Primary Principal's Sabbatical Report
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Term 2 2014

Supporting Students with Severe Behaviour

To develop their ability to Self Regulate their Behaviour

There-by increasing School Engagement.

"The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change." (Bruce Perry, The Boy who was raised as a Dog).

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical was to further develop our school approach to supporting students to develop their ability to self regulate behaviour there by increasing school engagement.

Through opportunities to read, research and interview other professionals I wanted to use this information to consider how we could extend our Nurture Group approach that had been in place since 2010.

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Inclusive education places an emphasis on schools to adapt the curriculum and their approach to meet the needs of diverse learners – including students with challenging and disruptive behaviours.

Schools are increasingly facing the challenge of meeting the learning, social and emotional needs of disturbed and distressed students. These students may have experienced a lack of nurture in the crucial early years of their lives and not formed strong attachments. It has been suggested that poor nurturing experiences in their early years and lack of bonding with a significant adult result in poor attachments and an inability to thrive emotionally.

The outcome is that these children find the social, emotional and intellectual demands of school challenging. These students have difficulty trusting others. They are the group of students who become disengaged and may be stood down or ultimately excluded and begin a "merry go round" of schools where the same pattern is repeated.

An approach to successfully meeting the needs of these students needs to draw heavily on a relationship approach that considers research on the importance of nurturing, social and emotional skills and attachment. A holistic approach that reflects an understanding of the trauma these children may have experienced is necessary.

Graphically represented, students we are working with intensively "fit" into the top of the triangle.

INTENSIVE

-5%

TARGETED

-15%

WHOLE
SCHOOL

-80% of students
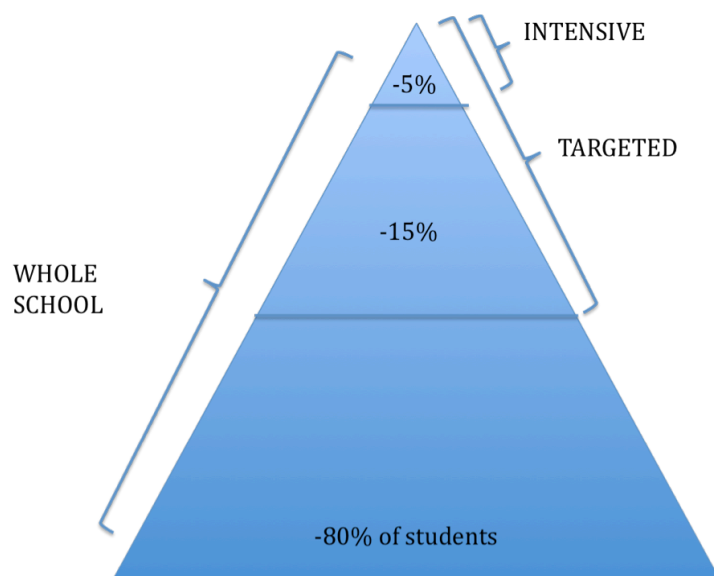
Typically these students may exhibit severe behaviours. Their school engagement can be characterised by regular patterns of antisocial or aggressive conduct, which is persistent and repetitive.

Church (2003) found that in order to prevent antisocial children growing up to become antisocial adults it is desirable that children are identified as early as possible. Interventions that focused on the need to practice responding in pro social ways to the behaviour of other people, developing trusting relationships and how other people react to behaviour is important, and the need to learn and practice age appropriate social skills was crucial.

Inabilities to self regulate emotional and social interactions disrupts student learning. Students with these severe behaviours present challenges to schools as their behaviour can interfere with their own learning as well as affecting the learning of others, and disrupts the work of the classroom on an ongoing basis.

Such behaviours include:
- Violent physical aggression towards other students and teachers
- Ongoing and offensive verbal abuse
- Refusal to take part in classroom activities
- Shouting, bullying and disrupting the classroom and not responding to efforts to regulate their behaviour
- Throwing books, chairs and desks
- Destroying their own work and the work of others
- Kicking, punching, biting
- Non compliance
- Truancy
- Absconding
- Withdrawing

Students presenting with such behaviours often have highly complex and challenging behaviour and social and emotional needs. They do not seem to

respond to "tried and true" behaviour management that can work well with other students.

Often they are the students who have been stood down, suspended or even excluded. Dealing with the needs and challenges of these students becomes difficult for teachers, principals and Boards. There is feeling that schools are becoming less able or effective in meeting the complex needs or dealing with the repeated aggressive, disturbing and disruptive behaviour of these students.

What we now know that these students may not be "naughty" but may have been "wired" differently in their early years. When we refer to trauma it is not the one off traumatic occurrences (which can have an impact) but trauma that has been ongoing and persistent. This type of trauma may occur when a power relationship is abused.

The importance of addressing severe behaviour in children reflects the significant influence emotional and social competence has on the impact of a child's ability to learn. Derivedi (2004) suggest that learning is unlikely to happen when children are deregulated, feel unsafe or not accepted by other children or adults. In order to be involved in learning children need to be calm and feel secure in their attachment to significant adults. Neuro science research indicates that for students to engage the "thinking" part of their brain (cortex) they need to be calm.

Maslow (1970) in his model suggests that our emotional needs are arranged in a hierarchy and considers self-esteem as necessary if emotional competence is to develop. It would seem that addressing the emotional and social needs of students with severe behaviour is needed before learning can take place.

Post and Forbes (2010) suggest that rather than just addressing the symptoms of behavioural change, efforts must be directed toward addressing the underlying causes, therefore bringing about change.

Their thinking is summed up by "scared children do scary things". This response arises out of a stress response. In times of stress, thinking processes become confused and distorted. When children become highly stressed or threatened they are not capable of making rational or clear decisions. Traditionally we have seen children as being disobedient, manipulative or oppositional. What can happen as they enter this state is their thinking is constricted and "short circuits their short term memory" – they retreat into survival mode. "I am being threatened, what has worked in the past for me to survive – flight, fight, freeze".

In considering our approach to meeting the needs of these students we need to consider research around brain development, attachment and the effect of trauma and integrate this understanding into a therapeutic approach.

If the world is a safe, predictable and the child is part of a world that presents enriched (relational and cognitive) opportunities it is likely the child will grow to be self-regulated. Conversely if the child's world is chaotic, threatening and lacking in nurture and supportive relationships a child may become aggressive in attitude and have difficulties with relationships.

A variety of solutions to address student severe behaviour and increased engagement at school have been offered.

One approach used in the United Kingdom has been Nurture Groups. This concept seeks to enable a child who has had disrupted development to form an attachment to a significant adult, developing social skills and form relationships from the care and empathy that the adults show. Boxall (2002) claims that providing a stable and safe physical and emotional environment with a low teacher pupil ratio can have a significant positive effect on students who display deregulated behaviour due to early trauma or "attachment issues".

It has been suggested that a lack of attachment to a significant adult/caregiver at an early age inhibits a child from developing emotional

security (Bowlby, 1992, Rolfe, 2004). Bowlby suggested that children need an attachment to a parent/caregiver, without this attachment they can be affected in their development – physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially.

Subsequently they can have difficulty forming stable relationships and regulating their behaviour.

The Nurture Group is a small group of students (between 8-12 students) who have emotional and behaviour difficulties and cause severe disruption to their mainstream class.

The Group operates within a school with students spending time connected to their "mainstream class". The nurture class is staffed a teacher and teaching assistants (teacher aides) who model appropriate social and emotional interactions.

Nurture groups have operated in the United Kingdom since 1970. Boxall (2002) suggests that the Nurture Group provides a safe environment with predictable routines and expectations. Experiences are broad based and developmentally appropriate. The importance of social play is recognised along carefully planned learning opportunities. The physical environment is organized to provide a more "home like" atmosphere. The preparation and sharing of food is an important social experience. Primarily the development of trusting relationships with the adults is crucial for the child.

Nurture Groups are an approach to inclusive education. They support students with social, emotional and behavioural problems. There is evidence that points to the positive outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

In a New Zealand setting there appears no consistent adoption of a Nurture group approach.

We have attempted to use a Nurture Group approach at Highfield School since 2010. One of the aims of this report is to consider how closely we are following the UK model and what improvements we could make to our approach.

Trauma, Attachment and Brain Development

When considering the complex and severe challenging behaviours presented by these students we need to consider our understanding of brain development, attachment theory and trauma theory.

In the early years of life a child's brain organizes to reflect their environment.
Early life can determine how potential is expressed or not. A child is most likely to reach full potential if he/she experiences consistent, predictable, enriched and stimulating interactions in a context of nurturing relationships
In the early years, as brain development occurs, children are vulnerable to negative experiences, inappropriate or abusive care giving, and a lack of nurture. They may experience relational poor environments, stress, fear and physical threat

Adverse effects could be associated with stressed, inexperienced, ill-informed or isolated caregivers, parental substance abuse, social isolation or family violence. Continued exposure to such events is more of a problem than episcopal exposure. Children exposed to these events will develop an adaptive response to threat. When a child is exposed to a threat his/her brain will adapt a set of adaptive responses. Some children will use a hyper arousal response (e.g. fight or flight). Some children will adopt a dissociate response (tuning out to impending crises or threat).

A child adopting a hyper arousal response can be seen as defiant which can be interpreted as willful opposition – these children may be resistant or aggressive, they can be hyper vigilant, anxious, and in a state of fight or flight

Children in this state will often display hyper vigilance, anxiety or panic. Those children who display a dissociative response may withdraw. They can be compliant display self soothing (e.g. rocking)

Perry (2002) would suggest that a child with a brain adapted for an environment of chaos, unpredictability, threat and distress is not well suited to a classroom or playground. Adaptive responses that help the child survive and cope in a chaotic environment puts them at a disadvantage. Even when there is no external threat they are in a state of "fight or flight".

Traumatized children may have less capacity to tolerate the demands and stress of school. When faced with a challenge, resilient children are likely to stay calm or slightly anxious. Those children who are vulnerable with high state of fear or terror often do not. When an event occurs such as an argument with a peer or adult, a challenging school task, vulnerable students can escalate their behaviour very quickly.

Fear changes the way we think. Children in a state of fear process information from the world differently than children who feel calm. In a state of calm, we use the higher more complex parts of our brain to process and act on information. If in a state of deregulation we use the lower more primitive parts of our brain. As the level of threat goes up the less thoughtful and reactive our response becomes. Actions are governed by emotional and reactive thinking. Often the traumatized child lives in aroused state not prepared to learn from social, emotional and other life experiences. They live from minute to minute and do not consider the consequences of their actions

Howard (2013) states that students in a calm healthy state interact within a school context mostly with their cortex – this is the part of the brain that is working hardest. When they experience a little bit of stress some brain activity may shift to inner parts of the brain or lower parts of the brain to deal with that but these parts of the brain will have healthy connects to the cortex. Mostly they will be able to manage the ups and downs of a school day or a normal

day in their lives – they might need a little bit of help but mostly they will be cope.

Children who suffer from disorganized attachment and trauma history tend to have very sensitive strong flight, fight and freeze responses. They present with disinhibited behaviours or inhibited withdrawal behaviours and their neural pathways have been sensitized to a fear response. Often it will not take much for the fear/survival response to kick in. When they are fearful or stressed they will rely on their emotional brain or in some cases their brain stem (especially if they are in terror mode) and less and less reliant on the cortex.

When children get into this deregulated state you can't talk logically to them. Students need to be calm to engage the "thinking part of their brain – the cortex. In this state they will be purely reflexive. What we tend to see is the flight, fight, freeze responses – hyper arousal is the in you face behaviour – the aggressive behaviour such as the hitting, kicking, swearing, punching, knocking over furniture, throwing things or yelling. Students might abscond from the classroom or school grounds. The hypo arousal state is the freeze response these children will disassociate and withdraw as a response to a challenging situation.

Generally the children with these severe behaviours may have experienced trauma along the moderate to severe range. What is likely that for most of these children the earliest trauma experienced consequently have been overlaid with more traumas.

Examples of childhood trauma:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Adoption

- Automobile accident
- Pre and perinatal trauma
- Loss of caregiver
- Depressed parental care
- Prolonged experience of unmet need

- Foster care
- Frequent moves

- Bullying
- Domestic violence
- Medical trauma

When a child experiences trauma the child's ability to develop a sufficient regulatory system is comprised. In cases of severe trauma the child's life could be at risk. When threatened the child's internal survival mechanisms becomes activated – they move to "survival mode". These children perceive the world as threatening – they then operate from a paradigm to ensure their safety and maintain some control.

Therefore what is seen as an overly stressed child who has difficulty interacting relationships and swings back and forth in their emotional state can be due to an under developed regulatory system.

Traumatic experiences are stored and for most children are buried, as unprocessed and unexpressed memories within our body/mind system. According to Perry (2002) we have four levels of memory: cognitive, emotional, motor and survival. It is the deepest level of memory – survival with in which these experiences are stored. When our survival state is activated it overrides all our other responses. It has the ability to dominate our other three states.

As noted childhood trauma can cover a huge spectrum. Mullinar (2011) suggests that what happens when trauma occurs is that the trauma is more emotion than the brain can deal with. At the time it is happening the person in an age appropriate way thinks their life is threatened and the brain reacts to this trauma and develops differently. This helps explain why childhood trauma has such a major impact on behaviour later on and how the brain will operate later in life.

Early childhood trauma changes the biology of the brain just as early childhood support also changes the biology of the brain. Perry, Siegel and Segal (1992) claim even when children have insecure attachments within the

home if they have at least one secure attachment with another adult (e.g. a teacher) in their lives then that makes a huge difference to them having the beginning of resilience. These children may still have difficulties but because they have had that one significant secure relationship – where they felt another individual knows them and feels what is going on inside them. These children still have the potential to do well in the future.

What helps children get better following trauma, or disorganised attachment is the connection to other human beings – Perry describes these people as those who are patient, present, kind and sensitive.

The need to be supportive, comforting and encouraging in interactions is more healing and therapeutic (Perry, Siegel and Segal). Teachers can help by being more emotionally present for children including working on their own nervous system and regulation. If teachers are angry and "out of control" on what is going on inside them then the message they are going to give to the child is that "I am angry and I do not like you".

Howard (2013) notes that attachment is not something that parents do to their children but it is an unseen but powerful bonding dynamic. Attachment provides the foundation or secure base that young infants and children learn to experience their world – social emotional and physical.

John Bowlby developed the basic understanding of attachment theory. Bowlby's theory came from the realization that our early experiences have an impact on how we interact with our world. He suggested that attachment had a number of important functions. The core function is to meet the safety care and protection needs of a young child.

Strong healthy attachment also allows a child to explore their environment safely and with security. Children with strong attachment learn basic trust. They come to expect that adults will reassure and calm them when they feel upset or frightening.

Healthy attachments help children build their ability to self regulate and become emotionally resilient and establish pro-social interactions. Children with strong healthy attachments view people and their life as good. Those children who are securely attached are as much concerned with the needs and feelings of others as their own needs. Without a secure attachment children may struggle to develop trusting relationships and become insecure in themself. When strong health attachment has not occurred between a young child and primary caregiver a variety of issues can develop.

These behaviours may appear abnormal to most, especially children, they are in fact understandable reactions to the experiences these children have witnessed or endured.

Its main premise is that a child cannot socially connect to others in their interpersonal relationships, the child can present as oppositional, frequent and intense anger out bursts, being manipulative or controlling, damaging property, themselves or others.

Our regularatory system is not "online" at birth and we now know through brain research that it takes up to 36 months before this part of the brain is fully developed.

When a young child does not receive this strong nurturing care the ability to develop an appropriate regulatory system is compromised. This child's internal survival mechanism is activated, They can perceive the world as threatening – from a physical, social and emotional view and will operate from a paradigm of fear. Hence an "attachment challenged" child is essentially a scared and or stressed child. In times of stress (and there will be many during the school day) this child when will have difficulty connecting. The external behaviours are a reflection of the internal chaos or fear. Forbes (2007) argues that treatment for these children needs to address this internal fear and takes intense work and many repetitions of positive experiences. Approaches need to consider neurological research and relationships and

environments that recreate the safety and security that these children have missed.

Bowlby (1973) noted that our attachment needs are ongoing and that people of any age do better, are more confident and happy when they have a trusted adult they can rely upon, and support them when a difficultly arises.

Naturally we would expect that the prime attachment figure in a child's life is the parent or primary caregiver however attachment figures can vary. Rolfe (2004) suggests that an attachment figure can be anyone to whom a child expects to receive care and protection from harm. Perry (2002) notes that attachment figures provide physical and emotional care. They are emotionally "present" for a child and have an emotional investment in the child. Accordingly a teacher could meet this definition.

The 90's were considered the decade of the brain. A range of brain scanning technologies has allowed us to develop our understanding in brain development. This technology has helped to make links between the effects of trauma and attachment on the child's brain and development.

As a teacher working with challenging students, an understanding of neuroscience is important so we can begin to comprehend why these students behave the way they do.

What we know that the science of early childhood development suggests that the first few years of life are critical to children's health, development and behaviour and sets the scene for the future. Concisely put "you are your brain". Our brain is not just produced by our genes the cells in our brain are sculpted by our experiences and the most important time is in the worm and the first few years (0-3) of life. The early years are also critical to the development of neural pathways (the "wiring") in the brain. These early years are important because the interactions that a young child has with their

environment determines the structure of the brain. Early experiences have a strong influence whether a child has a strong or fragile foundation to go into adulthood.

Stress systems are especially malleable or "plastic" during the fetal and early childhood periods. A child's early experiences shape how readily they are activated and how completely these responses can be contained and turned off. A stress response in a child (through trauma) that is activated too frequently or for prolonged periods in the absence of supportive systems can be damaging to the brain.

Being stressed is not good in the early years. If we consider the first 3 years as the data gathering time then we do want the child to gather as little stress data as possible.

What do we mean by a "nurture group"

Classic Nurture Groups are based on the following principles:

- Staff respond in a non-judgmental way to children's developmental needs.

- The classroom is a secure base which helps make the link between emotions and learning.

- There is an emphasis on reciprocal activities between children and adults, and on listening and responding appropriately to foster children's self-esteem.

- Children are helped to verbalise and understand their feelings.

- Staff are encouraged to understand what a child is communicating through their behaviour.

- Transitions are managed carefully as these can be difficult for vulnerable children.

Nurture Groups were first developed in the UK in the early 1970's. A nurture group classroom is within a school setting. It is "an early" intervention resource for children whose social, emotional and behavioural needs are

unable to be met in a mainstream classroom, " a bridge for children who, for a wide variety of reasons, are without the basic essential early learning experiences that enable them to function socially and emotionally at an age appropriate level" (Doyle, 2004, pg 24).

A basic assumption is that children who have not had emotional stability or suitable learning experiences throughout the early years need to be able to develop these skills before they can learn in a conventional classroom (Wearmouth et al 2004).

Nurture Groups are based on core family values and are underpinned by attachment theory. A key aspect of a nurture room is development of secure relationships, so that students are able to become attached to a significant other (Cooper & Lovey, 1999). The goal is to recreate the early nurturing experiences vital to a childs development.

This process according to Boxall (2002) requires the teacher and teacher aides to respond intuitively to the students needs just as a connected parent would.

Students are usually identified through The Boxall Profile which is a purposely designed assessment tool to help teachers identify precise areas of need and to measure children's social and emotional development. Up to ten children attend on a full or part time basis and usually return to their mainstream classes within four terms.

Children will stay on the roll of their mainstream class group and will be included in any class activities that they can manage successfully. From the beginning, they join their class for roll, assembly, break and lunchtimes and spend half a day a week in the classroom. The class teacher remains the responsible teacher for overseeing the child's learning and progress, with curriculum planning and assessment being a shared with the nurture group staff.

Two people are needed to run the group; a classic group requires a teacher and a teacher aide. The positive relationship between the adults is important so the children see constructive interaction between adults. The adults work closely together. The teacher takes primary responsibility for curriculum planning, assessment and recording of progress and liaison with others within the school and beyond, but both play a crucial role in creating the safe and secure environment.

Use of staff strength is important. The teacher or teacher aide may have a skill for a particular activity such as cooking, art or outdoor activities. There may be times when a particular student has a closer bond for one of the adults and such preferences are used to mazimise student engagement.

The Nurture Group room is purposefuly set up is to create a relaxed environment with many features that might be found in a home environment. The room will contain soft furnishings as well as kitchen facilities. The room will have a couch and comfortable chairs. There will be a space for group work and play.

A kitchen allows for the students to be involved in the preparation of food. A dining table is used for the sharing of meals as well as doing school work. There are also other tables just as there would be in the students mainstream classroom. The dining table is particularly important because of the association with sharing food and the social rituals of a family meal. For the students and staff it can be a popular aspect of the nurture group routine.

The physical environment can play an important part in developing feelings of security and emotional well being. Cooper and Tiknaz (2007) claim that "the educational setting of the nurture group provides respite from negative associations related to the physical experience of the standard classroom and can make a significant contribution to building a new set of positive associations."(pg27).

Opportunities for play is an important characteristic of the nurture group day. It has a specific purpose and can be a shared or individual activity.

Nurture groups will have a wide variety of play materials available. The importance of play is recognised in the opportunities it provides for cognitive, social and emotional learning. Through shared play students learn about the rules of social engagement and develop social communication – they learn how to ask and invite others into their play and how to negotiate access to materials. Students learn the importance of creating and obeying rules.

Play can be enjoyable for both students and teachers and contribute to the positive emotion climate of the nurture group.

Small group size is important as it provides opportunities for the development of relationships between students and among students and staff. A group of around 10-12 students is small enough to allow students to receive individual attention but still large enough to require students to see themselves as part of a class group. Opportunities are provided for students to rehearse many of the group activities that are essential to the operation of their mainstream class, such as sitting on the mat for a learning activity or shared story or practicing group participation skills – eg putting up their hand.

The small group allows the Nurture Group staff to get to know students well. They are able to respond quickly to students reactions and responses or when students experience difficulties in learning, behaviour and in relation to emotional functioning. The smaller size of the group provides opportunities for problem solving, discussion and coaching positive social interactions.

The staff in the nurture room will make friendly supportive relationships with the parents/caregivers, who are encouraged to ask for practical advice, and when upset are given time and attention. Often this has been lacking in the adults interactions when their child was primarily in the mainstream.

Our Experience at Highfield

Te Atawhai (Room 15) begun in 2010 and was established in its current teaching space in 2011.

Our approach to Nurture groups grew out of involvement with professional development, in neuroscience, choice theory, restorative practise and the Nurture group approach in the UK. It was also a response to the increasing number of students who demonstrated severe disregulation. In several cases we had been asked to enrol students excluded from other schools.

Our attempt at a nurture group contains many of the features and practices found in UK Nurture group but we have also adapted the approach to meet our setting.

Staff

Te Whare Atawhai is staffed by a trained teacher and between 2-4 teacher aides. Although not formally trained in Nurture Group approaches staff have been involved in professional development in brain development, attachment theory, restorative practice and social coaching. Strong collegial support is evident and appropriate adult interactions are modelled for students. Staff strengths are utilised and at times one staff member may be the primary adult working with a particular child. The increased number of teacher aides compared to the UK approach allows for children to be supported during their time in their mainstream class especially as they transition back into class. Funding for the trained teacher has come from within our MOE staffing entitlement.

Students

There are between 6-10 students on the nurture room roll. Most of these students have come from other schools either through

- Referral/request from Special Education or MOE

- An approach from another school

- Approach from a parent/caregiver

Other students can be referred through the in school learning support team.

Students have been referred mainly because of their severe behaviour and high incidents of emotion and social disregulation. There will have been numerous incidents of disruptive classroom behaviour. Initial assessment is through observation and anecdotal records. We have not yet used the Boxall profile.

The least amount of time spent in Room 15 by a student has been 3 terms. Most will spend at least 4 terms or even more. Our approach has been somewhat different to the UK Nurture groups where our students tend to spend more timetabled time in their mainstream class. This may reflect their longer term attachment to our Nurture Room.

Initially when we established Room 15, students tended to be Year 5-8. Increasingly we are "enrolling" younger students (Yr 1-3). This reflects the UK approach of beginning to work with students as soon as possible.

The Nurture Room

Room 15 is a stand alone building that is connected to two other classrooms through an outside deck. It is situated near the front entrance of the school

and within close proximity to other classrooms. It was a former staff area that we remodelled to provide a variety of "break out" spaces as well as a larger common area.

It has its own kitchen facilities and toilet area. As with UK Nurture rooms it is set up to resemble a more "homely" environment with a range of furniture including a couch and dining table. As well as space for whole class and group activities there is space for individual activities and quiet activities. There is a range of furniture children would still expect to see in a classroom. The outside space has a sandpit and deck for outdoor activities. The walls feature displays of children's work and collaborative art and craft activities.

Daily Timetable

There is a mix of core curriculum, cooperative activities and self chosen activities. Cooperative social play activities are important in developing learning as well as turn taking, sharing and social negotiation. Learning in core curriculum is carefully planned and supported to ensure success and reduce possible frustration for the student. The focus is on developing a sense of achievement through successful learning rather than the previous patterns of difficulties, students are supported to become leaders of their own learning. Children are helped to develop and discuss learning targets and are supported to evaluate their success. By doing so, they can see that they are making progress and feel good about themselves.

The opportunity for teaching through play is central to our Nurture Room approach – play is a vital source of learning, including self confidence, self esteem, independence, language and social skills. The use of play or "hands on" type of activities provide opportunities for adults to scaffold negotiating with peers and resolving conflicts.

The daily timetable is responsive to students need and interest. Opportunities are provided for "rehearsing" approaches the students will meet in their mainstream class eg listening to a shared story, completing independent tasks.

Children have a degree of choice with the social play activities but can also be asked to leave their play activity to come and complete another task with a group or adult.

The day will usually conclude with a time around the dining table, sharing a game, or snack and reflection on the day.

Ensuring the Nurture Group is fully integrated within an inclusive and supportive school is important. The Nurture Room needs to be seen as part of the school and although students are separated from their mainstream settings for varying periods the room is still within and part of the school – "nurturing is not something that can occur in a vacuum".

Our initial experience with our Nurture room was that it was seen as the "sin bin" and sometimes used as a drop box for students by other teachers. There has been (and still) community, and staff, perceptions that this is a "soft" approach to "naughty" children. A view often expressed is that all these children need is a "tough" approach. Parents (and staff) see some aspects (food, social learning, self directed play) as rewarding bad behaviour. Interestingly some students in our mainstream classes express an interest in going to our nurture room and taking part in activities offered. Often students see some of the activities as "fun" which begs the questions could not some of these activities and learning be part of any class programme.

Addressing negative parent/caregiver, community and staff questions of why we have to have these students is an ongoing challenge. Several factors have resulted in some shift in attitude and support from staff and the community.

- An inclusive ethos is necessary ie all students deserve to and have a right to an education.

- School leadership support and ability to articulate this in a way that contains the nurture group as part of the values and purpose of the school. The ability to relate the nurture approach to research gives the approach validity.
- Staff and the community seeing the positive outcomes for students both within the nurture room and within the mainstream classes.
- The development of a schoolwide approach that is not primarily focussed on behaviour management but is restorative focussed with an emphasis on developing nurturing and caring relationships.
- Professional development for all staff and the development of school values and systems through our involvement in the MOE PB4L initiative.
- It is better to look at an approach that meets the needs of all students. Having a Nurture Room helps meet the needs of those students but also allows opportunities for other students in the mainstream to learn.
- Equality of opportunity does not mean treating all children the same but finding ways that allow for all children to have the opportunity to succeed.
- Ultimately the approach needs to be grounded in maintaining a strong commitment, knowing a Nurture approach is effective in meeting the needs of these students.

An ongoing challenge is funding. As a school we have chosen to fund the teacher from our MOE staffing entitlement. The funding of teacher aides is challenging. It often becomes a catch 22 situation. At the start most of the students will have some form of teacher aide funding as the ability to engage and regulate the behaviour and relationship improves through their participation in the Nurture Room the funding is often withdrawn, but in our view the children are not yet ready to return full time to their mainstream classes. The importance of skilled teacher aides cannot be underestimated. Providing funding that allows for security of hours of employment over a year is a benefit to the staff but also gives continuity for the children. The often term by term allocation of funding is ad hoc and makes this goal difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

What we need to understand that students with severe behaviours need to viewed through a different lens. Rather than looking to bring about change through a purely behavioural lens we need to consider a neuroscience lens – neuroscience helps explain why these children will behave the way they do. These students will struggle with relationships and their ability to emotionally regulate their behaviour because of the past effects of trauma and/or issues related to diorganised attachments.

While a neuroscience view helps explain the behaviour it is now accepted that these children are not as "hard wired" as we use to believe. Althrough much of the neurol development will occur in the early years, the plasticity of the brain does allow for "rewiring". Evidence suggests that working on relationships that reinforce healthly neurological pathways can have postive effect on the "rewiring" of the brain.

Resilency can be developed through costructive relationships with a caring adult in a school environment and is necessary if success is going to be achieved in other areas, i.e. - school work and general well being. Howard (2013) suggests that the important factor for these students in adapting to school is the student-teacher relationship. It can be this relationship that provides the opportunity for safety and emotional security when the student is under stress that will eventually result in new ways of behaving and being, especially in learning to emotionally regulate their behaviour.

While the teacher, or the teacher assistant will be relationally available to the student they still remain a professional distance. The adult is not there to be the best friend or even "parent" but somebody the student can trust, be kind, consistent and resilient.

It needs to be remembered that many of our "traditional" behaviour practices work with most children because they have been "wired" in a relational rich environment to respond to ideas such as authority, respect,

trust and obedience. Often students with severely mal adaptive behaviour will have had to their brains wired to survive in environments which have lacked even basic nurture.

We have found that one approach that allows for the establishment of this relational approach is the Nurture Group approach.

Nurture Groups have been used in the UK since 2000. They provide an emotionally secure setting in a specially adapted physical environment to resemble a mix between a classroom and home setting.

A key component is the combination of a trained teacher and ancillary staff who model appropriate supportive relationships to make the students feel accepted and valued.

One of the aims of a nurture group is for the students to experience trusting relationships with adults who are reliable and consistent. This provides opportunities to replace many of the nurturing experiences that these children may not have experienced in their early years thus hindering their social and emotional development.

The therapeutic value along with the opportunity to develop emotional competencies in a safe environment is central to the nurture group approach.

A nurture group approach is underpinned by an understanding of attachment theory, brain development and the affect of trauma on children during their early years. This can lead to learning and social interactions being disrupted, distorted or incomplete. Children who have not experienced this can find the normal age appropriate expectations of school challenging.

Research into UK Nurture groups and our experience have found some key features that contribute to success.

- Trained staff who are unconditional in their concern, care and relationship with the children. Staff need resilience to persevere with some challenging situations.
- Providing opportunities for students to rehearse and learn the happenings they will experience in their mainstream class.
- Consistent routines and expectations.
- The important social rituals that happen around preparing and sharing of food. The social and emotional learning that happens as children and adults sit around the dining table sharing a meal.
- Learning that is developmentally based and paced appropriately for the children. This is easier to achieve in a smaller group.
- A combination of "core curriculum" activities along with children's self directed social play activities.
- Strategies are deliberately taught to manage emotions and to resolve conflicts.
- The support of school leadership and an inclusive school culture is crucial to the Nurture Group approach.
- The goal is for the students to maintain a connection to their mainstream class and eventually return to the class full time.

Looking ahead some considerations for our Nurture Group at Highfield.

1. Continuing to provide professional development and support to the Nurture group staff. Professional development with a focus on attachement theory and the meeting the needs of traumatized children.

2. Regular staff meetings of Nurture Group staff (we have a trained teacher and several teacher aides) to debrief and plan.

3. Considering the composition of the group so it may not only include students with severe social and emotional needs. This may provide a better balance.

4. Beginning to use the Boxall profile as a diagnostic and assessment tool.

5. Considering whether the UK approach of students spending most of their day in the nurture room is more beneficial than our approach of students moving between their mainstream class and the Nurture room during the day.

6. Exploring ways to recognise that our Nurture Group is a regional resource that supports students from neighbouring schools.

7. Finding a "critical friend" who can provide professional support to the Nurture Group staff.

8. Exploring funding models that provides some certainty.

"Relationships matter: the currency for systematic change was trust, and trust comes from forming healthy working relationships. People, not programs, change people."
(Bruce Perry 2002)

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