Nurture Groups in West Dunbartonshire: Summary Report and Next Steps

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Summary of the rationale, operation, impact and next steps for nurture groups within WDC.

Overview

Nurture groups have been in operation within West Dunbartonshire Council (WDC) since 2006 following a successful pilot funded by the Scottish Government. This paper provides a background to nurture groups, summarises the evaluation data collated by the Psychological Service during this period, and concludes with a summary of the challenges and opportunities for nurture groups within the context of closing the attainment gap. Full evaluation reports on nurture have been compiled on a year by year basis by the Psychological Service both for results across WDC and also for the individual schools involved. These reports have been circulated to the individual schools involved and are available as an annex to this report if required.

What is a nurture group?

The importance of a secure attachment in promoting a positive sense of self is well established and accepted with research clearly demonstrating that children evidencing emotional difficulties are much more likely than their peers to struggle to achieve their potential in school. A key factor in these findings is the role of attachment which has proven to be predictive of academic achievement, school completion and subsequent peer and adult relationships (Jacobsen and Hoffman, 1997; Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001; Reio, Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2009). Young children who have positive early experiences know that their needs will be consistently met by their adult caregivers and hence feel free to explore the world and learn. Sadly, for some, such positive experiences are not the norm and consequently when it comes to school, preoccupations or ambivalence in forming relationships can significantly hinder emotional and cognitive development. Given the significance of a secure early attachment, recognised nationally by the Scottish Government (e.g. Scottish Government 2012) it is of little surprise that educationalists have sought to develop approaches which aim to mitigate the impact of early attachment difficulties. One such approach which has seen resurgence in popularity throughout the late 1990s and beyond is nurture groups.

First developed in 1969 by Educational Psychologist Marjorie Boxall, nurture groups were established with attachment theory as the underlying principle and sought to help children form secure relationships with others (Lucas, 1999). It was recognised that as a child moves into the more formal school setting, and the demands for formal learning accelerate, children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties which remain unresolved quickly identify

themselves in the primary school and tend to be slow to settle in school and often quickly begin to fall behind academically. Nurture groups offer a nurturing setting where children feel a greater sense of security and are supported socially and emotionally.

Nurture groups as first conceived by Marjorie Boxall and Marion Bennathan (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000) have a very clearly defined structure and routine. Based on 6 nurture principles (see box 1) they seek to offer children a hybrid of home and school. Pupils start their day in their mainstream class and are picked up by nurture group staff who take them to the nurture room.
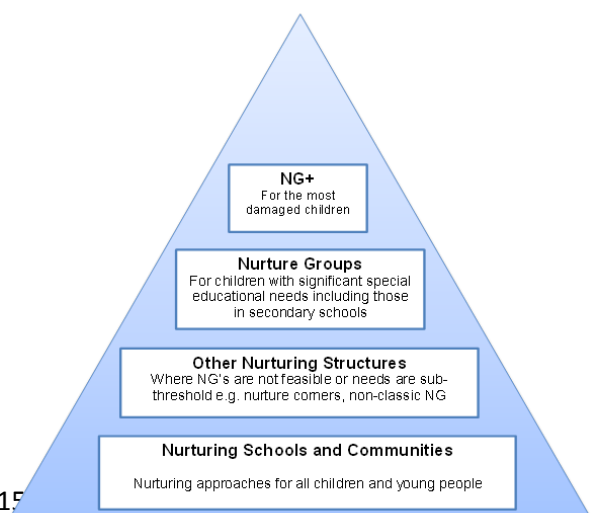
Activities undertaken include emotional literacy / health and well-being, in WDC this is often the PATHS curriculum, news sharing, snack and regular curriculum tasks. The group is staffed by a teacher and learning assistant who model and reinforce appropriate social interaction and act as key figures with whom the children can build a relationship. Central to the format is the modelling of social interaction by two adults, the sharing of snack / meal alongside a variety of activities. Pupils return to their class after a session and there is a key aim of returning full-time to mainstream after around 4 school terms. In their original conception, pupils spent approximately 95% of their week within a nurture group returning to their mainstream classes on average after 4 school terms.

Schools aim to be nurturing environments for all their pupils, and there is recognition of this for example in the guidance produced by Glasgow City Council on the nurturing school (HNIOS, 2014). The concept of a nurturing school is not an alternative to the provision and operation of a nurture group but is best seen within a hierarchy of approaches aimed at helping address the needs of children with significant emotional and behavioural needs. The need for such a continuum of support has been helpfully described in the literature most recently by Mackay (2015) who has suggested a

NG+
For the most damaged children

Nurture Groups
For children with significant special educational needs including those in secondary schools

Other Nurturing Structures
Where NG's are not feasible or needs are sub-threshold e.g. nurture corners, non-classic NG

Nurturing Schools and Communities
Nurturing approaches for all children and young people

From MacKay, 2015

model within which nurture groups can be seen as a support mechanism for pupils with significant attachment needs. Shown above, Mackay argues that nurture groups sit near the top of a pyramid of support for such pupils but critically their success is enhanced when schools develop a nurturing ethos where all staff have an awareness and understanding of the impact of attachment difficulties on children's learning. For the children for whom nurture groups where initially designed to support, being part of a nurturing school alone is known to be insufficient in helping them overcome the barriers they face from difficult early life experiences. Being part of a nurture group however has been clearly demonstrated as having a positive impact on pupil's social and emotional functioning (Binnie and Allan, 2008; Gerrard, 2006; Reynolds, Mackay and Kearney, 2009; Sanders, 2007).

While the evidence base for nurture groups improving social and emotional functioning has been unequivocal, within the context of improving attainment for pupils, it is critical to ask the question of whether nurture groups have a role to play. Evidence of the impact on improving attainment has been much less well researched than impact on emotional well-being, a point most recently commented on within the JRF report on closing the attainment gap in Scottish education (Sous and Ellis, 2014). There is, however, a very well designed research study from Glasgow (Reynolds et al 2009) where the positive impact on literacy attainment of attendance at a nurture group has been clearly demonstrated. Of note here, however, is that Glasgow City Council has kept to the classic model of nurture provision and it is within this context that the significant improvement was noted. Within WDC to date we have not systematically tracked the impact of nurture group attendance on attainment but recent re-introduction of baseline literacy measures and GL assessment measures will make this possible in the future. A cursory look at the literacy baseline assessment results of pupils in nurture groups last year confirms the working hypothesis that pupils attending nurture groups score within the lowest ranked group on literacy baseline triangulating the view that the most needy pupils are being selected to be part of a nurture group.

Nurture Groups within West Dunbartonshire Council

In West Dunbartonshire, nurture groups continue to operate in eight primary schools, the selection of these schools having been based on identified need via auditing and school demographics. Each nurture class usually consists of between 6 and 10 children offering a short term, focused intervention strategy. The children remain part of their class group and typically return full time within two to four school terms. The initial pilot study undertaken between 2006-7 was based on a model of nurture provision whereby pupil's time was evenly split between attending the nurture group and being in their mainstream class. This model of a 50/50 split has not been replicated in WDC since the pilot study which had additional Governmental funding. Instead, additional staffing has been divided between 8 nurture groups varying from 2 to 4 half sessions per week. Additional staffing is provided to schools with nurture groups from the pool of early years teachers. A learning assistant is also a requirement in the operation of a nurture group and schools deploy from their own allocation for this purpose. Training of new nurture group staff is offered annually by the Psychological Service and followed up throughout the year via nurture twilight sessions where themes are selected for discussion and good practice is shared.

The need for nurture groups operating within WDC continues to be high as evidenced in the initial completion of Boxall profiles and Strength and Difficulty Questionnaires (SDQs) all of which indicate scores in the out of the normal range. In addition the Chief Medical Officers (CMO) report from 2012 highlights the strong links between mental health problems and social disadvantage, with children and young people from the poorest households being three times more likely to have mental health problems than those growing up in better-off homes. If nurture groups can make a positive impact on social and emotional functioning in the early stages it would be hoped that this may serve as a protective factor for children growing up in households where poverty, addiction and adult mental health difficulties are a feature.

Between 2011 and 2014 the social and emotional functioning of three cohorts of WDC children attending nurture groups, alongside a control group, were tracked through the use of SDQs. This measure, which comprises of a teacher and parent version (pupil

version available for upper primary stages) is used widely internationally (Croft, Stride, Maughan and Rowe, 2015) and most recently is the tool completed by parents as part of the 30 month developmental assessment. Over the 2014 to 2015 session, a new cohort of pupils were tracked to monitor the impact of nurture provision on the children's emotional, social, behavioural and attention difficulties. Fifty-four children are now being tracked through teachers returning SDQs and of those children, 33 parents returned both SDQs. This new cohort will form the focus of study over coming years and will be supplemented by the addition of a control group. The change in the cohort of study has arisen due to changes in the amount of time allocated to nurture making comparisons year on year difficult.

Impact of nurture groups in WDC

Detailed reports summarising the data gathered since 2011 are available as an annex to this summary report. The key points as listed below are a summary of the key findings to emerge from this evaluation data.

Key findings:

Evaluation data has been collected on the impact of nurture groups via teacher, and where possible, parental completion of SDQs at 2 time points in a school year: before a child starts nurture and in May of each year. This data has been shared with the Psychological Service who have scored and analysed the questionnaires and reported on findings at an authority and individual school level. Three main sources of data have been drawn on for this report: (1) report of evaluation data 2011-14; (2) report of evaluation data 2014-15; (3) staff questionnaire completed in March 2015.

The cohort followed from 2011-2014 showed:
- A positive impact of nurture group attendance as evidenced in improvements in lower levels of stress, emotional distress, behavioural and social difficulties.
- Improvements noted in levels of stress, emotional distress, behavioural and social difficulties were maintained over time.
- Pupils who attended nurture groups also showed improvement in their pro-social behaviour which again was maintained over time.

- The scores on the SDQ indicate that, relative to a control group (note however that the control group was small), children who had attended a nurture group made greater improvements overall in terms of their behavioural difficulties which were now having a less notably impact in school.
- Overall, improvements were most apparent in social, attentional and behavioural difficulties as well as stress.
- Pupils who attended nurture groups with the largest number of sessions showed greater improvements over the first year.

From the cohort followed during school session 2014-15, results showed:

- Teachers reported the pupils in nurture settings exhibited lower levels of overall stress, attention difficulties, peer difficulties and that children demonstrated more kind and helpful behaviour at the end of the school year after attending nurture.
- Teachers also reported that any difficulties the children had were having less impact on their school life and learning at the end of the year compared to the start of the year.
- Parents reported that their child had fewer hyperactive and attention difficulties and the impact of any difficulties were less following the year in nurture. On the other scales measured, parents either reported a very minor change or none at all.

Staff questionnaire completed in March 2015:

In March 2015 a survey was undertaken of all staff in schools operating a nurture group. The impetus for the survey arose from the nurture twilight sessions at which self-evaluation and using data more effectively to plan next steps was a theme. In collaboration with nurture group practitioners, a questionnaire survey was devised and responsibility for its completion taken by nurture practitioners in each of the 8 schools. This led to a high response rate from both teaching and non-teaching staff (122 responses in total). Key findings from this survey reveal:

- Over 80% of staff reported that they felt their nurture group was effective at maintaining inclusion and commented that nurture was an important factor in ensuring certain children were able to remain in their mainstream school.

- Staff also commented that they hoped their current provision for nurture was able to continue and if possible to be extended to allow more children to benefit, notably beyond early level.

- Staff commonly requested further training or information either through a twilight session which would include all staff or through discussion with the nurture teacher. Many staff reported they would like to observe a nurture lesson and given time, possibly team teach with the nurture teacher.

Summary and next steps

Nurture groups operate within 8 primary schools across WDC with evaluation data demonstrating their impact on the social and emotional functioning of children who attend. Improvements are noted by both teachers and parents particularly the former. Staff in schools which operate nurture groups comment on the positive impact that they believe nurture groups to be having on their most vulnerable children and are increasingly interested in how older children might be supported by the approach.

Conclusion

The operation of nurture groups is not without its challenges particularly within the current economic climate. However, given the clear national agenda of inclusion and closing the attainment gap, nurture groups offer a mechanism by which some of WDC's most vulnerable children can be supported. Nurture groups have been shown to improve social and emotional functioning, attainment in literacy as well as impact on wider school factors - improved school ethos (Binnie and Allan, 2008), reduced staff turnover and absence, better behaviour management practices, fewer permanent exclusions and better attendance (Sanders, 2007). Nurture groups should be seen within the continuum of support on offer to pupils with social and emotional behavioural issues that yield the most effective results when supported by a nurturing

school ethos. They aim to support the most vulnerable children whose early attachment histories make trusting adults and settling to learn a significant challenge. Schools and what they do can make a difference. "The effects of disadvantage in the early years can be countered by high-quality services. Hence, thought needs to be given not only to *what* services are provided but *how* they are delivered….. emerging data from Glasgow that children from the most affluent families have more favourable trajectories than other children, but also importantly that primary schools do appear to have effects on these trajectories independent of other factors" (HIEY, 2014 Glasgow Centre for Population Health) calls us to look closer at what primary schools are delivering particularly those that seem to be bucking a trend. There is a need for high quality data and systems to monitor impact of initiatives aimed at closing the attainment gap and within the WDC context this should include a more thorough analysis of the impact of nurture groups on attainment and wider school factors. Parental involvement needs to also be considered.   Many of our nurture groups have developed strong positive parental links but there is no doubt that this can be improved upon specifically if closer links are established with the range of additional support available to parents across WDC.

Targets set for CPPs by Scottish Government include that 90% of children should reach the milestones expected for their age and developmental stage on entry to school calls us to look earlier than entry to school for improvements. Nurture groups continue to have an important place within the formal education system but there is a clear need to make sure that the early years' experience for children and their families also addresses the complex emotional needs that we know children face. Glasgow City Council have been piloting the introduction of nurture corners to some of their early years establishments with early evaluation data showing promise (Stephen, Stone, Burgess, Daniel and Smith, 2014) but with on-going adjustments to be made. The on-going challenge for nurture groups within WDC will be to ensure that they continue to target those in most need and that high quality approaches are taken to tracking and monitoring their impact on attainment. This may lead to questions about whether the location of the current groups continues to be appropriate and whether there is a need to consider groups for pupils at the upper stages of primary. What remains clear

however is that there is a need for nurture groups within WDC and that there is clear evidence of the effectiveness of such an approach.

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