

How the implementation of a secondary school nurture group relates to whole-school approaches and ethos: a case study

Karen O'Farrell, Larissa Cunningham, Brettany Hartwell and Jana Kreppner

Corresponding author: Karen O'Farrell, Karen.O'Farrell@southampton.gov.uk

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Abstract

Nurture Groups (NGs) have been widely implemented with vulnerable young people in mainstream primary schools to support the development of secure relationships and so promote a sense of wellbeing and readiness for learning. Success of the intervention within the primary school environment has led to increasing interest in the applicability of NGs to secondary schools. Within this single-school case study, the experiences and perceptions of NG and non-NG pupils and school staff were explored through individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis of the data produced three main themes and nine sub-themes, developed across the three stakeholder groups. Findings suggested that the successful implementation of secondary NGs is related to whole-school approaches and ethos. Secondary NGs can provide extensive support for vulnerable pupils and support a positive approach to whole-school wellbeing. Recommendations for developing secondary NG practice include: embedding NG practice into whole-school culture, adopting a more flexible approach to how NGs are organised and how they operate, and considering the particular needs of Year 11 pupils.

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Introduction

The mental health of children and young people is a priority within education and health policy (DoH & DfE, 2018). In addition, the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing is an area of current concern with, for example, young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) experiencing increased levels of anxiety and reduced levels of wellbeing (DHSC, 2021). Guidance within 'Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools' (DfE, 2018) highlights a need for schools to consider how to provide a 'safe and calm environment where mental health problems are less likely' (p.6) for all pupils in response to increasing social, emotional and mental health

(SEMH) needs. One school-based intervention – Nurture Groups (NGs) – has consistently been identified within government guidelines and policy as an appropriate and effective approach to supporting vulnerable pupils with SEMH needs (DfES, 2005; Ofsted, 2011) and is highlighted as an intervention where the development of best practice should be targeted (DfE, 2019). Furthermore, the promotion of a whole-school nurturing ethos has been recognised as a useful and preventative approach to help improve the SEMH of children and young people (DfE, 2018).

Based on attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992; Bowlby, 2005) NGs support the development of effective 'internal working models' (IWMs) through the experience of nurturing and trusting

relationships (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). A healthy IWM (mental template of relationships based on experiences with a primary caregiver) supports the appropriate organisation of a child's behaviour (especially their social interactions) through the way it shapes expectations of themselves and others.

The stability of IWMs has been an area of interest within developmental psychology (eg, Fraley, Roisman & Haltigan, 2013; Jones et al., 2018) with the emergence of two theoretical perspectives: 'prototype' and 'revisionist' (Fraley et al., 2013). Both perspectives propose that IWMs can be updated through exposure to new interpersonal experiences, but they do not agree on whether that change leads to full or partial replacement of IWMs (Fraley et al., 2013). Either way, the notion that IWMs are continuously 'updated' and 'revised' in response to current social interactions suggests that through new experiences of rewarding and trusting relationships, an individuals' IWM can become more positive and secure.

Nurture Groups and existing research

NGs are a short-term, psychosocial school-based intervention, built on six guiding principles underpinning the organisation and ethos of the approach (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006; see Figure 1). There is now an increasing evidence base pointing to the successful impact of NGs (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cheney, Schlösser, Nash & Glover, 2014; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Ofsted, 2011, Ruby, 2019). This growing literature has identified positive outcomes for primary-aged children who have additional needs relating to their social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and subsequent ability to effectively access learning. The research into primary NG practice has inspired an increasing interest in the application of NG practice within secondary schools, which is supported further by growing evidence relating to the plasticity of the human brain beyond early childhood (Blakemore, 2008; Kolb, 2013). In relation to the period of adolescence, evidence indicates that significant development and reorganisation of the brain occurs throughout this time (Crews, He & Hodge, 2007; Giedd, 2004). It has been shown that adolescents are more

susceptible to changes in IWMs than adults (Allen & Tan, 2016). A 'second window of opportunity' (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006) is, thereby, presented in adolescence within which new pathways in the brain that promote positive social interactions may be developed through exposure to environmental change.

Figure 1
The six principles of nurture
(Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006)

Children's learning is understood developmentally

The classroom offers a safe base

The importance of nurture for the development of self-esteem

Language is a vital means of communication

All behaviour is communication

The importance of transition in children's lives

Research into secondary NGs remains limited, although initial findings have been promising. For example, Grantham and Primrose (2017) reported a positive impact on the development of social and emotional skills and a decrease in behavioural needs. These findings concur with results from two previous studies carried out by Cooke, Yeomans & Parkes (2008) and Cooper & Whitebread (2007).

Grantham and Primrose (2017) were also interested in assessing the fidelity of NG provision across secondary schools. Using a qualitative approach, several recurring themes were identified relating to factors which both promoted the successful implementation of NG provision (such as support from senior management and staff training) and which presented as barriers to the successful implementation of NG provision (such as timetabling, whole-school understanding of NG provision and lack of parental involvement). The authors noted that the qualitative findings were

taken only from school staff, so further research needs to include the voice of pupils and parents.

Whilst acknowledging important gains for NG pupils, such as increased motivation, levels of self-esteem, happiness and confidence, research has also identified challenges to the application of NG principles to the secondary school environment, suggesting that adaptations to the typical primary approach may be needed (Garner & Thomas, 2011; Colley, 2009; Kourmoulaki, 2013; de Montjoie Rudolf, 2015).

Concerns around the transference of NG skills to the wider school environment have been highlighted by two further studies seeking the views of NG pupils, parents and school staff (de Montjoie Rudolf, 2014; Kourmoulaki, 2013). Both studies identified an increased sense of belonging and improved social and communication skills for NG pupils, but Kourmoulaki (2013) also identified inconsistent levels of communication between pupils, staff and parents, which was considered to hinder successful reintegration into mainstream classes. De Montjoie Rudolf (2014) concluded that whole-school culture might need to be addressed in order to support the transference of skills beyond the NG environment.

Collectively, findings from existing research into secondary NGs suggest a need for a more detailed understanding of secondary school NGs and how they may fit into whole-school culture. Capturing staff and pupil understanding of NGs using a detailed case study approach may enable a rich picture of the interrelating factors which impact on successful NG outcomes (eg, Colley, 2009; De Montjoie Rudolf, 2014; Garner & Thomas, 2011; Kourmoulaki, 2013). Furthermore, identifying the views of non-NG pupils in addition to NG pupils may help to develop a deeper understanding of how NGs function within the whole school.

Method

A critical realist epistemology provided the framework for this single-school case study through an in-depth exploration of pupil and staff perceptions and experiences (Easton, 2010). A qualitative, inductive single case study design was used in order to capture and learn from the experiences of a school with the Nurturing Schools Award (Nurture UK, 2019).

The present study

The present study took a positive psychology approach (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) involving a case study of a NG provision within a school holding the Nurturing Schools Award (Nurture UK, 2019). Case studies support the development of analytical insights through an in-depth inquiry (Thomas, 2015). Sometimes criticised for lacking both rigour and the potential to generalise findings (Yin, 2009), single case studies are not always viewed as a valid way to create and offer generalisations, although it is argued that a single case study promotes a detailed and interactive exploration, allowing something to be seen in its entirety (Thomas, 2015). Indeed, some researchers highlight the need to carefully consider the context within which interventions are used to understand the wider mechanisms through which change occurs and to engage in more 'realistic evaluations', rather than having an explicit focus on measuring outcomes (Byng, Norman & Redfern, 2005; Greenhalgh, Kristjansson & Robinson, 2007).

The research aim of the current study was exploratory and intended to consider the experiences and perceptions of pupils (NG and non-NG) and staff to try to understand the interrelating factors which may impact upon NGs within a whole-school context. The research question was: How might NGs operate successfully as part of a whole-school approach to supporting wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools?

The case study Nurture Group

The case study school was a mainstream secondary comprehensive and sixth form situated in the south of England with approximately 850 students on roll. The proportion of pupils supported by pupil premium funding was below the national average and the proportion of pupils with identified Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) was above the national average.

The headteacher was reported by staff to place wellbeing at the centre of the whole-school ethos. The NG is run as the focus of their Inclusion, Wellbeing and Support system. The inclusion manager and the deputy inclusion manager undertook the national NG training programme in the autumn term of 2016. This focused on the development of a whole-school nurturing

approach, with the aim of promoting healthy outcomes for children and young people. As a result, the school developed their inclusion, wellbeing and support space into a NG base and centred their provision on the six principles of nurture. The NG does not run in the same way as the 'classic' primary NG model. It provides both a drop in during break, lunchtimes and in between lessons for pupils, as well as individual and group timetabled support throughout each day. A Year 11 tutor group runs at the beginning of each day for identified pupils, which is centred on NG provision. Pupils receiving ongoing NG support are all referred to NG and assessed using the Boxall Profile® for Young People (Bennathan, Boxall & Colley, 2010). Monitoring of progress is achieved using individual rating scales, developed in liaison with the school's educational psychologist.

Participants

Opportunity sampling was used to recruit participants, using the knowledge of the deputy inclusion manager to inform for suitability. The first author requested that pupils were representative of all year groups and that staff members represented different roles within the school. It was hoped that a variety of different perspectives and experiences would support the emergence of a rich and detailed understanding.

In total, 11 NG pupils (some currently and some previously accessing the NG), 12 non-NG pupils and 9 school staff members took part in the study. The 23 pupils (9 females and 14 males) were aged between 11 years 10 months and 16 years 2 months (NG pupils $M = 13.7$ years, $SD = 1.62$; non-NG pupils $M = 13.6$ years, $SD = 0.91$). Twenty-one pupils were White British, one was White and Black African and one was Black Caribbean. Ten pupils (5 NG and 5 non-NG) were in receipt of pupil premium funding.

The school staff members interviewed had been employed by the school for between 2 and 31 years ($M = 10.5$ years). They represented a mix of staff from the senior management team (3), subject teaching staff (3) and learning support staff (3). All three support staff had some involvement with the NG (one had a main role within NG, one spent time within NG as part of her Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) role and another had links to the NG through providing SEND pupil support).

Measures

Semi-structured interview scripts (Appendices A and B) designed to capture perceptions, experiences and understanding, were developed for NG pupil and school staff interviews. The intention was for an in-depth understanding to emerge through responses to open-ended questions which the researcher could further explore using additional probes (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006).

A focus group (FG) approach was used to elicit pupil perceptions beyond those attending NG for which a discussion schedule was developed (Appendix C) made up of open-ended questions and suggested probes to allow the researcher to follow up on areas of interest within the group discussion (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Procedure

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (Study ID 40936). Pseudonyms were assigned to pupil participants during the transcription and write up of this research and staff members were kept anonymous to maintain confidentiality. The school deputy inclusion manager acted as gatekeeper, identifying and approaching potential participants and sending information letters to parents. Informed written consent (opt-in) was gained from parents and school staff. In addition, pupils gave their assent before the start of each interview or FG.

NG pupil and staff interviews took place in The Nook, a small, separate room within the NG area. Individual NG pupil interviews lasted approximately between 15 and 30 minutes and included a warm-up picture-sorting activity, and individual staff interviews lasted approximately between 20 and 40 minutes.

FGs were held in a quiet room and lasted for around one hour. The two FGs were split by age, one consisting of mainly younger pupils (11-13 years) and the other also including pupils from Year 10 and 11 (14-16 years). This was intended to help the pupils feel comfortable and enable them to fully engage with the discussion and share their own experiences (Nind & Vinha, 2014).

Each FG began with a metaphor activity to aid engagement and to help pupils feel more relaxed within the context of the group and stimulate discussion (Nind & Vinha, 2014). A post-it note recording activity was also used during the FGs to generate written recordings of responses to the question: 'How do you think the NG supports pupils at this school?' This supported all FG pupils in being able to share their thoughts and ideas and enriched the descriptions and interpretations produced (Fonteyn, Vettese, Lancaster & Bauer-Wu, 2008; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell & Britten, 2002). All interviews and FGs were audio-recorded and the first author noted any reflections post-interview/FG within a reflective journal.

Data analysis

Transcribed audio data was analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) following the six steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author listened to the audio recordings and re-read the transcribed interviews/FG discussions for each stakeholder group to become fully immersed in the data. Initial codes were noted on the interview scripts before preliminary themes were developed for each stakeholder group (see Table 1 for developing themes). These were then reviewed through the creation of thematic maps. A process of combining, dividing or eliminating themes then took place in order to produce a single thematic map (see Figure 2) that was reviewed by all authors.

Table 1
Developing themes for each stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Theme	Sub-theme
Nurture group pupils	Relationships/ sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support of teacher-pupil relationships • Friendship opportunities • NG pupils feel invested in • NG pupils feel included
	Nurture group staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills • Availability • 1:1 support • Kindness and trust
	Transferability of skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to remain in mainstream lessons • NG staff communication with subject teachers • Long-term goals (motivation) • NG supporting difficulties at home
	Safe space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drop-in • Supporting a positive start to the day • Family feel • Academic support • Calm environment
Non-nurture group pupils	Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buddy system • Opportunities to talk to staff • Peer-peer support • Support with friendships
	How pupils experience the whole-school environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes a lack of communication • Some stigma attached to NG • Timetable impacting on friendships • Lack of opportunity for (older) pupils to talk about difficult feelings • Pressures in Year 11 • Projection of school image

Table 1 (continued)

Stakeholder group	Theme	Sub-theme
	How NG is understood by pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible • Respected • A safe space • NG staff viewed positively • NG as a place to talk through difficulties • Supporting difficulties with home • Supporting academic needs
	Skills of NG staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting SEMH (e.g anxiety) • Support through trauma • Support to cope with difficult feelings
Staff	Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buddy system • Pupil ambassadors • Restorative approaches • Links to ELSA support • NG pupils supporting each other • Pastoral team supporting relationships • Expectations on behaviour in NG
	Staff understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole-school training on NGs • Nurture principles embedded into school policy • Joined up approach of staff • Staff visits to NG
	Whole child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupil wellbeing valued • Specialist staff • Headteacher invests in pastoral side • School is inclusive
	Skills taught in NG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling pupils to return to mainstream classes • Positive impact on behaviour (self-regulation) • Considering perspectives of others • Peer modelling
	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to families • Links to local community
	Nurture Group staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedication • Skills • Availability for pupils • Modelling values and relationships • Positive outlook

To minimise the risk of researcher bias and for clarity of the themes and sub-themes, a second coder (a voluntary research assistant) coded a random selection of the NG pupils and staff interview scripts (seven in total) and the FG scripts using a blank coding manual. The main author checked the extent to which the second coder

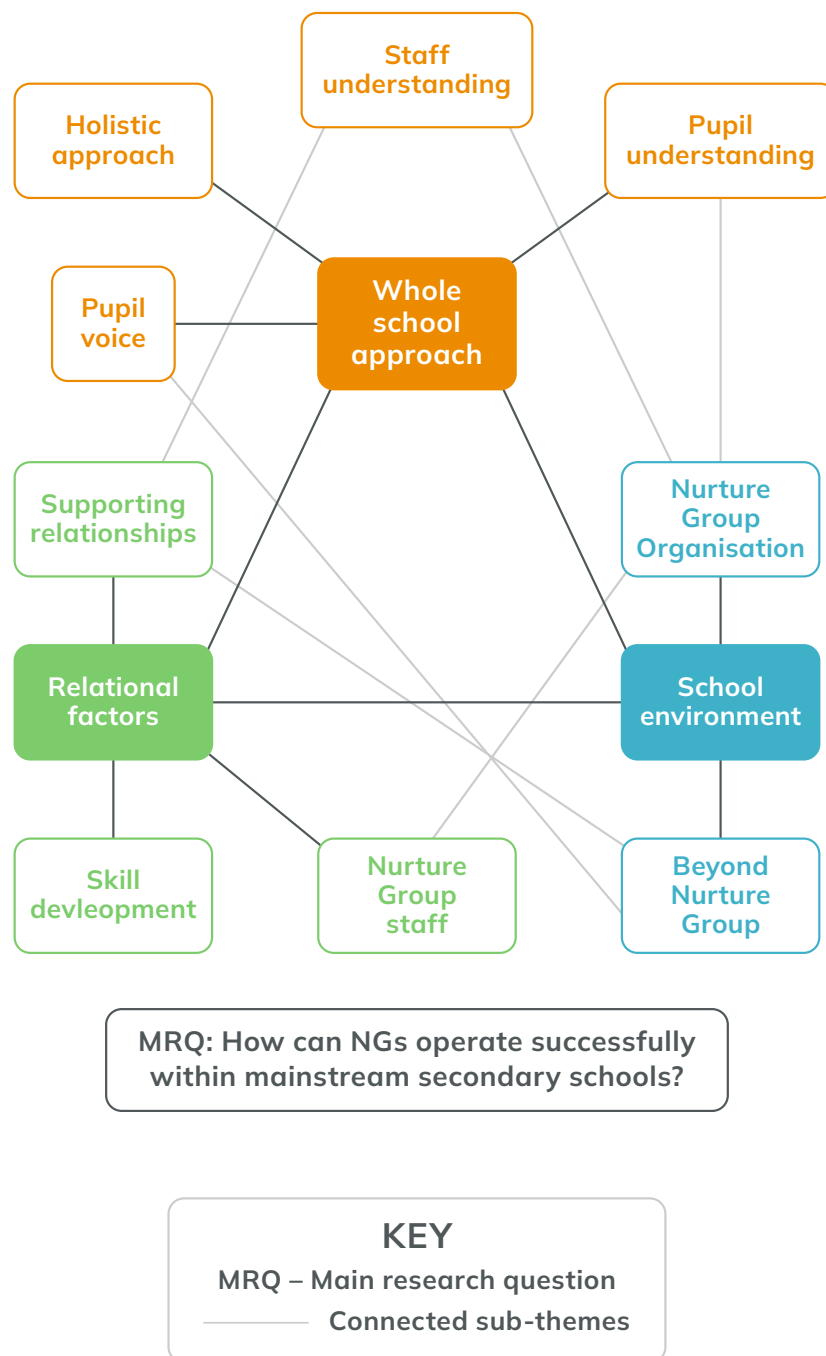
had allocated the same text extracts to the same themes and sub-themes. The level of agreement was considered to be acceptable and was also confirmed through joint discussion. This helped to support the transparency of the analysis process (Thomas, 2006).

Findings

Three main themes and nine sub-themes were identified through the process of TA in relation to the entire dataset (see Figure 3). The following section will present the nine associated sub-

themes as they relate to the three main themes in response to the research question: 'How might NGs operate successfully as part of a whole-school approach to support wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools?'

Figure 2
Final thematic map



Theme 1: Whole-school approach

The whole-school ethos was identified to be largely inclusive and one that incorporated the six principles of nurture. Four sub-themes were identified: 'staff understanding,' 'pupil understanding,' 'holistic approach,' and 'pupil voice.'

Sub-theme 1: Staff understanding

Analysis suggested that NG practice was understood, supported and valued by school staff and this was influenced by the status given to a NG approach by senior management, with the influence of whole staff INSET training and the embedding of NG principles within whole-school policy documents. One participant described how the NG staff had supported other staff:

"...they've managed to successfully get the staff trained up in the nurture principles and put that into policy where it never appeared before."

Staff 1

Staff from across the school understood the needs of pupils referred to the NG. A connection was made to possible challenges for those children whose home lives impacted on their ability to engage and learn in the classroom.

"So it's just, it's just like their safe place and if they haven't got that at home, if something's lacking then it can be made up here. Because before they can learn anything you've got meet their basic needs..."

Staff 6

Sub-theme 2: Pupil understanding

Responses from both NG and non-NG pupils evidenced some knowledge of the approaches taken in NG and the needs of the pupils who access it and an understanding of how the NG environment supported these:

"So the people in here can teach them how to calm down and help them repair their relationship and things like that."

FG 2

"I don't know, it's just a really warm and good environment up here. Like it's different, completely different to the rest of the school which is good."

Charlie, Year 9

This view was not wholly supported, with some pupils in the second FG suggesting that Nurture Groups might not feel accessible or welcoming to all pupils. However, this may have been a greater reflection on the need to have a range of people and places for pupils to go to talk about concerns or difficulties, rather than a sense that NG itself created a sense of exclusion.

Sub-theme 3: Holistic approach

Staff interviews gave rise to a sense that the school invested in the 'whole child'. One staff member talked about links with outside agencies who provided counselling for pupils, and another commented on the emphasis the headteacher placed on inclusivity and pastoral support:

"I think its ethos is that inclusive ethos and that's very much the Head's ...stamp that he has put on it since he has been Head."

Staff 7

Pupils across the school were encouraged to engage in extra-curricular activities and this sat alongside high academic and social expectations:

"...I think we comfortably push our students, we expect a lot of them, but in all rounds, not just academic, like taking part in school socially, behaviourally. Like friendship groups – we expect a lot of them and we help them... go through that."

Staff 4

Sub-theme 4: Pupil voice

This sub-theme arose largely from the non-NG pupils within the FGs, particularly the older (Year 11) pupils, in response to pupils considering whether all pupils were listened to. Although staff talked about the importance of pupil voice within the school there was a feeling amongst some older pupils that the school's priority was to project a certain image rather than to actually hear and

respond to its existing pupils. This related to a sense of academic pressure felt by the Year 11 pupils which was different to their experiences lower down the school:

“The second you get into Year 11 there’s just a lot of pressure.”

FG 2

“If they actually took the time to listen, so they could know how we feel and actually care.”

FG 2

In summary, the whole-school approach theme, related to the way in which NG practice and theory appeared to be well understood, valued and accepted by both staff and pupils across the school. The investment from the leadership team appeared to drive this and helped to embed the NG within wider school approaches and policy. For some Year 11 pupils, however, there appeared to be a feeling that outside of the NG, the wider school approaches were not always supportive of their needs, with academic targets taking precedence over SEWB.

Theme 2: Relational factors

This theme related to the influence NG had on peer relations and staff-pupil relationships and how this was enabled. Three sub-themes that all arose strongly across the three stakeholder groups – ‘supporting relationships,’ ‘skill development’ and ‘NG staff’ – were identified.

Sub-theme 1: Supporting relationships

The NG supported pupils to maintain existing and/or to develop new friendships. The way in which the NG pupils spoke about being in the NG suggested that relationships with others, both pupils and staff, were the foundation of NG provision:

“Because it’s helped, I don’t know really, like my friends come up here and they get supported as well and we then support each other and then it’s built on friendships.”

Charlie, Year 9

There was also a sense that the NG encouraged supportive peer relations between different year groups, particularly with older pupils looking out for younger ones.

“I get along really nicely with them, they’re all good friends; then the other ones, like the year 11 tutor group, they’re really nice. I made some friends there.”

Rowan, Year 7

Non-NG pupils appeared to have an understanding that the NG enabled friendships through the development of social interaction skills.

“Because it can make you more confident, so you meet more people and make more friends.”

FG 1

Sub-theme 2: Skill development

This sub-theme reflected the role of the NG in developing emotional literacy, social skills and self-regulation skills. NG pupils felt supported in being able to successfully transfer such skills to situations outside of the NG environment, helping the development and maintenance of positive peer and staff relations and reintegration into mainstream lessons:

“It’s just... allowed me to get new perspectives on stuff that before I was a lot more negative about...”

Jacob, Year 11

“They kind of teach you how to be a good friend. So, like, you might just talk to somebody on a regular basis, but they tell you how to grow the relationship and how to communicate with each other outside of school and things.”

FG 2

Some staff members appeared to have a particular understanding of how NG pupils were able to use the skills they had learnt through their time in NG:

“I think it the NG is very good at building empathy and I think that’s a hugely important trait or characteristic to build.”

Staff 9

One staff member, involved in running the NG provision, reflected an understanding of her role and an intention to support NG pupils in being able to function successfully within mainstream lessons:

“But you know we are not mental health nurses, our aim is to keep them in a mainstream class and so finding ways that makes that possible for that individual child... So we are giving them strategies and tools and ways that they can manage themselves and manage their strong feelings.”

Staff 8

Sub-theme 3: NG staff

This sub-theme related to the sense that NG staff were valued throughout the school, by staff and pupils alike, and were recognised as skilled in their understanding of and approach to working with vulnerable pupils. There was a strong feeling from the NG pupils that the NG staff were key to the NG provision:

“I don’t know, it’s strange how they do it, it’s kind of really comforting but I don’t know how they do it, it’s really nice.”

Rowan, Year 7

“Definitely the staff, they make it the way it is. Without them I think even... yeah it’s a nice room and it’s a nice school, but without them I don’t think the school would be the same.”

Imogen, Year 10

‘Post-it’ notes from the FG task also suggested that the NG staff were considered skilled in their role of supporting vulnerable pupils, always finding a way to help and providing a good level of trust. Some comments included: “You can talk about issues you may have that you can’t tell your parent” (FG 1) and “They can help with trust” (FG 1).

The non-NG pupils and school staff identified a particular sense of respect and gratitude for the work the NG staff did, which reflected a real and ongoing need for their support:

“Because I think there is an increasing number of students that need that kind of help; the traditional sort of pastoral system with tutors and just Heads of Year would not be able to deal with the kind of depth that is needed.”

Staff 7

Theme 3: School environment

This theme arose in relation to both how the NG environment was organised and how this might link to, support, or fit in with, the wider school environment.

Sub-theme 1: NG organisation

There was a strong sense from the NG pupils that the calm and relaxed atmosphere was important and supportive of their needs:

“It’s very relaxed and if you’ve had a hard day and you want to talk to someone they’re very open in there; they won’t judge you for what you say.”

John, Year 8

“It’s like my safe place to go.”

Charlie, Year 9

Availability, due to the drop-in nature of the NG at certain times of the day, was also important to pupils – “it’s just sort of whenever I feel like I need it I can come in and talk” (Jacob, Year 11) – and the fact that it was accessible before and after school was valued by staff.

Sub-theme 2: Beyond NG

Although not directly related to the NG, the buddying system appeared to link to the influence the NG had on supporting peer relations across year groups, helping to create a whole-school environment within which peer relations are valued. It was therefore included as a sub-theme to help build a picture of how the school tried to develop an environment within which all pupils could feel supported.

Non-NG pupils in both FGs talked about the buddying system positively, suggesting it helped to support problems with friendships and with academic work.

“The school do have a buddying system to, say if you have an argument with your friends, you can talk to them, they’ll try and help sort it out...” (FG 1).

Staff members also identified the school’s pastoral system as an area of strength:

“I think that the starting point is the tutor system so you know the students have a tutor all the way through, the same tutor, so that tutor gets to know them very well. We have peer group mentoring so older students supporting younger ones.”

Staff 7

Discussion

This single case study aimed to explore how a NG might operate successfully as part of a whole-school approach to support wellbeing within mainstream secondary schools. By seeking the views of non-NG pupils, in addition to NG pupils and staff, this study makes a unique contribution to NG research. Three main themes were identified: whole-school approach, relational factors and school environment. The findings suggest the NG is mostly perceived to be well embedded into the whole-school system, with pupil and staff understanding of the NG approach highlighted as a key factor. Factors relating to relationships both within and outside of NG were also considered key to the success and impact of NG provision. Further factors influencing the success of the NG included how it is set up and run and how it complemented systems from the wider school environment. The findings are discussed below in relation to the themes identified and relevant literature, theory and practice.

Prior research has identified the need for a whole-school approach, particularly with regards to staff awareness and understanding of NG provision, in order to support successful implementation of NGs within secondary schools (Grantham & Primrose, 2017; de Montjoie Rudolf, 2014). The current study provides evidence that, when a NG is embedded into the whole-school system then a positive

influence on both staff and pupil understanding of NGs can be developed. The six principles of nurture were evident throughout the case study school, displayed not only within NG, but also, for example, in the school’s reception area. Staff were also encouraged to understand and respond to these principles within their own classrooms. A whole-school nurturing approach may help to create an atmosphere whereby NG support is both viewed and experienced positively. Within the case study school, staff were able to understand and articulate the impact of social and emotional needs on learning and pupils were able to understand and accept the different needs of their peers.

Previous research into secondary NGs (Kourmoulaki, 2013) suggests the increased sense of safety and security experienced within NG limits the generalisability of skills developed to the wider, less predictable nature of the whole-school environment. Shared staff responsibility for pastoral care has been identified as one factor which may protect against this (Wright, 2010). Within the current study, the school promoted a sense of understanding around inclusive practice and pastoral care. Analysis of staff interviews revealed a sub-theme of ‘staff understanding’ in relation to what NGs entail, the theory upon which they are founded and how they support vulnerable pupils. This concurs with findings from Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) that identified staff understanding as one of the pre-requisites for the success of secondary NGs. In addition, a further sub-theme identified the holistic approach taken by the school, where the ‘whole child’ was valued and an array of pastoral support was recognised. One member of staff talked about the investment in pastoral staff roles and another described the way in which she might refer to the support received within NG when teaching pupils in mainstream lessons, helping them to generalise the skills they had learnt.

Colley (2012) described relationships as key to successful engagement in education. This current study identified relational factors as a main theme during analysis, with peer relations and staff-pupil relations being supported by NG intervention. The success of pupils being able to transfer their skills to outside of NG contrasts with the finding reported by Cunningham et al., (2019) where a continued feeling of loneliness for primary NG pupils, in areas such as the school playground,

was identified. The NG pupils within this case study school reported being able to generalise their increased levels of confidence in developing new friendships both within and outside of NG. Pupils talked about mixing with different pupils at break times and reflected that they had been taught new skills which supported them in socialising with others and participating in extracurricular clubs. The impact of the buddy system embedded within the school also impacted positively on the generalisation of skills.

The trustworthiness, skill and popularity of the NG staff was identified as significant to NG success, with pupils also acknowledging the popularity of NG staff across the whole-school environment. For the NG pupils, the emotional support they received through the relationships they built with NG staff appeared central to the positive impact they experienced through the NG provision. Interestingly, for the older non-NG pupils, it seemed there was a gap in school provision that centred on their SEWB. Kourmoulaki (2013) identified a similar theme, with pupils feeling that, as academic demands increased within higher year groups, emotional needs became less important to school staff. Whilst pupil perceptions here are important, it is likely that alongside this apparent reduction of staff interest in SEWB, there is an increased contextual and time-dependent pressure amongst staff to reach targets and achieve academic results. The consideration of how best to use NGs and nurturing principles during the important exam periods of Years 11 and Year 12/13 would be a pertinent area for future research. Year 11 pupils who accessed NG provision described the positive impact it had on their approach to school, helping them to express their feelings and relate to staff in a calmer way. The provision of a Year 11 breakfast club within the NG was well received by pupils and enabled a positive start to the school day. School staff also appreciated the early morning opening of NG provision. Access to similar provision for all Year 11 pupils may be a good consideration as well as ensuring such nurturing approaches were extended into sixth form provision.

It seemed the development of increased social confidence, skills and improved peer relationships

was supported by the complementary whole-school approach of using a buddying system. Viewed positively by both pupils and staff, this reflected the importance the school placed on developing a sense of community and belonging. This has previously been shown to impact positively on pupil wellbeing (Prati, Cicognani & Albanesi, 2018) which further supports the view that it is important for secondary NGs to be part of the whole-school community, supporting the development of positive relationships (Chiapella, 2015) rather than an 'add-on' intervention (Colley, 2012; Colley & Seymour, 2021). Indeed, a coherent approach which seeks to ensure that different parts of a school organisation communicate and work together has been shown to promote SEWB (Weare, 2015) and is recognised within government policy (Brooks, 2014; NICE, 2018).

Within the 'school environment' theme, a flexible approach to the organisation of NGs in secondary schools was identified as beneficial to their success. Previous research has identified the usefulness of secondary NGs in providing open access to vulnerable pupils who experience the NG base as a 'safe haven' (Garner & Thomas, 2011). This 'safe haven' may mirror the 'safe base' provided within securely attached relationships during early childhood (Bowlby, 2005). NGs, therefore, can provide an opportunity to respond to the developmental needs of secondary NG pupils, restoring missed childhood experiences, to support the development of the social and emotional foundations for learning (Colley, 2012; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). Within the case study school, flexibility of the NG organisation was a key identified theme. In particular, pupils viewed the NG as a safe space and referred to the accessibility of the NG room as key to the support it provided. Whilst this may bring into question the fidelity of this secondary NG, previous research has identified that the implementation of secondary NGs may vary between schools and is dependent on pupil need and local demographics (Grantham & Primrose, 2017). In addition, it is suggested that fidelity to the NG principles is of importance (Chiapella, 2015) and this is supported through maintenance of the National Nurturing Schools Award within the case study school.

Implications for schools

This study provides an example of how NGs can function effectively within a mainstream secondary school, where support for SEWB is valued and seen as a worthy investment of precious school time and resources. Several recommendations have been identified to support secondary schools when considering the development of NG practice:

- a NGs require support and investment from the senior management team to ensure that NG staff are suitably trained and supported to deliver the approach.
- b The underlying theory and approach of NGs should be shared across the whole-school staff to aid consistent understanding and to help create joined-up thinking in relation to the SEWB of vulnerable pupils.
- c The NG should be built upon the six principles of nurture. It is beneficial for these to be made part of wider school policy and classroom approaches.
- d Secondary NGs may need to adopt a more flexible approach than the classic primary school model. For example, incorporating a drop-in system as part of NG provision may assist the transferability of skills supported within the NG itself.
- e The NG should be developed as part of the whole-school community. Consideration of how peer relationships are supported within whole-school approaches (eg, through a buddying system) is also important and will help to support NG pupils in transferring their skills outside of the NG.
- f Secondary schools should consider how they can best support Year 11 pupils through a period of heightened academic pressure and upcoming transition. The use of a carefully attuned approach, for example, through a Year 11 tutor group planned upon nurturing principles, may be an effective way to offer this support.

Strengths, limitations and directions for future research

Previous research into secondary NGs has sought the views of NG pupils, school staff and parents, yet hasn't purposefully tried to understand how a NG is viewed by other pupils within the school. The richness of the data gathered in this study should support readers in developing a deep and authentic understanding of the key interacting factors and causal mechanisms associated with effective NG provision.

Although expanding on the paucity of research on secondary NGs, this study has certain limitations. Being a single-school case study, the findings relate to a particular school with a particular demographic and cannot, therefore, be assumed as generalisable to other mainstream secondary schools. Findings do, however, correlate well to some of those identified in a study by Colley and Seymour (2021), for example the importance of whole-school approaches and training and the embedding of the six principles of nurture into whole-school practice to support successful NG practice in secondary schools. It is hoped, therefore, that the findings of this study will still help to provide some insights for other schools when considering whether a NG approach may be suitable, and responsive, to their own particular needs. Additionally, this study was interested in qualitative data only and, as such, presents the perceptions and experiences of pupils and staff. It would have been interesting to also include additional quantitative measures, perhaps identifying how many non-NG children accessed the NG base.

Future research could explore further the experiences of older children (eg, Years 11-13) to develop a greater understanding of the need for additional emotional support at this crucial time of adolescence. In relation to secondary NG research, a multiple case study comparing NGs across different secondary schools would help to further understand how secondary NGs may work and to consider more closely the impact of school investment in NG provision and the potential significance of a whole-school approach. A study using Boxall Profile® for Young People data would also be a helpful addition to current research on secondary NGs.

Conclusion

The use of a single case study approach within this research has led to an in-depth understanding of how a NG can be set up and run within a mainstream secondary school as part of a positive and whole-school approach to wellbeing. The insights gained from NG pupils, school staff and non-NG pupils has allowed a picture to emerge which suggests NGs are an effective intervention to support the SEWB of vulnerable adolescents. In particular, skills taught within the NG that support the development of positive peer relations and pupil-staff relations, can be transferred to the wider school environment when there is a shared understanding of the NG approach developed throughout the whole-school. NGs appear to provide significant support for pupils when they exist within a whole-school culture where SEWB is prioritised (Coleman, 2019). It is hoped that schools can be supported to develop this understanding to maximise the positive impact that secondary NGs can have during an important 'second window' of opportunity for positive prosocial development within the period of adolescence.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Nurture group pupil interview script

- 1 How would you describe your school to someone else?
- 2 Tell me about school – what is it like?
- 3 Tell me about the NG (or its name) – what is it like?
 - a How long have you been attending the NG?
 - b What sort of things do you do in the NG?
 - c How would you describe the NG to others?
- 4 What can you tell me about whether being in the NG helps/ has helped you at school?
 - Tell me about a time when the NG has/ hasn't helped? Tell me about it (further prompt – tell me more about it...)
- 5 Tell me about the other people in your NG
 - How do you get along with other young people in the NG?
 - And how do you get along with the staff in the NG?
 - What else can you tell me about this?
- 6 How do you get along with other young people outside of the NG?
 - Tell me about a time when you talked with (hung out with/socialised with/played with/ worked with...?) What was it like? What happened?
 - Tell me about your friendships at school. Who are your friends? What are they like?
 - What sort of things do you do with your friends?
- 7 What do you like about the NG? What is the best thing about the NG?
 - Tell me about a time when...
- 8 What do you not like so much about the NG? What doesn't work so well?
 - Tell me about a time when...
- 9 How has being in the NG helped you in other areas?
 - Tell me about a time when...
- 10 What are your views about how the NG could be improved?

Appendix B

Staff interview script

- 1 Tell me about your role at school.
 - How long have you worked here?
- 2 How would you describe this school to colleagues at other schools?
 - What is it like?
 - What are the pupils who come here like?
 - What are your colleagues like?
 - How would you describe the leadership team?
- 3 Is there anything you consider to be particularly 'special' about this school?
- 4 Do you think the school has a particular ethos?
 - How would you describe that?
- 5 What do you know about pupil relationships within the school?
 - Are you able to comment on the quality of those relationships?
 - How do you think this compares to other schools?
- 6 Can you tell me about whether this school supports pupil relationships?
 - How?
 - Can you tell me about school policies which relate to bullying/peer conflict?
 - Are these effective?
- 7 What can you tell me about how the school supports pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs?
 - Do you think this approach/these approaches are well-embedded into the school?
 - Why might that be?
 - Do you think all/most staff feel informed about support for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs within the school?
- 8 What can you tell me about the NG?
 - Which children might attend the NG?
 - Are you able to describe what you think the aims of the NG are?
 - Do you think the NG is a useful intervention for pupils?
 - If so, why, or how?

- Do you think the NG has an impact on peer relationships?
 - If yes, why or how?
 - Can you tell me more about this?
- 9 If the school did not have a NG, what other support systems or interventions might be needed/would you like to see?
- 10 Is there anything you think should be changed or improved the NG?
 - Can you say more?

Thank you for your time. Is there any other information you would like to share about school? Are there any questions you would like to ask?

Appendix C

Focus group discussion schedule

- 1 Tell me about your school. What is school like?
 - a How would you describe what your school is like to others?
- 2 Tell me about the young people at your school.
 - What are they like?
 - How do they all get on with one another?
 - Why do you think that is?
- 3 What about friendships at your school, what are they like? (Why?)
 - How, does your school support friendships and positive relationships between pupils?
 - Give me an example of when the school supported good positive relationships/ friendships. (What did you think about this?)
 - What effect does this have?
- 4 What areas do you have where you can meet up with friends at school? – *Generate a list*
 - Tell me about these areas. What are they like? And what is it like to be there?
 - Do you think all students enjoy these social areas? Why?
- 5 What do you know about how your school provides for children with particular/extra needs? – *Talk in pairs and feed back*
 - Can you tell me more about this?
 - What examples can you give me?
- 6 What do you know about the NG (name) at your school?
 - Tell me about the NG (name).
 - Do you know anyone who goes to the NG?
 - Have you ever been into the NG room?
 - What do you think it is like to be part of your NG (name)?
- 7 How do you think the NG helps pupils who attend it? – *Talk in pairs and feed back*
 - What examples can you give me? – *Post-it recording activity*
- 8 How do you think the NG affects friendships?
- 9 What else do you think your school could do for its pupils?
 - What could you do?