

Characteristics and experiences of Nurture Group and Learning Support Zone educators in Malta

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Abstract

Nurture Groups (NGs) and Learning Support Zones (LSZs) started to operate as a pilot project in state schools in Malta in 2008. There are more than 60 NGs and LSZs in primary, middle and secondary schools in Malta, out of a total of 89 state schools, with more than a hundred educators supporting children and young people through the nurture approach. This small-scale study aimed to present and discuss the experiences of eight educators (teachers) and learning support zone educators (LSEs) working in NGs and LSZs in schools in Malta. Using semi-structure interviews, the study also described personal characteristics that the participants feel they need to have in their role as NG or LSZ educators, their experiences and the challenges they face. Findings from this study suggest that the role of a NG or LSZ educator is a role that brings about positive change. Also, participants suggested that a NG or LSZ educator needs to have several positive personal attributes. Findings in the current study suggest that there is the perception of a lack of understanding on the nurture approach from mainstream educators.

Data availability statement: Due to the nature of this research, the data cannot be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Introduction and research context

A Nurture Group (NG) is a special class that runs within a mainstream school and is generally intended for children or young people whose behaviour puts them at risk of exclusion (Syrnyk, 2012). In Malta, NGs, as they are called in primary schools, and Learning Support Zones (LSZs), as they are called in middle and secondary schools, started to operate as a pilot project in 2008. Now there are more than 60 NGs and LSZs in schools in Malta, with 120 educators supporting children and young people through the nurture approach.

In Malta the nomenclature for teaching assistant is learning support educator (LSE), so in all the country's NGs and LSZs there is a teacher and an LSE supporting children or young people. I, the author, have insider status due to my experiences as a NG teacher and currently as an education officer supporting NGs and LSZs.

The NG is made up of between 6 and 12 children or young people, and the role of the teacher and LSE is to build positive relationships between themselves as NG staff and between the children or young people, based on attachment principles and support for vulnerable children (Billington, 2012).

Literature review

NGs provide an effective intervention in improving the emotional wellbeing of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Hughes & Schlösser, 2014). The aim of a NG is to provide a carefully structured approach where there is a balance of learning, teaching, affection and structure within a home-like atmosphere (Davison & Duffy, 2017). Teaching approaches within a NG involve attunement principles, and the physical environment is designed to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people (Cubeddu & Mackay, 2017).

The nurture approach is based on the Attachment Theory (Balisteri, 2016) and, as stated by Geddes (2018), this theory is a core aspect of practitioners', professionals' and researchers' understanding of the issues affecting learning and performance in a classroom. As noted by Middleton (2019) and Balisteri (2016), Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory offers a unique insight into the roots of how children with difficulties benefit from a NG experience, as it recognises that communication implicit in behaviour is based on unmet needs. For children who benefit from the nurture approach, school is often their first experience of a consistent safe place where they are known, acknowledged, respected and feel safe with adults who are reliably and predictably present. It is perhaps their first experience of feeling noticed as having their own identity and a responsiveness to their feelings and experiences (Geddes, 2018).

There has been ongoing research into NGs since their introduction by Marjorie Boxall in the 1970s (MacKay, 2015). The focus has included social emotional learning (SEL) programmes implemented in NGs – such as research by Lyon (2017), Bennett (2015), Burns, MacDonald & Ferguson (2018) and Colley & Seymour (2021); the voices of children and young people who benefit from NG settings – such as studies by Pyle & Rae (2015) & Edmunds (2021); and the voices of educators who work in NGs – such as Billington (2012), Cubeddu & Mackay (2017), Davison & Duffy (2017), Middleton (2018), Middleton (2020), Syrynky (2012), Balisteri (2016), Lucas (2019), Gibb & Lewis (2019), Middleton (2019), Macpherson & Phillips (2020), and Kombou & Bunn (2021). For example, Macpherson & Phillips (2020) noted in a study of primary educators on their views of

NGs, that primary teachers believe that there is a reduction in undesirable behaviours exhibited by children attending NG provisions. However, there needs to be more training on knowledge and understanding of how best to facilitate social and emotional development within the NG.

Teachers and teaching assistants working in NGs have an exacting role that serves as a model for positive relationships and healthy social interactions in an often-demanding educational environment (Davison & Duffy, 2017). Middleton (2019) noted that nurture practice begins at the very point when an educator 'listens' to the inner voice of the pupil and responds to their cries through the creation of connection, safety and trust. Likewise, in their study of how NG practitioners make sense of their relationship with children attending the NG, Gibb & Lewis (2019) noted that several factors lead to a successful practitioner-child relationship.

Balisteri (2016) explored the teacher-child relationship in NGs, and noted that the overall relationship quality between teachers and students improved over time both during their mainstream class and in the NG. Research with NG educators also puts forward that these educators perceive themselves as vehicles for positive change (Billington, 2012, and Syrynky, 2012). Also, research from Cubeddu & Mackay (2017) noted that NG educators practise attunement principles significantly more than teachers in mainstream classes. Syrynky (2012) noted that NG educators felt that they are trusted by the children in their care, that they are open, trustworthy, secure role models and that they feel that they hold the following characteristics: inner strength, calmness, empathic nature, self-awareness, and objectivity. Billington (2012) noted the challenge that there was lack of teamwork between NG educators and other staff members, with NG staff feeling that other educators are envious of the NG educators' work.

Middleton (2018) pointed out that the nature of specialised work that NG educators undertake can greatly impact their personal lives, but it was suggested that having a shared belief, friendship and leadership among NG educators, as well as supervision, can present positive outcomes. A small-scale study by Middleton (2020) with teaching assistants working in a NG suggested

that a strong belief in the nurture approach, friendship and the feeling of being listened to, recognised, included and supported by the school leadership team had a positive impact on NG educators' work. However, there were negative implications if NG staff were not listened to, nor included or supported by the school leadership team.

Middleton (2019) explored the need for NG educators to be supported in their wellbeing as due to the nature of their job, these educators can experience several stressors that might negatively affect wellbeing. In a study by Kombou & Bunn (2021) on resilience in NG staff, the authors acknowledged that the role of an NG educator is a highly motivating one, but also demanding, and staff can experience isolation. Lucas (2019) noted from her experience as a NG teacher that it is essential that educators working in a NG do not lose sight of what makes NGs unique – that it is about children learning at their present developmental level, and it is not about therapy.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted in this research. While there have been studies on and with NG educators from different countries, it was felt that there was a need to do this research with NG and LSZ educators in Malta to understand their experiences of working within the Maltese educational context and the opportunities and challenges they face.

In view of this, the NG and LSZ educators were asked the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of NG and LSZ educators working in Malta?
- What characteristics do NG and LSZ educators feel are of importance in their role?
- What strengths and/or challenges do NG and LSZ educators experience in their role?

The research took a small convenience sample of NG and LSZ educators in Malta. Out of the eight participants who took part in an individual semi-structured interview, four were working in a NG and four were working in an LSZ. Four participants were teachers and four were LSEs, and five were female and three were male. Their experience working in a NG or LSZ ranged from one to eight school years.

While in other countries, NG educators tend to support children and young people for at least two full days a week, NG and LSZ educators in Malta support children for less time (Cefai & Cooper, 2011). A child or young person who is referred to a NG or LSZ in Malta, will receive support for about 90 minutes per week. However, NG and LSZ educators in Malta also provide other types of support, which can be in-class support sessions, whole-class support, and whole-school support. In-class support is support in the student's own class which provides a link between the skills learnt in the NG or LSZ and the mainstream class. Whole-class support is a scheduled session in a mainstream class where particular social and emotional learning topics, such as values or emotional literacy, are taught. Whole-school support includes events such as special assemblies and celebrations of diversity and awareness days.

Tracy (2010, p.839) noted that quality qualitative research needs to adhere to eight criteria: a worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical considerations, and meaningful coherence. As an insider of NGs in Malta, through my previous and present roles as educator, I felt the need to be self-reflexive and so throughout the whole research process ensured that I would not put my ideas and biases in the research, but rather listen to the participants' views of their experiences to ensure multivocality. To achieve this, I gave the participant interviewees the transcribed interviews, and sought their agreement to continue. As there was this particular need to research nurturing approaches in Malta, this report covers a worthy topic; however, due to the small-scale nature of the study the findings cannot be generalised.

To engage in this research project, I ensured that ethical considerations were in place. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Board of the Ministry for Education in Malta. Participants took part in the research voluntarily, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the duration of the research project and following publication. For safeguarding reasons, all of the participants' names were changed. Though this project was a small-scale study, through the use of individual semi-structured interviews, the research gave detailed information about the experiences, characteristics, and challenges of NG and LSZ educators.

I chose individual interviews as a research tool because I wanted to analyse whether the views and experiences the educators gave during the interviews were similar or diverse amongst the participants and whether they were in line with research undertaken outside Malta. My choice of research tool resonated with the literature on the experiences of NG educators working in other countries. After the eight interviews were conducted and recorded, they were transcribed and coded, and then thematic analysis was used in order to capture the meanings attributed by participants to their experiences (Willig, 2013), helping to make sense of their actions.

Findings

As a result of coding the transcripts through thematic analysis, five themes emerged from this research, which are:

Theme 1: Everyday experiences

Theme 2: Support for NG and LSZ educators

Theme 3: Characteristics of NG and LSZ educators

Theme 4: Strengths and opportunities

Theme 5: Challenges

Table 1

How the five themes link to the research questions?

Research question	Themes linked to research question
Research question 1: What are the experiences of NG and LSZ educators working in Malta?	Theme 1: Everyday experiences of NG and LSZ educators Theme 2: Support for NG and LSZ educators
Research question 2: What characteristics do NG and LSZ educators feel are of importance in their role?	Theme 3: Characteristics of NG and LSZ educators
Research question 3: What strengths and/or challenges do NG and LSZ educators experience in their role?	Theme 4: Strengths NG and LSZ educators experience Theme 5: Challenges NG and LSZ educators experience

Table 2**The five themes, the associated codes and relevant quotes from participants**

Theme	Key words/codes	Meaningful extract
Theme 1: Everyday experiences	Understanding their difficulties	"You need to care every day. The children who come to us have social problems and family difficulties... You are the only support that they have at school."
Theme 2: Support for NG and LSZ educators	Progress, understanding	"This year I had a lot of foreign students who were referred to the NG. They passed through a lot of trauma. I used to send for them and tell them that I understand their situation. I encouraged friendships through the sessions. I got to know about their culture. Now I have seen a lot of progress."
Theme 3: Characteristics of NG/LSZ Educators	Empathy, attunement, working under pressure, characteristics of a nurture educator	"It is important that the educator is self-reflective even on his lifestyle to that lifestyle compliments your attitude during the sessions."
Theme 4: Strengths and opportunities	Appreciation of NG and LSZ educators work, positive change, rapport with students, educators and SLT (senior leadership team)	"It is very positive when students observe the human side in your work."
Theme 5: Challenges	Burnout, lack of awareness on the nurture approach	"You need support when teaching children who have experienced a lot of challenges and trauma in their life, and this might affect you when you listen to their challenges and problems."

Theme 1: Everyday practices

The participants mentioned a number of experiences that they go through when they are teaching and supporting students who benefit from NG or LSZ support. One educator mentioned the need to practice empathy in her role on a daily basis, and she related a story of a boy she supported:

"There was a boy who was exhibiting very challenging behaviour; he even hurt this teacher. He was engaged in a lot of challenging behaviour and was on the brink of being excluded from school. But once you try to understand his situation, why he is acting in that way, you realise that he feels abandoned, even by his mum, and that resulted in a lot of anger."

Angele

One participant, who at the time of the study was a LSZ teacher, highlighted the need for continuously supporting young people on a daily basis:

“Every single day we support, all the time, during every lesson. Young people who attend our programme need to be shown love and patience, as you would not achieve anything otherwise.”

Francesca

Theme 2: Support for NG and LSZ educators

Participants also described individual experiences with students that they supported in the NG or LSZ, and how through long-term support they were able to observe positive change in these particular students. One NG educator mentioned how she supported students who were refugees as part of her everyday practices:

“This year I had a lot of foreign students who were referred to the NG. They passed through a lot of trauma. I used to send for them and tell them that I understand their situation. I encouraged friendships through the sessions. I got to know about their culture. Now I have seen a lot of progress.”

Denise

Another noted an experience of a boy who was transferred to the school where he was a NG teacher:

“I am thinking about a boy who came from another school. He was considered to be a problem in every school that he went to, but the problem was that this boy was not accepted by adults at school. They built a wall... but if you look at the other side of the wall of the student you see that the problem was not the boy and the problem could be solved. If you see from where the problem is coming, you start from that it is easy to understand from where the problem is coming from and be able to support.”

Blake

A NG LSE recalled how she supported a boy with externalised challenging behaviours:

“He was described as arrogant and that he answers back. When I started to work with him, through in-class support, and I supported his teacher and his LSE, they started to realise that there was a deeper level, that he was not able to express his emotions, he had complex emotions that were beyond his age and he could not regulate these emotions. So we did a breakdown of things and till the end of the year, though he still experienced some defiant behaviours, we saw an improvement in this boy’s behaviour.”

Emma

Theme 3: Characteristics of a NG/LSZ educator

In this particular study the participants mentioned the diverse attributes a NG or LSZ educator should have, namely: “being empathic”, “able to work in a team”, “being a good role model”, “building a good rapport with the children/young people”, “being patient”, “being understanding”, “being perceptive”, “being firm caring and calm and able to work under pressure”. One of the educators related how previous experience in his role as educator helped him as a LSZ teacher:

“Before I worked in a learning zone, as a teacher I tried to reach out to the students not only during the lessons but also during break time. That laid groundwork for building a good rapport with them.”

Harry

Another educator mentioned the characteristic of being attuned with the child:

“You need to see the situation from the student’s point of view and if you do, you see that the difficulty goes way back. The problem is a barrier that hinders him from functioning in class.”

Blake

One participant mentioned the need to be understanding of the child's experience and empathic as a characteristic of a NG/LSZ educator:

"You need to understand their (the children's) problem, understand what they're feeling, so to help them better. And at the same time you need to show love and be firm. These go together, to be able to prepare them for class and for life."

Denise

Another educator who took part in this study noted the need of being nurturing in the role of a NG or LSZ educator:

"You need to practice these characteristics every day because we meet so many children with difficulties that automatically you need to practice these characteristics. And the children themselves, they come to you as you are the only support that they have at school."

Francesca

Theme 4: Strengths and opportunities

Participant educators in this study mentioned that the rapport with the children and young people who attend the NG/LSZ was one of the strengths of the service:

"It is very positive when students observe the human side in your work."

Harry

Being an agent for positive change for the student was also perceived as a strength by the participants in this study:

"You see a positive change...I mean even parents come up to us and tell us, 'Thank you, because through your support my son has made an improvement'."

Angele

Some participants who felt that they were accepted and their work was appreciated by the senior leadership team (SLT) and educators mentioned the relationship with other educators as a strength:

"Luckily enough the head of school understands us and helps us. Even when we tell her that we need to buy something, she readily supports us."

Gavin

"The teaching staff at school they understand us, they accept us to the full."

Clara

Theme 5: Challenges

While some participants felt that other staff members and school leaders accepted their role as NG or LSZ educators, other participants in this study suggested that there is lack of acceptance and support in this approach, thus perceiving relationships with other staff and the SLT as a challenge, generally due to lack of knowledge and awareness of the nurture approach:

"I believe that though teachers have challenges in class like the curriculum and timetabling and syllabus, most of them do not understand that if a child has challenges that do not allow him to function well in a classroom school, he cannot focus on the maths lesson for example."

Blake

"Some teachers do not understand that you need to pull out a student for some time, to come to the learning zone, to stop from academic work and focus more on things that help him grow as a person."

Gavin

Two participants in this current study also mentioned burnout and challenges with regards to mental health and wellbeing in their role as a NG or LSZ educator:

"I have a full day at work, I get tired. Most of the young people we support have mental health difficulties we need to address, support them, and sometimes you feel you are not prepared to support them in a holistic way."

Francesca

"In certain situations you need to remain calm, or else if you are angry you might end up with even more challenging situations."

Clara

Discussion

The function of the NG and LSZ in Malta is to support children and young people who are at risk of exclusion (Syryn, 2012) and is based on attachment principles (Billington, 2012) & (Geddes, 2018). Similar to Davison & Duffy's (2017) findings, the participants in this study suggest that NG or LSZ educators create a home-like atmosphere through the rapport they build with the children and young people, and they engage in a number of SEL programmes, as stated in research by Lyon (2019), Bennett (2015), Burns, MacDonald and Ferguson (2018), and Colley & Seymour (2021).

Due to the diverse practices that take place in NGs and LSZs in Malta – such as the fact that they take students for shorter periods of time each week and engage in other practices such as in-class, whole-class and whole-school support – it could be suggested that their everyday running is different to that of other countries. However, a number of similarities were noted in this study when compared with previous ones, especially with regards to the characteristics of NG and LSZ educators and the strengths and challenges they experience. Such similarities can be seen in the use of language related to their characteristics, such as being an agent of positive change (Billington, 2012; Syryn, 2012) and ensuring that the NG and LSZ educators build positive relationships (Davison & Duffy, 2017; Gibb & Lewis, 2019; Balisteri, 2016). Syryn (2012), through her research with educators, mentioned a number of person-centred support approaches, which were also similar to

the views expressed in this current study. Similarly, Cubeddu and Mackay's study (2017) some participants in the study differentiated between the characteristics of NG and LSZ and their mainstream counterparts, suggesting a lack of teamwork between mainstream educators and NG or LSZ educators (Billington, 2012).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study presented the views of eight NG and LSZ educators in Malta and discussed the characteristics they required and the experiences and challenges they faced. While this research is subjective to the voices of these eight participants, it supports previous research of educators working in the NG-specialised setting, including Billington (2012), Middleton (2018) and Syryn (2012).

When discussing the qualities and traits required, the participants mentioned positive attributes that focused on the nurturing approach and the experiences that they face in their role as a NG or LSZ teacher or LSE. All the experiences mentioned in this study present support centred around a child or young person, and acknowledge how these educators engage in listening to the child or young person and observing their behaviour to build a trusting relationship. Participants also noted that they try to focus on the positive characteristics of each child and young person and then work with them to improve their social and emotional well-being through social and emotional learning.

Participants had diverse views of the strengths, opportunities and challenges that they experience in their role as NG or LSZ educators. Some saw relationships with other educators or SLT members as a strength, while others saw this aspect as a challenge. They all noted that they have a good rapport with the children and young people who are supported through the NG or LSZ.

While NGs and LSZs function with a different approach in Malta, the views of educators in this research suggest that the NGs and LSZs in this country present similar positive outcomes to their foreign counterparts. They all promote nurture approaches and engage in social and emotional learning to support children and young people.

Following this study, a number of recommendations for the NG and LSZ service in Malta could be suggested. As suggested by the participants, there needs to be more acceptance of the nurturing approach in schools, which could be achieved through more NG and LSZ training and awareness for mainstream teachers and SLT members. At present, NG and LSZ educators are supported by the Maltese State Schools Support Services, and this needs to continue to ensure that they all maintain positive mental health wellbeing in their role as educators.

NGs and LSZs in Malta support a number of students who exhibit social, emotional and behavioural challenges, through NG and LSZ sessions and whole-class, whole-school and in-class support. These sessions and support must continue as they are helping students with diverse needs, including those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities, those who are at risk of poverty, and those with emotional and behavioural challenges. This suggests the need for the continuous professional development and training for NG and LSZ educators, and awareness of other educators and education leaders on the nurture approaches implemented by the NG and LSZ settings.



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