

# “IT FEELS LIKE THE WHOLE NURTURE GROUP IS MY FAMILY”: WHAT PUPILS SAY ABOUT THEIR TIME IN NURTURE GROUP PROVISION

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**Keywords:** Nurture groups; Pupil views; Identity; Semi-structured interview

## **ABSTRACT**

Nurture groups (NGs) were a provision first conceptualised by Marjorie Boxall in the 1960s. They have since become established in schools to support children who have experienced early attachment difficulties. There is a bank of evidence in support of their benefits to children and some evidence of the positive views of parents and practitioners. However, there is a paucity of research that this study seeks to address to explicitly consider how children view their time in the NG.

Sixteen participants at Key Stage 2 (between 7 and 10 years of age) attending ‘classic-style’ NGs were involved in the study. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule and prompt activities, such as photographs and their own completed work. The transcribed data was coded and categorised using thematic analysis.

The themes identified were developed into a model of ‘*becoming*’ and ‘*being*’ a ‘preferred self’. External factors and problem identity were further classification themes.

These findings could be used as a lens by which to understand the needs of children attending NGs, and the methods by which to support these. Further research could focus on the relevance of these findings to a wider range of students.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1960s nurture group (NG) interventions have become established in schools across the UK. A literature search examined the impact of NGs with particular focus on the notion of ‘pupil voice’. There is a paucity of published papers exploring pupil views in relation to their NG experiences. This study aimed to elicit pupils’ views using appropriate methods, in order to understand what children value about their NG experiences and to give them agency and empowerment to be heard. Attachment theory is the underpinning theoretical basis for the development of NGs and this review also examines the influences of this theory.

### **1.1 Attachment theory**

The theory of ‘attachment’ provides the psychological foundation on which NG practice is based. This theory was initially developed by John Bowlby during his work with ‘maladjusted’ boys in the 1930s. Bowlby advocated a principle

of ‘monotropy’ where a child has an innate need to attach to a main attachment figure, which informs future relationships and influences wider psychological development. Further research and literature from a variety of disciplines support this theory and the notion that early relationships and experiences affect psychological health and wellbeing in adulthood (eg Bowlby, 1973; Cortina & Marrone, 2003; Slater, 2007).

The process of attachment is considered to provide the foundation for a number of competencies, such as emotional regulation, attention and behaviour (Kinniburgh et al., 2005), emotional and behavioural problems, delayed cognitive development and lower rates of self-esteem and self-worth (Geddes, 2006; Bomber, 2007). Work by Sroufe (1983, 1986) and Waters et al. (1979) provides some evidence that early attachment experiences can impact on behavioural organisation in the learning situation.

Geddes (2006) translates this theory into the

classroom setting, where she suggests that the teacher and classroom represent the educational 'safe base'. She details a notion of the 'learning triangle' that occurs between a pupil, teacher and task. Not only is trust an issue for classroom success, which allows children to test their boundaries in a safe and appropriate way but also social confidence and skill which would enable them to generalise across situations. Features of a classroom, including predictability, structure and safety, have the potential to minimise the negative impact of an insecure early attachment experience, or to exacerbate it in the contrasting state. This renders the educational setting a dominant factor in the child's experience once they reach school age.

### 1.2 Nurture groups

NGs were first created by educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall, in the 1960s. The intervention, based on the theory of attachment, targeted pupils who had missed out on these early attachment experiences. Boxall (2002) detailed that 'the mother is the first teacher' and the NG experience is designed to provide a restorative forum for children who had experienced a diminished early learning opportunity

with their own parent. NGs were intended to enhance the positive nurture experiences for the children rather than substitute for an early lack of these and consisted of small class groups within a larger school community. Boxall (2002) makes explicit links between the context of early childhood experiences in the home and the recreated structures in the NG.

Boxall (2002) set out criteria that would reflect a classic NG style. These criteria included a range of 10 to 12 pupils who register with their mainstream class and attend at least one afternoon session a week, increasing during the reintegration period. There should be two adults present (typically a teacher and support assistant). The daily routine is explicit, uniform and predictable; structured in line with the standard school day. Activities are recommended to be at a baby and toddler level, as well as activities that lead into the foundation stage and KS1 level of the National Curriculum. The room should be furnished to reflect both the home and school environments and is 'comfortable and welcoming, containing and protected' (p11). There should be a formal dining experience, most commonly breakfast. Playtimes should be held with pupils' mainstream peers and the targets for each student to work towards should be devised from the 'Boxall Profile®' combined with educational assessments.

Formal training for NGs continues to be provided by nurtureUK and involves a four-day certified course cited in much of the literature (eg Binnie & Allen,

2008; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007, Scott & Lee, 2009).

### 1.3 Pupils' views of their time in an NG

Despite the wealth of information and research on the impact of NGs and various aspects of their functioning, very little has focused specifically on the pupils' view of their time in the NG provision. A number of studies have touched on the pupil view as a by-product or subtheme of a larger study (eg Garner & Thomas, 2011; Sanders, 2007; Shaver & McClatchy, 2013) or consideration of attitudes or relationships between parent and child (eg Pyle & Rae, 2015). However, the research relating to pupils' views either lacks depth or does not focus on views of the provision. The only published studies that have specifically set out to study the impact of the NG experience from the child perspective are Griffiths et al. (2014) and Cefai and Pizzuto (2017).

The Griffiths study explored the views of a set of pupils who were currently involved in an NG provision within a school in a deprived area of Wales. Pupil views were gathered through activities presented to a focus group consisting of eight pupils from the KS2 cohort. The responses given by the students were analysed and categorised broadly into the themes of environment, learning, self-regulatory behaviour and relationships. The scale of this study limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised. However, these headings highlight some important issues surrounding the purpose of NG provision and may provide important messages about crucial components impacting on the pupils attending such provision and who are experiencing social and emotional difficulties.

The Cefai and Pizzuto (2017) study was also limited by taking participants from two NGs only (one with pupils aged 4 to 6 years and one with pupils aged 6 to 7 years) within one single school setting in Malta. The NGs only ran for four hours a week and the data was gathered by the NG practitioners through focus group activities involving cutting and sticking pictures.

This paper reported the themes of toys and games, relationships, food and breakfast, and 'feel good activities' as important to the students and although the NG could be viewed as a 'variant' model (Scott & Lee, 2009) the limited time that students spent in the NG identifies it as more of an intervention group than a model of provision. Although the findings summarised so far, go some way to understanding what is important to the students within a single NG, there is a need to explore further, both why these features are important to the students, and how comprehensive these findings can be across a wider number of NG provisions.

## 2.0 METHODS

### 2.1 Research design

To address the central question of 'What do pupils say about their time in NG provision?' a semi-structured interview schedule was considered to be an appropriate method of data collection, heavily influenced by approaches frequently used by psychologists to explore pupil views, such as personal construct psychology (Ravenette, 1999) and narrative approaches (Wong, 2008; Lunn-Brownlee et al., 2002).

Activities used to engage the students and structure the conversation included the use of photograph prompts and discussing the pupils' work with them. The discussion points targeted through each activity were those of the relationships that students have with significant adults and peers in school, the school environment and their learning experiences. These were designed to build on the findings of the study by Griffiths et al. (2014) that identified the areas of environment, learning, relationships and self-reflection as being significant to students attending NG provision. A pilot study was completed to test the interview schedule and it was adapted accordingly, specifically removing questions that included an assumption of difficulties for the student.

In an attempt to explore themes that were current across all the groups and participants involved, the use of thematic analysis was considered an appropriate method by which to analyse the data gathered. This process followed the stages of analysis detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and involved initial coding of data and subsequent organisation of codes into themes that were merged into a final summary of findings.

A number of possible approaches or ways to organise the data were considered. However, the initial codes were arranged into themes related to identity and sense of belonging, to link to the research questions and previous literature. This also reflects the social constructionist stance adopted throughout this study, asserting that each individual has their own unique view of events. Further categorisation into subthemes was considered and clusters of themes were given overarching superordinate theme labels.

### 2.2 Participating cohort

Due to the reliance on verbal means by which to gather data, it was considered that younger students may struggle with the discussion items. Consequently, pupils currently attending Key Stage 2 NG provisions in primary schools were identified as potential participants. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study

when interpreting the results in relation to Key Stage 1 or secondary aged students. In an attempt to expand the data set, four pupils from four separate NGs were considered an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study. Of the two groups with only four students attending, all the students were interviewed. Within the other two groups, students were selected based on their gender or ethnic status in an attempt to broaden the cohort range. Remaining students were then selected based on their language skills, maturity or ability to engage with verbal discourse. These judgements were made through discussion with the NG practitioners. The participating cohort consisted of 13 males and 3 females with a mean age of 9 years 6 months (with a range of 7 years 11 months to 10 years 2 months).

Participating NGs fitting as closely as possible to the 'classic' model were targeted, where the following criteria were applied: The NG was functioning with two adults, at least one of whom had attended NG practitioner training: it had been running for at least four sessions a week, (a session being at least a half day period): the pupils had been attending the group for at least six months: the group functioned as an integral part of the school and there were at least four pupils in the group. Although the 'classic' model identifies a group size of 10–12 students (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007), this is considered to be an arbitrary group number, without an evidence base for justification. In the area where this study was sampled, many of the groups had a lower group number.

Although all the NGs involved in the study had been running with the same cohort of students since the start of the academic year and for at least eight months, in some cases there had been more recent changes of staff within the NG. Three NGs running within one large rural county were identified through practitioner groups, which were support meetings attended by the staff running the groups and led by the Educational Psychology Service. All practitioners who were approached agreed to participate in the project. One of the NGs was situated in a rural part of the authority and two were on the outskirts of a larger city. A fourth NG was identified via a national NG support group on a social networking site where a practitioner responded to a request for participants. This fourth NG was from a smaller unitary authority and the NG was situated on the outskirts of a large city. At the time of data collection, two groups only had four pupils attending, although one had transitioned three more pupils back into full time mainstream education. The other two groups had 10 pupils in each.

## 2.3 Design

The activities accompanying the semi-structured interviews were linked to aspects of the students' experiences in school and were designed to aid and direct discussion. The first involved looking at photographs of adults in school and exploring students' relationships with the adults, primarily by asking them to identify which ones were important. The second activity was the same in nature but involved looking at photographs of other pupils in their class. The photographs were used as prompts only and in an attempt to minimise assumptions around who might be important to the students in school, participants were invited to think of other adults or pupils they considered to be important to them but were not included in the photographs. These were written down on an additional prompt card as a representation, so that participants could refer to them with equal importance.

The third activity explored pupils' experiences of the environment through the use of photographs of places around the school and asking pupils to rate their favourite places. Finally, students were asked to look through some of their work completed in class and in the NG to identify pieces they felt proud of. This aided discussion around the pupils' views of themselves as a learner.

## 2.4 Procedure

Information sheets were sent out to participating schools, including information for head teachers, parents and pupils. As the interview topic was not considered to be emotionally upsetting or sensitive in nature, 'opt out' consent was a preference for participant involvement and ethical consent had been agreed from the University Research Ethics Committee on this basis. Previous literature concerned with gaining pupil views has also described difficulty in gaining consent from the parents of 'hard to find' students (O'Connor et al., 2011) and opt out consent therefore removed this barrier. Education and educational provision from the perspective of the child is an area of particular importance especially with reference to the rights of the child (The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, 1989), current legislation (Children and Families Act, 2014) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). As such, it was considered more important to gain consent from the participating students than signed parental consent, although parents were entitled to remove their children from the project through the 'opt out' process.

A date was agreed with settings and all four students from each provision were interviewed on the same day within the school. Necessary

photographic prompts were either obtained by the researcher or provided by the NG practitioner and pupils' work was made available by the NG practitioners.

Participants were introduced to the interviewer by the NG practitioner and interviews took place in a quiet room within the school. The pupil information sheet was revisited with the pupils and they gave their signed consent to participate in the study. Participants were reminded that they could leave at any time and did not need to give a reason for doing so. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, the questions were used as a guide only, although generally did not deviate much from the script. Interviews, which were audio recorded, took between 18 and 32 minutes to complete. Participants were thanked for their co-operation and invited to ask any questions before the interviews were ended. Interviews were later transcribed for analysis.

The research study design was developed with consideration of the standards outlined in the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2006), Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014) and HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2016). The key principles outlined in the Code of Human Research Ethics include scientific integrity, social responsibility and maximising benefit and minimising harm. These were heeded during all phases of the study.

## 3.0 RESULTS

The data was analysed using the stages of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Atlas TI software was utilised to support with this process and the first stage of data immersion identified 58 initial codes. Data bytes were often given several code labels and as such, some of the data ultimately linked with more than one thematic heading.

The initial codes were considered for commonality and the second stage of the process involved merging or re-naming several codes, resulting in 47 codes.

These codes were organised into themes that were matched against the initial data identifiers in order to ensure accuracy of meaning in the data.

### 3.1 Theme organisation

The notion of 'identity' links with the concept of an internal working model, which is an important feature of attachment theory on which the NG model is founded. As such, the concept of identity was used as a perspective by which to interpret and organise the final code categories. Additionally, the relevance of this category organisation was decided on with respect to Griffiths et al. (2014) and Billington's

(2012) previous work acknowledging the importance of relationships in NGs and the John-Akinola et al. (2013) study suggesting the importance of belonging for students attending school. Consequently, the categories and superordinate organisational model selected links with the notion of identity. A miscellaneous category was used to allow for codes that did not fit easily into either of these categories and was later themed as 'external influences'. It was necessary to then subdivide the categories into subordinate headings relating to identity.

The terms 'problem identity' and 'preferred identity' relate to literature in the field of narrative therapy. Chow (2015) summarises that: 'narrative therapy includes three core components: deconstructing problem-saturated stories, co-constructing alternative stories and thickening alternative stories.' (Chow, 2015, p317) Additionally, Polkinghorne (1996) explains: 'In the dominant story, people are passive and under the control of the problematic parts of their selves.' (Polkinghorne, 1996, p366). In view of the life experiences that children attending NG provision are likely to have encountered, the terms 'problem identity' and 'preferred identity' for descriptive categories when organising the initial codes were considered to be appropriate.

This stage of the process revealed a majority of codes falling into the category of 'preferred identity' and further consideration of these codes led to a decision to subdivide this category into themes of 'becoming' [the preferred identity] and 'being' [the preferred identity]. These subthemes were chosen in an attempt to conceptualise the impact of the NG experience on the process of developing a more positive self-identity and were identified by studying the codes that fitted into the theme of 'preferred identity' and consideration of how they could be organised in a manner that would make thematic sense. For example, codes such as 'challenge', 'empathy', 'future aspirations' and 'making choices' were considered to relate to possibilities or aspirations, rather than established behaviours. Codes such as 'adult approval', 'meeting needs', 'respect' and 'rewards' appeared to reflect an actual way of being in relation to current behaviours.

### 3.2 CODE AND THEME ORGANISATION

The codes were organised into the following thematic structure and relate to the data presented in the following sections:

**Table 1: Theme organisation**

Misc (later themed as external factors)	Problem identity
Focus on learning <b>Contextual</b> Links with mainstream class / Wider community / Holistic view / Group size <b>Reinforcers</b> Physical space / Physical activity/ Equipment / resources <b>Environmental</b>	Family difficulties / Negative emotions / Dealing with conflict / Social exclusion <b>Unlovable</b> Disruption / Apprehensive <b>Managing expectations</b>
Becoming preferred self	Being preferred self
Belonging (Identity) / shared interests <b>Modelling / recognising possibilities</b> Strategies for /Overcoming difficulties / Play / Repairing relationships / Helping / Enabling / Mediation / Open and honest <b>Feedback and practice</b> Recognising difficulties / self-reflection / Familiarity / Reliable / social rules / Challenge / Manageable workload / Need to be listened to / Future aspirations / Empathy / Making choices (control??) <b>Exploring possibilities</b>	Achievement / Adult approval / Respect/ Peer approval / Rewards / Kindness / Meeting needs <b>Valuable</b> Calm / relaxed / thinking space / Comfort / Caring / Enjoyable / Mood enhancing <b>Contented</b> Family support / Relationships / team work / peer support / Positive self-image / Independent learning / Progress in learning / resilience in learning <b>Capable</b>

#### 3.2.1 Being preferred self

This theme related to positive remarks made by participants about their time in school or the NG and what is involved to achieve this. It encompassed themes characterised by the concept of being a way that gave pupils a sense of identity that was positive and pro-social.

Participant 6: "Well, like, I think I'm here because, well it's not really me that discussed to put it in here, it's my mum and (Family Liaison) and they decided because I get too angry at home and too angry at school, so they decided me to put into nurture and over the past couple of weeks my anger's come down and I am starting to control it."

#### Subthemes

**Valuable:** This subordinate theme was based on interpreting data as revealing a sense of value, feeling special or given a sense of worth.

Participant 13: "It's for special people only, we're the only four special people."

Participant 6: "Yeah, she always kept me and other people safe and she always like, cared about all of us and it's really helpful."

Participant 8: “Yeah and I just started to play with them. It feels like the whole nurture group is my family it is.”

**Contented:** These codes revealed a sense of calm and feeling comfortable, positive or happy. For example, ‘Thinking space’ related to being in a place where they could think or reflect.

Participant 14: “Yeah, we love having a laugh together.”

Participant 9: “It’s happy, it just makes you feel better than in class cos it’s more funner than in class because you got all these people around you and there’s only 10 people, and you know all these people and I don’t really know everyone in my class.”

**Capable:** This theme related to a sense of capability. These codes appeared to reflect feelings of competency and feeling able to achieve in any aspect of work or interaction.

Participant 7: (Interviewer: What would they say about you?) “You’re kind, you’re very kind and you’re good playing.”

Participant 10: “When I was at my maths and English, I was absolutely rubbish, didn’t do anything. Then when I started (NG) they taught me stuff and stuff, then I knew all of it and now I’m starting to learn, I’m in the middle.”

### 3.2.2 Becoming preferred self

This theme includes codes that suggest the participant is developing in a positive direction with respect to their behaviours or self-image.

Participant 2: “Yeah but we’re trying to not to retaliate in nurture.”

#### Subthemes

**Modelling/recognising possibilities:** where participants identified with different ways of being or have this modelled for them by others.

Participant 15: “These two, because they’re sporty and I like sports.”

Participant 5: “I thought it was going to be a little bit good because one of my friends used to come to here and they thought it was really good and they got to do lots of fun stuff.”

**Feedback and practice:** where feedback was shared with the participants in terms of their progress and they had an opportunity to practise or demonstrate more socially appropriate behaviours.

Participant 1: “...because sometimes we don’t take it in turns, we just grab, but we’ve learnt to take it in turns and wait our turn to speak.”

Participant 12: “...the teachers always say ignore them, so I usually always ignore them, but sometimes it might be something really hard to try and ignore, so, it’s a bit hard for me and it’s...”

**Exploring possibilities:** acknowledging that there are various ways of being, including negative experiences.

Participant 5: “We all had a discussion about what we think and we came here for it and if we like, get that wrong, they tell us why and how we’re making it better.”

Participant 10: “Because, (Participant 9) has changed a bit, ‘cos she used to cry for everything.”

### 3.2.3 Problem I identity

This theme reflects references to things that were self-negating or suggestive of negativism towards themselves and times of difficulty that reinforce a negative self-image.

Participant 10: “There is one, is one part I do not like, I like going to (NG) but on Fridays we have to go to class which I hate because it’s so hard, I absolutely hate it.”

#### Subthemes

**Unlovable:** suggestive of a negative self-image and poor opinion of themselves or situations where they feel that they are not valued.

Participant 10: “Well, it’s a bit, don’t like it... all the other children make fun of me.”

Participant 12: “(CT) because obviously, um, this year my dad’s been a bit really, really angry at me, so I, and I went to (CT) probably about five weeks ago, yeah five weeks ago, and he said ‘once you’ve finish your lunch can you come to me’ and I said ‘of course I can’ and then we talked about my dad because he broke something of mine so, yeah...”

**Managing expectations:** referring to expectations, disappointment or alternative preferences.

Participant 15: “Some afternoons I don’t like going because sometimes I’m like in the middle of my book and I’m, sometimes I have a really funny book and I don’t really, I don’t want to leave to go to the nurture room, I want to carry on reading my book, or if I’m like in PE, if I’m in a PE lesson and they come and get me I don’t want to leave.”

Participant 11: “I thought it would be different, I thought it would be the same teachers down there.”

Participant 8: “I was expecting like, everyone to be mean, but they was not actually mean.”

### 3.2.4 External factors

This theme reflects external factors impacting on the participants' time in school, including physical space, learning tasks and wider community influences.

Participant 9: "My actual classroom, because I know that, I know that a lot of people don't like classrooms but it's, it's easier to work because you can't just work on the floor, and so a classroom's better because you're in a separate place to everyone else in the school and it's just easier."

#### Subthemes

**Contextual:** how the experiences link with the pupils' own world and experiences.

Participant 1: "Because I... they talk to us and we can't concentrate when they're walking through."

Participant 11: "We do, we do like, we do maths we do, in English we talk about fidget spinners. We find out like if you do like, do you think fidget spinners are allowed in school?"

**Reinforcers:** experiences that were affirming for the pupil.

Participant 5: "(Peer B) came round my house and checked I was okay".

Participant 4: "Um... When we can like play really fun games and we, and if we want to like play a game and any, and another person wants to play a different game we just vote."

**Environmental:** physical environment, positive or negative.

Participant 4: "...this one because there's like, equipment and you can like, climb on it and stuff, this one because you get to run around and like, do stuff like that, and this one because it's like, nurture it's like a nurture place which means it's nurture pretty much."

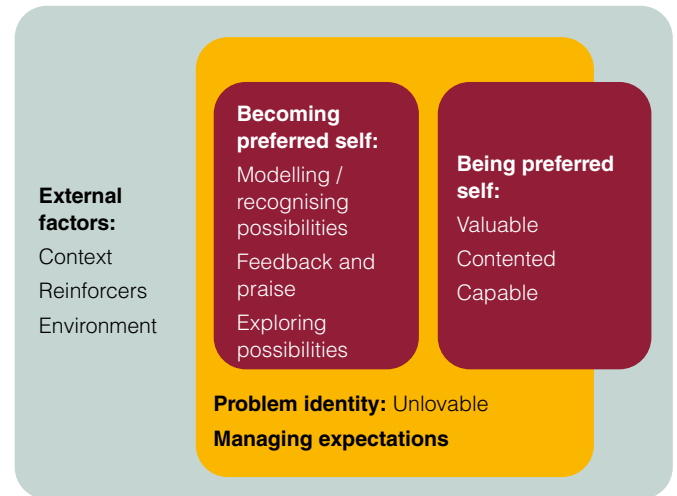
Participant 15: "We play football in that one, you do anything on there, water fights, sports day, um, you sprint round the field sometimes, you play cricket, any kind of sports or anything like that or you sometimes, if you can see that big tree up there, we normally sit underneath the trees, there."

Participant 16: "No, because the floor's too cold."

The following figure illustrates the themes and subthemes identified in Table 1, supported by the data examples presented in the previous sections. The model shows the interaction of various factors that impact on the development of an individual's identity and the processes involved in exploring

(becoming) and establishing (being) a preferred identity.

**Figure 1:** Organisation of themes and subthemes.



## 4.0 DISCUSSION

The participant responses suggest that pupils have felt supported through their time in the NG. This is particularly with reference to their ability to recognise and explore their possible identities with supportive feedback from adults and peers. In general, participants described positive experiences within the NG that resulted in feelings of contentedness, capability and being valued. This came across powerfully in comments around having fun, 'having a laugh' and the workload being more manageable so that they could complete it either more independently or with enough help. This enabled individuals to move from an 'I can't do this' perception of themselves to a more positive 'I can do this' awareness. A level of social connectedness that occurs within the NG could also be argued leads to their development of a 'preferred self'.

Relationships were, unsurprisingly, strong themes that emerged within the data and pupils referred to difficulties with relationships in and out of school in terms of family and peers. However, dealing and managing conflict were also identified topics. Sharing humour and having fun were strong themes, which suggests that time in the NG supports a sense of belonging and social identity.

The findings of this study elaborate on the conclusions made by Griffiths et al. (2014) identifying relationships, environment, learning and self-regulation as important to students attending an NG. They also support the findings of the Cefai and Pizzuto (2017) paper that reported the themes of toys and games, relationships, food and breakfast, and 'feelgood activities' as important to the students. However, the methodology employed in this study allowed for deeper exploration of

how and why these factors are important to pupils during their NG experience. Adding weight to the broad-reaching implications of these findings, links can be made with the conclusions derived from the John-Akinola et al. (2013) study that deduced that children find social relationships with teachers and peers and the school environment to be both important and valuable to their participation in the school community. This study also elaborates on the work completed by Garner and Thomas (2011), who identified that relationships and the availability of a 'safe haven' were valued by the secondary aged students involved in their research. It contextualises the findings of the Sanders (2007) study where the pupils considered that they were in the NG to 'learn more' and supports the understanding of why the pupils may have developed this perception. Closely related are the findings of the Shaver and McClatchy (2013) study that identified that what pupils liked about their time in an NG were toys, friends, the teacher, feeling happy and 'everything'. In summary, this study not only supports the findings of the research preceding it, but it elaborates and enriches the understanding of the pupil perspective, drawing a deeper meaning from the participants' responses and providing a student voice.

These findings, as presented in Figure 1, can provide a framework for adults working with pupils within NGs that could impact on their teaching and pedagogy. An understanding of what pupils need to support a developing sense of self or positive identity may help practitioners to structure their work with the pupils. For example, scenarios could be designed through planned sessions for pupils to explore possible characteristics of socialisation; have possible behaviours modelled; experiment with various outcomes and receive feedback or praise from the adults and the rest of the group. This could be done through role play opportunities, structured play sessions, circle time or literature and discussion. Practitioners could also give spontaneous feedback in relation to emerging behaviours observed in the pupils.

These findings could have wider reaching implications for general classroom practice or social skills training or interventions and could impact on the whole school community in terms of acknowledging and focusing on what creates a nurturing environment for pupils. The need to feel valued, capable and content could be promoted within a whole school ethos with respect to the behaviour policy and reward systems as well as individual teaching styles within the classroom. This could impact on pupils' mental health and feelings of worth within the school environment and improve overall academic and social development. It is

important to recognise and acknowledge these needs in pupils. These findings reveal the support processes that scaffold the development of identity. Recognising how to communicate and behave in a social situation is intrinsic for pupils through modelled adult behaviour. The feedback and praise necessary to mould these desired behaviours are also key findings and, perhaps more challenging, is the need for pupils to explore possible ways of being. John-Akinola et al.'s (2013) identification of the need for varied clubs and activities within the school community could strengthen this proposal.

Attending clubs or events could provide students with opportunities to explore potential ways of being that may support their eventual development of identity and sense of belonging. The outcomes of this study therefore are not only limited to the experiences and needs of pupils attending specialist provision but relate to good practice for all students.

Further research could consider links between these findings and those of mainstream counterparts or other pupils experiencing educational difficulties, such as learning difficulties, social communication difficulties or physical difficulties. It would be interesting to consider the wider implications of these outcomes, especially in terms of how far they can be generalised to other schools, situations or populations of young people.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The overwhelmingly positive evidential claims for NG provision come principally from statistical data charting pupils' progress, which provides two-dimensional feedback regarding the value of NGs and pupils' progress (eg Shaver & McClatchy, 2013). Initial exploration into the views of pupils attending these groups included anecdotal comments within case study samples (eg Garner & Thomas, 2011; Sanders, 2007) and one small-scale study conducted in the UK that aimed to explore pupils' views of their time in an NG (Griffiths et al., 2014).

The strength of this research includes the robust methods and qualitative nature by which pupil views were gained and substantiating gaps in current understanding. The findings add depth to the understanding of what children find important during their NG experience and what factors support their development of a 'preferred identity'. This thematic model can be used as a structure by which to consider identity development processes in a variety of other areas of exploration within the field of psychology. Limitations of the study include the restrictions on possible participants and lack of NGs currently using the classic model. There were also a variety of means by which to analyse the data and this could have led to varying outcomes.



The implication for NGs include using teaching methods and evaluations to target the processes by which pupils develop a sense of self, as identified through this study. This could be adopted within a broader school system and could impact ultimately on the development of policies and practices by which to support children at risk of social and emotional or mental health difficulties across children's services.

Future research could investigate whether this model fits within a broader spectrum of challenges, larger whole school populations and wider communities.

Consideration could be paid to how these findings dovetail with other conceptual areas of psychology, such as emotional literacy and resilience. This study has sought to address the gap in current research in terms of how pupils view their time in an NG and it provides a springboard by which to explore a spectrum of related fields. The engagement of the students in this research study supports the view that they were willing and able to have their voices heard and embraced the opportunity to share their views of a provision that is important and valued by them.

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