

NURTURING THE NURTURERS: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE WELLBEING OF A GROUP OF NURTURE GROUP PRACTITIONERS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Previous research exploring the role of nurture group practitioners (NGPs) has highlighted the complexities of the skilled work undertaken by these educators working with some of the most vulnerable pupils in schools, however, little research has been dedicated to investigating the demographics of this workforce and their perceptions of the stressors that affect their wellbeing in the workplace. This case study utilised an adapted version of constructivist grounded theory methodology to analyse data gathered from demographic questionnaires, wellbeing indicator surveys and semi-structured interviews to develop an understanding of NGPs that can be explored in future research. Data analysis resulted in the emergence of some distinctive concepts indicating a preliminary theoretical understanding of the emotional and psychological resources that NGPs employ in their daily work that act as stress moderators, allowing them to cope with the stressors of their roles more effectively, thereby enhancing their wellbeing and ultimately creating better learning environments for the pupils in their nurture groups. Results suggest that NGPs have a unique 'resource capability' and other attributes associated with high levels of emotional intelligence (EI) and that further understanding, development and protection of these attributes in relation to workplace stressors would be beneficial for their wellbeing and work-related outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing recognition that the school environment plays a major role in the social and emotional competence and wellbeing of children (Education Support Partnership, 2017a). Extensive developmental research into this area links pupils' mastery of social-emotional competencies with greater wellbeing and better academic performance, and further shows that the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of academic and personal difficulties experienced by pupils throughout their lives (Eisenberg, 2006 and Guerra and Bradshaw, 2008 cited in Durlak et. al., 2011). Yet in the current educational climate where schools are under increasing pressures to enhance their academic performance in the face of time constraints, competing demands and limited financial resources, addressing the social and emotional needs of children adequately through effective intervention presents a difficult challenge (Durlak et. al., 2011). Founded on the principles of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982 and Ainsworth et. al.,

2015) and evidence-based practices (Davies, 2011), nurture groups (NGs) have been found to offer an effective short-term, inclusive and focused psychosocial intervention in schools (Hughes and Schlösser, 2014).

Schools must fulfil their statutory duties towards pupils with special education needs (SEN), including those experiencing any social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) (Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, 2015). The vital role that educational professionals, such as Nurture Group Practitioners (NGPs), who facilitate specialist learning provision for pupils with SEMH in mainstream schools is widely acknowledged, with evidence demonstrating that it is the skills, energy and commitment of these practitioners that constitutes the most important resource a school has in providing care and education to these vulnerable pupils (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005; Syrnyk, 2012 and Cole, Visser and Upton, 2012). It is further acknowledged that NGPs are often involved in work that is emotionally and physically

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challenging and that they face a range of stressors dissimilar to mainstream teaching staff (Cole, 2010). A causal relationship between practitioners' emotional wellbeing and pupil outcomes is well documented in the research (Briner and Dewberry, 2007; Roffey 2012 and Paterson and Grantham, 2016), with schools' responsibility towards promoting staff wellbeing and addressing stress levels also clearly established (Weare, 2015).

A study by Boyer and Gillespie (2000) demonstrated that to successfully promote the wellbeing of pupils with SEMH, providing adequate support, training, understanding and monitoring, and the setting of realistic expectations of the practitioners that work with them, is of prime importance. There is currently one NG for every 14.3 schools in England (Nurture Group Network, 2015), yet there is no demographic information available for NGPs and little is known about the training, expertise and experience of the staff immersed in the nurture approach in schools across the country (Davies, 2011; Syrnyk, 2012 and Middleton, 2018).

Drawing from participants representing NGPs in Hampshire where 2.5% of the NGs operating in England (Nurture Group Network, 2015) are located, this study aimed to: gather demographic information towards providing a more detailed picture of NGPs in this region; provide a comprehensive examination of the NGP's perceptions of their own wellbeing; and suggest possible interventions that can be adopted to enhance NGPs wellbeing in the workplace. It is further hoped that the findings of this study may highlight areas that develop understanding of NGPs that can be explored in further research.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the past two decades numerous studies have been conducted producing a growing body of research evidence linking overall staff wellbeing to their performance in the workplace (Currie, 2001; Cotton and Hart, 2003; MacDonald, 2005; Department for Work and Pensions, 2006; Tehrani et. al. 2007 and Baptiste, 2008). The literature indicates that wellbeing is a key determining factor in workplace quality, performance and productivity (Bryson, et. al. 2014). In the UK, employers are bound by the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) to ensure the health and safety of their employees at work, including physical and mental/emotional aspects (Cousins et. al., 2004). A seminal review commissioned by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (Cox, 1993), found evidence to support the assertion that the experience of stress at work was associated with changes in behaviour and physiological function and noted that stressor reduction was the most promising avenue for intervention.

Previous research in this area has shown that to map, quantify or compare any change within a population's wellbeing, it is first necessary to be able to measure it (Bryant, et. al, 2015). Warr (2013) suggests that the effective measurement of subjective wellbeing requires several components including that the instrument of measure is technically sound, and that critically, the individual's own perspective of their mental wellbeing within the scope of the domain of employment, is taken into consideration. Based on previous research and in consultation with stakeholders (Mackay, et. al., 2004), the HSE developed a taxonomy of the most significant work-related stressors affecting the UK working population, called 'Management Standards' (MS). The MS highlight six key areas of work that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence (Kerr, et. al., 2009). The HSE also developed a self-report survey instrument, known as the Management Standards Indicator Tool (HSEMSIT) (HSE, 2018a) as a resource that could be used to investigate employees' exposure to these dimensions. Previous research undertaken by Cousins et. al. (2004) provides a detailed discussion of the development of this tool, including evidence of its validity and reliability.

Increasingly, alarming levels of stress and mental health issues among teachers, including depression, have been reported (Travers and Cooper, 2007). A recently commissioned report presented the key findings from a survey of 1,250 education professionals in the UK (Education Support Partnership, 2017b) and of the sample studied, 75% of the participants reported experiencing behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms where work was a contributing factor. Over half the participants surveyed in the same investigation also stated that they had already, or were considering, leaving education due to factors such as volume of workload, health pressures and the need for a better work-life balance. A key recommendation of this study was that to retain the country's latest generation of talented teachers, leaders and others, making their mental health and wellbeing a priority would be essential (Education Support Partnership, 2017a).

Researchers have also focused their attention on the causal links between teacher wellbeing and pupil performance (Briner and Dewberry, 2007). Published reviews conducted in 2011 (Spilt, et. al., 2011) and in 2014 (Bajorek, et. al., 2014) confirm that teachers are important adults in pupils' scholastic lives and consider the importance of the teacher-pupil dynamic on the wellbeing of teachers. Although both studies acknowledge that considerable research remains to be completed in this area, it was found that teacher wellbeing has effects on both a pupil's socio-emotional adjustment and pupil academic performance.

The literature also acknowledges the complexities and challenges of teachers working with children with SEN, in terms of the high levels of distress and burnout they experience at work (Travers and Cooper, 1993; Morvant, et. al. 1995; Greenglass, et. al. 1997 and Billingsley, 2004). Job burnout is conceptualised as a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors experienced in the workplace (Maslach, et. al. 2001). Research also suggests that pupils experiencing SEN are likely to require more learning support than others and are often co-identified as having additional needs, such as SEMH (Ellis et.al. 2012). Special needs teachers have reported that pupils with SEMH are some of the hardest to serve, and those working in this field have the highest rate of burnout (Garwood, et.al., 2017). Cole (2010) describes this work in more detail – as “emotionally draining, physically exhausting and occasionally dangerous” (p1). Pupils of disengaged or exhausted SEN teachers are reported to be frequently disruptive, struggle socially and emotionally, and attain assessment goals less frequently – all of which impact academic development (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009 and Ruble and McGrew, 2013). These findings would suggest that it may be time to give more attention to the psychosocial components required by specialist education practitioners to effectively serve students experiencing SEN and SEMH.

NURTURE GROUP PRACTITIONERS

NGs have been subject to a wide range of research investigations during the past 50 years, and are described as small, structured teaching groups that play a key role in the mainstream education of pupils with SEN, including SEMH (Cooper and Lovey, 1999; Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005; Sanders, 2007 and Hughes and Schlösser, 2014). As the pupils who attend NGs can present with varying difficulties that may categorise them as unable to thrive in a mainstream class, they are often referred to specialist Pupil Referral Units (Boxall, 2010) and can be at risk of exclusion (Syrnyk, 2012). Typically, a NG is a class in an infant, primary or secondary school where two adults – usually a teacher and learning support assistant (LSA) – work with a small group of pupils (Boxall, 2010). Although there is a need for specific research to provide unique insight into the particular characteristics and experiences of NGPs (Davies, 2011 and Syrnyk, 2012), studies suggest that NGPs have particularly complex and demanding roles that differ from their mainstream colleagues, in that they must cater for a diverse range of learning, social and emotional needs and manage high stress situations in the course of their work (Syrnyk, 2012). In a recent study Middleton (2018) noted there appears to be a lack of recognition of the level and extent of the physically and emotionally challenging behaviours experienced by NGPs, and that the impact this has on them is missing from current research evidence.

As well as highlighting the need to know more about the challenges NGPs face in their work Syrnyk's study (2012) also drew attention to the issues regarding training pathways and professional qualification of NGPs, concluding that ‘little remains known about the training and experience’ of NGPs (Syrnyk, 2012, p148). Evidence suggests that the training pathway of an NGP is unclear and that qualifications of NGPs varies (Bishop and Swain, 2000; Syrnyk, 2012 and Shaver and McClatchey, 2013). Indeed, the main training specific to the nurture approach, available to qualified teachers and support staff alike, is available in the form of a Certified Level-7 short course, ‘The Theory and Practice of Nurture Groups’, offered in England, Scotland and Wales by nurtureuk – a charitable organisation that provides resources and support in the development of NGs (nurtureuk, 2018). The research by Middleton (2018) referred to earlier, focused specifically on teaching assistants (also referred to as LSAs) working as NGPs, noting that: ‘accurate data about the staffing composition of nurture groups in the UK is unavailable’ (Middleton, 2018, p23), despite anecdotal evidence showing that a significant number of NGs are staffed solely by LSAs. The most recent school workforce census (Department for Education, 2017) states that TAs/LSAs account for 27.8% of the school workforce, but there is no differentiation of the varying work roles and responsibilities for LSAs detailed in the report.

RESEARCH APPROACH

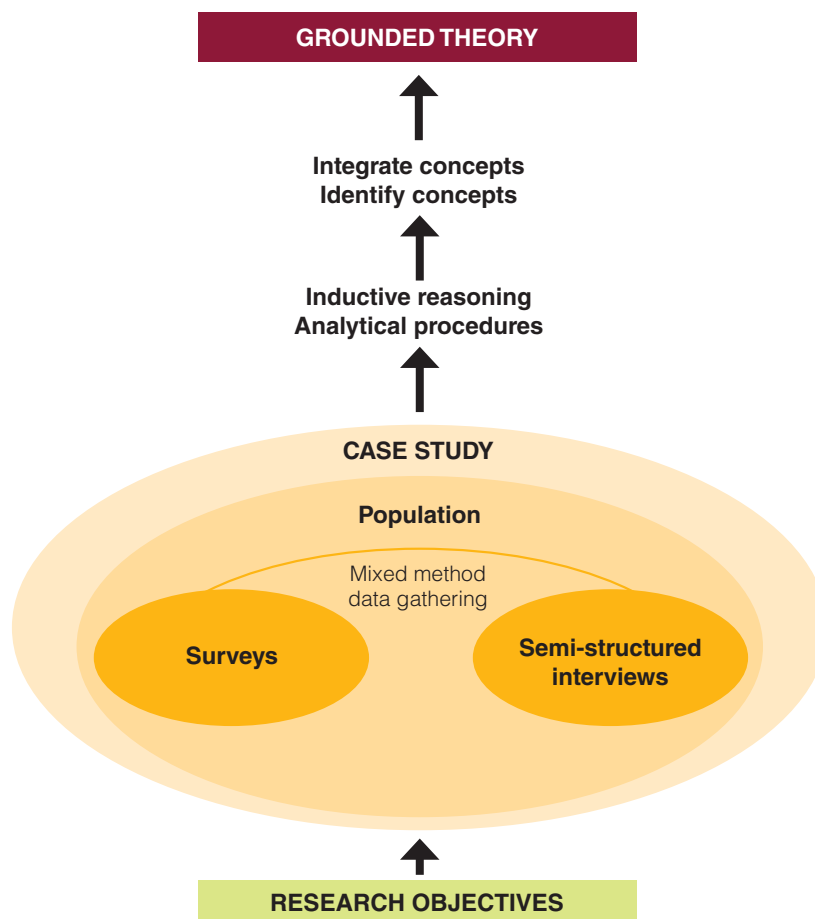
This study was mainly informed by constructivist grounded theory in that data gathering incorporated the multiple views and experiences of participants to identify and explain these conceptually through theory development (Breckenridge, et. al. 2012). There are two types of research activities in grounded theory methodology: data gathering procedures and analytic procedures (Corbin, 2017). Through a process known as inductive reasoning, the methodological process uses actual data gathered through field work to identify, develop, and integrate concepts (Corbin, 2017), making this an appropriate method for an exploratory piece of research to gain understanding of an under-researched area (Charmaz, 2006) that can be useful in practice (Hallberg, 2006). The outcome of a grounded theory study is the development of an empirically grounded theory, ‘both generated and verified in the data’ (Hallberg, 2006, p143), that can be further tested and verified with new data and applied and used in practice.

A case study approach allows the researcher to observe characteristics of an individual unit or population by intensive analysis of the diverse phenomena therein (Cohen et. al. 2000), with a view to using the results and findings to establish hypotheses about the wider population into which the unit belongs in future research (Yin, 1984), making this methodology suited

to the parameters of this study where a relatively small sample population size exists. For the purposes of addressing the research objectives central to this study an identified advantage of case study research is that it can provide a: ‘unique example of real people in real situations (Cohen et. al. 2000, p181), thereby enabling the researcher to understand specific contextual factors in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis. Case study research is flexible in that it relies on multiple sources of evidence, so can include both qualitative and quantitative evidence during data gathering (Wilson, 2013). This so-called mixed methods approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003) was selected for gathering the data to explore the research objectives identified in this study, as each source of data provided different types of information, allowing the researcher to examine a variety of experiences and perceptions of the sample population. This approach further addressed some limitations observed in the literature by facilitating triangulation of data which, in this instance, is understood as: ‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’ (Denzin, 1978, p291) towards providing a holistic view in illuminating data in context (Jick, 1979).

Combining grounded theory and case study research has been demonstrated in previous research and has become a preferred way of producing grounded theory in research areas such as information technology (Orlikowski, 1993; Mazhevski and Chuboda, 2000; Lehmann, 2001 and Urquhart, 2001 cited in Fernández, 2005). This study has sought to address this observation by employing a case-oriented methodological strategy developed by Yin (1984), combined with the collection and analysis of a category of concepts/themes based on the adapted grounded theory methodology developed by Charmaz (2014) (see **Figure 1**). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), this strategy enables the use of a theoretical framework to study the case in greater depth. By employing a constant comparative method, whereby every part of data – emerging codes, categories, properties, and dimensions as well as different parts of the data – are constantly compared with all other parts of the data, it is possible to explore variations, similarities and differences (Hallberg, 2006).

Figure 1: Combined Yin (1984) case-oriented and Charmaz (2014) grounded theory model used in this study (see also Appendix 13)



DATA GATHERING

Observing the HSE guidelines in deploying and using the HSEMSIT (HSE, 2004a), an adapted version of the survey (HSE, 2018a) was distributed through an anonymous paper version provided to NGPs at a Hampshire Nurture Group Support Group meeting, with an electronic version of the questionnaire emailed to NGPs not present at the meeting. A purposive sample of 60 self-completed demographic questionnaires and 63 self-completed HSEMSIT surveys was obtained. The cross-sectional survey consisted of eleven demographic questions followed by the HSEMSIT scales investigating job-related stressors. The six management standards (MS) were measured by the 35-item HSEMSIT that included seven subscales. Two response scales were used within the tool: a five-point Likert-type scale and a five-point frequency scale. To facilitate analysis, survey responses were compiled into the Excel-based HSE Analysis Tool (HSEMSAT) (HSE, 2018b) according to the published guidelines (HSE, 2004b). This generated a score and a recommendation for action at the item level as well as an aggregate score and recommendation for each of seven sets of working conditions.

Semi-structured interviews were selected to gather qualitative data. This method afforded the use of predetermined, yet flexible and open-ended questions, that allowed the interviewer the opportunity to clarify and explore issues that arose spontaneously during the interview (Berg, 2009; Ryan et. al., 2009 cited in Doody and Noonan, 2013). A convenience sample was drawn from NGPs willing to volunteer to participate in telephonic, semi-structured interviews. Two volunteer participants were identified from this group and written consent to take part in the study was obtained from each of the individuals. Participants were interviewed telephonically at a pre-arranged time by the researcher. The interview schedule contained eight questions of a demographic nature, thereafter participants were asked to consider particular aspects of their roles and how these affected both their physical and emotional wellbeing. Each interview was recorded and saved as an audio file and subsequently transcribed as a MS Word document. Transcripts were read and analysed, and in accordance with the grounded theory approach, several cycles of coding analysis were conducted.

Employing an In Vivo coding approach the words and concepts of the participants themselves were used as an open code for the purpose of capturing the meaning inherent in NGPs' unique experience (Wilson, 2013 and Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding was used as a second cycle analytic process, to develop categories wherein similarly coded data was clustered together and reviewed before the assignment of tentative category names (Saldaña, 2016). The resulting analytic categories and subcategories from the axial coding were recorded in the form of code maps. A code map was produced after the first interview to show the emerging categories that were then used to adapt the interview questions through theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), so that the developing theory could be expanded to gather new insights and refine concepts already gained (Kolb, 2012), before being tested further with the second participant. Analytic data identified in the axial coding cycle was extended through focused coding by synthesising, analysing and conceptualising the data, with the purpose of advancing the theoretical direction of the work (Charmaz, 2014). This coding method then continued until full saturation of the data was achieved, to establish the core conceptual category (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). **Figures 2, 3 and 4** show examples of the coding process described above, and **Figure 5** shows a workflow diagram of the Charmaz (2014) model of adapted grounded theory applied in this study.

This study was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011), and in adherence to the researcher's own university ethics committee guidelines. Voluntary participants gave their written informed consent agreeing to their participation and confidentiality was maintained by the anonymisation of all participant data and interview scripts. In compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 and to ensure safeguarding for participants, all raw data collected in the form of survey questionnaires, research project notes and transcripts of interviews were stored securely for the duration of the study.

Figure 2: Example of In Vivo coding

Transcript	Initial In Vivo coding	Memos
<p>Do you think you would have benefited from individual counselling or support if that had been possible?</p> <p>I do actually – I do. I think they say that even counsellors have to go for their own counselling, don't they? I think I would certainly have appreciated that.</p>	<p>"I do"¹⁹²</p> <p>"Counsellors go for counselling"¹⁹⁶</p> <p>"I would certainly"¹⁹⁴</p> <p>"Appreciated that"^{195d}</p>	<p>Participant identifies that individual counselling would have certainly benefited her as it recognised as beneficial in other therapeutic professions.</p>

Figure 3: Example of semi-structured Interview Axial Code Map



Figure 4: Example of focused coding code map

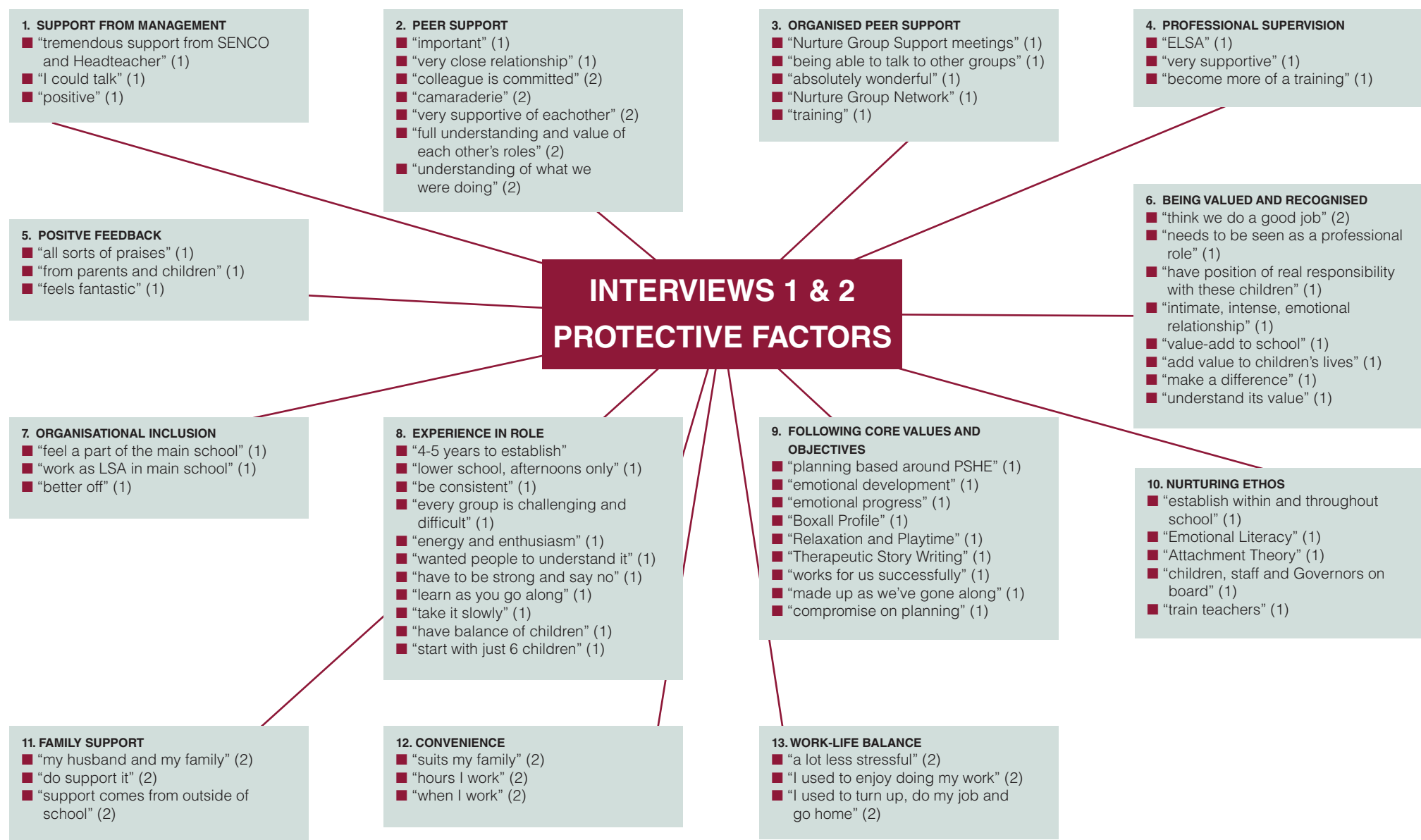
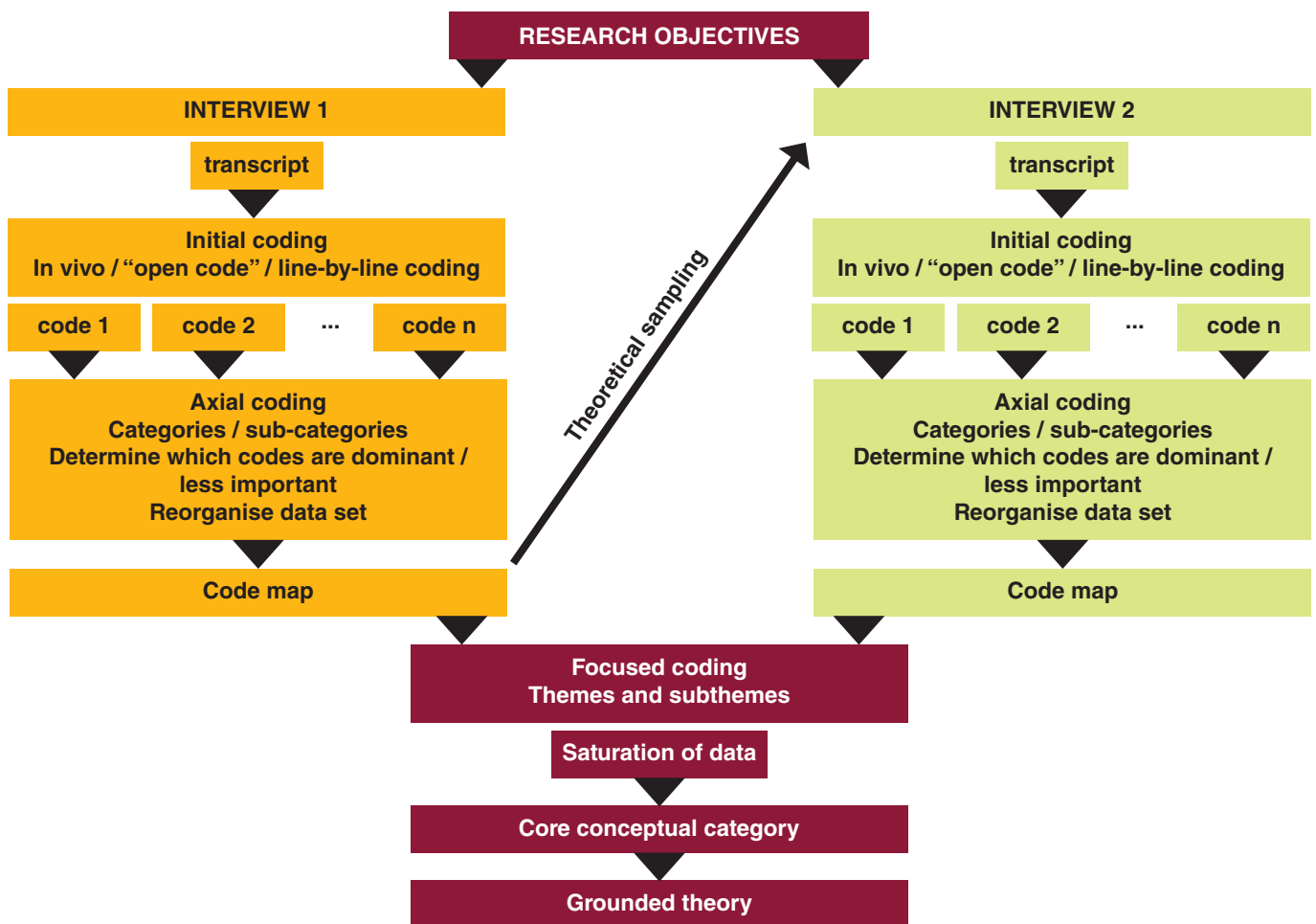


Figure 5: Workflow of the Charmaz (2014) model of adapted grounded theory applied in this study



FINDINGS

The research objectives of this study have been explored through the analysis of data arising from quantitative and qualitative study strands that can provide the level of detail and comprehensiveness needed to understand the complex social phenomena being investigated (Kawamura et. al. 2009). The integration of the data and analytical procedures form the basis for the generation of emerging grounded theory (Creamer, 2008).

The demographic data gathered from questionnaire responses (**Table 1**) allowed for the generation of a representation of the NGP population in this study based on aggregate scores (see **Figure 6**).

The results of the HSEMSAT (**Table 2** and **Table 3**) shows that scores on seven items distributed across three of the seven analysis categories were identified as being below the 20th percentile in comparison to benchmark data gathered by HSE from 136 organisations and were 'red lighted' with the recommendation, 'Urgent action needed'. At the aggregate level, one of the MS

categories (Demands) was identified as being below the 20th percentile. In addition, a small number (N=6) of the participants reported that they are always, often or sometimes bullied.

Scores on several items (N=6) were identified as being between the 20th and 40th percentile in comparison to benchmark data and were 'yellow lighted' with the recommendation 'clear need for improvement'. At the aggregate level one of the categories (Control) was identified as being in this group. Scores on several (N=9) items were identified as being between the 50th and 79th percentile and were 'blue lighted' with the recommendation, 'good, but need for improvement'. At the aggregate level, three of the analysis categories were identified as being in this group. Scores on several (N=13) items were identified as being above the 80% percentile in comparison to benchmark data and were 'green lighted' with the recommendation 'doing very well – need to maintain performance'. These items were dispersed across six of the analysis categories. At the aggregate level, two of the analysis categories were identified as being in this group.

Figure 6: Graphic representation of a NGP in this population (aggregate scores)

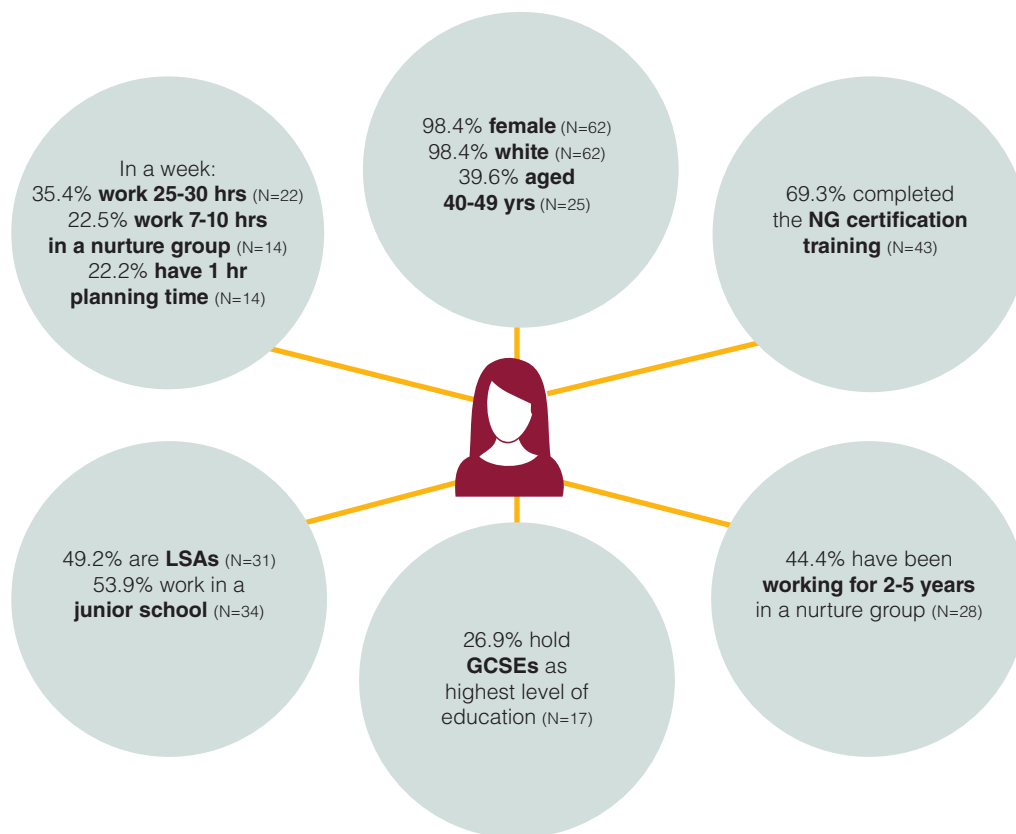


Table 1: Participant demographics

Variables	Number	%
GENDER		
Female	62	98.4
Male	1	1.5
ETHNICITY		
White	62	98.4
Asian	1	1.5
AGE		
21–29	6	9.5
31–39	7	11.1
40–49	25	39.6
50–59	23	36.5
60+	2	3.1
LEVEL OF EDUCATION		
GCSE	17	26.9
A-Level	11	17.4
Foundation Degree	2	3.1
Bachelor Degree	12	19
Graduate Degree	11	17.4
NVQ Level 3	2	3.1
Other (CSE/HNC/LACHEL3 Diploma/O-Level/PACE/Registered Nurse)	8	12.6
TEACHING QUALIFICATION STATUS		
LSA/TA	31	49.2
ELSA	23	36.5
HLTA	6	9.5
QTS	10	15.8
SENCO	3	4.7
Other (Child & Family Support Worker/Home-School Link Worker/Mental Health Lead/Nurture Group Leader/Pastoral Support Worker/Senior Inclusion Tutor)	9	14.2
COMPLETED 3-DAY NURTURE GROUP CERTIFICATION COURSE?		
Yes	43	69.3
No	19	30.6

LENGTH OF TIME WORKING AS A NURTURE GROUP PRACTITIONER		
0–1 year	21	33.3
2–5 years	28	44.4
2–10 years	14	22.2
10+ years	0	0
TYPE OF SCHOOL CURRENTLY EMPLOYED IN		
Infant	21	33.3
Junior	34	53.9
Secondary	8	12.7
Specialist Provision Unit	0	0
Independent	0	0
WEEKLY CONTRACTED WORKING HOURS		
15–20	11	17.7
20–23	7	11.2
25–30	22	35.4
30–35	8	12.9
35–38	13	20.9
38+	1	1.6
WEEKLY HOURS WORKING IN A NURTURE GROUP		
1–2	9	14.5
2–3	3	4.8
3–4	4	6.4
4–5	6	9.6
6–7	13	20.9
7–10	14	22.58
10+	13	20.9
PLANNING HOURS ALLOCATED PER WEEK		
None	12	19
30 minutes	2	3.1
1 hour	14	22.2
1.5 hours	7	11.1
2 hours	13	20.6
3 hours	4	6.3
Other (As required/if time allows at end of session/'Snatch-time'/varies/none necessary/4–6 hours termly)	11	17.4

Table 2: Summary of HSEMSAT results

	Your results	Suggested interim target	Suggested longer term target
Demands	2.80	3.00	3.29
Control	3.23	3.38	3.72
Managers' support	3.69	3.69	3.69
Peer support	4.12	4.12	4.12
Relationships	4.02	4.04	4.04
Role	4.29	4.31	4.31
Change	3.21	3.24	3.24

Data set: Organisational averages

KEY

- Doing very well – need to maintain performance**
Represents those at, above or close to the 80th percentile
- Good, but need for improvement**
Represents those better than average but not yet at, above or close to the 80th percentile
- Clear need for improvement**
Represents those likely to be below average but not below the 20th percentile
- Urgent action needed**
Represents those below the 20th percentile

Table 3: Results of HSEMSAT questions grouped by stressor (aggregate scores)

DEMANDS

Question	Average
03 Different groups at work demand things	2.73
06 I have unachievable deadlines	2.28
09 I have to work very intensively	2.03
12 I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do	2.83
16 I am unable to take sufficient breaks	3.15
18 I am pressured to work long hours	3.64
20 I have to work very fast	3.51
22 I have unrealistic time pressures	3.21
Overall	2.80

CONTROL

Question	Average
02 I can decide when to take a break	2.70
10 I have say in my own work speed	3.38
15 I have a choice in deciding how I do my work	3.78
19 I have a choice in deciding what I do at work	3.39
25 I have some say over the way I work	3.85
30 My working time can be flexible	2.28
Overall	3.23

MANAGERS' SUPPORT

Question	Average
08 I am given supportive feedback on the work I do	3.45
23 I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem	3.83
29 I can talk to my line manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work	4.02
33 I am supported through emotionally demanding work	3.38
35 My line manager encourages me at work	3.80
Overall	3.69

SUPPORT

Question	Average
07 If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me	4.33
24 I get help and support I need from colleagues	4.10
27 I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues	3.87
31 My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems	4.17
Overall	4.12

RELATIONSHIPS

Question	Average
05 I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour	4.22
14 There is friction or anger between colleagues	3.70
21 I am subject to bullying at work	4.66*
34 Relationships at work are strained	3.50
Overall	4.02

*6 (10%) of the staff who responded report that they are always, often or sometimes bullied.

ROLE

Question	Average
01 I am clear what is expected of me at work	4.35
04 I know how to go about getting my job done	4.37
11 I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are	4.33
13 I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department	4.14
17 I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation	4.26
Overall	4.29

CHANGE

Question	Average
26 I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work	3.20
28 Staff are always consulted about change at work	3.10
32 When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice	3.32
Overall	3.21

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Demographic data collected from interview participants are summarised in **Table 4** below.

Table 4: Demographic data of the interview participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Job title	School type	Teacher status	Level of education	Nurture Training Certification	Work experience in NGs	Hours p/w worked in NG
1	Female	51 years	Nurture Group Leader	Junior	LSA/ELSA	BA(Hons)	Yes	10 yrs	15 hrs
2	Female	43 years	Nurture Group Leader	Infant	LSA/ELSA	BA	Yes	5 yrs	8 hrs

The following themes were identified through data analysis: demands; support and relationships; role; personal attributes and physical and emotional effects of stress. **Table 5** presents a thematic map of the key themes and sub-themes.

Table 4: Demographic data of the interview participants

Themes	Sub-themes	
1. DEMANDS	Risk factor	Protective factor
	Planning	Timetabling
	Skills range	Following nurture curriculum
	Behaviour of children	Experience in role
		Work-life balance
		Convenience
2. SUPPORT & RELATIONSHIPS	Risk factor	Protective factor
	Lack of support form management	Support from management
	Lack of value	Being values and recognised
	Negative feedback	Support from peers
	Isolation	Support from family
	Lack of communication	Organised peer support
	Job insecurity	Professional supervision
3. ROLE	Risk factor	
	Lack of understanding of role	
	Lack of understanding of nurture practice	
	Conflicting values and objectives	
	Lack of vision	
	Conflict with teachers	
4. PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES		
5. PHYSICAL & EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF STRESS		

Demands

The participants identified a range of risk and protective factors that related to their workload, work patterns, work environment and the choice they had in the way they worked. Within this theme, several sub-themes emerged.

Planning demands, including differentiation of curriculum subjects, associated with running NGs was identified as one of the major stressors affecting both participants in their work, with both reporting that planning the lessons was not within their range of skills or expertise and this factor had led to sustained stress:

I'm not a qualified teacher and I have not had to prepare planning like a teacher before nurture group. We were trying to include maths and English and it was well, how do we differentiate the work for the nurture group children? (Interview 1)

Another major risk factor identified was assuming responsibility for a large number of children with behavioural difficulties which was deemed a common issue in many schools:

...the biggest thing was that they chucked the 12 worst-behaved children in the school all into the nurture group as a 'sin bin', it felt. (Interview 1)

Experience in the role was cited as a protective factor in that when confidence in the role increased, the physical and emotional demands reduced. Additionally, experience allowed effective compartmentalisation, creating a balance between work and homelife. Additionally, the convenience and suitability of the participant's work structure was described as protective.

Support and relationships

The participants identified a range of risk and protective factors affecting their wellbeing related to the relationships within the work environment and the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided to them, both professionally and personally. Support received from school leadership was cited as an important protective factor. In contrast a lack of understanding and interest from management was cited as a major stressor:

I would say the other massive, massive deal is the [lack of] support from the top, so support from the headteacher... the lack of interest that comes from the top is very much indicative of how they view nurture group. (Interview 2)

Recognition and value of their work, in the form of positive feedback from the school leadership, parents, and the pupils was identified as protective. Conversely, when negative feedback was received, the impact on wellbeing was negative:

... positive is the value that you feel that you add to the school when you have real support from your headteacher; and the feedback you get from parents and children that make you feel that you do add value to children's lives and that you are making a difference. (Interview 1)

A significant protective factor identified by participants was support they received from their fellow nurture group colleagues:

We both had full understanding of each other's roles and the value of what we were doing, so the relationship really supported me. (Interview 2)

Additionally, the support and understanding received from family helped to mitigate some of the stressors experienced at work:

Outside of work, my husband, my family – they do support [the work] and understand its value. (Interview 2)

External support organisations were cited as protective factors in the form of nurtureuk, and the termly Hampshire Nurture Group Support Group meetings. Additionally, the professional supervision received by participants in their roles as ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) was reported as being supportive in their NG work.

Feelings of isolation were cited as being significantly affective and this concept was expanded to incorporate physical isolation due to location of the NG away from the main school building:

I think that feeling a little bit isolated from the main school – that can be physical isolation because we are out in the hut. Also the kind of not being involved in the main school because I just run the nurture group in the afternoons only, so I don't really have that much input into the whole school. (Interview 1)

Isolation was also described in terms of the NG not being part of the main school staffing structure, which affected communication between NGPs, staff and school leadership:

[We] weren't part of any other team within in the school – so you have your year group teams or stuff and the camaraderie and the support and the understanding that you get with that was definitely not there. (Interview 2)

Job insecurity was cited as a notable risk factor affecting wellbeing:

It causes a lot of stress, a lot of pressure, a lot of looking over your shoulder permanently not quite sure if somebody's going to suddenly swoop in and take the role away because they don't see the true value of it. (Interview 2)

Role

The participants identified significant risk factors affecting their wellbeing with regards to their roles within their respective schools; in terms of the clarity and definition of their roles; their understanding of their roles; and how the school staff and leaders understood their roles as nurture group practitioners. Both participants cited a lack of understanding of the principles and objectives of NGs on the part of the staff and leadership as significant stressors:

I think they like it. They think it's nice and they think it's fun, but I don't think they understand the depth and the scientific knowledge there is behind it and all that it encompasses. (Interview 2)

The conflicting aims of academic attainment and progress versus improved emotional outcomes were described as notable stressors as they sometimes led to conflict between staff members:

Nurture groups aren't about academic progress, it's about getting the basics right first and it's more about the emotional development and it's very hard even to put a marker on emotional progress... and so yes, there certainly was conflict with some teachers. (Interview 1)

Role confusion and unfair expectations on the part of school leadership were described as risk factors:

My SENCO, my line manager, really has always thought of me as a class teacher. She always says that she forgets that I'm not a class teacher and I think that is how we need to be valued. Because we are teaching and taking a real class. (Interview 2)

Personal attributes and stress factors

Participants described themselves as possessing certain emotional characteristics that had allowed them to navigate some of the more challenging aspects of their roles. One of the protective factors cited by both participants was their total conviction that the work they did had value for their pupils. The conviction and resolution of participants allowed them to continue even when the required support was not available:

I guess that my inner belief of the system of nurture groups and what they can do for these children and the need that these children have, makes me quite stubborn and makes me quite determined to do it, regardless of the support that's there. (Interview 2)

Participants described the physical and emotional toll of NG work over time. Medical diagnoses, as well as more general conditions such as exhaustion and fatigue, were also attributed to the physical effects of NG work:

But it did tire me out and I do wonder if that's why I ended up having like an early menopause and hysterectomy. (Interview 1)

Both participants also describe the work as having notable effects on their emotional wellbeing, with one participant ascribing her use of anti-depressant medication to the effects of the stressors experienced during the course of her work. The physical and emotional demands of their roles resulted in them considering leaving their jobs, with one participant having decided to resign:

I think that it has drained me and now it's just I realise it's time for me a bit more how, yeah, it's time to walk away from the emotional side of things. (Interview 1)

Professional supervision that incorporated an adapted form of one-to-one counselling was suggested by participants as intervention that would possibly have mitigated some of the stressors and the ensuing physical and emotional effects experienced in NG work.

DISCUSSION

Demographic variables

Evident in the survey data was the anecdotal evidence observed in previous studies (Syrnyk, 2012 and

Middleton, 2018) that the majority of NGPs in this population are indeed LSAs. Given that NGPs work with pupils described as having complex social and emotional needs and often displaying challenging behaviour, it is striking to note that the educators charged with meeting the specialist emotional and learning needs of these pupils have limited educational qualifications themselves. While the majority of NGPs within this population are not formally educated beyond secondary school level, many of them are experienced in their field and hold specialist qualifications in emotional literacy and attachment theory, with some having attained bachelor and graduate degrees. Given these insights, the demographic variables are significant and warrant further scrutiny in future studies of NGPs.

Overall wellbeing

The results of the HSEMSAT analysis show that NGPs are satisfied that five of the possible seven MS for psychosocial work environment are within acceptable levels, indicating that their sense of wellbeing is generally good. This finding would seem contradictory given that the NGPs identified several workplace stressors deemed to be well below (20th percentile) the benchmark standards set for organisations. These findings were mirrored somewhat in the interview participants' accounts where they identified several risk factors affecting their wellbeing similar to the stressors seen in the HSEMSAT. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to expand, describe and detail stressors not necessarily highlighted in the HSEMSAT. A possible explanation for these differences may be that the small sample size of interview participants limited the coverage of stressors experienced by the wider population as observed in the HSEMAT.

Workplace stress

The MS provide a taxonomy of chronic workplace stressors based on a normative view of stress (Elliot and Eisdorfer, 1982) which outlines those continued stressors in the workplace that would likely lead to psychological distress or physical deterioration. This concept has been expanded to the most commonly adapted model of stress employed today – the homeostatic model of stress (McGrath, 1970 and Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) – where stress is viewed as a relationship between a person, their resources (personal characteristics or energies valued by the person) and the environment. According to this model, stress is experienced when the person perceives an imbalance between the environmental demand and their resource capability that endangers their wellbeing. In the context of NG work, the findings observed in this study correlate with the conceptual understanding of stress described earlier. NGPs have identified the environmental risks associated with their work and have described the physical and

mental consequences they have suffered as a result of prolonged job stress, including emotional exhaustion, which is a key dimension of burnout (Klusmann, et. al., 2008). Participants' views in this study also reflect the existing literature describing teachers' experiences, where teachers report having to cope with a wide diversity of stressors including workload, role ambiguity, lack of workplace social support or classroom management difficulties (Alarcon, 2011; Chang, 2009; Montgomery and Rupp, 2005 cited in Mérida-López and Extremera, 2017). Consistent with the literature on the links between teachers' perceptions of stress and attrition, participants in this study cited similar stressors as influencing their thoughts about and/or decisions to leave their jobs, eg conflicting goals and directives and the range of pupils needs (Morvant et. al. 1995 and Billingsley, 2004).

In accordance with the findings in this study, previous research (Kyriacou, 2010) has identified the need for school leaders to identify the environmental stressors affecting staff wellbeing and to incorporate organisational practices of: 'healthy schools' (p31) to resolve the source(s) of stress. Several characteristics of good practice observed in Kyriacou's (2010) review of teacher stress were reflected in the views of participants in this study where it was suggested that in order for NGPs to work in safe and healthy conditions, school leaders should: promote good communication between all staff; make management decisions based on consultation; establish consensus regarding key values and objectives; clearly define roles and expectations; ensure that NGPs receive positive feedback and praise; provide a good level of resources and facilities; make support available to help solve problems, and ensure that duties are matched to NGPs' skills and training.

Work engagement

Klusman et. al. (2008) suggested a theoretical framework wherein successful teaching professionals are described as those who experience high levels of occupational wellbeing and succeed in creating: 'optimal learning environments' (p704) for their pupils. The current findings suggest that NGPs have high levels of work engagement which is described in the literature as: 'the willingness to invest energy and resources in one's job' (Klusmann et. al. 2008) and is associated with teacher retention and high-performance levels (Hakanen, et. al. 2006). In terms of this definition, and based on the findings in this study, NGPs can be considered successful in their work, despite the multiple stressors that their daily work entails. Why is this the case when the evidence in the literature confirms that when teaching professionals are exposed to prolonged and diverse occupational stress, it leads to burnout? (Garrick et. al. 2014, Johnson et. al. 2005; Maslach, et. al. 2001, cited in Mérida-López and Extremera, 2017).

Resource capability

Implied in the homeostatic model is that stress is not merely the product of imbalance between objective demands and response capacity, but of the person's perception of these factors (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll's resource-oriented model of conservation of resources is based on the supposition that people strive to retain, protect and build resources, and stress is produced when there is either a perceived or actual loss of resources or when there is a lack of gain following the investment of resources. Thus, resources are the: 'single unit necessary for understanding stress' (Hobfoll, 1989). What remains to be explored is NGPs' 'resource capability' (p56) – what these resources are and how they appear to be a protective factor in keeping these practitioners in their jobs despite the constant challenges and demands of their work. Hobfoll (1989) states that personal attributes can be characterised as resources to the extent that they generally aid stress resistance. The emergent findings in this study further reflect evidence observed in previous research of NGPs (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005; Syrnyk, 2012 and Middleton, 2018) that suggest these individuals are distinguishable for possessing specific personal attributes that help them face the challenges of their roles. These 'resources' include resilience, empathy, self-awareness and emotional regulation (Syrnyk, 2012); their strong belief in the nurture approach (Middleton, 2018) and the motivation from intrinsic rewards gained from witnessing the positive impact on pupil progress (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005). This range of attributes has been associated with the concepts of emotional intelligence (EI) and emotional resilience found in practitioners engaged in helping professions such as social work, nursing and teaching (Grant and Kinman, 2013).

Emotional intelligence and resilience

Mayer and Salovey's (1997) construct of EI has been found to be a major personal resource in the workplace, with four emotional abilities interactively involved in EI: perceiving emotions, using emotions, understanding emotions and regulating one's own and others' emotions. The important role played by EI in enhancing the resilience and psychological wellbeing of teachers and the protection it offers them against burnout and compassion fatigue has been highlighted in the literature (Mérida-López and Extremera, 2017). Strong links have also been found between EI and positive job performance (Carmeli and Josman, 2006), in that emotionally intelligent people tend to be more psychologically flexible, optimistic, socially confident and cooperative, and possess superior problem-solving and decision-making skills (George, 2000 and Bonnano et. al. 2004 cited in Grant and Kinman, 2013). The identification and development of EI and resilience as moderators in the stress process of NGPs might

have significant potential for intervention (Nikolaou and Tsousis, 2002). Schools that offer education and in-service training that includes aspects of NGPs EI, resilience and coping behaviour might enhance not only NGPs occupational wellbeing but also their effectiveness in their roles, thereby 'creating optimal learning environments' for the pupils in their NGs (Klusmann et. al. 2008: 704).

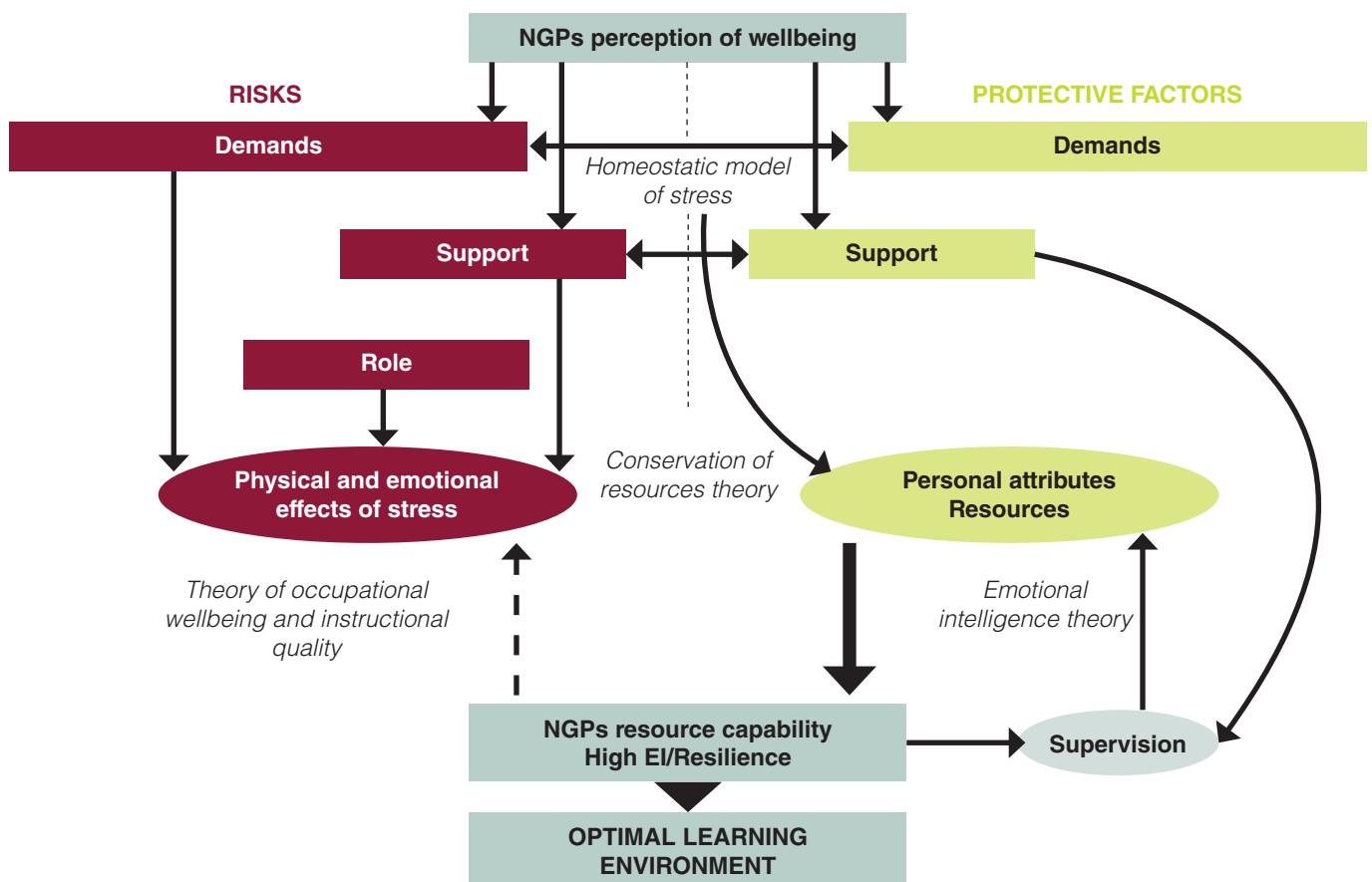
Supervision

Many helping professionals develop their EI and reflective learning through the process of supervision (Grant and Kinman, 2013). According to Hawkins and Shohet (2007), supervision provides a safe environment in which professionals can reflect on their practice and disclose and discuss their emotional reactions. In a recent report for the British

Psychological Society, Faulconbridge et. al. (2017) recommended that ongoing systems of consultation, advice and professional supervision be provided for educators undertaking a more formal therapeutic role in schools. Participants in this study have identified the need for the type of nurturing supervision environment described above wherein they could further develop their EI, resilience and manage practice-related stress. Rae et. al. (2017) have proposed a model of supervision that encompasses a combination of group supervision and individual supervision: 'based on the principles of nurture and narrative practice' (p214), aimed at improving practitioner wellbeing that might be beneficial to NGPs if embraced by school leaders.

Figure 7 shows a complex representation of NGP resource capability theory as described above.

Figure 7: Complex representation of NGP resource capability theory



LIMITATIONS

Due to limited size and context of the study sample, it was not possible to draw final conclusions about the causal relationships between the study variables. Similarly, the findings are limited in their generalisability. To address concerns regarding credibility and the management of data of qualitative studies utilising the grounded theory methodology observed in the literature (Charmaz, 2014), measures were employed in this study including multi-method data collection for triangulation of data, careful documentation and the thorough checking of interpretation and analysis throughout the research process (Kolb, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Despite limitations that small-scale research such as this presents, this study offers a novel exploration of both the risk and protective factors affecting NGPs' wellbeing and the emergent findings, if supported by larger scale research, could have implications for NGPs, schools and pupils in a wider context. The emergent theory derived from participant interviews, which would benefit from further investigation and research, suggests that NGPs have a unique resource capability that is a protective factor in aiding stress resistance. This study further highlights the need for school leaders to engage with NGPs in using tools, such as the one utilised in this investigation, to identify specific environmental stressors affecting wellbeing, and to raise efforts to reduce stress by incorporating practices aimed at the reduction of job demands and creating healthier and happier work environments. Additionally, by adopting supportive practices that increase the emotional and psychological resources of NGPs, such as professional supervision, school leaders could facilitate more positive outcomes for practitioners. These outcomes include lower levels of burnout and attrition and higher levels of staff wellbeing, engagement and commitment. This study has provided a glimpse into the types of people engaged in NG practice in terms of their training, qualifications and experience, thereby highlighting additional areas that could benefit from further exploration in future research.

In a climate of limited resources in schools, where stress is high, wellbeing is low (George, 2018) and demands for support for pupils experiencing SEMH is increasing (Faulconbridge et. al. 2017), protecting the valuable skills and resources of NGPs is essential for the sector. It is further hoped that this study has highlighted the valuable work of NGPs and shown the vital contribution they make in supporting vulnerable pupils in schools and made a case for the protection of this crucial resource.

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