

# ON THE ORIGINS OF NURTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The approaching 50th anniversary of nurture is an opportunity to tell the story of nurture groups and consider what the underlying rationale, philosophy and principles have to offer now in meeting today's challenges, especially the high numbers of exclusions from education, the increased demand for mental health services and the impact on individuals, families and society. This paper is the story of nurture: it is a personal memoir as well as our collective story seen through the eyes of the first non-pilot nurture group teacher. In addition to nurture groups it refers to early applications of nurturing principles to a whole school. The paper draws on archives from Kingsmead Primary school, Hackney nurture group that contain much of Marjorie Boxall's original work. It concludes with Marjorie Boxall's maxim: 'Be and do for these children as you would your own young children'.

## THE CONTEXT FOR THE EARLY NURTURE GROUPS: OUR STORY

The six principles of nurture were defined some 30 years after nurture groups began and were part of the formalising of the nurture movement at the turn of the millennium. But first, understanding the origin of these principles will, I believe, enable the new generation of nurture teachers to interpret them with imagination and creativity as they seek to meet today's challenges.

In compiling the nurture archives<sup>1</sup>, my attention was caught immediately by the differences in expectations, understanding and experience of the world of 'then' and 'now'. To understand the 'why' and 'how' of nurture it helps to know a little about the world of education of 50 years ago, especially of Hackney, where Marjorie Boxall was an educational psychologist.

Hackney was on the fringe of the Inner London Education Authority, distant from County Hall. There was no tube or major road. The Divisional Office, with locally based officers, and the Child Guidance Clinic were a considerable walk and two bus journeys away and there was minimal contact. Kingsmead, then a one-form entry infant school where the first non-pilot group was established in 1972-3, served a pre-second world war housing estate of 15 blocks built on marshland bordering what is now the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. It was known to many as a 'dump' estate (Harrison 1983) taking 'problem' families, largely struggling immigrants, from across the GLC area into a poor and isolated community of older East End families. These families, rehoused from earlier slum

clearance programmes, were unsettled by the new arrivals and were leaving for the suburbs or Essex, with their vacated flats let to even more newcomers. Pupil mobility was very high with few staying throughout an academic year. A total of 146 new admissions out of 230 were recorded in 1972-3 and as teachers we rewrote our class attendance registers every term. Staff turnover too was very high and morale, low. Break-ins and vandalism occurred frequently. Within two years of my arrival the head, deputy and the two most experienced teachers had left. The usual support services, education welfare, social services and health visitors, all had high staff turnover and the local GP was the only long-term professional in the area.

Education was becoming politicised. Nineteen seventy-one saw the publication of the first of the Black Papers (Cox and Dyson 1971). A small minority of the residents were politically active, especially in challenging perceived exclusion and disadvantage but most had little time or energy for anything apart from survival. The Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) had recommended the creation of Education Priority Areas (EPAs) to receive additional resources aimed at raising standards. But implementation was patchy and mostly left to individual schools to respond.

In 1971 with my young family I arrived at Kingsmead from the north east. I had taught there since leaving teacher training college. With the collapse of the steel industry the north east faced extensive unemployment. Colleges in London offered opportunities for retraining

1. The 'nurture archive' referred to is my collection of children's records and notes from the Kingsmead group, particularly those children with features that contributed to the drafting of what is now known as the Boxall Profile, together with some records of meetings with Marjorie Boxall, headteachers and others, which eventually led to the structure and organisation of the nurture movement into what is now nurtureUK. There are notes too of work that Marjorie and I were doing to develop a 'nurture' curriculum and which we were working on together until her death.

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and the ILEA had generous incentives to relocate. Before a GLC flat became available we shared a house with a family from the Caribbean. It was our first close contact with what we now know as the Windrush generation and it influenced our thinking as a family profoundly. The different perceptions and challenges of inner-city London life held valuable lessons, especially for me as a teacher. We had friendly conversations about our differing approaches to child care and the inappropriateness of many resources. Reading scheme books at the time were particularly unhelpful, even for my children let alone those from Africa or the Caribbean, with their stereotypical images of families and life style.

My post-war teacher training had prioritised child development. Child study and observation were central, and I was able to adapt the teaching materials available for basic literacy and numeracy to the needs of my class of 35 six-year-olds. I was keen to learn more about the lives of the children and families, partly for teaching purposes but also to help my own children understand and cope with their experiences of school. And I was fascinated by the behaviour of many of the children which I saw as more appropriate for much younger children rather than deviant. I recall describing my response as that of a mother rather than a teacher, unknowingly anticipating Marjorie Boxall's insights.

The publication of the James Report on teacher education and training (DES 1972) drew attention to important areas pertinent to the early development of nurture groups. In-service training was recognised as necessary for all teachers with longer courses being an entitlement for all experienced teachers. During the autumn of 1972 I completed a six-week course on educational disadvantage which was considered essential for teachers in relevant areas. During this course I first heard the name of Marjorie Boxall and her experimental nurture groups.

Hackney headteachers were aware of Marjorie's work from a talk she had given following a visit to the West Indies. We met soon after her return and agreed to set up a nurture group at Kingsmead as soon as possible. Space was found and equipped with furniture and resources for 12 infant children. An experienced nursery assistant volunteered to help as the second adult. The group began to operate in the spring term 1973 with children carefully selected by teachers to ensure a balance.

### **Who the groups were for: nurture, not nurturing or therapy**

The nurture groups were for those children who were unable to meet the expectations and demands of the ordinary infant classroom and whose behaviour suggested that they had experienced some disruption

or distortion in their early parent-child relationship. Nurture, Marjorie insisted, is allowing the child to relive their earliest years. It is essentially about learning, although at a very early level; it is not therapy. For instance, the earliest interactions of a baby with an adult are making eye contact and smiling, the normal behaviour of a healthy six-week-old baby and is the first step in learning about one's identity, that one is valued and can form a relationship, it is at the root of 'wellbeing'.

The organisation and management of nurture groups flowed from this simple observation, that is, what best facilitates this early level of interaction and the normal thrust for growth. Our failure to identify and understand this, insisting on conformity beyond the child's capability, adds further layers that cannot be processed, increases alienation and leads to later mental health issues (Lucas 2010).

Nurture is about a relationship; nurturing is something that we do. Therapy 'unties' the knots.

### **The classic nurture group: size, balance and the role and responsibilities of the adults, nurture teacher, class teacher and assistant**

After trial and error, groups of 12 proved to be the optimum size to allow relationships to develop. Smaller groups were too limiting in the range of personalities available for friendships to form, larger groups presented too many challenges and did not easily 'gel'. Of these, experience suggested that no more than two in three should be 'acting out' children with one in three 'withdrawn' or non-communicating.

Nurture groups were for those children who could be helped to function, at least part-time, in their ordinary class. There was a clear time limit, usually a term. The children remained on the register of their own class, began the school day with them and joined in any activity or lesson they could manage, PE for example. Class teachers retained responsibility for monitoring the child's academic progress and worked closely with the nurture teacher on deciding appropriate lesson content. Nurture groups were not appropriate for children with chronic disabilities or conditions requiring lengthy therapy although, occasionally, if space was available, a short-term place was helpful. From the beginning it was emphasised that no child should become 'hidden' in the group; they were part of a regular class. Typically, over a week, the children were in the nurture groups for nine sessions for the first term, then part-time with increasing class contact as confidence grew during the second term and occasional visits in the third term. The place would be offered to another child in need as the time was freed up. One session a week was kept for the nurture staff to observe or for meetings with other staff or visitors.

The adult child ratio of two to 12 seemed even more of a luxury then, when teaching assistants were unknown and classes were 35+, than it would today. But it was an essential requirement for a group for the reasons described elsewhere (Lucas 2010). Importantly, the adults would keep up a running commentary, verbalising the activity in progress – as two adults might at home – and they were free to relate to the children at their different developmental levels, with one managing a class activity, perhaps hearing children read, while the other supported an individual in difficulty with a task or their behaviour. Roles were generally interchangeable, and it was the nature of the relationship that they responded intuitively. Essentially, they demonstrated a model of positive, supportive interaction for children who were unlikely to experience it elsewhere.

### **Intuition, recording and theory**

'Informed intuition' based on Marjorie's maxim: *be and do for these children as you would your own young children*, best describes the methodology for decision making about the selection of children, organisation of the room and the day and all subsequent decisions until, after detailed record-keeping and much discussion, clear criteria began to emerge. We were not ignorant of child development and attachment theories, having been trained in the post-war period, but theory was not to be our starting point; we were to follow our instinct, to 'be and do' as we would for our own young children.

The documentation that emerged from this approach as evidenced in the existing archives, became the origin of what we now know as the Boxall Profile and the Nurture Principles. At a time when planning, record-keeping and assessment were minimal if they existed at all in many schools prior to the Education Reform Act (1988), it was itself revolutionary in teachers' practice. All staff were engaged in observing and recording and the benefits of improved behaviour and morale were soon evident. For instance, the smallest reduction in the frequency of fights or temper tantrums, while barely recognised during a busy day was clear evidence of even marginal improvement over a week or two and encouraged new attention to detail, accurate observation, description and recording.

These observations were shared with other nurture group teachers and assistants at monthly meetings with Marjorie at the Child Guidance Clinic. It was from these discussions that the first Boxall Profile, known then as the Diagnostic Developmental Profile, was formulated. Every item in the Profile can still be traced back to an individual child. I have vivid memories of many of them and some of the original records are being archived.

Occasionally we had input from other Clinic staff, notably, Elinor Goldschmied (1987), who introduced us to Daisy, an eight-month-old baby, from whom we learnt

about the treasure basket and how a very young child concentrates and learns if provided with interesting materials at the appropriate level (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006). Gill Gorrell Barnes (CCETSW 1978) guided us in running meetings for parents, a very new and intimidating development, but one that would become increasingly important.

### **Working with parents and the local community**

It was unusual at the time for parents to come into the school unless invited, usually by the school nurse or doctor. Children generally arrived unaccompanied unless there was a problem. The Education Welfare Officer (EWO) would follow up welfare or attendance concerns, often with home visits. The introduction of meetings with potential nurture group parents was an innovation but one we came to insist on and require as an ongoing commitment to helping the child. Knowing the family circumstances and the child's early experiences such as child minding or fostering, parental employment and work patterns became increasingly informative. Wherever possible, we compiled detailed child studies, to help our understanding of individual needs and to discern patterns in behaviour.

Slowly, parents, usually the mothers, came to feel more at ease as we became more confident in running 'parents' parties' when, over a cup of tea, they were encouraged to chat about their children. Their morale, too, usually improved as their children were more settled and made progress (OU 1976). There were, of course, more difficult cases where the EWO, school nurse or health visitor was needed to intervene. In cases of what was then known as non-accidental injury, little advice was available. The few social workers frequently changed, however useful contacts were established with local hospitals and GP training programmes, including Hackney (now Homerton), Royal London, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for children and the Winnicott Centre. Kingsmead, unknowingly and intuitively, was piloting an early multi-disciplinary way of working (CCETSW op.cit.).

Nonprofessional Community representatives became involved through setting up the Tenants' Association, which continues today to be active through a Residents Association and Hackney Marsh Partnership, working particularly with young people (Green 2005). At this point, although Kingsmead was a community school, the value of nurture groups was perceived by the late Cardinal Hume and other senior Church figures.

### **The origin of the nurturing school**

Towards the end of the first year of the Kingsmead's group life, the headteacher resigned, the deputy followed suit soon after. An acting head was appointed for a term and I was given a post of responsibility. As the nurture group teacher and now, the longest serving after little more than two years, I became the point of

reference for parents and the LA, was appointed to the headship in the summer term 1974 and continued to run the group until I could appoint and train a teacher for the following school year, 1974-5.

Happily the new nurture group teacher worked constructively with the assistant, who was now experienced with nurture practice and the procedures we had introduced. After the departure of most of the previous staff, new teachers were appointed based on their interest in, or support for, nurture practice. Divisional Officers who were at the time responsible for allocating staff, were understanding and helpful, as they saw the benefits of 'nurture' in their local schools. ILEA published a pamphlet written by Marjorie in 1976, the first published documentation of nurture practice which later appeared as chapter 2 in the book *Effective Intervention in Primary Schools: nurture groups* (Bennathan and Boxall 1996). The ILEA made films at Kingsmead and De Beauvoir Junior, another Hackney school, for in-service training. A former nurture group teacher came to work with us on home school 'nurture' liaison, which was now seen as an essential part of our work. Together, with new and enthusiastic staff, and with the nurture group now at the heart of the school, we developed whole school policies and procedures based on what we had learnt from nurture practice (Lucas, 1999). In 1976, nurture groups came to the attention of the Open University which made a film for their programme, *Personality and Learning*, broadcasted on BBC2.

In 1980, Kingsmead was reorganised and designated as a Primary School. Children had long been disadvantaged in having to leave the estate at the age of seven, a move particularly unsettling for nurture children. From September 1980 they remained at Kingsmead until 11. The school was now more stable and the neighbourhood itself withstood episodes of social unrest, particularly the wider effects of the Tottenham riots, in 1985.

The 1981 Education Act with its new definition of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, was an incentive to share our expertise beyond the school. One assignment, when I took on the acting headship of a school in difficulty, became a turning point. This new role demanded a different level of leadership and management skills and, through a course at the Tavistock Institute, I developed an interest in consultation, drawing on organisational and group theory and beginning to consider how nurture might help in understanding adult relationships and learning and creating healthy organisations (Silverman 1970). A much-needed consultation group was set up for nurture teachers and ran successfully until funding was withdrawn.

At the same time, the political landscape of London was changing, the GLC was dissolved in 1986 and the ILEA in 1990, transferring responsibility for education to the inner London boroughs. When Hackney Council became responsible for education, funding for nurture groups ceased; schools appeared more stable and nurture groups were closed.

This was the impetus for my move to a very different school. My final headship took me to another school taking on new and different challenges. A largely high-achieving school, it nevertheless had a 'tail of underachievement'. Exclusion was accepted as the ultimate sanction and used as a deterrent. I believed that nurture principles could be articulated in a way that would raise standards for all children, especially those considered less able. Using the understanding and principles of nurture, all the adults, teachers, parents and community were encouraged to work together as I described in the paper for the journal, *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* (Lucas 1999). With the general improvement in behaviour and morale that this collaborative approach brought about, standards improved further, and exclusions were no longer necessary (Ofsted, 1997).

#### **Further developments: formalising nurture; beyond the school**

Meanwhile Marion Bennathan, then Chairman of the Association of Workers with Children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (AWCEBD), liaised with Marjorie Boxall and others to formalise and promote the wider development of the nurture movement following its endorsement in the DfEE paper, *Social Inclusion; Pupil Support* (DfEE 1998) and described in Bennathan and Boxall (1996). The Nurture Group Consortium, later to become the Nurture Group Network, set up as a sub group of AWCEBD, worked with Dr Paul Cooper then of the University of Cambridge School of Education to promote and research nurture groups.

I continued to work closely with Marjorie particularly on a detailed nurture curriculum (unpublished), contributed to meetings of the Consortium and the four-day course, the *Theory and Practice of Nurture Groups* at Cambridge. After retiring from headship in 1998, I joined the staff of the Institute of Education as a tutor to develop a new part-time open learning primary PGCE and as a mentor for *Headlamp*, the new programme of support for newly appointed headteachers. This gave access to many schools across London and the South East as well as to IOE resources. The success of the Cambridge course led to requests for training to be available in London and IOE. The four-day course model was accepted and ran with the help of another experienced member of the IOE staff, Kim Insley, who continued to oversee it until the merger of the IOE with UCL in 2014.

There was now a widespread interest in nurture, especially the nurturing school. There were requests for advice and consultancy from a range of institutions, including special schools and some faith schools that understood the concept as compatible with their ethos. Charitable organisations, working with some of the world's most disadvantaged children in Africa, Central America and the Philippines too, with support and advice have begun to adapt the principles to their culture and language.

Closer to home, current research is addressing exclusions from school. Could the provision of more nurture groups help to diminish the need to exclude? Surely the rise in violence among our young people also raises serious questions about our current education and mental health provision.

## CONCLUSION

Nurture has an important founding story that it is taking forward into the future. The desire to improve the life chances for children in the 1970s seemed like an impossible dream, but it is being realised and today there are great opportunities in and beyond our schools to spread the message of nurture.

My own dream for the future is for a continuum of nurture to resolve the world's problems – people, especially children and their families are the future; all our politics and economics must focus on support for families as an absolute priority for our future wellbeing, for the future of all of us and for our world.

For us as nurture teachers, it is essential that we do not lose sight of what makes nurture unique. That is Marjorie Boxall's original, and very simple vision: that nurture is about children's learning at their present developmental level, it is not therapy. We do it by following her maxim: be and do for these children as you would your own young children.

In so doing we also discover how to nurture ourselves and all those around us; it is like good health, so often we value it only when we don't have it.

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