

# THE CLASSROOM OFFERS A SAFE BASE: EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF A KEY PRINCIPLE OF NURTURE GROUPS FROM ATTACHMENT THEORY TO PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY, TOWARDS DEVELOPING A CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF NURTURE-IN-NATURE PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

From its origins within the deprived schools of inner London in the late 1960s, nurture group practice has evolved organically. Based on instinctive, clinically observed and evidence-based principles, nurture groups continue to offer a viable educational response in providing for the fundamental attachment needs of vulnerable children in schools. The theoretical, philosophical and pedagogical concepts that have shaped nurture practice since its establishment are discussed - particularly the theory of the safe base introduced by child psychologists, Bowlby and Ainsworth. This paper asserts that through the expansion and exploration of our understanding of one of the key principles of nurture practice, and by embracing elements of a place-based pedagogy approach, nurture practice can evolve further to meet the needs of vulnerable pupils today and in the future. Furthermore, this paper suggests that nurture groups are well placed to offer the opportunities of reconnection to, and the wider exploration of, the child's natural setting, thereby increasing attachment to place, connectedness to nature and the promotion of pro-environmental behaviour. Insights into a current nurture-in-nature model of evolved practice are presented for the purpose of initiating discussion and further research into this subject.

*'All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.'* (Bowlby, 1988)

## INTRODUCTION

Half a century ago schools in London were experiencing many of the challenges still being faced in education today – severe behavioural issues among pupils leading to high rates of exclusions and referrals to specialist services; and high levels of stress among teachers leading to staff attrition, absenteeism and burn-out (Bennathan, 2011; Education Support Partnership, 2018). Marjorie Boxall, an educational psychologist working with the socially and economically deprived children of the city during the late 1960s, responded to the challenge of supporting these pupils in school. By

drawing on her clinical experience of the early nurturing experiences of young children, Boxall devised and developed an inclusive and responsive educational approach that sought to address the root causes of the issues among these vulnerable children. The first nurture group, established in 1969, was Boxall's instinctive response to remedy the consequences of the '[in]adequate and [in]attentive early nurturing care' (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000 cited in Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007, p12) she observed, by affording children the opportunity to re-establish these lost experiences within the classroom.

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In observing the milestone of 50 years of nurture groups, we have the opportunity for professional and personal reflection on the evolution of nurture practice. With the benefit of hindsight, together with the advantages offered through the growth and development of research, technology and our increased understanding of brain development and psychology, we are perhaps better able to evaluate the past successes and future challenges of nurture practice than ever before. This paper is the result of my own reflection on the theoretical, philosophical and pedagogical concepts that have shaped nurture practice since its establishment. Furthermore, it seeks to answer the question of whether we, as contemporary nurture practitioners can – by reaffirming our theoretical foundations and by embracing more recent concepts – respond with the same curiosity, imagination and innovation as our pioneers once did, in evolving our practice to meet the particular challenges faced by vulnerable children in education, today and in the future.

Although many of the perennial social, emotional and behavioural challenges described by educational professionals in the 1960s are still prevalent today, children and young people are additionally facing urgent and unique challenges in a time of unprecedented ecological crises. Pollution, global warming, overpopulation and natural resource depletion are evident and seem symptomatic of the wider disconnection between people and planet. Indeed, the term ‘nature-deficit disorder’ (Louv, 2010) – a metaphor describing the human costs of alienation from nature and the environment – is one that is now familiar with educators and the public alike. Within this reality, one of the most significant challenges for contemporary nurture practitioners appears to be not only to offer the opportunity for the remedy and repair of the underdeveloped connections between child and attachment figure, but also that of the fractured connection of child to their natural environment, community and wider world. This paper asserts that through the expansion and exploration of our understanding of one of the key principles of nurture – that the classroom offers a safe base – and by embracing elements of a place-based pedagogical approach, we may further evolve nurture practice to meet these challenges. Furthermore, this paper suggests that nurture groups are well placed to offer the opportunities of reconnection to, and the wider exploration of, the child’s natural setting, thereby increasing attachment to place, connectedness to nature and the promotion of pro-environmental behaviour. This paper also offers an evolved model of nurture practice – a nurture-in-nature approach – that was adopted in a primary school setting in Hampshire more than two years ago, as a possible model for future practice. Forest Circle is a nurture group,

grounded securely on the six principles of nurture, that also embraces the concepts of nature connectedness and place-based education in providing opportunities for wider reconnection to self, people and place, for vulnerable pupils. An illustration of how this evolved model of nurture practice is translated into practical activity is included by affording the reader a glimpse into a typical session of the Forest Circle.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF NURTURE PRACTICE**

The theoretical and pedagogical framework underpinning nurture practice from its first intuitive beginnings has evolved over the past 50 years, alongside our developing understanding of child development, psychology and neuroscience. The first nurture groups were informed by the theories of child development, including those of Piaget (1896-1980), Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Erikson (1902-1947), current at the time (Lucas, 2010). The preceding two decades after the second world war had seen the emergence of a new theory of child development pioneered by John Bowlby (1907-1990), a British psychoanalyst and child psychiatrist, that asserted early childhood attachments played a critical role in the cognitive functioning and later development of young children. Attachment is defined as: “a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space” (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby drew on a variety of disciplines, including cognitive science, developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, zoology and ethology in the formulation of his ‘attachment theory’ (Van Dijken, 1998). At the time the first nurture group pilot scheme was established in 1969, Bowlby was collaborating with another pioneering psychologist, Mary Ainsworth, in the collection of empirical evidence for the emergence of attachment theory. Ainsworth’s insights to Bowlby’s theory contributed significantly to the expansion of attachment theory and its influence in the spheres of developmental and social psychology (Bretherton, 2006). One of Ainsworth’s major contributions to attachment theory is the concept of the attachment figure as a secure base from which an infant can explore the world.

The first generation of nurture practitioners were familiar with these theoretical, philosophical and psychological concepts that formed the foundations for the pedagogical framework of nurture groups (Lucas, 2010; Lucas, 2019). Within this framework, with attachment theory as its cornerstone, nurture groups were, and continue to be, conceptualised as: “a school-based learning environment specifically designed for pupils whose difficulties in accessing school learning are underpinned by an apparent need for social and individual experiences that can be construed in terms of unmet early learning needs” (Bennathan and Boxall,

2000; Boxall, 2002 cited in Cooper and Whitebread, 2007, p.173). Nurtureuk (formerly The Nurture Group Network), the leading charity dedicated to the support and development of nurture groups, has identified six key principles of nurture group theory and practice that underpin the context, organisation and curriculum within all nurture groups (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2010), namely: Children's learning is understood developmentally; the classroom offers a safe base; the importance of nurture for the development of self-esteem; language is a vital means of communication; all behaviour is communication; and the importance of transitions in children's lives.

### **THE SAFE BASE**

Since the establishment of the first nurture group, several variants of the 'classic' nurture group structure were introduced by practitioners who applied the underlying principles of nurture, but adapted the original model in response to the needs of their pupils, and taking into account the particular conditions, resources and situation of their schools or settings. These variants are described in the literature in terms of their differing structures (eg full-time, part-time, groups for older children in Key Stages 2 and 3, etc) but are all defined by the theoretical underpinnings of the nurture group approach and by their adherence to the underlying principles of nurture (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007; and Lucas, 2010). One of the principles common to each variant of the classic nurture group structure is the concept of the classroom offering a safe base (Lucas, 2010). The phenomenon of the secure base was first described in the literature by Ainsworth, who observed this 'behaviour pattern' in her developmental studies of infant-mother attachment (Bretherton, 2006). Rather than being a physical place, the secure base, in Ainsworth's view, is provided through a close relationship with one or more sensitive and responsive attachment figures who meet the child's needs and to whom the child can turn as a safe haven when upset or anxious. Ainsworth asserted that when children develop trust in the availability and reliability of this relationship, their anxiety is reduced and they can therefore explore and enjoy their world independently, safe in the knowledge that they can return to their secure base for help if required (Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969). In other words, the emotional connection (attachment) created between the adult and the child is the secure base, and through this connection, the child develops the deeper connection with their physical environment. The concept of a secure base is significant, not only because it provides the basis of a secure attachment, but because it also links attachment with exploration; a securely attached child does not only seek comfort from an attachment figure, but through feeling safe to explore their wider environment, develops confidence, competence and resilience (University of East Anglia, 2019).

### **THE SAFE BASE**

Place attachment refers to the positive emotional-cognitive connections or bonds forged between a person and the significant places where they live and spend their time (Schultz, 2001; Scannell and Gifford, 2017). Schools are places that are imbued with both personal and shared meaning and therefore the space they occupy can act as conduits of ideas and practices: "within which cultural knowledge, norms, values, attitudes and skills can be passed from one generation to the next" (Hutchison, 2004, p.9). The study of child developmental psychology describes how children gradually come to know the world as they mature and how children's perceptions of their immediate and distant places change over time. This understanding has been developed into a variety of theoretical models to explain this concept of place attachment; however, few educators have used this knowledge in developing a learning curriculum responsive to children's developmental experience (Hutchison, 2004). Although there is little published research available regarding place attachment and the classroom environment, a recent study investigating the ways in which person-place connections contribute to an individual's psychological wellbeing revealed several cognitive-emotional benefits, including comfort/security, belonging, relaxation and positive emotions (Scannell and Gifford, 2017). There is little doubt that such evidence was not available 50 years ago when nurture practice first emerged, yet the instinctive response of Boxall and the other early practitioners bears out what contemporary research confirms – namely that attachment to homes (one's current home, childhood home, or the house of someone else) emerge as the most common type of place attachment and that when the socio-physical features of the place match the individual's needs and goals, place attachment is more likely, thereby increasing feelings of wellbeing (ibid).

The nurture group classroom was, and is, consciously planned and arranged: "to create an educational experience that is rooted in feelings of emotional security" (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007, p27). With the acknowledgement that the physical environment associated with feelings of secure attachment has a significant role to play (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007), practitioners give much thought to how the classroom itself will feel homely, comfortable and safe, and how the physical environment will encourage secure attachment and embody and promote the principles of nurture (Lucas, 2010). The findings of a recent study appear to confirm this idea when it found that individuals seem to benefit psychologically and experience intrinsic fulfilment from places of attachment that provide them with aesthetic pleasure (Scannell and Gifford, 2017). The physical environment of the nurture group classroom also provides the backdrop to the:



'ritualised routine' (Lucas, 2010, p38), characteristic of all nurture group classrooms – providing familiarity, recognition, reassurance and a sense of calm – all of which reduces anxiety, builds connection and relationships and optimises the opportunity for learning. Nurture group practice acknowledges the significance of both the 'emotional space' and the physical environment and the positive effects of both on building attachment. Thus, for children attending nurture groups, the development of place attachment facilitates the development of attachment between child and main attachment figures in the form of the nurture group practitioners.

Place attachment is also associated with connections to natural environments, with emerging research demonstrating that secure place attachment is linked to the presence of nature, social bonding and the development of emotional and cognitive processes such as resilience (Chawla, 2015; Little and Derr, 2018). Despite the potential importance of this concept, it remains relatively undertheorized, particularly in relation to children's relationships to the natural world (Little and Derr, 2018).

### **NATURE CONNECTEDNESS**

Human connectedness with the rest of nature – the extent to which individuals include nature as part of their identity – is a topic of increasing research interest. A growing body of evidence suggests that emotional association with one's natural environment, also known as nature connectedness (Schultz, 2001), has benefits to psychological and physical health and the ability to learn (Louv, 2010); and can also assist in developing pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Richardson et al, 2019; Gosling and Williams, 2010). A recent report conducted by the Institute of Education at University College of London was commissioned by The Wildlife Trust with the aim of evaluating the impact that nature-based activities have on children's wellbeing and views about nature. The researchers found that regular contact with nature allows children to experience profound and diverse benefits, including improved wellbeing, health, motivation, confidence and better relationships with teachers and peers (Sheldrake et al 2019). Despite the proliferation of this evidence, research also demonstrates that children are spending significantly less time in nature than ever before (Beer et al 2018). Several reasons for this have been cited in the literature, including: the rapid embrace of digital technology as recreation by young people; poor play opportunities; increasing urbanisation of the population; and increased risk aversion and safety fears among parents (ibid). In his seminal work, *Last Child in the Woods*, (Louv, 2010) the author asserts that this disconnection from nature is related to lower school achievement, lack of self-confidence and many other social, emotional and physical problems.

Human beings are currently living in way that is completely unsustainable with the world we live in. There is a wide range of views about the nature and severity of the current environmental crisis and although some of the issues are highly controversial, the majority of current scientists agree that massive resource depletion, widespread poverty, pollution and climate change are unfolding more rapidly than normal because of human activity (World Future Fund, 2019). The 2018 Living Planet report from the World Wildlife Foundation has found that an astonishing 60 per cent of the earth's mammals, birds, fish and reptiles have been eliminated by human activity in just over 40 years (WWF, 2018). The report offers a sobering picture of the impact of human activity on the world's wildlife, forests, oceans, rivers and climate. As we proceed rapidly towards a future of increasing ecological uncertainty, the need to involve our next generation in appreciating and respecting the natural world is of pressing significance (Beer et al, 2018). A growing body of research suggests that motivating people to care sustainably for the environment means promoting compassionate concern for our natural world, which originates from early contact with nature, empathy for our fellow creatures, and a sense of wonder and fascination (Frantz and Mayer, 2014; Geng et al, 2015; Schultz, 2001). These studies confirm that while environmental education imparts knowledge and creates experience to change beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (Frantz and Mayer, 2014), it is only when children are given an opportunity to develop a sense of wonder – particularly if nurtured by an attentive adult who facilitates and listens to the child's inner life and own world – that rapid advances can be made in developing ecological understanding (Lloyd and Gray, 2014).

### **PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY**

Place-based education is a pedagogical model based on a philosophical orientation to teaching and learning that emphasizes the pupil's immediate local environment and community as the primary resource for learning through hands-on, real-world learning experiences (Sobel, 2013). From a phenomenological perspective, place-based education acknowledges the deeply personal experience of place that is rooted in feelings of attachment and belonging to particular environments; these natural and cultural spheres from which people derive meaning and purpose are viewed as the starting point from which curriculum learning emerges. In this way the importance of the conscious planning of learning environments, including classrooms, is reinforced (Hutchison, 2004). Place-based education can be characterised as a pedagogy of community – the reintegration of the individual into their homeground and the restoration of the essential links between a person and their significant place (Sobel, 2013). Although place-based education only

originated as an educational concept within the past 20 years, its origins can be argued to be far more ancient. The study of significant spaces can trace its conceptual roots to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) and his theory of place, or *Topos*, which refers to the feelings of belonging evoked by the orientation and dimension of a person's relationship to the space they inhabit (Hutchison, 2004). Later, Comenius, the 17th century education philosopher, articulated one of the core precepts of place-based education by stating: "Knowledge of the nearest things should be acquired first, then that of those farther and farther off." (Woodhouse, 2001 cited in Sobel, 2013, p7).

In the UK the natural environment of the school outside the classroom is seen as integral to the implementation of government initiatives that focus on improving curriculum learning, children's wellbeing, sustainable development and pro-environmental behaviours (Lloyd and Gray, 2014). The Education Outside the Classroom Manifesto (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) makes the case for learning outside the classroom to promote widespread understanding and acceptance of the: "unique contribution these experiences make to the lives of young people" (p10). The Manifesto asserts that the learning experiences outside the classroom are often the most memorable, as they help children to make sense of the world around them by forging links between emotional and cognitive learning. In their meta-analysis of the qualities required by educational settings to provide significant experiences of nature activity, Giusti et al (2018), found initiatives that were: child-driven, challenging, entertaining and restorative; focused on free play as well as learning; allowed engagement with plants and animals; provided environmental epiphanies; and allowed opportunities for cultural and artistic activities were the most effective in shaping connection to nature among children, their families and their community. Incorporating the key concepts of place-based education within the nurture group setting requires practitioners to consider not only the characteristics of the classroom in facilitating secure attachments, but also the existing opportunities for deeper connection with the natural spaces within the school environment; and examining the possibilities of how these spaces could embody and promote deeper connection and wider learning. One of the posited models of place-based pedagogy – the developmental congruency model – suggests an approach where educators heed the developmental experience of the individual pupil by imagining a developmentally congruent learning curriculum derived from each pupil's developing sense of place (Hutchison, 2004).

The Forest School movement is one example of a place-based learning pedagogy evident within the UK school

system that emphasises experiential learning, self-directed play and exploration in a safe and supportive natural environment (Lloyd and Gray, 2014). Through repeated opportunities of being and learning in nature, Forest School allows pupils to build a deep, instinctive connection to their natural space; reconnects them to their ancient heritage; and allows them to consider their roles and responsibilities towards the wider natural world (Forest School Association, 2019).

Emerging research suggests that children benefit from engagement with Forest School in a number of ways, including showing increased motivation, concentration, confidence, knowledge of the natural environment, and increased awareness of others (Ridgers, et al., 2012). The Forest School philosophy offers many similarities to the ethos of learning within nurture groups in that the learning is focused on 'processes rather than products' (Norfolk County Council, 2009, p3) and allows pupils the time and space required to develop at their own developmental pace. Inclusive, child-led learning through play; the development of personal, social and emotional skills; and the opportunity for pupils to be themselves, find peace and communicate with others in a safe and caring environment, are features common to both the Forest School and nurture group approaches.

#### **FOREST CIRCLE: A NURTURE-IN-NATURE MODEL**

The theoretical concepts contained in nurture group practice, attachment theory, place attachment and place-based pedagogy discussed above, have been incorporated into a practice-led project in a primary school based in North-East Hampshire over the past two years. The Forest Circle nurture group project engages up to 12 pupils from both Key stage 1 and Key Stage 2, and comprises two part-time nurture groups – Seedlings and Saplings – with each group attending sessions for an afternoon once a week, facilitated by a nurture group practitioner and a Learning Support Assistant (LSA). The pupils attending Forest Circle are identified by their class teachers as experiencing a range of emotional, behavioural and social difficulties that impact their ability to access aspects of their learning in their mainstream classes. Teachers' observations are recorded in the form of the Emotional Literacy Questionnaire (ELQ) (Southampton Psychology Service, 2003), a standardised assessment tool that measures the status of pupils' emotional literacy within five key areas, addressed in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) curriculum, including: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. The measures on the ELQ are used to help identify areas of focus for the intervention and to inform lesson planning. Boxall profiles are also completed for each pupil attending Forest Circle within the first half-term of admission (baseline), and at the end of each term, to provide

more detailed developmental and diagnostic data with the view to create a targeted prepared environment and to track pupils' progress.

The setting for the groups comprises the nurture classroom and the local ecology of the school, which includes the schoolyard garden, school grounds and adjoining fallow farmland, rented by the school and incorporated as a functioning school field. The nurture room is located in a quiet area of the school with direct access to the full extent of the school grounds described earlier. The nurture room is designed to be cosy, comfortable, uncluttered and contained to induce a sense of calm and peace. Wherever possible, natural materials (wooden furniture, living plants, natural textiles, etc) and natural elements (eg the nature table displaying seasonal objects) have been incorporated into the décor. Two key 'home areas' (Lucas, 2010, p39) have been established – the fire circle indoors, and the totem circle outdoors – as the secure places described in the literature (Lucas, 2010 and Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). These areas provide pupils with a physical and emotional base from which to: orientate themselves; begin their learning journey; and return to in order to reconnect with the practitioner and the rest of the group at the start and throughout the session.

The classroom set up is prepared by the practitioner before the children arrive so that the space is always presented in a similar way. Pupils have a designated place assigned to them within the fire circle. Their space is designated by the placement of a cushion and name card, depicting an image of a species of an indigenous animal, bird, insect or plant. For example, at the time of taking the photograph in Figures 1 and 2 (below), each pupil's card depicted a different species of owl occurring in Britain. Each seating place

also contains a (battery operated) candle contained within a clay bowl, made by the pupils in a previous session. The centre of the circle is delineated by a green felt mat with a wooden perpetual calendar at the midpoint - a repeated symbol within the classroom - of the continuity of the seasons and the rhythm of life. Resting on the perpetual calendar will be either of two objects – the 'Idea Seed' box or the 'Lost Word' tin. The idea seed is a concept used in Forest School sessions where the practitioner prepares a stimulus for the outdoor activities and learning that will take place later in the session; the 'seed' is selected based on observations from previous sessions and can take the form of an item related to a story, song, game, activity, natural occurrence, etc (Norfolk County Council, 2009). The lost word tin is an activity inspired by the award-winning book, *The Lost Words* (Macfarlane and Morris, 2017), written in response to common nature and landscape words, eg 'acorn', 'bluebell', 'kingfisher' and 'wren', being found to have fallen from the consciousness and common usage in children (ibid. 2019). In the Forest Circle classroom, a tin containing sensory natural materials such as leaves, twigs, acorns, etc is prepared by the practitioner who places magnetic letters inside depicting the lost word for the session. A magnetic whiteboard is stored nearby to facilitate the task of forming the word during the session.

The Totem circle is situated in the schoolyard garden on a relatively flat and grassy site where three wooden sculptures, depicting the lifecycles of various animals had been installed some years before. Movable wooden stumps sourced from a local tree surgeon have been placed in a wide circle, with a large stump at the centre.



**Figure 1:** *The Forest Circle nurture classroom*





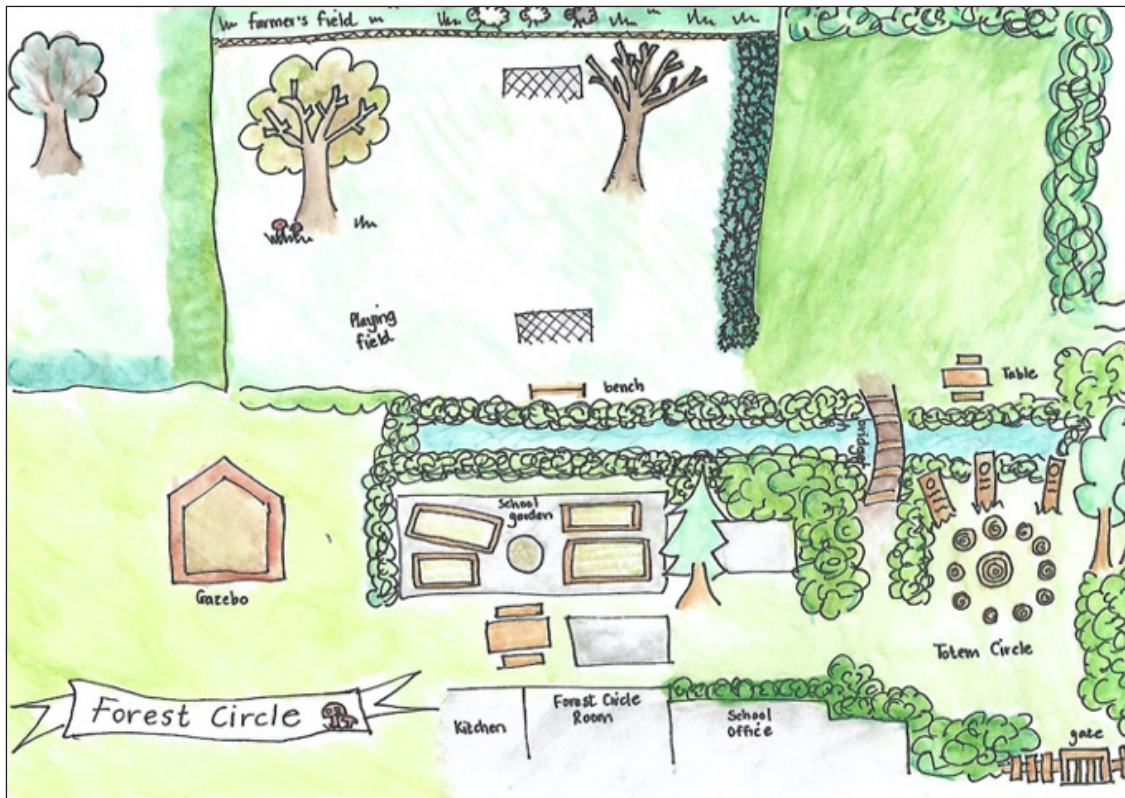
Figure 2: The Fire Circle safe place

A large display board covers each of two classroom walls – one is referred to constantly throughout the sessions and contains session information in visual form (see Figure 3), eg Forest Circle Customs (visual timetable), calendar, weather, pupils' birthdays etc; and the other is used to display evidence of previous sessions in the form of the pupils' artwork, journal excerpts and photographs. The predictability of routines in the group and the visual cue of the picture timetable offers a sense of security and helps the children to manage the stress associated with change and transition (Lucas, 2010). There are no distinctive rules within the nurture group that are set apart from the pupils' year groups and wider school, instead a simple maxim – 'always kind, always fair' – depicted at the top of the main display board, underpins all interactions and sets the aspirational code of conduct within the group. In the place of individual rewards, when the nurture group practitioner notices the children displaying behaviours that support the group's maxim, the practitioner mentions the child and the incident and places an acorn in a glass jar. When the jar becomes full of acorns, the children receive a group reward in the form of an item that benefits everyone within in the group, eg a handcrafted item, seeds or piece of gardening equipment.



Figure 3: Main display board featuring session information





**Figure 4:** Map of the Forest Circle environment created by a Year 6 pupil

The schoolyard garden is accessed through double doors opening directly from the nurture classroom into the outdoor space. A large wooden picnic table and benches are located a few steps into the fenced garden, which serves as a surface on which to work and create, but also as a dining table where a snack is shared towards the end of the session. The totem circle is set a short distance away from the classroom and sits in a secluded spot, bordered by a fenced-off pond and a small bamboo plantation and fruit trees, which provides a shady area, excellent for den building. A small bridge spans a dry stream ditch and leads to the school field, bordered by wild hedgerows and diverse species of mature trees. Figure 4 depicts the area as seen through the eyes of a Forest Circle pupil.

### A typical afternoon in Forest Circle

When they enter the nurture classroom each pupil takes their seat in their place (identified by their name card, candle and clay bowl), and lights their candle. These items are specifically provided to offer each pupil an objective representation that is both tangible and symbolic of their identity and their value to the group (Lucas, 2019). Once all the pupils are seated in a circle and each candle has been lit, the group recites a short verse, signalling the beginning of the session. Repetitive rituals or customs allow for the establishment of fellowship and create a sense of belonging within the group (Norfolk County Council, 2009). At each session, an 'Okethiwe' (chosen person) is selected sequentially according to the calendar of pupils' birthdays depicted

on the display board. This leadership role facilitates the development of the pupil's thinking and social communication skills, and the development of self-esteem and confidence (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). A visual timetable is permanently presented as a familiar, reassuring ritualised routine of the afternoon's itinerary that helps pupils to develop feelings of safety and security (ibid.). The Okethiwe chooses a card from a pack that displays a greeting spoken in another country around the world and with the help of the practitioner, finds the country using a world globe, then models how to pronounce the greeting so that all the pupils may greet each other in a foreign tongue. This activity creates an awareness in the pupils of the wider world, and its possibilities of diverse cultures and languages and geographical locations. The Okethiwe is also responsible for changing the calendar settings to show the season and date, thereby orienting the pupils to the cyclical passage of time in the natural world. With the consensus of the group, weather cards are chosen and displayed to create an awareness of the outdoor conditions in preparation for the transition to the natural environment.

### The Idea Seed and Lost Word

Once the routine of the session has been established by working through the customs mentioned above, the practitioner will call the pupil's attention to the centre of the circle by asking them to focus on their candle for a moment and by engaging in a few rounds of nose breathing. Nose breathing has been found to promote



activity of the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms and relaxes the body and increases cognitive functioning of the brain (Ruth, 2016). In the silence of the moment, the practitioner will ask the Okethiwe to open the idea seed box or the lost word tin, depending on which has been prepared and placed at the heart of the circle. The idea seed box will contain a sensory stimulus that can be passed around the circle to every pupil, thereby promoting a conscious link to the outdoors, as well as the philosophical enquiry and discussion promoted in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) curriculum (SAPERRE, 2018). The lost word tin is passed around the circle and when a pupil receives it, they will close their eyes and try to find one of the magnetic letters inside the box, without looking. This sensory activity isolates the sense of touch as the pupil must discriminate the shape of a letter from the other forms inside the tin. Touch is essential for building and maintaining attachment and trust (Gerhardt, 2004). The activity also promotes patience and turn-taking among the other pupils in the circle. Once a letter is found, it is placed on the magnetic board until the whole word is discovered, whereupon a discussion about the word will elicit the discussion of experiences of the children or facts they already know that link to the lost word. These simple, yet profound, techniques associated with these two activities allow the pupils to reconnect with nature and with their own 'inborn sense of wonder' (Carson and Pratt, 1965 cited in Beer et al, 2018).

### The Totem Circle

The practitioner draws the children's attention back to the board, where the activities for the day are displayed, and explains the outdoor task for the session. The outdoor portion of the session follows the basic outline and contains a number of characteristics of a typical Forest School routine (Norfolk County Council, 2009). The pupils now prepare to head outdoors and after dressing themselves in the appropriate clothing (jumpers, coats, etc) according to the weather cards,

they follow the practitioner outside to reconvene in the outdoor safe space, the totem circle. This space represents the reference point for the pupils in the outdoor environment; a place where personal contact with the practitioner has been established so that the pupils can return to it as a safe base for the duration of the session (Lucas, 2010). Once the pupils are seated in places of their own choosing, the practitioner shares any specific hazards from a daily risk assessment with the group. Pupils are encouraged to think ahead and determine any risks they may encounter and discuss these thoughts with the other pupils. Certain procedures may need to be practised through games or role play, particularly in the case of activities or tasks that may be unfamiliar or new to the group. In this way pupils are supported in taking appropriate risks which develops trust in themselves and the other members of the group (Norfolk County Council, 2009).

Another characteristic of Forest School adopted in the nurture-in-nature approach is the element of free will. Each pupil has the choice to work alone, work in a pair or work in a whole group – leading to increased participation, motivation and enjoyment (ibid). The practitioner will ask the Okethiwe first, and then the other pupils in turn, how they would prefer to work in the session; if they indicate they would like to work in pairs or in a group, the pupil will invite the other pupil(s) to do so. The practitioner will model the use of language in how to invite a member of the group to work and how to politely accept or decline an invitation. Modelling the use of language while creating awareness of what a pupil might be feeling, allows the person choosing to feel empathy for and identify with, the other pupils in the group. As the pupils are provided with support, they become more aware of themselves as individual people who 'make choices, have legitimate wants and are able to control them' (Lucas, p125), which contributes to the development of self-awareness, self-esteem and empathy.



**Figure 5:** *The Totem Circle photographed through the seasons*

## Outdoor learning

The outdoor learning experience mirrors the Forest School ethos in that the learning is focused on the process and the journey, rather than on outcomes. Pupils are given the time and space to learn and develop at their own rate, while building a deep instinctive connection to the natural space of their school environment (Norfolk County Council, 2009). During the first session of a new cohort, the outdoor activity will include a guided walk through each area of the outdoor nurturing space, where pupils are encouraged to note features of the landscape significant to them, followed by a mapmaking exercise. Mapmaking, from a developmentally congruent point of view, can be viewed as a developmental expression of the pupil's innermost need to organise, make sense of and connect with their surroundings (Hutchison, 2004). This further affords the practitioner the ability to observe the pupil's 'unique perceptual, spatial, and emotionally resonant ways of perceiving the world around them' (ibid).



**Figure 6:** A map produced by a Year 2 pupil depicting the outdoor nurture space

Some of the planned outdoor learning experiences within the nature-in-nurture model are practitioner-led, although the focus remains a pupil-led approach that will include opportunities for the pupils to observe the ever-changing natural environment and to form questions about the unfolding process independently. The Woodland Trust (2019), the UK's largest woodland conservation trust, has developed an initiative – Nature Detectives – which provides a large bank of cross-curricular ideas, activities and free online resources designed to encourage pupils to embrace the natural world around them. Many of the activities and ideas for the Forest Circle are drawn from this resource and also that of Trailblazer – an outdoor learning initiative devised by Hampshire County Council (2019), dedicated to supporting outdoor learning in Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and West Berkshire by providing practitioners with training, ideas and experience-sharing opportunities. Some of the structured outdoor activities offered during Forest Circle sessions include (but are not restricted to): seasonal activities (scavenger hunts, material gathering, etc); arts and crafts using natural materials (sketching, watercolour painting, sewing, clay sculpting, etc); nature observation and study (bird watching, tree and leaf identification, identifying animal tracks, bird egg identification, etc); habitat building (animal shelters, nest making, den building, etc); cooking (pumpkin soup, pesto pasta, apple tasting, etc); plant/garden cultivation (planting a herb garden; creating a wildlife meadow, etc); and wildlife conservation (creating a hedgehog habitat and feeding station, etc).

Structured activities in the outdoor environment are important and allow for the development of the pupils' knowledge and skills, however, just as children require positive adult contact and a sense of connection to the wider human community, they also need the positive playful contact with nature and moments of solitude that being in nature offers (Louv, 2010). Play is generally understood as the 'various activities and behaviours that children engage in' (Ridgers et al, 2012, p3) and while it is difficult to define due to the complexity of the behaviour, there is general acceptance that play is enjoyable, fun, intrinsically motivated and self-directed (ibid). Unstructured play, whether a solitary or a shared activity, is an important element in nurture practice as it is recognised as a conduit for the exploration and engagement of a pupil's cognitive, social and emotional resources (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). Play also facilitates the development of pupils' problem-solving, cognitive and social communication skills and has the potential to help pupils 'to connect the school experience with their inner world' (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007, p. 29). Including the time and space for pupils to engage in unmediated play within the routine of the session, is therefore imperative.



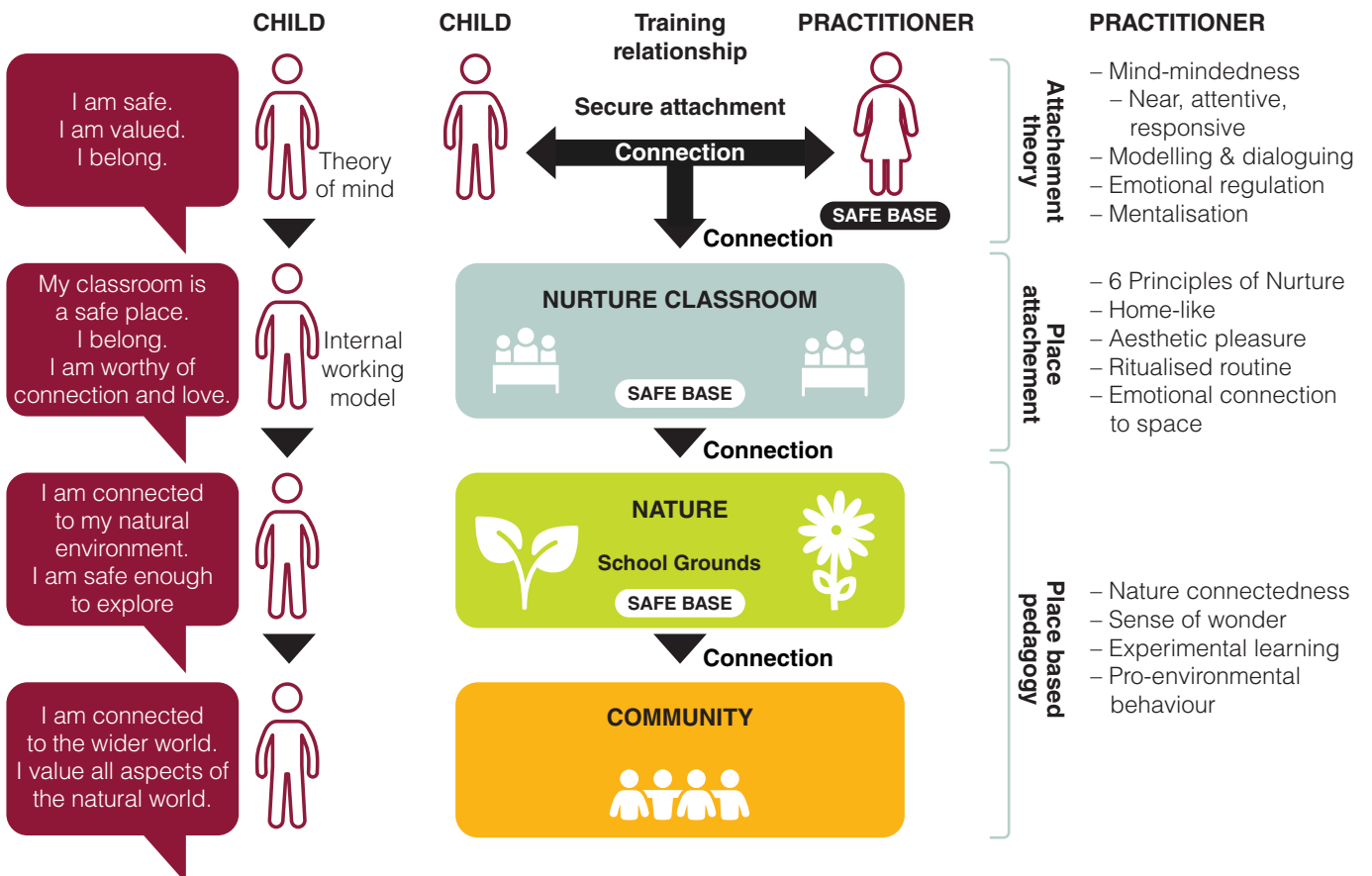
**Snack time**

The sharing of a meal or snack has been a feature of nurture practice since the first nurture groups were established, as they recognise the association between food, nourishment and the satisfaction and security inherent in the early feeding experiences of young children. In a nurture group, pupils respond to the physical and emotional nourishment of the snack time experience as it satisfies a common underlying need for care and attachment (Lucas, 2010). Within the routine of a Forest Circle session, snack time is considered an important opportunity for the pupils to learn and practice essential social and communications skills as well as being a time for sharing and celebration. Usually the practitioner will prepare the table and food while the LSA observes the pupils engaged in unmediated play. The snacks offered are typically fruit, vegetables or other simple, healthy types of food that are natural and easy to prepare. Once the table is set with placemats, cutlery and crockery, the children are invited, one at a time, to wash their hands and take their places at the table. When the group is assembled, the LSA will walk around the table with a jug of water, offering the pupils a drink, while modelling the use of polite language. The practitioner follows with a tray, offering each pupil a snack, which they may politely accept or decline. When everyone, including both adults have been served a short prayer of thanks is recited by the group.

Thereafter the practitioner rings a small brass bell, and the pupils close their eyes for a short moment to offer thanks for something they are grateful for in their lives. This example of mindful eating can encourage pupils to be curious and try new tastes and may also heighten the sensory experience, thereby creating more enjoyment and establishing a pleasurable experience with the process of eating. Mindful eating can also encourage pupils to consider where their food comes from, allowing them to become more aware and appreciative of the process (Jacobsen, 2016). During snack time, pupils have opportunities to talk and exchange their ideas and opinions with each other. Practitioners facilitate and promote conversations around the table and also model and assist pupils with the application of basic skills, eg correct eating, the use of cutlery and the acceptable ways of eating (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). Once snack time is complete, the pupils help to clear the table and stack the dishes, ready for washing up.

**Rest and reflection**

Depending on weather conditions pupils return either to the totem circle or the fire circle indoors to gather together to recall and review their experiences during the session. The practitioner will take the opportunity to verbalise her recalled observations of moments when pupils acted in accordance with the Forest Circle maxim – ‘always kind, always fair’. The practitioner names the



**Figure 7:** The nurture-in-nature theoretical model of the Forest Circle nurture group.

pupil and gives details of the occurrence and then places an acorn in the group jar. This exercise helps to create a sense of positive achievement that highlights not only individual achievement, but allows the other pupils to celebrate in the collective success of each pupil's positive achievement (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). The practitioner encourages the continuation of the sense of calm and peace of the outdoor experience by reading a story to the pupils, with the chosen book usually relating to a tale of the natural world or linked to the structured activity offered earlier in the session. Research has found that the exploration of a book by young children alongside an attachment figure is a fundamentally social process, 'embedded in the affective interpersonal context of the attachment relationship' (Mackay et al, 2010, p101). Reading in this way provides an opportunity for a pleasurable, calming experience that creates a deeper connection between pupil and practitioner; and additionally, has positive implications for social, emotional and cognitive learning, particularly in the learning process involved in the development of literacy skills (ibid).

At the close of the session, the group gathers in a circle once again. The pupils hold hands and recite a blessing on each other until they meet again for the next session.

The practitioner will call each pupil in turn to gather any items of clothing, etc and invite them to meet at the door, where they shake hands and thank each other for the experience of being together for the afternoon. This is a gesture of mutual respect and affection that strengthens the emotional connection and attachment between practitioner and pupil, and that allows the pupil to transition back to their mainstream class with assured confidence.

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this paper was to endeavor to offer a comprehensive narrative of the fundamental theoretical, philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of nurture group practice that has evolved from its beginnings 50 years ago, to the present day. What emerges from this retrospective reflection is an impression that although nurture practice has certainly evolved and grown over the half-century of its existence, its fundamental purpose has remained unchanged – to provide opportunities within the school setting for the establishment of warm, reciprocal, responsive attachments that will empower the pupil to be confident enough to explore their world, embrace opportunities and fulfill their innate potential.

Schools have a long history of concern about pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties who underachieve at school (Geddes, 2012). Bowlby's attachment theory offers a unique insight into the roots of these difficulties as it recognises that the

communication implicit in behaviour is based on unmet needs. Nurture practice begins at this very point by 'hearing' the inner voice of the pupil and responding to the cries through the creation of connection, safety and trust. From the position of a secure relationship, the pupil learns to function within the school environment in way that is more synchronised to his true nature. In the words of one of our pioneers: 'Nurture is about relationship; nurturing is something that we do' (Lucas, 2019). The theoretical framework of nurture practice has grown from the core of this instinctive response to the obstacles faced by pupils in schools 50 years ago; and just as the pupil matures and grows, so too must our response as practitioners evolve to meet the new challenges and embrace the singular experiences of the present day.

The global landscape of the 21st century presents significant challenges for the children of today, and the pervasive risks and uncertainties are impacting on children's precious childhood experiences (Malone, 2004). The fact that the natural world is essential to the emotional health of children has been articulated in the body of research referred to in this paper. This paper offers the findings of previous research that affirms the following position: concern for the environment is based on an individual's connection to nature that develops with the opportunity for regular, autonomous and unmediated contact with natural spaces that hold meaning for the individual.

Additionally, it is asserted that through the evolution of our own model of practice, and by embracing elements of contemporary practice, such as place-based pedagogy, nurture groups are well placed to offer pupils the type of opportunities for contact with the natural world described above; having the awareness of the benefits that such contact would provide to the pupils themselves, their schools, communities and the wider world. I concur with Krautwurst (2004, p. 1) when he asserts: "Our challenge isn't so much to teach children about the natural world, but to find ways to nurture and sustain the instinctive connections they already have."

This paper does not outline a formal research investigation, but rather offers an anecdotal example of a model of contemporary nurture-in-nature practice for the purpose of initiating interest and discussion. In this respect, further research that focuses on the formal evaluation of a similar model of practice would be welcome, and more specifically, studies that relate to the impact of the engagement with nature as a key element of nurture practice. The evaluation of such case studies could combine data gathered from observational assessment tools commonly used by nurture groups, for example, The Boxall Profile (Bennathan and Boxall, 2010) and the ELQ (Southampton Psychology Service, 2003)





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