

“Nurture Groups” in primary schools as a means of supporting at risk students in the school environment.

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Executive Summary

Nurture groups have been in place in the UK since the 1960's, there are now well over 1000 groups all over the UK often in areas of significant social deprivation. They aim to help children at risk of failure in mainstream education learn and become an active member of the mainstream environment by identifying and addressing any developmental, social or academic needs which prevent them from engaging positively in the normal classroom environment. The writer's exposure to the Nurture Groups concept began in 2007 through the Brainwave Trust and later upon further investigation when they undertook some initial training in 2008. Having undertaken all the reading and theory around the concept the writer chose to see the groups in action.

Concern is now being widely expressed in New Zealand about the increasing number of vulnerable and at risk students entering into schools who require considerably more support to succeed positively in the classroom and school environment than is reasonably able to be provided by classroom teachers. The deficits for these children show increasingly over their time at school as their issues and behaviours start to impact more significantly on the learning of others as the gap between them and their peers increases.

Time was spent in nurture group environments meeting with students and staff who worked within this environment and also with staff who were able to comment on the impact of the groups within their schools. Information gathered is largely anecdotal based on practitioners experience but is overwhelmingly supportive of the impact Nurture Groups can have on successfully engaging at risk students in mainstream education settings whilst benefiting the whole school and learning environment.

Purpose

The key investigative questions for this inquiry were;

1. How do we support and keep students who, through no fault of their own, have had damaging life experiences which have affected their social development, behaviour and relationships and their attachments with adults in mainstream schools and engagement in learning?
2. Can we provide an environment or structure within a school which supports these students to be successfully learning in a mainstream school environment? What are the essential and fundamental components.?
3. Are Nurture Groups a model that could be applied in the New Zealand School setting?

Doing well at school is an important factor for the healthy development of children and young people. For over thirty years nurture groups have been demonstrating that with the right help children who present emotional and behavioural difficulties can be successfully included in mainstream school. Nurture groups provide a safe and nurturing learning environment where each child is valued, understood and has their emotional needs met appropriately. They offer an experience of adults through which trust and confidence are built and learning begins to take place. “

Nurture Group Network website

www.nurturegroups.org

Rationale and Background

There has been an ongoing dissatisfaction and frustration with the ability of schools to meet the needs of emotionally needy, disturbed and distressed students within the present structures within the school environment. There are increasing numbers of students who from an early age have no strong attachments in their lives. Therefore they have reduced ability or desire to trust adults or others. There is a growing need to address the needs of these individuals and intervene at an early age. Many at risk students go through their schooling intermittently disengaged to be finally stood down, suspended or excluded where they are simply shipped around from school to school. When this happens they decrease the ability to regain confidence, trust or strong relationships. An environment is required which allows them to overcome their undeveloped or negative behaviour and support them to begin to engage effectively a school setting. These students need early, timely and nurturing intervention within a school environment. Students who feel safe and supported will naturally have a more positive attitude to school, their teachers, their peers and their learning.

This view is based on the writer's personal experience as a principal for 13 years, 5 years in a decile 1 school, and 9 years in their present decile 7 school where despite the substantial difference in decile rating the same patterns are emerging.

The rising levels of stand downs, suspensions and exclusions, the marked increase in younger children exhibiting challenging and concerning behaviour at an earlier age and the minimal ability to support this within what is an under resourced inclusive environment is a huge challenge. The local Ministry Office has met with Principals in the South Canterbury area expressing their concerns for the high number of stand downs and suspensions, seeking principals input into solutions for intervention to prevent this. It needs to be noted this statistics are not significantly different to other small urban areas in New Zealand. Within these meetings there is a strong view and expectation that Principals should be keeping these students within the school environment to prevent them from becoming disassociated from a school. I contest the only way to successfully do this is to provide a structure such as a Nurture group within the school. These students are therefore able to be supported, managed and potentially learning within an environment that is set up to meet their needs with reduced impact on other students and staff. These students are able to experience success in the mainstream environment whilst they develop the skills and behaviours to engage in an increasingly positive way in the mainstream. This of course comes at a cost. The cost now however would be significantly less than later in these individuals' lives when research suggests that disengagement from school is a huge cost to government in social development later. "Classroom to Prison Cell" by Alison Sutherland captures many examples of this, "from the mouths of our young criminals".

Exposure to the concept of Nurture Groups early in 2007 through the Brainwave Trust, led the writer to explore this further. The writer then attended a Nurture Group training programme run by Nurture Group Facilitators and Trainers from the UK in Christchurch in 2008.

What is a Nurture Group?

Nurture groups provide a carefully routined day, where there is a balance of learning and teaching, affection and structure within a home-like atmosphere.

Nurture groups are classes of between eight and twelve children, usually in a mainstream primary school, although they have successfully worked in Secondary schools, supported by the whole staff group and by parents. The groups function well across a two-year age band and it makes sense to start as early as possible. They are run during school time but in a room with soft furnishings and cooking facilities. The children share food around a table together at some stage of the day which gives them important opportunities for learning to relate to others.

Nurture groups always have two members of staff; this may be a teacher and a teacher aide. The children spend a substantial part of each week in the group but remain part of their mainstream class, joining the other students daily for planned activities, particularly areas where they are successful. Children are expected to use the group for a short time – usually less than one year – gradually spending increased periods in the mainstream as they are more able to cope.

Nurture groups provide a small, emotionally secure setting in a specially furnished classroom where staff model a supportive relationship, make the child feel accepted and valued, and teach in a way and at a level that the child can accept. The child goes through learning experiences they have missed. The aim is for the child to build trusting relationships with

reliable and consistent adults and with their peer group establishing a foundation for healthy emotional development, enhancing their self- confidence and their ability to take responsibility for their own behaviour, all of which should increase their chance of educational success.

Repeated and consistent daily routines, using language to learn to express feelings rather than acting them out, use of names and eye contact, reminders about saying please and thank you not just to observe niceties but to encourage interaction to promote sharing and taking turns, are each integral parts of the nurture group experience. The educational and therapeutic value of ordinary experiences in a safe and contained environment is the basis of the nurture group work.

Relationships in the group are warm and affirming, with an emphasis on talking and listening. Rules are discussed with the children, who are made aware of the consequences of behavioural choices rather than punished for them. Feelings and behaviour are talked about, and children are helped to see themselves as valued members of the group, and to know that they will feel better if they join in constructively.

The overall aim of nurture groups is to provide the necessary developmental and formal experiences to enable children to overcome their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in order for them to return to work with their mainstream class at a level appropriate to their age. The focus is on helping children to develop secure and trusting relationships with adults in the group. By identifying the developmental needs of children and effective early intervention there are long term benefits.

Philosophies behind Nurture Groups

- Attachment theory – behaviour and learning can be affected if early attachment has been disrupted, distorted or incomplete.
- Psychodynamic theory – what we see is behaviour but it is based on the unseen needs, thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs
- Behaviourism – behaviour can be learned and taught

Nurture Groups are based on the following six principles

1. Children's 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 children's lives.

Inclusion

Schools with nurture groups are inclusive, Working in the school with a nurture group means there is a recognition of what inclusion means. All staff work towards children's full inclusion into mainstream classes. Children are still on their mainstream class roll and stay on there while in the nurture group. Class teachers are still responsible for the children's progress so planning in both the nurture group and mainstream class is collaborative to meet the students' needs.

Who is the Nurture Group child?

Satisfactory emotional, social and cognitive development in the earliest years is the product of adequate and attentive early nurturing care. Missing this children are unable to engage with normal age-appropriate school demands. Children can miss this crucial development and nurturing for many and varied reasons. A child who would benefit from nurture group is someone who;

- has been denied a close and trusting relationship with a responsive parent/carer
- is unable to engage in learning / cannot listen
- is not ready to share/take turns
- is unwilling to trust or take risks
- has had negative early learning experiences
- doesn't know any better.

The focus of the nurture group work is always on the individual and the particular needs of each child in the group. Careful consideration is given to who would benefit the most from the group and the composition. This is based on an assessment tool called a Boxall Profile.

What is a Boxall?

The Boxall Profile is a tool for structured observation of children in the classroom. It provides a means of assessing areas of difficulty in emotional and behavioural function highlighting areas for interventions for children.

It consists of two sections; a developmental strand and diagnostic strand.

The **developmental strand** reveals how the child has gone through early learning processes and as a result how well they have organised experiences and internalized controls, and how these influence their ability to learn.

The **diagnostic strand** identifies behaviours which interfere with satisfactory involvement in school and suggests the basis of this behaviour.

The scoring results in three groups;

self-limiting – isolated, uninvolved and almost non-functioning;

underdeveloped behaviour with unmet emotional needs and;

unsupported development – children who have had adverse life experiences that they avoid emotional attachment, have internalized a view of the world as hostile and react with self-hate, with hostility to others and sometimes rage.

Methodology

The writer chose to investigate and visit schools both in New Zealand and in the United Kingdom to gain first hand knowledge of current best practice in the use of the Nurture Group concept. The writer's Board of Trustees, the disciplinary committee in particular, was very keen for their principal to seek further information. They were motivated by strong interest in seeing schools intervene to prevent students getting to the stage where their actions were impacting so significantly on the learning and safety of others that they are putting their future schooling at risk.

The writer chose to

- Travel to the UK, visiting Schools with Nurture groups in England, Scotland and Wales. Spending time in schools observing meeting with key personnel and

exploring documentation. Visit schools in UK with Nurture Groups operating and review current research and their existing data, England, Scotland, Wales.

- Spend time observing, discussing and interacting with personnel involved in Nurture groups and variations of these in New Zealand.

Findings

Six schools with operating Nurture groups were visited in the UK . The following is a summary of the notable features, findings and observations from these visits. An attempt has been made not to repeat information similar to each school but identify differences and variations.

School 1

This first school visited provided substantial insight into the whole operation of Nurture groups. This school, in Swansea, Wales had been operating Nurture Groups for many years initially funded through Education Authority funding through an amalgamation of schools and an enhanced budget but then largely having to secure funding themselves. Until recently they had operated two different key stages of Nurture group (from 3- 7 years old and then from 7- 9 years olds) but have found over time the need for the second group was redundant due to the intervention of the first group. As new students entered the school who presented with issues they were able to accommodate them within the nurturing school environment and with mentoring.

The school culture was a notable feature of all the schools and it was widely accepted by the whole staff that there was a Nurturing culture within the school. Several people in this school had undertaken the training in Nurture Group philosophy and all were involved in the overview of the programme. The school also conducted their own training.

The nurture group operated part time with 4 mornings during the week and fifth morning being used to observe the students in their mainstream classroom. It was being run by a trained teacher and a learning assistant (similar to a Grade B Teacher Aide) , both had undertaken Nurture group training. The leadership within the school felt that the personnel running the Nurture group was a crucial factor, their relationship and the composition of the group needed to be given high priority ensuring a balance and the provision of effective role models. Initially the teachers were trying to link in with class planning but found this was not always practical so had to change this to be more student focused whilst trying to link in some content areas.

The school had a practice of using the Boxall Profile to assess all children in the school and was tracking this over time. This information was providing a useful profile for the school and also used to make the most effective selections for the Nurture groups. The school felt that the Nurture group was an essential component of their school and found that over a period of years it had had a huge positive impact on the culture of the school. The staff were both proud and pleased with what was being achieved with individuals who had had very vulnerable starts to school. Students stayed in the nurture group for a maximum of 4 terms. It was felt that there was a need for additional outside intervention if there had not been sufficient progress.

The school felt that getting parents on board was a challenge and the success of the nurture group intervention usually increased this as parents saw the benefit to their child. Initially they invited parents in and showed videos of children before proper nurture intervention and then

started talking about nurture. It was acknowledged it did need to be handled sensitively however generally parents were delighted that the school might have something that helped them at home also. The passion and commitment of the school and staff involved was a significant factor here with all seeing the benefits gained and therefore prepared to see it as a funding priority.

School 2

School 2 was in Neyland, Wales. The group (only boys at this time) was run by a Higher Learning Teacher Assistant (an untrained teacher in New Zealand terms) and a Learning Assistant. Whilst not recognized as a trained teacher this person had exceptional skill level and was also an affordable option for the school. It was extremely well supported by a psychologist who was employed by the Local Education Authority (LEA) to support nurture group initiatives.

The whole school staff had received training in Nurture philosophy including the “Dinner ladies” and governors. The nurturing principles were highly evident across the school and it was indeed a pleasure to be immersed in this inclusive and supportive environment. Each staff member was required to, and had agreed to, adopt a nurturing target as part of their appraisal process and all staff were expected to undertake Boxall profile assessments.

The Nurture group was also part time and catered for year 2-4 or 6-9 year olds. It was a very strong feature of school development and well supported financially and socially by the local community. There were very high behavioural expectations in this group and this was seen in the most very basic routine behaviour such as entering the room. This set the tone.

Transition to and from the Nurture group was a priority and the school utilized a re-integration scale before beginning the transition out of the Nurture group. Extensive portfolios were provided with all students having their own individual plan and goal setting procedures. There was strong link between the mainstream class and the nurture group to support the development of these identified goals.

The school had given careful thought to how to bring parents on board and had prepared scripts for initial contact as well as supporting materials to provide more information. As part of the transition process students were encouraged to bring a friend and the result was many students wanting to be part of the group. It was viewed as a very positive place to be, students wanting to join “Nurture”.

Of note in Wales there are specialist teacher facilities for physical disabilities and units attached to schools even with this level of mainstreaming. They also operate Pupil Referral units for excluded pupils, this was not viewed positively by the schools visited as they felt it simply meant disaffected students were placed in a punitive environment. The LEA has conducted outside audits as to the effectiveness of the Nurture groups with a positive outcome. Whilst the LEA no longer supports it financially it does provide an advisory and support role to support schools. This is seen as recognition of the value being added by the nurture groups to schools and students in the absence of other funding.

School 3

The third school visited was in Hampshire, England and operated 5 mornings a week for the core nurture group. There were other groups put in place from time to time to meet specific needs in the afternoon. This group coincidentally only consisted of boys and was highly hands-on activity based due to the nature of the individuals. The teacher felt that there was a need to have access to many toys, blocks, train sets and games etc.. that reinforce interaction but also allow the children things they can have regular access to and learn to value and respect. It was felt many children have not had the opportunity to develop care for or attachment for things due to their home circumstances, such was the level of transience in their lives.

The programme was largely aligned with the mainstream classroom content but focused on the individual learning needs of the individuals. Students were identified by their presenting behaviour in class and Boxall were undertaken. The group was run by a New Zealand Teacher trained in Nurture in the UK. She felt it important to state that there was need to ensure that a nurture group was not a dumping ground, sin-bin or behaviour unit and the school culture was extremely important to maintain or it could easily be misunderstood.

Location within the school was an obvious feature here as it had access to an extensive playground and outlook as well as being placed in a central location within the school. Students arrived early before school to the Nurture group – enjoyed a cup of tea and a chat with the teacher before school. This had become a very important way of beginning the day, they would then leave in time to go to their mainstream class and then return once collected from this class. It was clear these students saw the Nurture Room as a reliable, safe and secure place where they felt they belonged. As a result of this the students shared openly about what was worrying them and gained support from others. An example was where one student was deeply concerned that he had to do his SATs assessment that morning in Maths and stated,

“ I don’t want to do it Miss, I am no good at Maths, Miss and won’t do any good”. The teacher was able to boost the child along and encourage him to do his best and attempt to put in a more positive frame of mind.

From time to time some students would arrive at the nurture room if it was felt the classroom activity was going to cause a problem for an individual student i.e. tests or exams. Whilst this appeared to be an accepted practice from staff it was highly likely that the dynamics of the group were affected as observed on one occasion. This highlighted the need for all students to be prepared for transition and clear processes in place about why and when this would happen – otherwise it could become “a dumping ground”.

Reintegration meetings and transition plans were prepared jointly with the Nurture group personnel and the Mainstream class teacher taking into consideration the students needs. The need for good and regular communication between all the professionals involved was restated in all schools, systems were essential or learning was not successfully supported or transferred.

Funding for Group was initially provided by a government initiative, but was to be ending within the next three months. The teacher was concerned that as yet the school had been unable to gain any further source of funding but they were hopeful that there would be some form of reprieve.

School 4

The fourth School visited was in Hampshire and at Foundation 1 level with 5-6 year old children. It operated 3 afternoons week and was strongly literacy and developmental based. There was much focus on modeling and discussing feelings. Communication with the mainstream class was seen as integral and the group was run by the school SENCO and a learning assistant. The funding for this had been achieved by focusing the SENCO's time in this area and it was felt that the intervention at this level was reducing issues which previously would have had to be addressed further through the school by the SENCO and other additional staff and support agencies.

School 5

This school in West Lothian, Scotland operated a Nurture group part time four mornings a week. As well as similar features to the other groups visited it also incorporated a Music therapy session each week with The Local Education Music Therapist. This was an experience to be seen with students using music as very effective means of communication and expression. The school was also well supported by local network of nurture groups who met regularly to share ideas and practice. This nurture group was funded through additional staffing provided by the school taking on a probationer teacher. This allowed them sufficient release time to support the programme. A similar system of supernumerary teachers was provided in the early 90's in New Zealand when there was glut of teachers.

School 6

This school had two groups operating concurrently run by two different sets of personnel. The additional group had been provided by employment of a probationer as in the previous school. Time spent in this school gave the writer the impression that nurture groups were just the what we have always done here and would always continue to do. The school was clearly a very nurturing school in all aspects of its culture. The school assembly attended was an excellent demonstration of this.

School Commonalities

There were common characteristics and features of each group where the content and structure were similar, following nurture principles.

1. Priority was placed on consistent routines and expectations.
2. Taking part in sharing food was important. This was an opportunity to reinforce the very important basic skills of taking turns, sharing, waiting patiently and eating etiquette. Breakfast or Snack time was provided – an opportunity to sit together at a table following a family –like meal time procedure were seen as important to relax and share with others over food. Kitchen duties –roles and responsibilities were developed and monitored, as one would expect at home.
3. Sensory, practical, hands-on, table- top activities were essential to reinforce social and emotional skills.
4. Relaxation and teaching students how to relax was built into the daily routine.
5. Circle time, talking time – or a time to share thoughts and feelings and work through these were part of the regular day.
6. Many opportunities would be provided for group and individual activities and foci.

7. Strategies were modeled and taught to manage behaviour and emotions and plans put in place so students could identify safe places and appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. There were clear and strong behaviour management processes.
8. Record keeping and communication were essential between the mainstream class and the nurture group personnel so that timely interaction and intervention was provided.
9. The nurture group was seen as a positive opportunity rather than a stigma or implication of a deficit. It was a privilege.
10. The importance of having a school-wide commitment to nurturing principles.
“Persuading hearts and minds of staff, boards and parents of the benefits is the way to sustain it within the school”. “Prove that it works. “
11. A support network is essential as is extremely demanding emotionally draining work.
12. The physical placement of the nurture group within the school is important, as is the physical environment. It needs to be central, integral, welcoming and homely.
13. Transitions between nurture group and mainstream classes need to be monitored and re-integration carefully planned for.
14. The quality, training and commitment of the personnel has a substantial impact on the success of the nurture group programme. Not all teachers would necessarily make good nurture group teachers. These teachers need to have an empathy and affinity to persevere with some challenging situations, be resilient and willing to give a lot of their own personality to the role. The inter-personal interaction which occurs between and with the students was crucial.
15. Composition and balance of the nurture group needs careful consideration.
16. Success observed by parents further engages their interest and ability to support their child.

Ongoing Support Available for Nurture Groups

In addition to visiting these schools the writer also had the opportunity to meet with a psychologist and members of a Nurture Group Network. This provided a valuable insight into the commonalities of the groups but also recognized the need to provide mentoring, outside support and supervision for the personnel involved.

Conclusions and Considerations

Clearly the value of Nurture groups continues to be recognized by schools who continue to seek funding to operate them in the UK. I contest it is also an approach that can be utilized in New Zealand to allow at risk students more success and also reduce the level of disruption to mainstream classes. For this to occur however the first step is to develop sincere nurturing cultures within schools, committed to focusing on supporting children and their behaviour in a nurturing way. This will also have huge benefit for school tone and culture. Research has shown that knowledge and awareness of nurturing principles can enhance teachers' behaviour management practice, as it encourages staff to adapt their teaching approaches to engage children more actively in their learning (Sanders 2007 cited in Llyod 2007) Schools need to be committed to the implementation of nurturing principles within normal mainstream practices in order for the development of a nurturing school to be successful (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000).

It is the writer's intention to where possible, implement the practices seen. The writer is very keen to work with other professionals, school and agencies to see these practices placed within schools to support at risk students to prevent later disengagement and therefore a future

cost to society as a whole. The writer is happy to be contacted for further information at jmc@waimataitai.school.nz.

And Finally

The opportunity for this sabbatical has benefited the writer both professionally and personally. It has provided the opportunity;

- for personal and professional refreshment, research, reading and reflection.
- to investigate, observe and discuss programmes and strategies being used by schools
- to develop an information base for the further development of policy and practice for our students.
- to visit a range of schools giving them the opportunity to discuss and evaluate what other schools are doing.
- to access and examine information with the hope of strengthening the quality of leadership the writer can offer their staff and school in supporting at risk students in the school environment.
- Enabled the writer the opportunity to provide a basis for sharing valid information with local schools who have all expressed concern at the number of students being stood down and suspended in our local area., with the view to looking at exploring possible support systems for these students within the school environment.

The writer is grateful that they were afforded this opportunity and recommend this practice as a way of supporting and enhancing the education profession, it challenges the thinking of the individual engaged in the sabbatical as well those they undertake to work with , this is surely beneficial for all.

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