

“All behaviour is communication”: the impact of refining staff attunement to pupils in a Swiss special school setting

Katharina Vivian Schaal

kschaal@brookes.ac.uk

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Abstract

Nurture practice provides educational settings with methods that support the emotional needs of children and young people. The attunement principles present themselves as efficient tools that will assist educational staff in their work (Education Scotland, 2025). This study examined the application and the impact of the nurture approach and more specifically the attunement principles within a special school setting in a German-speaking region of Switzerland. The aim of this research project was to evaluate the experiences of staff with the application of the nurture approach and the training given in attunement, and to examine their thoughts and feelings on the effectiveness of the attunement principles. The educational staff had been newly introduced to the nurture approach and the attunement principles, and the study shows how educational staff in this specific environment have been positively affected by the inputs of the nurture approach and training in attunement.

The research study indicates that the nurture approach is an appropriate one for a special school setting as it portrays the benefits for educational staff and the children and young people with SEND. Findings are in line with research showing that the nurture approach is suitable to strengthen relationship-building and attachment in children and young people on a whole-school basis.

Introduction

The nurture approach is a child-centred approach that may be particularly appropriate for children and young people with special needs and disabilities (SEND) (DfES, 2002). Research in this field (Boxall & Lucas, 2010; Lucas, 1999) has clearly established that it is important to include the nurture approach into educational settings. However, there is an overall lack of research regarding how best to apply the Nurture Principles (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006), and more

precisely the attunement principles (Education Scotland, 2025), in a special school setting, where a high number of staff, (who are not always well trained and have a high turnover) collide with children and young people with SEND. The aim of this research was to identify staff's level of understanding in a Swiss special school setting regarding the nurture approach and attunement, and to evaluate the developments made by staff following training in those areas.

Relationships are central to successful educational

engagement (Colley, 2012) and as teaching is a relationship-based profession (Carpenter, 2023) the attunement principles support staff in fostering secure attachment (Education Scotland, 2025). The attunement principles may help regulate children's neurophysiological states (Porges, Tucci & Mitchell, 2015) and enhance staff responsiveness to learners' social, emotional and behavioural needs (Geddes, 2017), increasing opportunities for attuned interactions (Kohut & Ornstein, 2011). Such interactions strengthen connection and attachment (Cairns & Cairns, 2016).

Few studies include children and young people with SEND in this research context. Nurture groups have been shown to be effective interventions for children and young people with SEND (Bennathan & Boxall, 2015; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014 and Sloan, 2020); however, much of the existing research has focused on their delivery within designated, safe and structured spaces rather than on a whole-school basis (Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022a). Given the limited research on the whole-school application of the nurture approach in special school settings (Lyon, 2017), this inductive, exploratory study aimed to examine educational staff's understanding of the nurture approach and attunement as applied in a special school setting. In particular, the aim was to evaluate the impact that the attunement training had on the staff.

There were two research questions:

1. How do staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement in relation to the children and young people that they teach or support?
2. How does training in attunement impact their practice?

Literature review

Nurture work

The term "nurture approach" was based on the work of Marjorie Boxall (Boxall, 2002), an educational psychologist, who developed the concept of the nurture group in the 1960s. The nurture approach is based on the understanding that we should relate to children and young people in a "developmentally appropriate way" (Boxall, 2002 p. 4). It focuses on the unmet social,

emotional and behavioural needs of children and young people (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000) and helps to create attachment (Bowlby, 1969) while endeavouring to establish secure relationships (Ainsworth, 1987). Boxall & Lucas (2010) emphasise that only when children and young people feel attached will their needs come to the surface. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1944) is founded on Bowlby's observations of children's reactions to separation from and reunion with their primary caregivers (Follan & Minnis, 2010) and emphasises the caregiver's responsiveness and accessibility for the child, which Bowlby calls "availability" (Bowlby, 1973). Nurture practice is a term that contains the work that was initiated by Marjorie Boxall in the 1960s. The developments pushed forward in that field by, amongst others, Sylvia Lucas (Lucas set up one of the first nurture groups in the 1970s), *nurtureuk* (<https://www.nurtureuk.org>, 2025) and Education Scotland (2025) have been instrumental in evolving the field since then. Nurture practice nowadays not only takes into account attachment theory, but also consideration of the impact of early childhood adversity, trauma, child development and the latest knowledge from the fields of neuroscience and psychotherapy (Middleton, 2022). Nurture practice relies strongly on the Six Principles of Nurture:

1. Learning is understood developmentally.
2. The classroom offers a safe base.
3. The importance of nurture for the development of self-esteem.
4. Language as a vital means of communication.
5. All behaviour is communication.
6. The importance of transitions in the lives of children and young people

(Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006)

Attunement

Siegel (1999) depicts attunement as "mindsight", when words become unnecessary to feel the other person's emotions and when the empathetic comprehension takes place without discomposure. Attunement means a deep emotional understanding that entails an engagement generating trust and improving overall wellbeing (Decety et al., 2014). Fishbane (2007) describes

attunement as “primal empathy” (p. 402) and Miehls (2008) stresses how that neuronal linkage, which is attunement, enabled by interactions in secure attachments, accelerates the development of the social brain of the infant. For Erskine (2015, p. 45), attunement represents a “kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others knowing their rhythm, affect and experience”. It is the experience of being in the other person’s skin (Erskine, 2015) and recognising one’s own perspective and subjectivity in the process (Wang, 2020). Being attuned means engaging with the world and revealing oneself through this act of engagement, thus consequently allowing oneself access to new forms of thinking (Wang, 2020). Martin Heidegger discussed this notion in his lecture course of 1929-1930 (Heidegger, 1995) where he clearly separates emotions, as internal representations, from attunement (*Befindlichkeit* = “disposedness”), which is not a state in the individual but the result of people interacting with each other. “Attunement is not some being that appears in the soul as an experience, but the way of our being there with one another” (Heidegger, 1995, pp. 65-67).

The fifth principle of nurture and its relationship with attunement

The fifth principle of nurture – “All behaviour is communication” (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) – evaluates the understanding of behaviour and takes the requirements for staff in a nurturing environment into consideration. The key requirements for staff in a nurturing environment are to use the attunement principles (Kennedy, Landor & Todd, 2010) and to recognise the powerful role of sensitivity and its undeniably positive impact on shaping secure attachments (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2003; Herbert, 2023), as well as to have the openness and the flexibility to modify one’s own behaviour strategies in order to interrupt repeated cycles of confrontations (Colley, 2013). Cubeddu & MacKay (2017) emphasise the importance of applying the attunement principles in schools and suggest using them as the foundation for teaching tools within nurturing school environments (p. 270). Education Scotland (2025) has adapted these attunement principles and reorganised them into an attunement profile with five attunement principles. Miller (2023, n.p) renamed them slightly and expressed them in a more simplified form:

1. Being attentive;
2. Encouraging;
3. Receiving;
4. Attuned together;
5. Guiding and supporting.

Attunement in educational settings

In order to apply the attunement principles in educational settings we need to remind ourselves of the power of mirror neurons and how we connected through direct stimulation to other people in the beginning of our lives (Trout, 2011). The attunement principles address the core principles of connecting with each other. They oblige educational staff to briefly pause, to observe and to use their full senses to be able to focus on the right things (Trout, 2011). Education Scotland (2025) supports educational staff in implementing the nurture approach and provides guidance on how to apply the attunement principles in educational settings. Attunement enables teachers to understand classroom group dynamics and promotes positive co-living (McGuire, 2019). It plays a crucial role in early peer experiences (Hoffmann, 2012), supports secure attachment and emotional safety (Zeller, 2008) and underpins effective learning and academic progress (Poulsen & Fouts, 2001). Porges (2021) underlines that it is attunement and a feeling of safety that admits sociability and permits social interaction in classrooms and schools. Porges (2021a) asserts that attunement contributes to the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual and assists in acknowledging that cues of safety differ from one person to another. Educational staff need to be great listeners and trust in children’s and young people’s bodily reactions because they are accurate (Porges, 2007). Educational staff must be able to attune to their own physiological states, as well as those of the children and young people they work with. This self-awareness supports meaningful social engagement and helps to prepare students for future opportunities in life (Porges, 2011). For example, in a challenging classroom moment, a teacher who attunes to their own stress can respond calmly to a student’s meltdown, modelling regulation and supporting the student’s coping skills. The attunement principles (Education Scotland, 2025) help us to feel differentiated and linked at the same time (Siegel, 2020).

Methodology

This research took place in a special school for boys and girls (aged 4 to 18 years) with SEND, situated in a German-speaking region of Switzerland. The objective of the research was to explore the opinions and perceptions of staff on the nurture approach and attunement in relation to their practice in that special school setting. The study intended to reveal the impact of training in attunement for staff and to detect improvement and development for change for the individual. The researcher was the full-time teacher of one of the classes in the school. A qualitative methodology was adapted in this research. Qualitative methods enable participants to articulate experiences in their own words, revealing how they make sense of their contexts (Hammersley, 2002; Silverman, 2017). As an inductive and exploratory approach, qualitative research is well suited to examine lived experiences (Jones & Gratton, 2015). This study explored the nurture approach and the attunement principles, largely unrecognised in German-speaking educational contexts, making its impact particularly striking.

Two separate groups of participants; (Group 1: teachers and therapists; Group 2: teaching assistants) participated each in two focus group discussions (FGs) and three training sessions (one hour each over a period of three months). The first FGs (Appendix 1) had the aim to elicit the general knowledge around nurture and understanding of attunement. The training sessions were built upon the insights provided by the data from the first FGs. The first training focused on Emotion Coaching (Gottman, 1996), the 'hand model of the brain' (Siegel, 1999), stress responses, the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Felitti et al., 1998) and included exercises for self-reflection. The second training introduced the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1944), attachment experiences (Ainsworth, 1978) and explored the nurture approach (Boxall, 2022) with its relevance in supporting secure relationships. The third training centered on attunement and availability (Bowlby, 1973), as well as the Attunement Profile (Education Scotland, 2020) with the attunement principles (Education Scotland, 2025). Emphasis was placed on applying these principles effectively with children and young people with SEND and participants applied the attunement principles over a period of five weeks in their practice. The second

FGs (Appendix 2) were informed by participants' answers from a questionnaire with open-ended questions (Appendix 3) about the training sessions and their experience with the application of the attunement principles (Appendix 4).

The groups were made up to respect the power imbalance of the staff (Bourgeault, Dingwall & De Vries, 2010). The purpose of the sorting of the participants was not to compare these two groups but to explore their different perceptions, possibly based on education and professional training, to the fullest. In total, eight participants (three teachers and one therapist with an average age of 51 years, and four teaching assistants with an average age of 26 years) agreed to take part in the research. Data from all participants were included in the analysis and the results.

All participants provided written informed consent and were informed of potential risks, their right to withdraw and data confidentiality in accordance with the Oxford Brookes University Research Code of Practice and GDPR requirements (Oxford Brookes University, 2020). Ethical considerations, including transparency, participant wellbeing and integrity in data analysis were prioritised throughout the study. Participants were offered opportunities for reflection, were thanked and debriefed at the study's conclusion with ongoing communication available upon request. All access to data and research tools was ethically approved by relevant institutions and contributors.

The two focus group discussions were recorded, then transcribed and coded. A second, neutral coder was involved in enhancing the credibility of the thematic decisions. Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun und Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to identify patterns of meaning. Themes were actively constructed, reflecting the researcher's positionality and reflexivity, and represented interpretative stories shaped by the study's specific context and timing (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

Findings

As a result of coding the transcripts and analysing the questionnaire responses, four themes relating to the first research question could be identified (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Thematic map of understanding of the nurture approach and attunement.

1. How do staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement in relation to the children and young people that they teach or support?

The participating staff of this special school setting did not have the know-how on emotional intelligence, attachment theory, the nurture approach and attunement/ the attunement principles before entering this research project.

The first theme illustrates the meaning of attunement for staff in relation to the children and young people in their working environment. Attunement was, for example, understood as alertness and attentiveness. “One needs to absorb everything, one is occupied with one pupil, but one has to pay attention to everything else as well” (FG2S4 = Focus Group 2, participant S,

section 4). “One has to be fully alert all the time” (FG1P8). Good observation skills were thought to be essential to accomplish the “complete alertness that needs to be there from beginning to ending” (FG2A4), but also in order to communicate with the children and young people and to get to know them better. Attunement was also understood as a specific kind of empathy that would help staff to “predict behaviour patterns” (FG1P2), by help of some sort of “antenna” (FG2S2). Participants had difficulties in explaining this ability in words but said that it was something “that is hard to capture, but one simply feels it” (FG2S1).

The topic of openness was closely linked to the topic of empathy, because a specific kind of openness “is required to be able to begin each day anew and to be able to be open to the fact that everything is vague each day” (FG2S5). Openness

was explained as the ability to “be flexible enough in order to get involved, to obtain new experiences” (FG1U5) and to be able to “allow things to take longer and to offer more time” (FG1M24).

The second theme depicts the understanding of a nurturing environment for staff and it gives way to comments on the conditions of the working environment in the school. The need for more “staff” (FG2S14) and more “quiet space” (FG2S13) was expressed. The lack of room was voiced in connection to the lack of staff, due to “the need for constant supervision of the children and young people in the school” (FG1B21). The concern about the general atmosphere in the school building was raised. In a nurturing environment it would be “okay to demand help and to obtain the help from colleagues” (FG2S19). In a nurturing environment “staff can openly discuss issues and one can rely on each other to flexibly assist each other where help is needed” (FG1P22). The importance of working together “as a team” (FG2S19; FG1P22) was evoked. The nurturing environment would elicit the notion of security in everyone and this would be made possible through “the constant, regular and reliable structuring and scaffolding of the days with the requested aids” (FG2S12) in which everyone would be able to “feel safe and sheltered” (FG2S12).

The third theme suggests the topics around the personality traits of the nurturing staff and the fundamentals of how staff would need to act around children and young people with SEND. Staff are expected to be “patient, calm, steady in their demands but also generous and tolerant in regard to the special needs and disabilities of the children and young people” (FG2Aa/S15). Theory of mind, described by Siegel (1999) as the ability to understand others’ thoughts, feelings and perspectives, is reflected in the focus group participants’ emphasis that staff should be “accepting of the needs and disabilities of the children and young people” (FG2A16), “valuing” (FG2A16) them, adopt a “solution orientated manner” (FG2S16) and strive to “understand the child’s and young person’s needs and comprehend their actions and behaviour” (FG1U3). The significance of attachment was included in the discussion. It was formulated that staff should demonstrate an image like the “mother or father” (FG2Aa17) that will enable “an attachment that

is unconditional” (FG1P14) and “can represent the required steadiness that is very important for secure attachments” (FG1P14).

The fourth theme focused on the needs of children and young people with SEND, highlighting the role of staff expertise. Attunement was considered to be a skill that had to “be existent in staff that worked with children and young people with SEND” (FG1B2) but certainty was not gained on “if the skill could be learned” (FG2A24). However, it was stated that “experience in the work field will improve the ability of attunement” (FG1P4). There was agreement on the fact that strategies and methods could be learned “that will be useful in relation to the work with children and young people with SEND” (FG2Aa27). One participant raised the issue of “pupils with a mental health issue” (FG3U21) and that “their individual needs would have to be especially considered by everyone” (FG3U21). It was clarified that staff reacted in an appropriate way when there was a “fear of insects, for example” (FG1U25). Participants claimed also that staff “must put focus on their own needs in order to be able to look after themselves psychologically” (FG2A10).

2. How does training in attunement impact their practice?

For the second research question, three themes relating to the impact due to the training sessions and staff’s experiences with the attunement principles could be identified (**Figure 2**). With the knowledge gained from the training sessions, participants were prepared to include the attunement principles in their practice. They were equipped with guidelines to support them in implementing the attunement principles, along with a self-evaluation sheet to document observations for each principle. The self-evaluation sheet (Education Scotland, 2025 and Miller, 2023) was tailored and translated by the researcher to suit this specific setting of the research (Appendix 4).

The first theme reflects staff’s expressions of having experienced support from the structured guidelines for the application of the attunement principles (Appendix 4) and overall participation in the research study. Staff stated that the “logical and sensible concept” (FG3U41) of the input “can easily be applied with our children and young

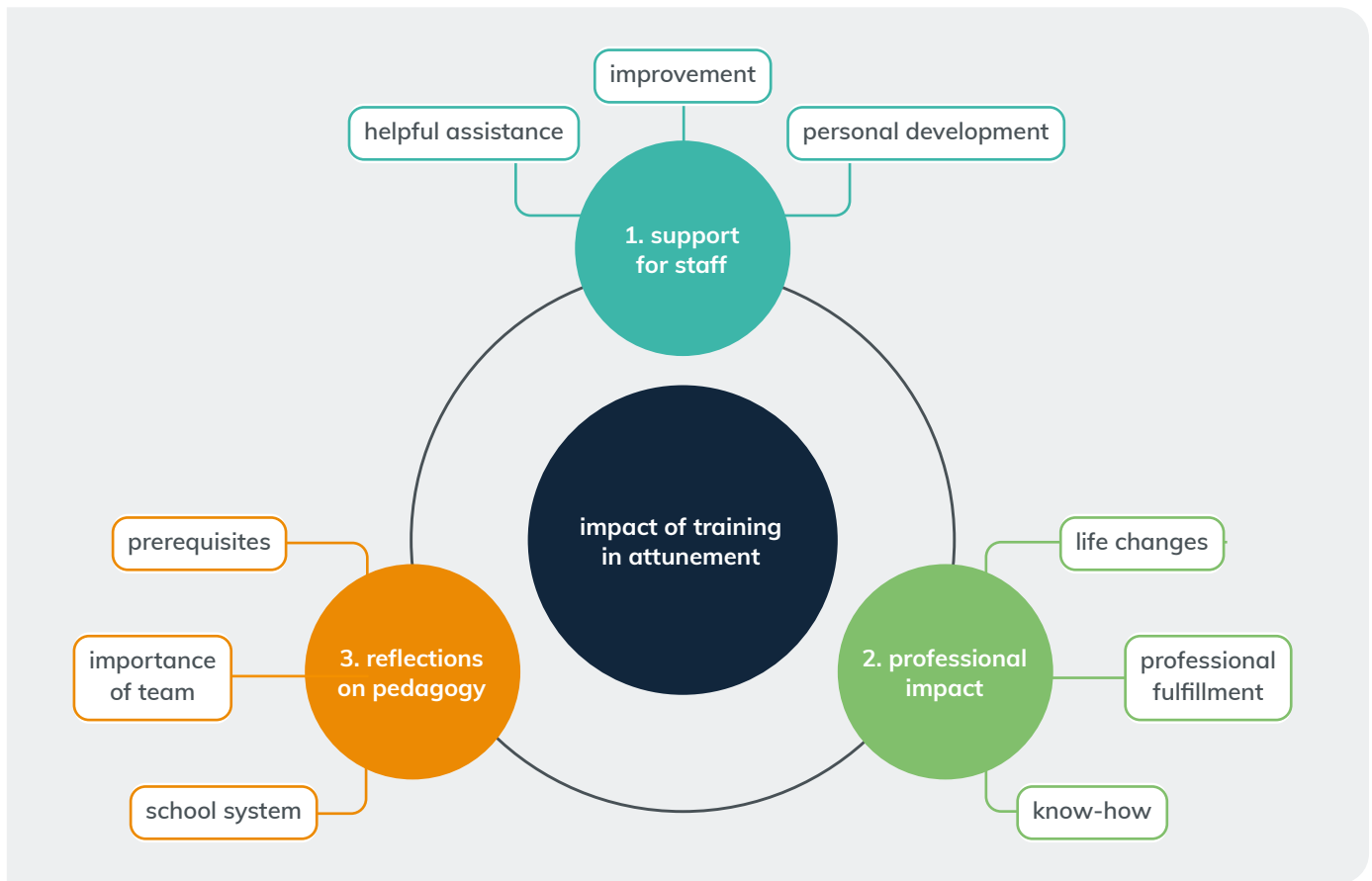


Figure 2. Thematic map of impact of training in attunement.

people" (FG3U41) and they praised its simplicity: "The practical applications can be used on all occasions" (FG4Aa24). The input of the study's training enabled staff "to take a step away in order to brave the daily grind" (FG3U41). Those with more work experience particularly talked about having appreciated the evaluation sheet as helpful assistance "to self-reflect and to self-criticise one's own doing" (FG3U6) and used it as a practical pattern "to check one's own behaviour and professional abilities" (FG3U6). They added that "the guidelines and instructions improved my teaching and led to personal growth, offering reassurance by letting me match my pupils' pace"; "I do not feel as much pressure to finish each and every task anymore" (FG3M12); "I am more patient and more understanding now" (FG3M12) and that "Everything is more agreeable" (FG4Aa7). Participants also said: "The work is more efficient" (FG3B12) and "takes less of my energy" (FG3U10); "even though I am required to concentrate more" (FG3U9). They claimed the guidelines had improved "their relationships with the children and young people" (FG3B12) and that it allowed staff "to be

more open towards their patterns of behaviour" (FG4Aa6).

The second theme highlights the professional impact staff experienced from the training input. Staff reported a sense of peace of mind: "Less often I stand around clueless now and know better what to do" (FG4Aa7), which also increased their confidence and helped them "get a better overview and a broader understanding of group dynamics" (FG4Aa4). The training led to more "reflected actions from me and also to actions in which I did not feel I lost control over them" (FG4S22), creating opportunities "to better get to know the pupils" (FG4S22) and resulting in "more attentiveness towards their individual needs" (FG4A2). The given training in attunement helped staff to better understand early childhood experiences and insecure attachments, which they then incorporated into their reflections. This knowledge also restored their job satisfaction and a sense of personal fulfillment: "When I focus more on my pupils, then I can feel that I am rewarded by this focus and notice it in the pupils" (FG3U6) and "at

the end of the day I am tired but very happy with myself and with my pupils" (FG3U10). Participants reported that, thanks to the "instructive guidelines and the training, the work with my pupils is fun again" and that "it is great to attempt these on our pupils" (FG3U35). One noted: "I am not demoralised by my efforts because they show effect now" (FG3U14), while another shared that the inputs enabled them to "relax with my pupils, to enjoy the small things and to take pride in their doings; to voice my pleasure with them" (FG3B27). Staff also observed that the acquired knowledge made them more courageous and calmer in challenging situations: "I am more at ease to attempt presumably difficult situations now" (FG4S22). One participant emphasised that the inputs encouraged them "to carry on and not to give up! Without the inputs from this study, I would have renounced working with one specific pupil, maybe with my work in general" (FG3U15), adding that previously, "I was trapped with my own thoughts, my doings and this pupil. The new inputs helped me to resolve this" (FG3U20). A calmer approach was formulated: "I ask for explanations from the pupils now instead of judging them straight away, which takes out the pressure in all of us" (FG4Aa24). The professional impact on another participant resulted in that person leaving the workplace and planning to "inform the world about this revolutionary concept". High hopes were voiced for "a better world, without war, if everyone is aware of this approach and the attunement principles" (FG4S25).

The third theme treats the reflections on pedagogy by staff. They concluded that the offered concept represented "the fundamental pillars of the relationship between pupil and educational staff" (FG3B13). It was stressed that "without inclusion of the pupils' perceptions and emotions, no pedagogical work is possible" (FG3B40). That this was the "basis of all pedagogical work" (FG3B40) and it was underlined that all "beginners in the field of education should hear about these inputs" (FG4S16). It was voiced that "the concept would need to be lived in the classrooms in order to pass the knowledge on to inexperienced staff" (FG3B17) because "it was a gain and emphasised pedagogical issues that were new to me" (FG3U40). Staff claimed that "it is the only reasonable method to apply with children and young people with SEND" (FG3U11). One participant concluded that "it is this attentiveness

and the putting the focus on our pupils that really makes the difference and is worth the effort and the concentration" (FG3U32). It was argued that the school system would need "to be adapted to the inputs of this research study" (FG4Aa28), so that these inputs would be more recognised and more easily accepted by schools and their staff. Staff agreed on the fact that "everyone in the team should know these inputs; so that everyone applies them" (FG4Aa28).

Discussion

1. How do staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement in relation to the children and young people that they teach or support?

The findings from the first research question suggest that participants of this specific special school setting understood attunement as emphasised attentiveness and as a pronounced focus on the children and young people that they teach or support. Participants described attunement as empathy that required openness and flexibility to allow observations to better understand the children and young people that they were working with. Like prior research (Siegel, 1999 and Erskine, 2015) participants of this research recognised the power of interactions which is the foundation for attunement (Baker, 2000). Nevertheless, they did not comprehend attunement as "availability" that Bowlby (1973) thought paramount for forming bonds in secure relationships. Guidelines by Glasgow City Council (2011) and studies on the nurturing environment in a school setting (Colley & Seymour, 2021; MacKay, 2015) elicit the emphasis on the whole-school nurture approach where all staff feel valued and secure (Doyle, 2003). Here, participants expressed sentiments of feeling left alone. The teaching staff, not the teaching assistants, mentioned the lack of cooperation in the team in particular. The general climatic conditions in the school building remained in the foreground for participants.

Prior studies show that in relation to the nurture approach certain characteristics in staff and of the environment in a school setting are necessary (Colley, 2012).

Unlike previous research (Syrnyk, 2012), participants in this study did not highlight emotion

coaching (Gilbert et al., 2021) or the “context of responsiveness” (Rose, 2015, p. 1768) in staff-pupil relationships. They overlooked attachment experiences (Ainsworth, 1978) and the concept of “dyadic communication” (Schore, 2001, p. 20), focusing solely on staff perspectives. Their understanding of “needs” was limited to basic survival (Maslow, 1999), ignoring social, emotional and behavioural needs (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000) and childhood adversity (Boxall, 2002). Findings from the first research question portray participants’ reasoning on work experience and work ethic to inform good practice (Carpenter, 2017).

The gaining of knowledge from continuous training would help staff to learn more about mental health difficulties in general and to show more “availability” in their practice. Participants of the current study seemed to be focused on themselves. A gain of knowledge may support them in fulfilling “authentic attunement”, as described in research (Mössler et al., 2020; Wang, 2020).

2. How does training in attunement impact their practice?

The findings of the second research question provide a convincing picture of the importance of new inputs and continuous training for staff. They suggest that this research study about the nurture approach and the attunement principles on staff has had an impressive impact. It has ignited discussions and provoked reflections relating to their work with children and young people with SEND. The self-evaluation approach by Education Scotland (2023) supports schools to improve practice. Participants of this study endorsed the tools by Education Scotland (2023). This study encouraged participants to “be curious” (Carpenter, 2017), explore approaches that may improve outcomes for children and young people (Carpenter et al., 2015) and consolidate staff strengths (Kombou & Bunn, 2020). Training in attunement provided security in their work, fostering a clearer professional vision for both their “micro-system” (Bronfenbrenner, 2006) and themselves. Participants reported that the knowledge gained improved their understanding of the children and young people they worked with, enhancing relationships (Syrnyk, 2012). Teaching assistants emphasised relationship building, while teaching staff highlighted the improved quality of their work

and the value of new tools for viewing issues from different perspectives. Research supports the positive impact of reflecting on habitual methods and approaches (Roma, Monaro & Mazza, 2022; Bethune & Seldon, 2018).

Participants expressed opinions about the work setting and formulated perceptions on the significance of the unification in the school community and a shared whole-school approach (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006). As a result, they produced strong support for research (Colley & Seymour, 2021) that asserts the value of the culture of a whole-school community (Abram, 2020) and the importance for a whole-school approach. Participants consented with research that recognises the nurture approach as a relevant approach for schools (McGuire, 2019; Hoffmann, 2012; Zeller, 2008; Poulsen & Fouts, 2001). They confirmed the findings of prior research (Middleton, 2022; Porges, 2022) that maintain that knowing about neuroscience is essential. Learning about the physiological aspects of safety (Porges, 2021) proved to be eye-opening for participants. Participants seemed favourable to applying the attunement principles in their work field, as the practical attention given to the pupils appeared to convince them that it was worth the effort.

Participants also spoke about the effort required to apply the attunement principles. Prior research (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017; Schore, 2001) does not reflect on those endeavours that educational staff must exert when focusing on children and young people. In this current study, teaching staff explained that applying attunement was something they actively had to practice and that for them this action was not produced naturally.

Conclusions, recommendations and limitations

This study has adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach to discover a deeper understanding of how staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement and how training in attunement impacts their practice. The study presented the views of a limited sample size of educational staff, which may have resulted in sampling bias, due to the small number of staff that were willing to participate and due to the researcher’s own personal choice. Little research

exists on the application of the attunement principles and prior research has mostly been carried out in functioning nurture groups (Cubbedu & MacKay, 2017; Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022a; Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022b). Participants in this study were informed about the nurture approach and given training in attunement by the researcher, but they did not undergo the specific training offered by the Nurture Group Network. How this new input really affected the participants cannot be measured completely. There are no comparable studies that investigate this detail.

The study was undertaken in a special school setting that accommodates children and young people with SEND in every classroom. Variables that mark interventions of the nurture approach in special school settings are yet to be fully researched.

A key limitation of this study was the participants' limited understanding of social, emotional and mental health difficulties. As a result, it is unclear whether they will continue applying the new insights in the future or how this setting might develop.

New approaches can only be successfully implemented with the support of the senior leadership team. In this particular setting no whole-school approach was evident, which may limit the long-term impact of any individual efforts.

However, the overall positive impact of the inputs suggests that introducing alternative approaches and theories to educational staff is worthwhile. The themes identified in the analysis highlight the potential for these topics to be explored and implemented in other educational settings.

The number of studies on the nurture approach has been growing over time. Nevertheless, there is little research that examines the impact of the attunement principles on educational staff and no research at all that explores the direct impact of the attunement principles on children and young people with SEND. There has been no research on the effectiveness of applying the attunement principles as a whole-school approach. This area needs further consideration.

This current research recommends more in-depth investigations for special school settings, particularly in relation to the fifth principle of nurture (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) that "all behaviour is communication", which is closely connected to the fourth nurture principle that "language is a vital means of communication". Both emphasise the role of language, speech and interactive behaviour in expressing needs and emotions and in building meaningful relationships. Educational settings must offer room for communication and interactions, as these conditions enable staff to respond meaningfully to children's social and emotional cues. While verbal communication is typically dominant in staff practice (Bani, 2011), the given training in attunement encouraged teaching staff to reduce verbalisation and adopt a more receptive, observant stance. This shift increased the intentional use of non-verbal communication, thereby supporting more attuned interactions.

Such attunement enhances staff sensitivity to children's cues and contributes to the development of secure relationships (Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022a).

These findings indicate that trained staff are more observant, more present and less oppressive with words. Future studies should therefore focus on encouraging staff to reduce verbalisation, providing a clearer and more practical approach to implementing the concept of attunement. The current study found that strategies for becoming more attuned to children and young people with SEND are achievable but require deliberate effort from staff, in contrast to the effortless use of speech that comes naturally. Future research should consider both the significant impact of words on children and young people with SEND and the possible challenges they face with speech and language (Bani, 2011). Studies should also explore communication approaches that demand staff maintain attentiveness, good memory and an attuned stance. Future researchers should focus on attuned communication. An implication of the current study is that attuned communication seemed to be a "difficulty" for educational staff in this context, but when applied, it improved pupil-educational staff interactions and attachment. Staff would be advised to begin by understanding "behaviour as communication" (Lucas, Insley &

Buckland, 2006) because “behaviour is a reflection of needs rather than a need in itself” (Cowne et al., 2019; p. 11). It is especially a “serve and return” (Center on the Developing Child, 2023) that does not necessarily rely on spoken words.

The results of this research indicate that opportunities to reflect on one’s own practice and to exchange opinions on existing conditions, approaches and work procedures help educational staff to review operations and patterns of behaviour. The findings demonstrate that inputs about the nurture approach and attunement impact educational staff on a personal and professional level. Findings show that staff took an overall positive view of the approach and imply that the nurture approach is a worthy approach for special school settings. This single study adds to the body of research in the field of SEND and more precisely to the field of nurture (Boxall, 2002), while also demonstrating that the application of the nurture approach and the attunement principles is feasible internationally. The adaptation of the Attunement Profile (Appendix 4) for special needs settings may represent a key stage in developing a pathway that integrates the nurture approach and the attunement principles in the field of SEND. Future research should consider the inclusion of practical training to support effective implementation of the attunement principles. The study indicates that staff without pedagogical training may apply the attunement principles inappropriately, highlighting the need for ongoing professional training. Further research can build on this study to strengthen practice-based understanding of the attunement principles within nurture-informed settings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1:

Focus group 1 schedule

Appendix 2:

Focus group 2 schedule

Appendix 3:

Questionnaire to training sessions

Appendix 4:

Adapted self-evaluation sheet: Attunement Profile

Appendix 1: First focus group discussion schedule

1. In job descriptions in the special needs field it is sometimes demanded to have the ability to be attuned to the children and young people with SEND and SEMH difficulties. How do you understand this ability to be attuned?
2. "Attunement is how you feel in other people's feelings and even going beyond that resonance. You actually understand what's going on in the other person's mental world. You develop mindsight to see inside subjective experience" (Dr Dan Siegel).
How can we realise this attunement in pupils with disabilities and those who are non-verbal?
3. A mother is attuned to the needs of her newly born baby. The baby feels safe, seen and understood. Any relationship that enables safety, emotional stability and understanding will create strong attachment. Which needs do you recognise in your pupils? What do you do to make your pupils feel safe and understood?
4. I believe that anyone can thrive in the long term if their needs are cared for! How would you describe the perfect setting and the perfect attitude of staff that make such a thriving possible?
5. Verbal communication does not always take place from behalf of our pupils. Can you describe their behaviour and can you describe your reaction to that behaviour? How can we adapt our behaviour to that of our pupils?
6. Attunement is something that is demanded, but can it be trained or is it a gift to deeply understand someone else without the use of words? I would like to ask a miracle question after De Shazer: if we woke up tomorrow and were able to really know our students and foresaw their emotions and difficulties, what would be different in our classroom? How would we know that a miracle had happened?

Reserve questions

Do those children and young people who do not show any feelings, have feelings? What can we do to make them show us their inner worlds and their tormentations?

What is your approach in your work and why have you chosen it? How does it help you in your work or your personal qualities?

Appendix 2: Second focus group discussion schedule

1. In the training sessions you were introduced to the nurture approach and the attunement principles. Have you tried to apply the information? Please illustrate your example. How would you describe the effect you noticed in the children and young people when applying the information? Please illustrate your example.
2. How has the training impacted on your practice? Possible examples were given here.
3. Most of you said that you would want to tell colleagues about the input from the training sessions. What effect would such informing have?
4. The attunement principles were introduced to you as a strategy with clear steps that support you in being more attuned to the children and young people with special needs. Please share the experience you had with the given steps.
5. What was helpful for you with these steps?
6. What would you need in order to better apply these steps?
7. In the first focus discussion we discussed the topic of attunement. How have you developed professionally following the training in attunement and nurture?
8. How do you think it would be possible to create more occasions to apply the steps of attunement in your work with children and young people with special needs?
9. On a scale from 1 to 10, in your opinion how important is it to include these principles in the school policy?

Appendix 3: Questionnaire to training sessions

Thank you for answering these questions in your own words. Your answers are individual. There is no right or wrong answer.

1. The learning goals from the training sessions were to get to know the nurture approach, to understand the meaning of psychological security, attunement and the attunement principles. How do you feel about having learned about these topics?
2. How would you describe the training in your own words?
3. In what way did it make you think about your practice and your qualities?
4. Can you describe the feelings and the perceptions about yourself and your work that came to the foreground due to the training? Were they positive or rather negative and why?
5. What did you learn about yourself through this training and why is this important concerning your work?
6. What could be the impact of applying the nurture principles and more precisely the attunement principles in your practice?
7. Was anything mentioned in the training that you find impossible to realise? Please illustrate and explain why.
8. What are you willing to apply from the training in your work concerning children and young people with SEND?
9. What could you absorb from the training in general?
10. Is there something that was mentioned in the training that you would like to tell colleagues? Please illustrate.

Appendix 4: Adapted self-evaluation sheet: Attunement Profile

(Education Scotland, 2020; Miller, 2023)

Core principle		
Under-principle	Self-assessment	Comments / examples
<p>Being attentive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing verbal and non-verbal cues • Maintaining eye contact • Smiling • Nodding • Turning toward the child • Thinking aloud about feelings/actions • Expressing joy • Using warm tone 		
<p>Encouraging and responding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Returning eye contact • Smiling • Nodding • Being playful and engaged • Repeating the child's words • Verbalising observed actions 		
<p>Developing interactions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding with language or body • Checking understanding • Waiting for reactions • Offering short turn-taking exchanges • Cooperating • Engaging in back-and-forth interaction 		
<p>Guiding and supporting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing flexible scaffolding • Setting limits calmly • Building on responses • Offering help when needed • Giving understandable choices • Suggesting actionable steps 		