

Primary school nurture group curriculums: an exploratory study of the curriculum in primary school nurture groups

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Abstract

Nurture groups aim to replace missing early experiences by developing secure relationships in a supportive environment that aim to promote a readiness to learn and a sense of wellbeing. This small-scale, qualitative study investigated the primary nurture group curriculum based on the perceptions of pupils, parents/caregivers and staff through face-to-face interviews supported by observations in both nurture groups and mainstream classrooms. Previous research indicated that primary school nurture groups can be successful, but research into the specific characteristics including curriculum provision is sparse and required further investigation. Thematic analysis of data was based on classroom observations and interviews with 16 pupils, 10 parents/caregivers and eight staff members from three primary schools in the North West of England. Findings highlight the similarities and differences between the nurture group and mainstream curricula alongside the perceptions and experiences of all stakeholders. Common themes identify increased levels of both pupil and parental confidence, improved pupil concentration and independence that led to a greater desire to learn. In conclusion, implications for pupils, parents, nurture groups and schools are discussed.

Introduction and literature review

A nurture group is a school-based intervention of up to 12 students that aims to replace missing early experiences by developing positive pupil relationships with both adults and peers in a supportive environment (Boxall, 2002). Nurture groups originated in the late 1960s in a London borough where the psychological services were struggling to cope with high rates of pupil exclusions and unprecedented rates of referrals relating to social issues (Boxall, 2002). Early nurture groups were influenced by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) that related to the bonding process of parents and their children. The psychological understanding of nurture groups is based on

socio-cultural theory relating to social interaction (Vygotsky, 1962).

Effective nurture group practice follows the Six Principles of Nurture (see Figure 1).

In setting up the early nurture groups, Boxall and Bennathan (2000) emphasised the influences of attachment theory research by John Bowlby (1969, p.126) who identified that a child's relationship with their primary caregiver develops an internal working model that is "a cognitive framework supporting their understanding the world, self and others". This theory has been translated into the classroom setting to provide valuable guidance for practitioners in planning an appropriate curriculum,

especially for those pupils who may have an insecure attachment (Bombér, 2007; Delaney, 2017; Geddes, 2018).

Figure 1. Nurture principles
(Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006)



Parallels could be drawn with the social culture behind the need for these early groups and the post-COVID-19 (UK Government, 2019) climate regarding mental health issues and the cost of living pressures (nurtureuk, 2023). For example, 75% of children and young people who experience mental health problems are not getting the help that they need (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). A survey by Young Minds (2020) revealed that the coronavirus pandemic had a profound effect on young people with existing mental health conditions. Many of those who took part in the survey reported increased anxiety, problems with sleep, panic attacks or more frequent urges to self-harm. Therefore it is highly relevant that the current research identifies strategies that may encourage pupils to enjoy, engage with and benefit from the curriculum to help address the most common form of permanent exclusion in primary schools caused by persistent disruptive behaviour in mainstream classrooms (DfE, 2016).

Typical nurture group timetables (see Table 1) tend to follow a routine for each session (Boxall, 2002; Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). Foulder–Hughes (2023) emphasises the importance of regular routines

to promote positive wellbeing. The ‘welcome’ and ‘closing session’ tend to be based on a Circle Time model (Mosley, 2003). The majority of the nurture group activities are collaborative that aim to promote social interaction (Vygotsky, 1962) and encourage dialogue (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007). These activities need to be carefully differentiated, as some pupils may need small independent steps such as turn taking that need to be modelled by a more experienced peer or adult (Geddes, 2018).

Table 1. Typical nurture group daily routine
(Adapted from Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007)

1. Registration with mainstream class and transfer to nurture group room
2. Welcome: share news, review previous session and set agenda for the day
3. First activity
4. Snack time
5. Second activity
6. Closing session that reviews the session and plans ahead for the next session

In the context of the current study, the ‘total curriculum’ needs to be defined (Kelly, 2004, p.4). The first published nurture group curriculum (AWCEBD, 2001) was based on Boxall’s ‘Earliest Learning: a summary chart’ (Boxall, 2002, pp. 5–9) that emphasised the need to access a broad and balanced curriculum that developed early learning skills and personal, social and health education (PSHE).

The mainstream curriculum may not be appropriate for all pupils, as some pupils need a modified curriculum (Sonnet, 2010). Boxall (2002) emphasised the need to plan the curriculum based on pupils’ developmental age rather than their chronological age and that the curriculum may need to be modified depending on pupils’ circumstances. Cooper and Tiknaz (2007, p.29) emphasise the importance of building on “what pupils at a particular stage of development are likely to know, understand and do in a given area”. A recent example of this relates to the post COVID-19 (UK Government, 2019) provision as Carpenter and Carpenter (2020) identified

the need for a “recovery” curriculum to support pupils returning to school after a long absence. School closures at this time resulted in widely varying home provision so on return to school the curriculum needed to be based on prior skills and competencies. For example, discussions with school-based staff identified that many pupils showed a regression in fine motor skills, resulting in an inability to use a knife and fork when eating and a deterioration in handwriting skills (Carpenter and Carpenter, 2020).

Effective nurture group curriculum planning is a highly complex process that needs to take account of identified social and emotional targets identified by the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998); relevant National Curriculum age-related programmes of study (DfE, 2013); the Six Principles of Nurture (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006); and relevant mainstream planning. Many nurture groups use a thematic approach to planning based on cross-curricular themes that can be defined as “a framework in which existing curricula can be organised” (Lau, Lee-Man and Lung, 1999, p.18). Also, the nurture group curriculum needs to take account of unplanned effects of teacher activity (Kelly, 2004) that allows the necessary flexibility to promote effective dialogue (Mercer, 2009) and adapt to the need for support through appropriate modelling (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007) and/or reciprocal scaffolding (Holton and Clarke, 2006).

The value of play has been identified in early childhood experiences (Wood and Cook, 2009) that relates to an important element of the nurture group curriculum in developing relevant social skills and independence through play based activities to build self-esteem, confidence, self-awareness and resilience (Boxall, 2002). Although much of children’s play in the nurture group is through enactment of everyday events it can also provide a way of “working through turbulent events in a child’s life as an outlet for any stress” (Boxall, 2002, p.97). Vygotsky (1978) discusses the importance of the use of play to develop social rules, such as when children adopt the role of different family members.

The nurture group curriculum emphasises the importance of language and communication (Boxall, 2002) to provide both structured and informal opportunities for pupils to explore language through natural conversation in a relaxed

social context (Cooper and Tiknaz 2007). Mercer (2009) discusses linguistic ethnographers who emphasise that language and social life are mutually linked and exploratory classroom talk may be needed to replace a lack of social interaction at home. Wegerif et al. (2004) discuss exploratory talk in the classroom in relation to its importance in the learning process. Colwell and O’Connor (2003) and Bani (2011) discuss nurture group dialogue and stress its importance in the possible development of pupil self-esteem. ‘Snack time’ (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006, p.50) is a key activity where adults and pupils share breakfast or a mid morning snack within a formal dining scenario. Foulder-Hughes (2023) emphasises the importance of eating around a dining table with place settings in an attractive environment and cites the Mental Health Foundation (2021) that suggests that there are lots of social, psychological and biological benefits to be gained by sharing meals with other people. Ingram (1993) comments that a conversation over lunch identifies a number of cues that participants use may relate to their upbringing and advises that if these cues are not already familiar to the participants then they need to be taught.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted based on an exploratory study of the curriculum in primary school nurture groups. Four research questions were considered:

RQ1: What are the perceptions and experiences of pupils in relation to the impact of the nurture group curriculum?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of parents regarding the nurture group curriculum in relation to the experiences of their child?

RQ3: What are the perspectives and experiences of staff regarding the nurture group curriculum and how it may relate to the mainstream curriculum?

RQ4: How did the observations identify any similarities and differences between the curriculum in the nurture groups and mainstream classrooms?

The participants in this research were 16 pupils (m=12, f=4) aged between six and nine years (mean=7.0), 10 parents/caregivers (m=2, f=8), six nurture group staff (m=0, f=6) and two mainstream

staff ($m=0$, $f=2$) in three primary schools in a county in the North West of England.

Selection

To identify schools and pupils, purposive sampling was used based on identified criteria and the subjective judgement of the researcher. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative as selection was based on specific features within the sampled population. The selection procedure for schools was based on the following criteria: the nurture group was well established and had run for at least five years; all nurture group staff were trained and fully certificated; the nurture groups were based on the 'classic' or 'new variant' model (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007); pupils were between the ages of 5 and 11 years; and the nurture group was within a mainstream setting. Six schools met these criteria and three agreed to take part in the research. Full initial consent was obtained from all head teachers followed by a meeting with a key contact from each school to discuss possible participants and consider any ethical issues.

The selection procedure for pupils to take part in the research was based on the following criteria: pupils needed to have been in a nurture group for at least one term to ensure familiarity with the nurture group curriculum; and pupils needed to represent both key stage 1 (KS1) and KS2. The selection of parents and staff was based on a non-probability voluntary participation approach based on the judgement of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and snowball sampling, where existing research participants identify possible new participants (Robson, 2002). Consent was obtained from all pupils, staff and parents. A pilot visit was arranged to each consenting nurture group to enable the researcher to meet potential participants and begin building a rapport before the interviews. Also, all participants were given the opportunity to meet the researcher before their interview so any queries or concerns could be addressed.

Data collection

The chosen forms of data collection were face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured protocol with observations in nurture groups and mainstream provision. Careful consideration was given to the feasibility and possible barriers of

using face-to-face interviews with pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties through asking appropriate questions and establishing a high level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The researcher has extensive experience of conversing with pupils with SEMH difficulties through previous roles that included nurture group provision. Following consultation, pupils preferred to be interviewed with a friend or peer. As nurture group staff needed to adhere to their school's current safeguarding policy, it was agreed that pupils were interviewed in pairs in the nurture group room with one member of the nurture group staff present in the room but not taking any part in the interview process.

The chosen approach for parents and caregivers was an individual one to one interview. The individual in-depth interview gives the researcher the opportunity to discuss more personal issues with participants and offers greater confidentiality than group interviews (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

Nurture group staff and mainstream staff were given the choice of being interviewed individually, in pairs or as a group. Mainstream staff chose to be interviewed individually, whereas nurture group staff asked to be interviewed in pairs. To ensure rigour and consistency careful consideration was given to the questions asked of all participants through the first question in each interview being broad and open-ended to get the interviewee talking (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

Observations

Observations in nurture groups and mainstream classes were unstructured as the purpose of the observations was to develop a narrative account of participant behaviours "in their natural settings... without using predetermined categories of measurement or response" (Adler and Adler, 1994, p.384). In addition, a reflective journal was used following each observation. To ensure a high degree of rigour in the observation process it was based on five characteristics of observations and settings defined by Patton (2002 cited by Mertens, 2005).

Ethical considerations

Full compliance with the British Educational

Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) ensured that all participants gave their voluntary informed consent. Written informed consent from parents and caregivers was obtained to allow their child to be a participant in the research. Informed consent was then obtained from pupils, parents and caregivers and staff. Correspondence with participants emphasised the confidential nature of the data and its storage with all participants having the right to withdraw from the research at any stage (Robson, 2002). It was made clear that all data in the current study would be fully anonymised. The Open University ethics committee gave ethical approval for the research.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse and interpret qualitative data with the aim of identifying

recurring patterns of meaning (themes) across the data that relate to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). To ensure rigour the six phases coding framework was followed alongside data reliability and authenticity techniques including keeping a detailed audit trail and reflexivity notes throughout the entire analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Participants were numbered ensuring their anonymity. The resulting themes and sub-themes were generated from this process. Emergent codes were reviewed against the research questions ensuring that only the codes that made a significant contribution were included (Braun and Clark, 2006).

4. Results

As a result of coding the transcripts through TA the following themes and sub themes emerged (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of themes and sub themes

	Themes	Sub themes
Observations	Curriculum planning and activities Dialogue Modelling and scaffolding Environment	
Staff interviews	The nurture group curriculum Supporting parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to the mainstream curriculum • Confidence and self-esteem • Feeling welcome • Emotional support • Homework
Nurture group pupil interviews	Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Confidence • Attitude to school
	Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendship with peers • Nurture group staff • Empathy
	Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical environment • 'Safe' environment
Parent and caregiver interviews	Pupil confidence Parental confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing new tasks • Independence • A desire to learn • Feeling welcome • Behavioural issues at home • Emotional support

Observations

Six observations were completed that comprised one in each of the three nurture groups and one in each of the three mainstream classrooms that included at least one nurture group pupil. Four themes emerged: curriculum activities; dialogue; modelling/scaffolding and environment.

Theme 1: Curriculum planning/activities

There was a marked difference in the range of activities offered, the classroom management and the planning of these activities between the nurture groups and mainstream classrooms. Approaches to planning varied as the nurture groups used a thematic approach; the planning for mainstream provision was based on individual National Curriculum subjects (DfE, 2013). Although planned, the activities in the nurture groups adapted to the needs and moods of the pupils throughout the session. This flexibility was not apparent in the mainstream classrooms, as the lessons did not deviate from the planned approach.

A key focus of the nurture group activities was to support the development of social skills identified through the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998). There was no evidence of this in the mainstream classrooms, as the focus was on meeting academic targets. Many of the nurture group activities gave pupils freedom of choice especially during play-based learning sessions. Generally there appeared limited freedom of choice in the mainstream lessons observed, as they appeared to be teacher-led. However, in the science lesson observed pupils were given some freedom of choice in the main body of the lessons, as paired children freely moved around the classroom to elicit data from other groups of pupils.

Theme 2: Dialogue

There appeared to be a significant difference in the opportunities for dialogue between the nurture groups and mainstream settings. In each of the nurture groups observed, there was high emphasis given to peer-to-peer and adult-to-pupil discussion throughout the sessions. Some of this interaction and discussion was pre-planned through snack time, board games and play-based activities to encourage interaction and dialogue. Other discussions occurred as a natural interaction during activities. In contrast there were few opportunities

in the mainstream lessons observed for any dialogue between peers or adults. For example, the mainstream numeracy lesson observed provided the least opportunity for peer-to-peer discussion as the only opportunities were the whole class question-and-answer session led by the teacher, where only a very limited number of pupils responded.

Peer-to-peer discussion in the nurture groups was encouraged, whereas peer-to-peer discussion in the mainstream classes tended to be suppressed by the teacher, as pupils were told they needed to be quiet and get on with their work. An interesting comparison in one school identified that pupil discussion of football matches and Christmas presents was encouraged in the nurture group, whereas in the mainstream classroom a similar conversation was suppressed as it appeared to hinder progress.

Theme 3: Modelling and scaffolding

Observations in the nurture groups provided evidence of numerous examples of modelling and scaffolding that on the majority of occasions was pre-planned. In a variety of observed activities the adults modelled appropriate behaviour, social skills, correct language usage and encouraged eye contact. Reciprocal scaffolding supported any children who were challenged by the curriculum (Holton and Clarke, 2006).

In the mainstream classrooms there was evidence that the two adults modelled appropriate communication skills that included listening skills and responses to questions. There were a number of occasions in the science lesson where the two adults independently modelled how to carry out the experimental testing to a number of groups. However, there was no evidence of the two adults working collaboratively to model or scaffold learning experiences. For the majority of time, the role of the teaching assistant (TA) in these mainstream lessons appeared to be dealing with off-task pupil behaviour rather than modelling or scaffolding the learning process.

Theme 4: Environment

There were a number of differences between the nurture group and the mainstream environment. The nurture group rooms were smaller, more colourful and more representative of early-years provision than the mainstream classrooms. The

most significant differences in the two physical environments were the kitchen and soft furnishings in the nurture group rooms that created a more 'homely' scenario. Seating arrangements in the nurture groups were flexible and varied according to the activity, whereas in mainstream class they were more static as pupils sat in the same seat for the whole lesson.

Staff interviews

Two themes were identified: the nurture group curriculum and supporting parents.

Theme 1: The nurture group curriculum

Two sub themes were identified: links to the mainstream curriculum, and confidence and self-esteem.

Sub theme 1: Links to the mainstream curriculum

All nurture group staff interviewed appeared fully aware of the mainstream curriculum relevant to the pupils in the group and the need to follow current National Curriculum requirements:

"We know what they cover in classes as they give us their timetable. We try to match up with this as much as possible, so if they are doing a Romans topic we will follow the theme."
(NG1, interview 1, lines 3-5)

Sub theme 2: Confidence and self-esteem

There was evidence that the nurture group staff planned the curriculum around the individual needs of each pupil:

"We plan the curriculum around the needs of the group. If a number have low self-esteem then we need to build in activities to support this and make them feel better about themselves. This group struggles to share and take turns so we play lots of games where we model how to do this."
(NG4, interview 2, lines 10-12)

Theme 2: Supporting parents

Staff in each of the nurture groups emphasised the need to fully support and involve parents in the learning process, especially those who were regarded as 'hard to reach'. Three sub themes were

identified: feeling welcome; emotional support; and homework.

Sub theme 1: Feeling welcome

All nurture group staff interviewed gave high emphasis to making every parent welcome through regular events and the opportunity for parents to pop in for a chat:

"Many parents do not attend formal events so invite them in for informal chats and a cuppa and are encouraged to help with activities in the group so they are working with their child in a comfy room that's non-threatening."
(NG4, interview 2, lines 23-25)

Sub theme 2: Emotional support

All nurture group staff commented that they supported the emotional needs of the parents. One member of staff accepts there are limits to her counselling skills:

"She calls in each night for a chat. I'm not a counsellor but I try to listen and support to help her son. She has a lot of personal issues so I have advised her to go for professional help to the relevant person." (NG4, interview 2, lines 27-29)

Sub theme 3: Homework

There was evidence from the data analysed that a high number of parents were very keen to support the homework given from the nurture group and relied on support from nurture group staff to give guidance. The great majority of this homework related to reading and phonics awareness:

"We give homework once a week. Parents are really interested and want to help but need a bit of support in knowing what to do. We are happy for them to pop in on homework night."
(NG6, interview 3, lines 40-44)

Pupil interviews

Three themes were identified: curriculum; relationships; environment.

Theme 1: Curriculum

The data for this theme identified three subthemes: learning; confidence; and attitude to school.

Sub theme 1: Learning

Ten pupils commented that they felt they had learned more in the nurture group because learning was fun and enjoyable:

“We do more fun stuff in the nurture group. It’s different and I learn better.”
(PU8, interview 4, line 12)

However, some pupils felt the work in the nurture group that specifically related to numeracy, although enjoyable, was easier compared to that provided by mainstream provision:

“I enjoy the group work but it’s easy for me as I’m good at numeracy.” (PU5, interview 3, lines 22-23)

Sub theme 2: Confidence

Several pupils commented that they felt more confident following nurture group provision.

“I felt I was getting better at writing in the nurture group so it made me more confident to give it a try in my class.” (PU6, interview 3, line 22)

Sub theme 3: Attitude to school

Three pupils had a very negative attitude to school prior to nurture group provision:

“I hated school ‘cos all the teachers had a downer on me. Now it’s better and I can go into class without her (class teacher) screaming at me. It’s better but I still don’t like it.”
(PU2, interview 1, lines 16-19)

Theme 2: Relationships

Three sub-themes were identified: friendship with peers; nurture group staff; and developing empathy.

Sub theme 1: Friendships with peers

Three pupils interviewed commented that a positive outcome of nurture group intervention was making new friends:

“I have new friends now in the nurture group but I did not have any real friends before. I didn’t like having no proper friends in class as I wanted to join in and make friends but they wouldn’t let me.”
(PU10, interview 5, lines 14-18)

Sub theme 2: Nurture group staff

The majority of pupils spoke very highly of the nurture group staff.

“I love Mrs A and Mrs B [nurture group staff] as they helped me to be better.”
(PU11, interview 4, lines 13-14)

Sub theme 3: Developing empathy

Four pupils expressed the view that making news friends in the nurture group alongside shared experiences had led to an increased understanding of their viewpoint and difficulties:

“We made this viking ship. I helped Leanne ‘cos I knew she couldn’t do this stuff as she is rubbish.”
(PU3, interview 2, lines 14-15)

Theme 3: Environment

Two sub themes were identified: physical environment; and ‘safe’ environment.

Sub theme 1: Physical environment

Seven pupils made reference to the homely nurture group environment:

“I can read cuddled up on the sofa like at home.”
(PU11, interview 6, line 8)

Sub theme 2: ‘Safe’ environment

Some pupils made reference to the nurture group being a ‘safe’ environment.

No one makes fun of me here.”
(PU 10, interview 5, line 21)

Parent interviews

Two themes were identified: pupil confidence; and parental confidence.

Theme 1: Pupil confidence

Three sub themes were identified: completing new tasks; independence; and a desire to learn.

Sub theme 1: Completing new tasks

Several parents commented that their child appeared more outgoing and were more willing to

try new things that they would have not attempted before nurture group intervention:

“She’s so much more confident since September when she came into this group ...she tries all sorts of things now she wouldn’t have had the confidence to do before.”

(PC3, interview 3, lines 12-15)

Sub theme 2: Independence

Several parents commented their child had become more independent:

“I always had to take her to school even though she was 7 as she did not want to go by herself. It was the same until Christmas when she suddenly said ‘I want to go by myself like everyone else’. It was such a relief.” (Laughs out loud).

(PC3, interview 3, lines 6-9)

Sub theme 3: A desire to learn

Several parents commented that as a result of increased confidence their child had an increased desire to learn:

“He suddenly took an interest and wanted to learn to read.” (PC1, interview 1, line 19)

Theme 2: Parental confidence

Three sub-themes were identified: feeling welcome; behavioural issues at home; and emotional support.

Sub theme 1: Feeling welcome

A number of parents commented that they now felt more welcome and confident when coming into school to meet the nurture group staff.

“I hated school... [becoming agitated]... So it’s taken me years to walk in.... but I’ve done it for our (pupil x) but it’s OK in here ‘cos they treat me good. I even get a cup of tea (laughs out loud).”

(PC6, interview 5, lines 18-19)

Sub theme 2: Behavioural issues at home

Several parents expressed their concerns about their child’s challenging behaviour at home and how they struggled to cope because of a lack of strategies to encourage positive behaviour. These parents expressed their gratitude to the nurture

group staff for giving them a range of strategies used in the nurture group to try out at home. As a result, some parents expressed the view that they were more confident in dealing with negative behaviour at home following advice from nurture group staff:

“I pop in every night to see how he’s got on and Mrs. X [nurture group staff] tells it straight like so I follow her advice. She says I’m too soft and need some rules so I’m working on it.”

(PC1, interview 1, lines 23-25)

Sub theme 3: Emotional issues

A number of parents welcomed regular discussions with nurture group staff to discuss issues at home that appeared to impact on their child’s behaviour.

“I have a lot of issues at home that get me down so I pop in for a chat with Miss X ... it has really helped me. She is good and listens as she knows the family well and understands my problems. She doesn’t give me advice but gets me to sort it out myself.” (PC4, interview 4, lines 22-25)

5. Discussion

This research is based on the central question: How do pupil, parent and staff perspectives contribute towards an exploratory study of the curriculum in primary nurture groups? To answer the central question, four sub questions were considered:

RQ1: What are the perceptions and experiences of pupils in relation to the impact of the nurture group curriculum?

Most pupils enjoyed the engaging curriculum, as it appeared to be fun and practical. Pupils gave specific examples including gardening, art, design technology and food-related activities that were similar to findings by Cooper, Arnold and Boyd (2001); Kourmoulaki (2013) and Shaver and McClatchy (2013). Many pupils enjoyed play-based activities that included role-play and valued freedom of choice. These findings are consistent with research by Cooper, Arnold and Boyd (2001), Scott and Lee (2009) and Kourmoulaki (2013). However, some older pupils felt that specific areas such as numeracy could have been more challenging.

Some pupils felt that the nurture group curriculum improved their levels of personal confidence that promoted a greater desire to learn and improved perceptions of themselves as learners as discussed by Sanders (2007). This greater desire to learn is highly significant and is described by Bandura (1997, p.195) as “self-instructed performance”, one of the “modes of induction in performance accomplishments”. Also, there was evidence suggesting that this greater desire to learn can be transferable to the mainstream setting and the home environment.

Pupils described their nurture room environment as calm and emotionally safe, which supports earlier research by Cooper, Arnold and Boyd (2001) and Kourmoulaki (2013). Pupils identified improved learning that was based on the comfortable furnishings that reminded some pupils of the home environment of their grandparents. Also pupils commented that the calm and relaxing atmosphere improved levels of concentration, as identified by Bishop and Swain (2000a); Cooper, Arnold and Boyd (2001); Kourmoulaki (2013); and Griffiths, Stenner and Hicks (2014).

RQ2: What are the perspectives of parents regarding the nurture group curriculum in relation to the experiences of their child?

The findings identified increased levels of confidence for both parents and their child. Parents valued the open-door policy and informal events that allowed them to meet nurture group staff on an informal basis to discuss their personal issues and pertinent issues relating to their child as identified by Taylor and Gulliford (2011). Also, parents highlighted that their children were more confident and more independent in a variety of situations at home supporting the research of March and Healey (2007); Sanders (2007); and Scott and Lee (2009). One parent gave the example of their child being able to go to school on their own, which made her mornings less stressful and thereby allowing her to spend more time with her younger children and allowing this pupil the opportunity to socialise with their peers and build friendships.

RQ3: What are the perspectives and experiences of staff regarding the nurture group curriculum and how it may relate to the mainstream curriculum?

All nurture group staff were aware of the importance of curriculum liaison with mainstream staff to avoid any misconceptions, gaps or duplication. A number of nurture group staff raised the issue identified by mainstream staff that by attending the nurture group pupils would ‘miss’ core lessons such as literacy and numeracy. In part-time groups this was resolved through nurture group attendance in the afternoon.

Nurture group staff emphasised the importance of planning relevant curriculum activities based on developmental needs. They highlighted their role in modelling appropriate behaviour and scaffolding pedagogy through shared and co-operative activities. Finally, they appreciated that mainstream staff could not replicate this high level of support, but hoped the principle could influence mainstream practice.

RQ4: How the observations identified any similarities and differences between the curriculum in the nurture groups and mainstream classrooms.

The curriculum activities in the nurture groups and mainstream classrooms varied quite markedly. In the nurture groups there was much higher emphasis on practical activities, informality, freedom of choice and freedom of movement. Nurture group staff had a greater freedom to plan relevant activities based on the needs and interests of the pupils, whereas the mainstream classes based their planning on the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013)

The nurture group curriculum planned for opportunities to promote dialogue between adults and pupils in shared activities, whereas there was less evidence of this in mainstream planning. Cubeddu and MacKay (2017) identified guiding and deepening discussion as one of the Six Principles of Attunement. In one mainstream class there was effective use of ‘talk partners’ and in another group science tasks promoted discussion, but the majority of mainstream activities were on an individual basis. A key area of contrast was the interpretation of effective dialogue by staff, as some conversation was encouraged by nurture group staff but not by the mainstream staff.

The roles of the adults varied. In the nurture group the two adults worked both independently and

cooperatively in teaching, facilitating, modelling and scaffolding roles. The nurture group adults planned the work together and during the observations it was not clear who was the teacher and who was the TA. In all mainstream classrooms the teacher planned and led each lesson with the TA taking a more subservient role. In the mainstream classroom both adults worked independently and apart from the science lesson there was little evidence of any modelling or scaffolding of the learning process. The scaffolding observed in the nurture group observations can be defined as reciprocal scaffolding (Holton and Clarke, 2006). In the mainstream classroom there was no collaborative scaffolding evident, but there was evidence of 'soft scaffolding' (Simons and Klein, 2007) where both the teacher and TA circulated the classroom and talked to some pupils, mainly answering questions and providing constructive feedback.

The most noticeable difference between the nurture groups and mainstream classroom environment was the layout of the rooms. The nurture group had a more informal 'homely' layout that included a kitchen area and comfortable seating. The mainstream classroom was a 'typical' classroom environment with sets of tables surrounded by chairs and a carpeted area used mainly for the introductory and plenary sessions.

5.5 Limitations and Implications for future research

This small-scale study has limitations due to its small sample size that will be difficult to replicate. It could be extended to other areas of the country and also investigate secondary school provision. Although parents and mainstream staff were informed about pupil selection there was no discussion with pupils to support their transition. Further investigation could explore the consultation processes with pupils selected for nurture group provision and extend pupil involvement in planning an appropriate curriculum. Parents/caregivers appeared to have a better understanding of the principles and practice of nurture groups, resulting in increased confidence in dealing with their child's behavioural issues at home. This appears to be a

successful model of parental involvement that is worthy of further investigation. Based on the data collected, nurture group staff must be made fully aware of the importance of their pivotal role in the success of nurture group provision. At a whole school level, nurture groups need to be supported by the head teacher and other senior management, governors and all members of the school staff, including lunchtime supervisors.

6. Summary

This research explored the curriculum in primary school nurture groups from lesson observations and gaining the perceptions of key stakeholders. There is wide-ranging evidence to suggest that primary nurture groups are a positive form of intervention in supporting primary aged pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007; Reynolds, MacKay and Kearney, 2009; Seth-Smith et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2016). However, these studies have tended to focus upon children's measured SEBD outcomes with little research that identifies the characteristics as to why primary nurture groups appear to be effective.

Data analysis indicated that the nurture group curriculum is different to that of mainstream provision, as it appears to be more flexible and takes greater account of identified social and emotional needs through the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998) and importantly takes account of pupil interests. The planning of the nurture group curriculum emphasises the importance of building language and communication skills through planned and informal activities, including play-based learning and cooperative activities that allow children to learn at their developmental not chronological age. Parents of children attending nurture group provision benefitted through their involvement in attending formal and informal events and there was evidence of empowerment that encouraged a number of parents to support the nurture group provision as a helper on a regular basis. A key finding of the research data was 'a desire to learn', which is a very powerful and positive statement.

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Appendix 1

Interview schedules

Pupil schedule

- What do you enjoy best about school?
- Are you enjoying being in the nurture group?
- How often do you come to the group?
- Can you tell me about the things you enjoy doing in the nurture group?
- Is it different to what you do in your classroom?
- Tell me about Circle Time?
- Tell me about the snack time
- What do you like doing in your classroom?
- What do you enjoy doing in your classroom?
- What would you like to do more / less of?
- Does everyone get on in the nurture group?
- Do you miss being in your class? If so, why?
- (Supplementary questions will be asked based on the responses to the above questions)

Parent / caregiver schedule

- How long has (name of child) been in the nurture group?
- Tell me a bit about (name of child)?
- Why do you think they went in the group?
- How did you feel about it at the time?
- How do you feel now?
- Does (name of child) tell you about the things they do in the group?
- Do you know the sort of activities/curriculum they do in the group?
- Have you been to visit the group?
- Have you met or chatted with the staff?
- How well do you think (name of child) was getting on in school with learning and behaviour before starting the group?
- Do you think (name of child) has changed after being in the group?
- Have you noticed any difference in them at home?

- (Supplementary questions will be asked based on the responses to the above questions)

Nurture group staff schedule

- How long has the group been running?
- When does it run?
- How did you plan the room?
- Why was the group set up?
- How do you decide who goes into the group?
- How long do they stay in the group?
- What do you want the children to learn in the group?
- How do you go about planning the curriculum?
- Which areas of the curriculum do you enjoy teaching?
- Which bits of the curriculum do the children enjoy?
- How do you plan your roles in the group?
- How much freedom do you have in your planning?
- Do you have breakfast and snack time?
- Of all the things they have learned, what have they taken back into the classroom?
- How do you know when they are ready to go back into class full time?
- How do parents react to their child being in the nurture group?
- How do you keep in touch with parents?
- Do you think parents have an understanding of nurture group practice?
- Do you think parents know about the nurture group curriculum?
- Are there any skills that children have learned in the group that they can take home?
- How do mainstream staff respond to the group?
- (Supplementary questions will be asked based on the responses to the above questions)

Mainstream staff schedule

- How long has (name of pupil) been attending the nurture group?

- What is your experience of the nurture group in school?
- When do the pupils in your class attend the nurture group?
- How do you keep in touch with the nurture group staff about curriculum planning?
- Do you have any concerns about the curriculum areas they miss?
- How long do pupils stay in the nurture group?
- What sorts of activities do the nurture group pupils enjoy/find challenging in your class?
- Have you noticed any changes in the pupils since they started the nurture group?
- How do you keep in touch with the nurture group staff about pupil progress?
- How do you track pupil progress in your class?
- Would you know if the progress was due to the nurture group?

(Supplementary questions will be asked based on the responses to the above questions)

