preliminary discussions. Lilly had agreed with a child that, as it was the end of term, he could bring his skateboard to school and she took him into the playground to use it. The child encouraged Lilly to try his skateboard and when she did so, she fell off the skateboard. Aware that she was injured, she then walked the child back into the school, including walking down a flight of stairs. When they reached another member of staff inside the building, Lilly sank to the floor and was subsequently taken to hospital where she was diagnosed with a broken leg. More generally, the physical impact of the work was clearly illustrated:

"It does impact on your life because you're just going, 'Oh I'm so tired' I said before, 'I've got nothing else to give.' I just want to sit here, drink tea and then just fall asleep on the sofa, which most of my Fridays are as exciting as that." (Lilly RSC2)

'It's draining as well, it's tiring. It's tiring.' (Lilly RSC3)

'I was on my knees, I had nothing else to give at the end of the year and I was physically crying, it was my best year.' (Lilly SSC1).

Impact on motivation
Both participants expressed a very high level of commitment to their nurture work in both a professional and personal sense:

'I love my nurture group, I love my job.' (Lilly RSC3)

'That's what I love about the job, that is what gives me my drive, because I know by doing that sort of stuff I'm

hopefully supporting them and hopefully helping them to feel better about themselves, too, understanding themselves, too.' (Kerry RSC3)

In spite of this deep commitment to nurturing, a strong sense of their nurture group work impacting on their motivation was communicated:

'...a couple of hours just sat and thought about it …..that was me trying to…gee myself up to get in, a come on, come on, we can do this…' (Kerry RSC1)

'I felt like I wasn't giving all the children 100% what they needed … So I think because I felt so frustrated I was almost at a point where I thought, actually, I'm not even going to do it anymore …' (Lilly RSC1)

Motivation was also impacted by the particular phenomena of the 'differentness' in relation to other staff:

'If you are butting heads with the teacher, it's really difficult to want to continue.' (Lilly RSC2)

'So just personally I was sort of saying I don't want to go to work. For the first time in my life, I do not want to go.' (Lilly RSC1)

'I know both of us have been looking at other jobs too which is really bad.' (Kerry RSC1)

Impact on personal relationships
While it may be expected that professionals, at times, think about their work into their 'non-work' time in general, there was evidence of thoughts about nurture work dominating this time:

'I mean, I've even dreamt of it before… I was worried about him the whole time thinking, oh my God, what's happening to him at home and what's he doing, is he okay… and yes, even dreamt about being in this room.' (Kerry RSC1)

The impact on personal relationships was communicated in relation to friends' comments:

"…one of my friends said to me 'God, is that all you do?' I said, 'What do you mean?' She said, 'All you've done is talk about work.' 'What?' She said 'That's all you do, isn't it?'" (Kerry SSC3).

The participants' narratives particularly highlight the impact on their home life:

'I mean, I went home and I went, grrrrr, you know, screaming my head off.' (Kerry SSC1)

'I think everybody is feeling more positive around me because I'm feeling more positive in myself.' (Lilly RSC2)

'And when you finally get that recognition that actually what you are saying is right… it is a relief. It's a relief everywhere. It's a relief at work, it's a relief at home.' (Lilly RSC3)

And on relationships with family members:
'It did feel like it became… he became almost an extension of my own children, he was then… So they're always there, always.' (Kerry RSC2)

'We take the dog for a walk every evening… most of that half an hour is me talking at my husband about the frustrations of my day to the point that eventually he says, "Just stop. Just stop talking. You are doing it again."… there's so much going on in my own mind that I need to get out, that I can't focus on what he's saying to me.' (Lilly RSC2).

The recognition of this impact is clearly communicated through Lilly's reflection on changes in her relationship with her son:

'We sort of talk to each other in the mornings and we have a bit of a giggle on the way to school now rather than me shouting at him and bellowing and being stressed.' (Lilly RSC2)

Emergent findings
Through exploration of the research question as a guide rather than a destination (Kim, 2015), as a consequence of the collaborative, co-constructed nature of the research (May, 1997), further findings also emerged through the participants' narratives. These can be summarised as identifying three key factors that act as barriers and promoters for successful nurture group practice and the impact of the research process on the participants.

Successful nurture group practice
The three key factors that emerged through the narratives are: shared belief, friendship and leadership. The evidence for these factors are explored below.

Shared belief
As identified above, the participants evidenced strong beliefs in a nurture approach. The participants identified that sharing this strength of belief was a key factor that supported them when negotiating the challenges the work presents to them:

'It's that connection, it's knowing somebody and obviously myself and Kerry have both had the same training and we've both been in nurture for quite a while now.' (Lilly RSC3)

The significant use of the personal pronoun 'we' in the following extract further evidences the importance of a shared belief:

'That opportunity and seeing their faces, it's like a toddler-like delight isn't it? We looked at each other and said yes, this is why we do nurture.' (Lilly SSC3)

While the significance of times when their work together was not working well provides further evidence of the importance of the shared beliefs:

'It feels like we are all disjointed. It doesn't feel like we are flowing'. (Kerry RSC3)

Friendship
The importance of friendship that goes beyond professional teamwork was communicated as an important factor in the successful work of the participants:

'…we are really lucky and I think you've got to have that, you've got to have a good working relationship and a good friendship to obviously be able to co-lead a nurture group I think.' (Lilly RSC3)

'You've got to have a strong working and maybe strong friendship to be able to work together and give the best you can for these children.' (Lilly RSC3)

An important aspect of working together was identified as being physically with the other practitioner:

'…not even talk about nurture necessarily but just to sort of wander.' (Lilly RSC3)

Leadership
The impact of the school leadership was increasingly present in the participants' narratives across the research year. Four key issues related to leadership were communicated. These were; being listened to, feeling recognised and supported, not letting problems escalate, and a shared belief with the leadership.

Being listened to. Occurrences where members of the school leadership team were perceived as not having listened were highlighted as having a significant negative impact:

'…that thing where you just know she's not really listening…it was almost like we weren't being listened to in a way…that really just makes you feel undervalued.' (Lilly RSC3)

'I've tried to discuss about the whole situation and how it was dealt with and how I felt about it but I was shut down.' (Kerry RSC2)

Feeling recognised and supported. Beyond being listened to, the narratives identified the importance of their work and the challenges they encounter being acknowledged by leaders:

'So, for me, it's the relief of being recognised'. (Lilly RSC3)

'I almost feel like I'm always railroaded, I'm always round the outside of it.' (Kerry RSC2)

And that leaders communicate their support for the actions of the practitioners:

'So yes, I felt a bit funny about that then yesterday, unsupp… yes, unsupported, I guess, that thing of I feel like I'm doing everything I can but then not being able to talk to the correct person at that time.' (Kerry RSC2)

Kerry communicates feelings about being supported that impacted negatively on her work:

'…they don't trust me as much or they've lost confidence in me.' (Kerry RSC2)

'I'm doing the right thing by following procedures, policies, etc, but I'm not being backed up with it.' (Kerry RSC2)

And in contrast, Lilly identified a positive impact from positive recognition:

'I think the realisation that actually I must be doing something right is a good feeling.' (Lilly RSC2)

Not letting problems escalate. Further developing the theme of being listened to, recognised and supported, the issue of this taking place in a way that is timely, as perceived by the practitioners, was highlighted by the participants:

'…that thing of I feel like I'm doing everything I can but then not being able to talk to the correct person at that time.' (Kerry RSC2)

"Rather than a proper discussion and it only seems to get to a proper meeting point when you go, 'Do you know what, I've had enough of this.' And I find that really strange because you don't need to get to that point of like going, 'Do you know what, I've had enough.'." (Kerry RSC2)

These comments highlight the perception that problems become greater when not addressed at the time of need.

Shared beliefs and being involved in decision making. A key barrier that was identified in the narrative was a perceived gap between the participants and their managers in the area of beliefs and the decision making:

"I feel that actually there's so much more we could do and then if you want to do those things and then you're almost being cut off then you think eventually it will just be, 'well, you know what, you do it your way.'." (Kerry RSC2)

"So yesterday I just went, 'Well that's fine if that's what you want to do but you find someone else to run nurture because I'm not doing it.'." (Kerry RSC1)

'How can we possibly make it a success if we're not all singing from the same hymn sheet?' (Lilly SSC2)

Impact of the process

In response to both the emerging findings that relate to barriers and promoters of effective practice, and also the participants' comments in the research sessions about how they had changed during the research, the participants agreed to write a reflection about the impact of the research process and additional 'supervision' sessions.

The comments and reflections highlight a significant consideration for enabling nurture group practice:

'So even having that, the ability to talk through those things, because you can't carry that burden just on your own, you need to offload. If you constantly store it, I think you'd end up an emotional wreck by the end of it.' (Lilly RSC3)

'The research process was a very positive experience. While it highlighted …the non-existence of supervision for nurture practitioners within my setting, I have become a more confident and effective practitioner, developed personally and become more self-aware. The process has made me continuously self-evaluate. I have a deeper understanding of my beliefs and boundaries.' (Kerry reflection)

'And I feel happy and I just feel being able to talk and being able… I felt more confident after our chat actually and after reading through some things I said, I thought, yes, I am going to say that, in a constructive way.' (Lilly reflection)

'The supervision has been vital this year…it has given me the reflection time I needed to make valuable decisions and to recognise when it is okay to say no. It also gave me time to just talk to somebody who wasn't connected to school but understands the importance of nurture coupled with the importance of taking care of yourself to be the best person to do the job I love.' (Lilly reflection)

'I found talking to another professional, who had been a nurture practitioner themselves, easier to discuss situations that had happened with children within the nurture group and staff. It put me at ease and I felt able to give my opinions, thoughts and feelings without being judged.' (Kerry reflection)

'The process allowed me to have a voice and to realise the impact of nurture upon myself.' (Kerry reflection)

These comments identify the positive impact of having a sympathetic external listener, who facilitates reflection on the part of the practitioners and the exploration of their professional and personal challenges. The fact that the listener shares the values and professional understanding of nurture group work is identified as having a positive impact on the 'supervision' relationship.

While these comments may imply that the 'supervision' relationship fulfils a supplementary and supportive role, the participants identified that this may actually be a requirement:

'We needed the emotional support to be able to just offload sometimes because it can be heavy, can't it?' (Lilly RSC3)

DISCUSSION

This research has highlighted that the nature of the specialised work within a nurture group, which could be identified as having a significant element of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 2003, p16), and the challenging behaviours encountered, have a significant impact on practitioners. There may be a literature gap in the acknowledgement of the extent to which practitioners in nurture groups encounter physically and emotionally challenging behaviours. This research has identified the way in which the professional challenges of nurture group work impact significantly on the personal lives of practitioners.

The emergent findings have led to the consideration of factors that impact on the resilience of nurture group practitioners within the context of these challenges. Participants in this research identified the following factors within their setting: shared belief, friendship and leadership, and also the positive impact of the 'supervision' opportunities provided as part of the research process. These factors relate closely to the findings of Warin and Hibbin, (2016) that relationships are at the core of successful nurture groups. Alignment is also identified with the four promoters of teacher resilience: thoughts, relationships, actions, and challenges (Greenfield, 2015) and also the protective factors of sense of agency, support (including a competent and caring leadership team), pride in achievements and competence identified in resilient teachers by Howard and Johnson (2004, p415). While the factors of shared belief and friendship can be seen to be present for the participants, underpinned by interpersonal relationships (Rae, 2016), the factor of leadership, including agency and support, is an area that can be fostered and developed. The negative impact of leadership that is not perceived to support practitioners, nor give agency, was clear throughout the narrative.

The positive impact of and the need for a 'supervision' relationship was made clear by the participants. This is within the context of national education policies where early years practitioners are the only education practitioners who have a statutory right to supervision (Department for Education, 2017, Sections: 3.21, 3.22). This research further identified that there may be value in a 'supervision' relationship that is underpinned by a relationship based on congruence (Rogers, 1957),

where the supervisor's experience and values are matched with those of the practitioners, enabling the practitioners to be deeply heard (Rogers, 1967).

A range of limitations can be identified within this research, forefronted by the specific context of the nurture group setting. The type of nurture group, the age phase and location of the school and the personal relationships and histories of the staff within the school may all have presented particular characteristics and meanings into the narrative, which may not have been present if the research were undertaken in a different setting. A recognition of these limitations can act as a springboard for further research into settings with different contexts, leading to a wider body of knowledge. A further limitation may be considered, linked to the relationships between the researcher and the participants. In particular, the implications of gender and status, given that the researcher was a male university lecturer and the participants were female practitioners without university level qualifications. In addition, further research challenges to the researcher-participant relationship of trust and confidentiality were faced by the researcher in negotiating their relationship with the gatekeepers, the senior leadership of the school, and their desire for tensions and challenges raised during the research to be shared with them.

CONCLUSION

This research did not set out to provide generalisable findings, given the limitations of being small-scale and contextual in character. However, this is compensated for by the resulting, 'inclusive, enriched and nuanced understanding' (West, 2010, p. 84) which can, rather, contribute to the understanding of the work of nurture group practitioners as a way of providing areas for leaders and policy makers to consider.

This research has identified that the challenges presented by nurture group work can have a significant impact on the motivation of practitioners, and on their professional and personal lives.

This research has further identified key factors that can mediate the impact of these challenges, contributing to the resilience of practitioners within nurture groups, and that where these practitioners are teaching assistants rather than teachers, these factors may impact differently as a result of the status difference between these two roles.

As a result of the findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Research into the nature and extent of the physical and emotional challenges encountered by nurture group practitioners should be undertaken

- Research into the impact of supervision on the resilience of nurture group practitioners should be undertaken

- Leaders and policy makers concerned with improving the outcomes for nurture group provision may benefit from considering how to support the resilience of practitioners, in particular through:
  - Considering relationships between practitioners
  - Considering how shared beliefs can be developed
  - Developing understanding and awareness of the nature of leadership approaches and relationships and how these impact on practitioners: this may include issues of status, shared vision, relationships and decision making
  - Evaluating the need for supervision or other opportunities that give the opportunity for practitioners to speak, reflect and be heard

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