

PRIMARY TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NURTURE GROUPS ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS, ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT AND BEHAVIOUR.

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ABSTRACT

Current research suggests that nurture groups are an effective psychosocial intervention to support children and young people with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties. However, to date research has not examined teachers' personal opinions of nurture groups' effectiveness. The present study addresses this gap in knowledge by exploring teachers' perceptions of the nurture groups' effectiveness on social, emotional skills, behaviour and attainment. A total of 12 primary school teachers were recruited and interviewed with a semi-structured interview schedule. The thematic analysis of the transcribed narrative accounts indicate that teachers notice a positive effect of the nurture groups on children's social and emotional skills and behaviour. Specifically, with developed emotional understanding and regulation, the children's social and behavioural functioning improved. While the nurture group was not characterised as directly improving attainment, academic skills were improved through developed engagement, independence and self-efficacy. Implications for future research and practice were highlighted. This included the need for early pupil identification by a trained practitioner, as well as the potential negative impact of recent funding cuts on nurture groups' efficacy. Further research into these is suggested, alongside research into pupil attachments, self-concept and the long-term outcomes of nurture group intervention on attainment.

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There is much concern about social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experienced by children and young people within the UK. Numerous contextual factors are involved in achieving improvements in wellbeing and attainment within school and children's SEBD can present a significant barrier (Goodman et al., 2015). The term SEBD has been updated in England to SEMH, following the publication of the SEN Code of Practice: 0-25 years (DfE, 2015). However, as this research was carried out in Scotland, the term SEBD will be used as this is reflective of the local legislation and guidance (Scottish Government, 2017). More specifically, for the purposes of this study the following definitions have been employed as they are in line with current research and widely used. Emotional difficulties refer

to the inability to identify, understand or regulate emotions, including anxiety and anger (Poulou, 2015). Goodman et al. (2015, p.9) describes emotional wellbeing as "the absence of internalising problems". Children in the school setting with emotional difficulties may internalise their emotions resulting in anxiety or depression or they may present with externalised behavioural difficulties, such as aggression and defiant and oppositional behaviour (Willner et al., 2016; Bornstein et al., 2013). Social skills can be defined as the ability to interact with others and form and maintain relationships (Goodman et al., 2015). This includes sharing, empathy and cooperation, and gives children the ability to make friends, play games and hold a conversation (Gresham, 2016).

SEBD all pose various challenges for children and young people throughout schooling and beyond (Ruby, 2018; Goodman et al., 2015). These SEBD have been found to be prevalent in schools in the UK. On average, one in three children in a class of 30 experiences some form of SEBD and only around half of those with significant difficulties receive any mental or wellbeing support (Ruby, 2018). This illustrates the need for effective, sustainable and affordable intervention in schools (Ruby, 2018). Findings from Geddes (2006) suggest that appropriate early interventions are vital to the wellbeing of children and young people. Early social and emotional experiences are what shape their ability to cope with the challenges they are likely to encounter during their childhood and throughout their adult life (Geddes, 2006). To address the growing concern for SEBD faced by children and young people the educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall set up the first nurture groups in London in the late 1960s (Lucas, 2019). There are currently over 2000 nurture groups across the UK, in nursery, primary and secondary schools (Sloan et al., 2019). nurtureUK (2019) claims that nurture groups provide children and young people with various early nurturing experiences they may have missed during their early life. It aims to equip them with social and emotional skills to succeed in making meaningful friendships, do well at school and be able to deal with challenges throughout life (Lucas, 2019).

Nurture groups are rooted in Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment which proposes that the nurturing and consistent relationship built between an infant and their caregiver is essential for the child's psychological and social functioning (Gillibrand et al., 2016). The impact of nurture groups is commonly measured by the paid resource called the 'Boxall Profile®' which was set up for this reason by Marjorie Boxall (Ruby, 2018). To campaign for the widescale use of the Boxall Profile® for all pupils, Ruby (2018) commenced 'The Boxall Childhood Project'. The study found the Boxall to provide a detailed assessment of children with SEBD, however, limitations of the Boxall were also highlighted. Specifically, Ruby (2018) emphasises the importance of training staff to be able to utilise the Boxall Profile® appropriately. The quality of the profile can be influenced by the lack of staff training or staff time constraints. The project also identified a potential drawback in the Boxall as significantly more boys than girls were found to have SEBD. This conflicts with evidence showing that despite boys displaying more challenging behaviour, girls often internalise difficulties such as depression (Deighton et al., 2018). This suggests that the Boxall may be failing to identify children with internalising SEBD.

Although less frequently used for nurture groups, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) can be used to assess a child's SEBD through a series of questions, again completed by parents and staff (Gerrard, 2006). This measure is widely used in clinical settings due to its reliable psychometric properties (Huskey et al., 2018). The SDQ has the advantage of being brief, comprehensive and easy to administer and score in comparison to the Boxall (Rothenberger & Woerner, 2004). High concordance was found between the Boxall and the SDQ by Couture, Cooper and Royer (2019) when completed by school staff. Both measurement tools reported similar SEBD, supporting their reliability and validity for diagnostic and research.

Bennett (2015) highlights that despite successful outcomes measured from the Boxall and the SDQ, these outcomes are not usually followed up in a qualitative way. Qualitative research allows for a more detailed, rich and in depth understanding of the subject matter, including the thoughts and opinions of those involved (Howitt & Cramer, 2014). In the evaluation of nurture groups, quantitative research identifies if children are experiencing benefits from the intervention. However, it does not provide detailed insight into why and how this is happening and what impact this is having in the everyday life of children and young people. This complex subject has benefited from qualitative research by exploring children's, parents', teachers' and other staff members' experiences of a nurture group intervention (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Sanders, 2007; Symeonidou & Robinson, 2018).

The Boxall Profile®, the SDQ as well as qualitative research provides data on the intervention's effectiveness, however, little research has been carried out on teachers' experiences and options regarding this. Teachers have the great responsibility to provide support for children with SEBD in mainstream schools and help those most vulnerable through prevention, identification and access to specialist support (DfE, 2018). Nurture groups aim to help children become resilient and able to overcome barriers to their learning and teachers are arguably the best placed to evaluate this impact.

Despite this, while previous research investigates the positive effect of nurture groups (Bennet, 2015; Shaver & McClatchey 2013; Cunningham et al., 2019), teachers' personal experiences and opinions have received little academic attention. The present paper addresses this gap in knowledge, by examining teachers' opinions on the effectiveness and limitations of nurture groups.

The research questions were:

1. How do teachers perceive children's social and emotional skills following nurture group intervention?
2. How do teachers perceive children's academic attainment following nurture group intervention?
3. How do teachers perceive children's behaviour following nurture group intervention.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Opportunity sampling was employed to recruit participants who were most readily available for interview. Criteria for the participants' inclusion consisted of being a qualified primary school teacher based in the United Kingdom. The participants also must have worked or be working with a child who had attended a nurture group in the past two years, to be able to compare their behaviour before and after the intervention. Sixteen participants were asked to participate through email and 12 were able to be interviewed. Eleven of the participants were female and one was male. The gender of the participants therefore reflected staffing ratios in primary schools, which in Scotland currently stands at around 9:1 females to males (National Statistics Publication for Scotland, 2019).

Table 1: Demographic data of the participants

| Participants | Gender | Status | Location |
|--------------|--------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| 1 – 7 | Female | Primary teacher | Highland, Scotland |
| 8 – 9 | Female | Primary teacher | Aberdeenshire, Scotland |
| 10 | Female | Primary teacher | Oxfordshire England |
| 11 | Male | Primary teacher | Highland, Scotland |

2.2 Materials

Each participant was given a Participant Information Sheet, a Consent Form and a Debriefing Sheet. An interview guide was used to ensure all topics were discussed. Open questions allowed for and encouraged detailed responses and probing questions were added if more information was required.

The interviews were recorded onto a password protected mobile phone and then stored on a password protected laptop until the transcription took place. Thematic analysis was carried out using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, and thematic maps created.

2.3 Procedure

To express interest in taking part in the study, the participants emailed the researcher. Preceding any data collection ethical approval was granted and all participants were issued with an information sheet

and provided informed consent. During the interview open questions were asked alongside any probing or clarification questions such as: "Could you describe how the pupil is any more or less disruptive following the intervention?" and "How is their ability to play well with others, such as sharing and taking turns?". Once the interview had concluded participants were provided with the Debrief Sheet and were given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the study. The narrative accounts were transcribed verbatim, transposed to NVivo12 and analysed using thematic analysis.

2.4 Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised to obtain key themes from the interviews using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps. Participants were numbered from P1-P12 granting them anonymity. A wealth of rich, in-depth data was obtained and reflected in the thematic maps (Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 3). Following data familiarisation, the data was scanned and coded with the purpose of identifying meaning within the text. The initial coding information was conceptualised by grouping codes and eliminating any that were no longer relevant or appropriate. The resulting seven themes and subsequent 10 sub-themes were generated from this process. To obtain an overview of these themes and begin to understand how they worked together, several mind-maps were produced. Succeeding this, the next step involved refining the themes against the entire data set and producing a thematic map to detail the themes, sub-themes and the relationship between them.

3. FINDINGS

Seven themes and 10 sub-themes were identified through thematic analysis. Social and emotional skills appeared to be the overarching theme (cf. Figure 1) throughout 83.3% of the interviews (10 teachers), overlapping with topics of behaviour (cf. Figure 2) and attainment (cf. Figure 3). The experiences of 12 teachers were expressed in the participants' narrative accounts. Despite limitations and barriers such as lack of funding, staffing and training, a total of 91.7% (11 teachers) felt nurture groups were an encouraging addition to the school and provided a crucial intervention for those with a high level of need. The inter-rater reliability for these findings was checked by inviting an individual who works in the field of psychology to code the transcripts. Similar themes and interpretations thereof were identified, giving evidence for the intersubjectivity of the findings presented here.

Figure 1: Thematic map of teachers' perceptions of social and emotional skills following nurture group

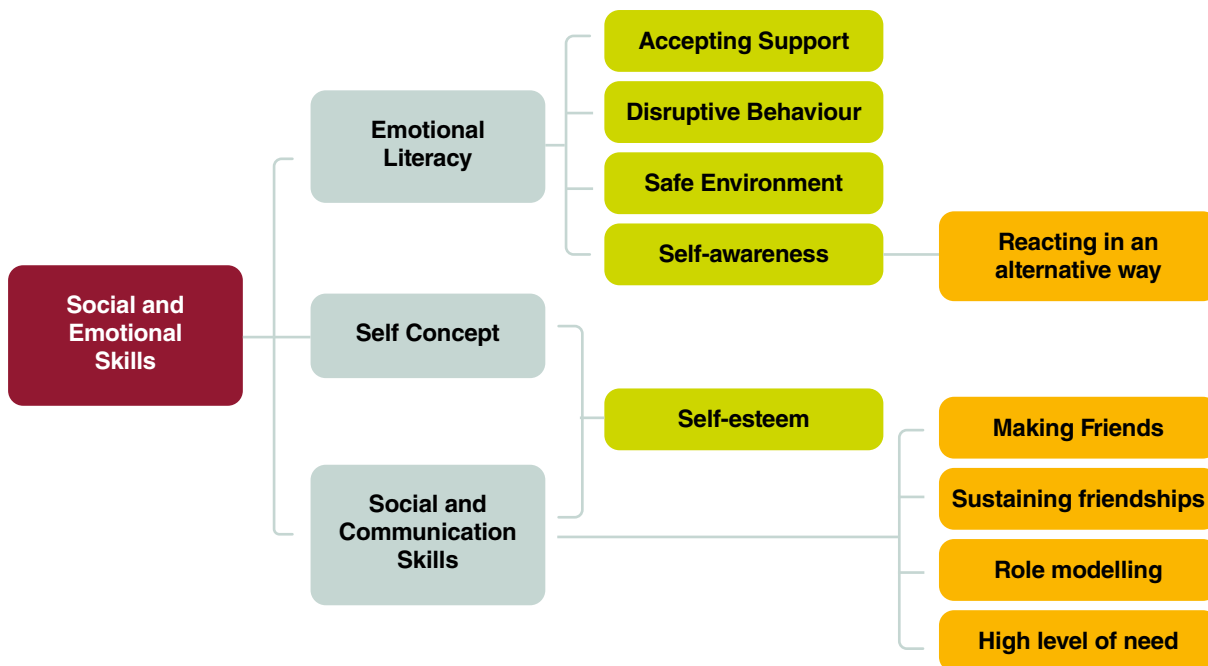


Figure 2: Thematic map of teachers' perceptions of behaviour following nurture group

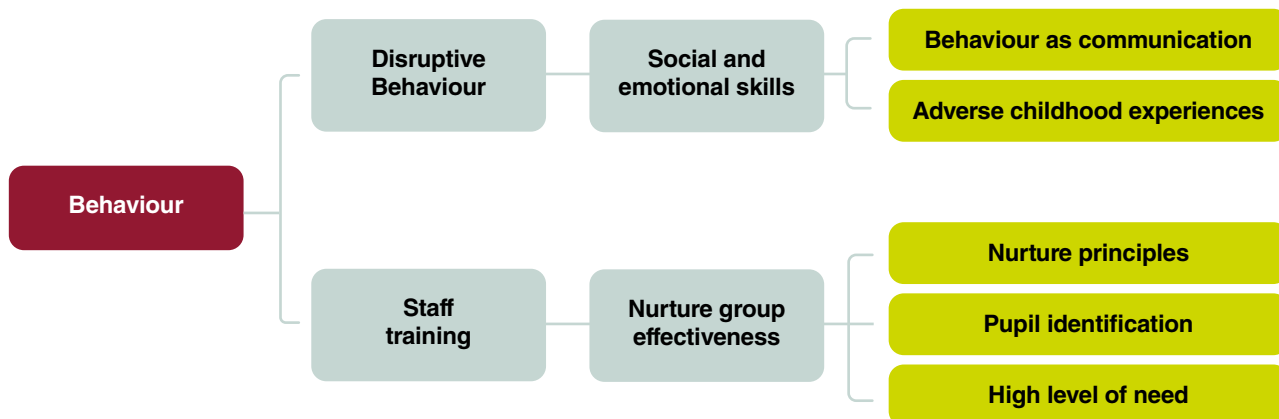
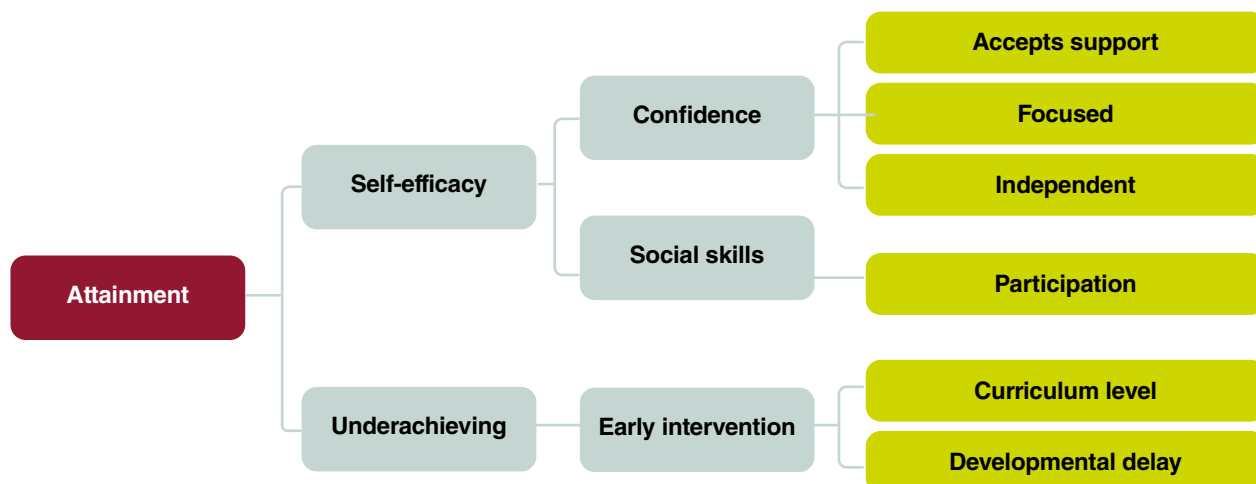


Figure 3: Thematic map of teachers' perceptions of attainment following nurture group



3.1 How do teachers perceive children's social and emotional skills following nurture group intervention?

3.1.1 Emotional literacy

Within the theme of emotional literacy four sub-themes of accepting support, disruptive behaviour, safe environment and self-awareness were identified (cf. Figure 4.1).

Teachers reported that expressing emotions of anxiety and anger following nurture intervention appeared to have significantly improved for 66.7% of pupils (eight pupils). Emotional literacy skills denoted that pupils had developed self-awareness of their feelings and were able to describe the emotions of others and themselves. Children were better able to communicate their feelings when seeking adult support or to prevent disruptive outbursts.

This move towards accepting emotional support from the mainstream teacher was reflected in 41.6% of the narratives (five teachers). This indicated the potential for continuous emotional development as the teacher is able to provide the ongoing support required by the pupil. Individuals lacking emotional regulation skills were found to be more likely to suffer from aggressive outbursts or be withdrawn and distressed. These behaviours reduced in line with developing emotional literacy skills. Twenty five per cent of participants (three teachers) highlighted the positive change resulting from pupils' improved emotional recognition, awareness and self-expression. Pupils were better able to understand emotions within themselves and begin taking steps towards building coping strategies (cf. Chiappella, 2015).

P1: (Pupil A) definitely understands simple emotions which they didn't previously. Thinking about recently in class they can now tell me how they are feeling using pictures. They have a picture board which has different emotive faces on it which they can pin their name against... importantly they can also tell me why they feel this way which is so helpful as their teacher to be able to help them.

This narrative illustrates the pupil's new-found proficiency in naming emotions, in this case through the use of visual representations. This allowed the mainstream teacher to offer support in emotional regulation. As reflected by the participants, the ability for pupils to understand emotions was closely linked to their capability to identify their personal triggers. Specifically, the emotional regulation skills were deemed valuable to teachers who felt children became more resilient as a result.

3.1.2 Self-concept and social and communication skills

Following the nurture group interventions, 50% of participants (six teachers) noticed improvements in the children's social skills. Within the themes of self-concept and social and communication skills, one sub theme of self-esteem was identified.

Seventy five per cent of participants (nine teachers) considered the skills required to make friends were enhanced in pupils following nurture group attendance. A move towards positive self-concept is reflected throughout 50% of the narratives as participants report improvements particularly in the component of self-esteem (cf. Rogers, 1959; Vincent, 2017). This increased self-esteem was closely linked with making friends, playing in a group of peers and decreased anxious behaviour.

In addition to the enhanced self-esteem component, further social skills were identified as having developed during the course of nurture group. 75% of participants (nine teachers) shared that pupils were better able to hold a conversation with others about a shared interest and had developed capability in cooperation, sharing and following the rules of a game.

3.2 How do teachers perceive children's behaviour following nurture group intervention?

Behaviour was the most reported concern from teachers prior to nurture group attendance with 58.3% of participants (seven teachers) sharing behavioural concerns. This was due to the disruptive and destructive nature of the children's behaviour, involving refusal to partake in any learning and hurting other children and members of staff. Disruptive behaviour as well as staff training were the two themes identified, alongside the sub-themes of social and emotional skills and nurture group effectiveness (cf. Figure 4.2).

3.2.1 Emotional regulation

All four participants who expressed the greatest concern regarding pupil behaviour prior to attending nurture group subsequently experienced a reduction in disruptive outbursts. Similar to findings by Sloan et al, 2016, gradual change in behaviour was extensively intertwined with emotional literacy and regulation.

P6: (Pupil F) was much less disruptive following nurture intervention and continued to improve towards the summer holidays... When disappointments happened the child was able to be sad about them then very quickly move on and be distracted by something else. They became better at communicating in words when they were sad or angry.

Experiences of children who were calmer and more cooperative were shared. Teachers reported a significant reduction in aggressive and disruptive behaviour in line with children's ability to talk about their emotions and use emotional regulation techniques.

P6: (Pupil F) was more able to communicate with other children about what they were working on or playing with. (They) would try to talk things through with peers rather than throwing things and screaming.

P5: (They) were able to speak to children and let them know if they were annoying (them) rather than lashing out first.

These quotes illustrate the observed impact of the children's enhanced communication skills. Similar to Cunningham et al. (2019), possessing the skills to discuss conflicts and share feelings both contributed to the changes seen in behaviour with peers. More specifically, 50% of participants (six teachers) considered the combination of developed social skills and emotional literacy to be most transformative to pupil behaviour following nurture group.

3.2.2 Staff training

When teachers discussed their feelings on the limitations of nurture groups, 33.3% (four teachers) mentioned their concern regarding the efficacy of the group for children who struggled with very disruptive behaviour. Rooted in this concern was inadequate staff training.

P11: Nurture groups are not always run by people who have received the correct training. If an adult is not confident delivering the programme, then it won't work.

P1: Yes, I've experienced the nurture group not being successful. A pupil last year attended the group and staff struggled to manage his aggressive outbursts.

These quotes exemplify the link between the disruptive behaviour of pupils and the importance of nurture group staff training. A third of participants (four teachers) expressed the potential for nurture groups to become viewed as an intervention for all disruptive children, without the time being taken to assess them for suitability using the Boxall Profile® for example. This appeared closely interconnected with inadequate or no staff training.

The importance of training was echoed across all narratives. As also highlighted by Fraser-Smith and Henry (2016), nurture principles are central to the success of the intervention and it is therefore to be expected that the group may not be as effective an intervention if run by untrained staff. Participant

4 and 11 share this sentiment and experienced greater efficacy from the intervention when run by trained ASN staff in previous years.

P4: I think if a nurture group is run properly, fully planned, following all of the nurture principles it is a wonderful tool!

I feel in the beginning when it was run by our ASN teachers there was structure, purpose and progression. I was less confident in the quality of provision when the ASN teachers were not involved.

Despite concerns regarding training and child selection, participants overwhelmingly experienced positive outcomes from the nurture group intervention. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that lack of staff training was conceptualised as negatively affecting the set-up and efficacy of nurture groups.

3.3 How do teachers perceive children's academic attainment following nurture group intervention?

Prior to nurture group significant lack of engagement was prevalent across 33.3% of narratives (four teachers) with cases most acute experiencing no participation in the curriculum. Consequently, children scored under the expected curriculum level for their age. Two themes, self-efficacy and underachieving were identified with the corresponding subthemes of confidence, social skills and early intervention (cf. Figure 4.3). Across the interviews 83.3% of participants (10 teachers) all identified at least one change that has either improved or influenced attainment.

3.3.1 Self-efficacy

Two thirds of those interviewed (eight teachers) understood the nurture group's contribution to pupil's engagement to be in increased self-efficacy. This was reflected across six narrative accounts with reports of pupils as more confident to take part in activities. Pupils increased confidence coincided with their willingness to participate in classroom activities. Pupils were described as more likely to complete tasks without help and work on their own. This high self-efficacy reported by participants appeared to be foundational to the augmentation of independence and participation (cf. Sanders, 2007). A third of participants considered pupils to be more independent with classroom activities with further accounts of increased participation.

P6: (Pupil F) could now complete work on their own at their table when previously they would have refused to do it. They would still look for adult company while doing a task but could more often than not complete it without an adult. They became more confident in speaking in front of peers.

This narrative conveys teachers' observations of transformed academic behaviour following nurture group. Self-efficacy is fostered in the nurture group environment through supportive relationships and goal setting as described by Bennathan and Boxall (2000). Two teachers detailed that the encouragement provided by the nurture staff and achievement of personal goals facilitated their pupils' belief that they could achieve.

3.3.2 Underachieving

Not all participants communicated widespread positive changes regarding attainment, with 58.3% of participants (seven teachers) sharing continuing attainment concerns. Some felt that pupils were able to work better in the small and highly supportive environment nurture group provided, however they did not manage any better in their mainstream class.

P8: ...he is able to complete some tasks more independently but he still has a very short attention span and needs lots of teacher support. Before the group he couldn't do any work independently so hopefully this will now improve his attainment.

The recurrent and continued barrier to attainment for many of the pupils was their often significant developmental and academic delay. With persistent SEBD present for 75% of pupils discussed (nine teacher accounts), the attainment gap has only increased between these pupils and their peers. References were made to pupils not achieving at the expected levels across the curriculum despite being more engaged and independent in class. As highlighted by participant 8, for many of the pupils it is likely to be too early to make any concrete judgements on attainment as it will take several weeks or months to progress within the curriculum.

Impressions of a perpetual cycle between this very poor level of attainment and pupil frustration or defiance were evident and early intervention was identified as an underlying theme across the whole study. With SEBD most likely to exhibit in children's early years it is consistent with narratives of deteriorating behaviour (cf. Goodman et al., 2015).

Narratives suggest that nurture group generates the improvements necessary to benefit pupils' attainment by providing them with the resilience and self-efficacy required to be successful (cf. Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). Long-term impact of these skills cannot be determined from the narratives. However, with the significant potential stemming from an increased self-efficacy combined with a reduction in SEBD, it could be assumed that attainment will improve. This was signified within the hopeful connotations expressed by participants.

4. DISCUSSION

This study found positive experiences of nurture groups' effectiveness for promoting children's social skills, emotional regulation, positive behaviour and attainment. Differences in experience were largely due to the way the nurture group was run in each school. In line with previous research, all participants valued nurture groups as an intervention. Each research question will be discussed in turn.

4.1 How do teachers perceive children's social and emotional skills following nurture group intervention?

Following pupils' participation in the nurture group, emotional literacy skills were developed, which included the improved ability to identify, express and understand emotions. Binnie & Allen (2008) found teachers reported similar findings in the teacher SDQ that reflected an improvement in children's emotional development and functioning. More specifically the interview data findings echo the teachers' views collected by Cooper and Tiknaz (2005), who observed pupils as calmer and more able to manage their feelings of anger following nurture group intervention. This study highlighted the impact of this developed emotional literacy skill in the mainstream classroom. Furthermore, participants made references to developed emotional literacy being associate with the safe space nurture groups provide for pupils. Parents, staff and children also identified the "secure base and safe haven" (Garner & Thomas, 2011, p. 216) nurture group provided in the study carried out by Garner and Thomas (2011). Children reported feeling safe within the nurture environment to share their emotions and current difficulties. Garner and Thomas (2011) credited the safe environment and subsequent development of emotional skills to the supportive relationships nurture pupils formed with the nurture staff. These positive relationships are described by Sloan et al. (2019) as the formation of attachments between the nurture staff and pupil. Evidence of attachment theory is apparent in narratives throughout all three research questions. Geddes (2018) states that insecure attachment in the early years can impact self-awareness, confidence and the ability to communicate feelings. In this study pupils improved in self-awareness and were able to identify sources of distress. This skill enabled enhanced emotional regulation indicating a secure attachment had been formed. In participant interviews, mainstream teachers had reported improved relationships with their nurture pupil. Geddes (2006) recognises the potential for pupils to form attachments with their teacher and the positive impact this can have on their wellbeing.

Social skills developed significantly during and

subsequent to attending nurture group. Participants accredited this to an increase in self-confidence for those who were previously shy and anxious in social situations. These findings concur with Shaver and McClatchey (2013) who interviewed nurture group staff and found pupils to have increased confidence. More specifically it appears that children developed a positive self-concept, particularly concerning the component of self-esteem (Rogers, 1959). Self-esteem has been linked to interpersonal relationships, which for some pupils from this study resulted in the formation of new friends and improved relationships with their mainstream teacher. This is reflective of research that has identified nurture groups to significantly improve scores in self-esteem (Binnie & Allen, 2008) and lead to pupils making more friends and displaying enhanced social communication skills (Cunningham et al., 2019; Shaver & McClatchey, 2013). Self-concept has not yet been discussed in nurture group research as an outcome of the intervention, with only a single mention from Vincent (2017). However, the development of a positive self-concept was an identified theme across narratives in this study. Given the protective factor positive self-concept may provide against future stress and childhood depression (Jaureguizar et al., 2018) further research into the link with nurture groups would be beneficial. Furthermore, most participants reported children to have developed the necessary social and communication skills to allow them to make and sustain friendships. In line with Vincent (2017), skills lacking prior to nurture group, which subsequently improved, included conversational skills, sharing and taking turns as well as being able to participate in a group game. These developed social skills were understood to be related to improvements in children's behaviour.

4.2 How do teachers perceive children's behaviour following nurture group intervention?

Disruptive behaviour was found to be deeply intertwined with emotional regulation and social skills. Children who developed emotional literacy and regulation skills were reported as being calmer and more cooperative following nurture group attendance. Studies have frequently demonstrated similar findings of improved behaviour as a result of developed emotional literacy and social skills from nurture group intervention (Bennet, 2015; Shaver & McClatchey 2013; Cunningham et al., 2019; Vincent, 2017). Boxall (2002) describes in one of her six nurture principles that all behaviour is communication. Geddes (2018) expands on this by stating that behaviour is sometimes the only means of communications for children with underdeveloped emotional literacy and social skills.

The concerns raised from participants of the effectiveness of nurture group for very disruptive pupils was linked with staff training. The lack of training was described by some teachers as a significant limitation to the effectiveness of the nurture group and was viewed as negatively impacting the intervention. This is a concerning finding as Kearney and Nowek (2019, p.19) state that training is central to ensuring nurture is "rooted in evidence-based psychologically informed practice". Furthermore, the importance of having the sound knowledge and understanding of the six nurture principles through training has been highlighted as an important factor to the group's success (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). Shaver and McClatchey (2013) recognised that funding is often a barrier to providing staff with the adequate training required and this was clear in many of the schools in the current study. With inconsistent staff training identified across narratives, it appears the training of both nurture and mainstream staff in the nurture principles and use of Boxall Profile® would be beneficial in improving the effectiveness of nurture groups for children with SEBD.

4.3 How do teachers perceive children's academic attainment following nurture group intervention?

Attainment sparked discussion that teachers initially felt had not improved significantly following intervention. However, despite pupils not having progressed within the curriculum, on further reflection attainment progress was made with improved engagement and independence. These findings are reflected by Sanders (2007), who reported that some teachers thought attainment had significantly improved following intervention as children were more motivated in completing classroom activities and were able to complete work independently. In this research participants observed pupils' improved self-efficacy to have facilitated the change in academic behaviour. This concurs with Adams et al. (2020) who found positive associations between attainment and the confidence pupils had in their ability to achieve their desired grades. This suggests pupils who develop their self-efficacy through nurture group may be more likely to achieve academically. Furthermore, similar to Chiappella (2015), interviews identified that developed social skills facilitated more cooperative behaviour between the classroom teacher and pupil that resulted in pupils being more willing to follow instructions as well as work with other children on group tasks and towards class goals. These positive changes observed in pupils have the potential to positively impact their attainment according to Flook et al. (2005). They found pupils' social relationships

with peers to predict academic success. With strained relationships and less peer acceptance, self-concept and mental health were negatively affected, resulting in poorer attainment (Flook et al., 2005). Gresham (2016, p. 320) refers to social skills as “academic enablers” which are behaviours and attitudes that encourage participation and facilitate learning from teaching. Teachers’ experiences of nurture groups’ effect on attainment has rarely been investigated. This study provides invaluable insight into the impact the intervention is having on pupils’ level of attainment in the mainstream classroom in relation to the development of social and emotional skills and behaviour. With attainment following nurture group usually measured by the Boxall Profile®, SDQ and curriculum measures (Binnie and Allen, 2008; Cooper et al., 2001; Reynolds et al., 2009; Sanders, 2007,) little consideration is given to the small, but potentially significant, changes improved self-efficacy and social skills could have on long-term attainment. With support from this study highlighting teachers’ positive experiences of academic engagement, motivation and independence, it could be hypothesised that nurture group intervention will increase attainment in the long term.

However, while positive changes in pupils were observed, the extent to which nurture groups have improved attainment remains questionable with pupils still underachieving within the curriculum. This identifies a limitation of the current research, which is that it was not possible to follow up pupils in a longitudinal design. Nurture groups bearing little or no direct effect on attainment has been reported in some research (Sloan et al., 2019; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Symeonidou & Robinson, 2018). For example, Sloan et al., 2019 found no direct improvements in academic attainment resulting from nurture group attendance when compared to a control group. In the present study concern was shared that many pupils still required significant adult support for most classroom tasks and teachers felt this would be ongoing. Some participants believed the persistent SEBD for children had negatively impacted their attainment for many years so nurture group would most likely not result in rapid improvement. Despite these feelings, with pupil’s displaying behaviours of engagement and self-efficacy, improvements may not be immediate but these positive academic behaviours are encouraging.

4.4 Strengths, limitations and suggestions for future research

Although the present study provided essential explanative insight that allowed to further understandings of teachers’ experiences with nurture groups, caveats regarding the method

need to be taken into consideration. Essentially, the qualitative data obtained as well as the small sample size limits the generalisability of this study. A larger recruitment of teachers across a wider geographical area would provide a more reliable interpretation of teachers’ experiences. Despite this, relevant findings were obtained regarding pupils’ social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes following the nurture intervention. The current study makes a positive contribution to the nurture group literature in providing teachers’ own experiences of its effectiveness, which to date is sparse. With utilising semi-structured interviews to obtain teachers’ views on nurture groups, in-depth insight is gained into the realities of how the intervention impacts children in the mainstream classroom.

The interviews produced a wealth of data providing various avenues for future research. First, the interviews carried out identified an improvement in self-concept that appears to be a result of the intervention. With a high correlation between SEBD and poor mental health (Goodman et al., 2015; Waddell & Clarke, 2017; Richards & Huppert, 2011; Katz et al., 2011; Layard et al., 2014) the influence of nurture group on the protective factor, self-concept, should be investigated. This would offer further insight into the potential for nurture groups to promote lasting mental wellbeing and prevent the development of mental health conditions. Additionally, with recent local funding cuts across various local authorities in Scotland, it appears nurture group staffing and training is being negatively affected. It would be beneficial to research how these changes are affecting nurture groups’ efficacy and the implications that may arise. The importance of training and the barriers to its facilitation have been identified by research (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Shaver & McClatchey, 2013; Ruby, 2018; Fraser-Smith & Henry, 2016) but the implications of deficient training on nurture groups’ effectiveness do not appear to have been investigated in depth. Teachers’ criticisms and the discussed barriers to the effective running of nurture groups warrants further research. This is largely due to the role teachers play as an advocate for nurture groups as a successful intervention in mainstream schools. Finally, in relation to nurture groups as an effective intervention for children with SEBD, further research is required into the long-term outcomes. This is especially the case regarding the long-term effects on attainment as this continues to be lacking within literature (Sloan et al., 2019). A longitudinal, control group study, with a focus on attainment, would offer insight into the impact nurture groups may have on enabling academic success throughout education.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative, semi-structured, interview study has contributed to the current evidence on nurture groups' effectiveness for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The study has addressed the deficiency in literature concerning teachers' personal experiences of nurture groups' effectiveness by providing rich interview data. In line with previous research, nurture groups support the development of children's emotional wellbeing and relationships. Findings of inconsistencies with staff training highlight the importance of nurture staff having a sound knowledge and understanding of how best to facilitate social and emotional development within the nurture group.

Most significant for teachers was the reduction of disruptive behaviour in class. Improved emotional regulation skills as well as social skills were both involved in enabling this change. With such remarkable improvement for most pupils with these difficulties following nurture group attendance implications for practice are evident. For some teachers they found it very distressing that pupil behaviour had escalated to such a high level before nurture group intervention was offered. It would therefore be beneficial for pupils and staff to be able to offer nurture group to pupils as early as possible before such behaviour escalates. Barriers to this are apparent due to a reduction in funding and staffing in many local authorities. This may limit the capabilities of schools being able to facilitate the number of nurture groups required and run these with a consistent evidence-based approach.

Furthermore, consistent with previous research, teachers reported little or no change in educational attainment following nurture group intervention.

Despite this, with improvement in both social and emotional development, alongside increased self-efficacy, pupils have the potential to achieve academic success. Due to the short-term nature of this study it was not possible to conclude improved academic attainment and longitudinal research on attainment have been recommended. Findings do however indicate the wider benefit that nurture groups may provide for pupils with SEBD by giving them the opportunity to engage in classroom lessons and achieve academic success. Academic attainment should therefore not be viewed by teachers as an expected outcome of nurture group but view the intervention as providing pupils with the foundation to achieve academic goals.

In conclusion, teachers' experiences were predominantly positive towards the effectiveness of nurture groups for supporting children with SEBD. Those critical of their effectiveness in certain circumstances were still positive about the intervention's goals and potential. These schools were experiencing barriers and limitations to the groups' success, and therefore the intervention was not able to achieve its full potential. Teachers felt the emotional and social skills gained in nurture group improved children's emotional wellbeing and provided them with the foundations to build lasting friendships and attain educational success. While further research would be beneficial to provide deeper understanding of the raised issues, the study achieved its aim and provided a comprehensive analysis of current experiences of nurture groups from the perspective of primary school teachers.

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