While research on their effectiveness is still in its infancy nurture groups contribute to the current emphasis on inclusive education and help promote nurturing practices throughout a school.

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Nurture groups: theoretical background and research on their effectiveness

The dramatic increase in numbers of nurture groups (helping children in infant and primary schools who exhibit emotional and behavioural difficulties) is itself an index of success.

Nurture groups are special classes within mainstream infant schools, aimed at helping children who exhibit emotional and behavioural difficulties. They were originally set up in 1970 in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) by Marjorie Boxall, an educational psychologist, proving so successful that there were around fifty by the end of the decade. Boxall felt that the origins of problem behaviour seen in school lay in earlier home experiences, specifically because of poor or faulty attachments, and the prime function of the nurture group is to enable a child to develop satisfactory or normal attachments within an educational setting.

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Attachment Theory

Attachment theory derives from the work of John Bowlby, who was commissioned by the World Health Organisation to investigate the effects of institutional upbringing on homeless children after the second world war. Bowlby (1951) introduced the concept of 'maternal deprivation', and argued that a warm, nurturing relationship, preferably with the mother, was necessary for later healthy psychological functioning. This one-to-one relationship with a significant other, usually the mother, though it could also be the father, or for that matter caretaker, was referred to as 'monotropy'. Bowlby also drew on work by ethologists such as Lorenz (1935), on imprinting and critical periods. Lorenz demonstrated that geese (in line with some other birds) attach themselves (imprinting) to the first moving object that they see as soon as they hatch, during a specific period of time (critical period), and that object becomes for the chick its species, and is irreversible. This has included inanimate objects such as a pair of Wellington boots! Usually, of course, in nature, this will be the mother. Also central to Bowlby's conceptual system was the notion of 'internal working models' - a child will develop internal representations of interpersonal relationships, based on a satisfactory relationship with the primary caregiver. A warm, responsive relationship produces a model of oneself as lovable and the other as available and reliable, whereas unsatisfactory attachment results in a model of others as unavailable, and of oneself as unworthy, with low self-esteem, and mistrust of others.

Subsequent research has questioned many of Bowlby's initial assumptions. For example, instead of monotropy, a child may have multiple attachments (eg Schaffer & Emerson, 1964), and the so-called critical period for attachment, said by Bowlby to occur within the first year of life (and no longer than the first two years), is actually much wider, and not irreversible.

However, as Rutter (1995) points out, despite the fact that Bowlby's ideas initially met with much criticism (eg O'Connor & Franks, 1960), and that some of the basic tenets have had to be revised in light of later evidence, the importance of attachment processes in social development and learning has stood the test of time, and is now widely accepted.

Faced with an increasing number of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, 'it seemed the only thing to do was to start again' (Bennathan and Boxall, 1996, p9), and the creation of the nurture group was an opportunity for such children to re-experience early attachment and nurturance within the school environment.

The aim was for nurture group teachers to become substitute attachment figures, providing the missing warmth and understanding in a secure, stable environment tailored to a child's developmental needs. Nurture groups are small, with up to twelve pupils and two members of staff (one teacher and one assistant), and they attempt to simulate the home environment, as far as this is possible, within a school and learning environment.

The Boxall Profile

Children are assessed prior to entry into a nurture group with the use of the Boxall Profile (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998). This comprises thirty-four items in two main sections, each consisting of ten sub-strands, as shown in Figure 1.

The Developmental Strand contains items 'to describe different aspects of the preschool years' and the Diagnostic Profile items 'describing behaviours that inhibit or interfere with the child's satisfactory involvement in school' (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998, p7). Each sub-strand is made up of several items.

Figure 1. Main strands and sub-strands of the Boxall Profile, along with example items.

Section I: Developmental Strands		
Main Strand: Developmental Strands		**Example Item**
Sub-strand A	Gives purposeful attention	Listens with interest when the teacher explains something to the class
Sub-strand B	Participates constructively	Is reasonably well organised in assembling the materials he needs and in clearing away.
Sub-strand C	Connects up experiences	Of his own accord returns to and completes a satisfying activity that has been interrupted.
Sub-strand D	Shows insightful involvement	Appreciates a joke or is amused by an incongruous statement or situation.
Sub-strand E	Engages cognitively with peers	Engages in conversation with another child
Main Strand: Internalisation of Controls		
Sub-strand F	Is emotionally secure	Looks up and makes eye contact when the teacher is nearby or addresses him by name
Sub-strand G	Is biddable and accepts constraints	Complies with specific verbal prohibitions or his personal use of classroom equipment
Sub-strand H	Accommodates to others	Maintains acceptable behaviour and functions adequately when the routine of the day is disturbed
Sub-strand J	Maintains internalised standards	Abides by the rules of an organised group game in the playground or school hall
Section II: Diagnostic Profile		
Main strand: Self-limiting features		
Sub-strand Q	Disengaged	Repetitively pursues a limited work or play activity which does not progress
Sub-strand R	Self-negating	Self-disparaging and self-demeaning
Main strand: Undeveloped behaviour		
Sub-strand S	Makes undifferentiated attachments	Clings tenaciously to inconsequential objects and resists having them taken away
Sub-strand T	Shows inconsequential behaviour	'is into everything'; shows fleeting interest, but doesn't attend to anything for long
Sub-strand U	Craves attachment, reassurance	Adopts stratagems to gain or maintain close physical contact with adult
Main Strand: Unsupported Development		
Sub-strand V	Avoids/rejects attachment	Sullen, resentful, and negative in general attitude and mood
Sub-strand W	Has undeveloped/insecure sense of self	Attention-seeking in a bid for recognition or admiration
Sub-strand X	Shows negativism towards self	Sulks when disapproval is shown, or when attention is withdrawn, or when thwarted
Sub-strand Y	Shows negativism towards others	Disparaging attitude to other children; is critical and contemptuous
Sub-strand Z	Wants, grabs, disregarding others	Can't wait for his turn or something he wants; plunges in or grabs

For each of the 34 items a score between 0 and 4 is given for a child, as follows:

4 Typical behaviour
3 Level attained, though not always maintained
2 To some extent, level just reached
1 Virtually never
0 Does not arise or is irrelevant

Scores on individual items are summed to give totals for all sub-strands, which are then represented as histograms; on these are also shown a range of total scores which are regarded as normal. Typically a child with problems will have below range scores on the Developmental Strands, and above range scores on the Diagnostic Profile. An examination of the overall Profile will usually point to the nature of the child's problems, and, more critically, will provide pointers for remedial interventions by nurture group staff. Bennathan & Boxall (1998) provide detailed examples of case studies using the Profile.

Recent History

Most nurture groups disappeared (along with funding) when the ILEA was abolished. However, Eva Holmes, an educational psychologist with Enfield Child Guidance Services, introduced nurture groups in some schools in the London Borough of Enfield during the 1980's. More recently there has been what can only be described as an explosion in their growth and popularity, with estimates in excess of four hundred groups (personal communication, Nurture Group Network, February 2004). Indeed accounts of individual groups are readily available on the Internet:
http://www.portables1.ngfl.gov.uk/ssoames/nurture.htm
and
http://www.somerset-health.org.uk/pdf/ha_reports/hamp_nurture_group.pdf
and useful information can be found on the Nurture Group Network website:
http://www.nurturegroups.org/

The following extracts are taken from the websites referred to in this article (Editor)

An extract from the Nurture Group Network http://www.nurturegroups.org/

"All schools, governors and LEAs should know about Nurture Groups. The Nurture Group model has a history of effective teaching for children in school. Nurture Groups support school improvement by promoting emotional development and improvements in behaviour. Teachers use attachment principles to ensure social inclusion and reduce exclusion." - Marion Bennathan

What is a Nurture Group?

Nurture Groups are small classes in Infant or Primary schools for children with identified needs. They may be children who feel insecure in school or who are in need of more teacher attention than can be provided in their main class. Sometimes the children are described as being withdrawn or as having emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Each class has a Nurture Group Teacher and a Nurture Group Assistant.

Children register with their class every morning and then join other children in the Nurture Group following the Nurture Group Curriculum alongside the National Curriculum. They always return to their class for certain whole class activities such as Physical Education and class trips.

Children continue to attend the Nurture Group for between six to eighteen months.

Nurture Groups principles are informed by models of child development and attachment theory in particular.

Nurture Groups are run by the school and are usually supported by the Local Education Authority.

They have been in existence since the 1970's. There has recently been an increase in interest in Nurture Groups. Evidence is growing that shows they are an effective early intervention for social, emotional and behavioural special needs. They have been mentioned by the DfEE in their last three SEN policy papers. In the last year or two there has been an interest in developing Nurturing Principles in Secondary Schools. Work in this area is in the early stages. The Nurture Group Network is supporting these initatives.

An extract from http://www.portables1.ngfl.gov.uk/ssoames/nurture.htm

A reflection on the effectiveness of Nurture Group provision for children with Special Educational Needs in Key Stage 2.

CAPS - Certificate of Advanced Professional Studies. © Steve Soames. SENCo, Marlborough Primary School.

This investigation outlines the principles and strategies used in school to meet the special educational needs of a specific group of child designated as a Nurture Group. After outlining definitions of 'effectiveness' and 'nurture group' the investigation goes on to explore the background of the nurture group in school and sets this in a wider, national context through looking at current trends in SEN provision and inclusion. Through drawing on statistics held by the school, questionnaires completed by staff and external agencies, and wider readings, this study has led me to conclude that nurture groups offer a unique way for schools in areas of high social deprivation to provide for social inclusion while enabling the raising of educational standards.

An extract from http://www.somerset-health.org.uk/pdf/ha_reports/hamp_nurture_group.pdf

Hamp Nurture Group is an integral part of Hamp Junior School. It aims to provide a secure environment that develops personal and social skills so that children can gain greater access to the curriculum. The design of the evaluation for Hamp Nurture Group was designed in conjunction with input from the Hamp Nurture Group Co-ordinator. The evaluation was carried out between Sept 2001 and Feb 2002. The aim of the evaluation of Hamp Nurture Group was to establish whether and how the group has improved attendance, behaviour, pupil attitudes and impact on the whole school. Class records, teacher interviews, a pupil questionnaire and monitoring data was used in order to evaluate the Nurture group.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evaluation of the Nurture Group that: Pupil confidence and self esteem is raised through involvement with the Nurture Group; Teachers find the Nurture Group a valuable resource; Reintegration of pupils into mainstream classes works effectively; Pupils in the school benefit greatly from being able to access the Nurture Group.

Nurture Group Variants

Cooper et al (2001) provide three criteria for defining what they refer to as 'genuine' nurture groups. Firstly, an emphasis on the agenda of the nurture group being driven by developmental needs in producing adaptive behaviour. Secondly, the nurture group should be integrated within the mainstream school. Thirdly, entry into, and departure from, the group, should be facilitated with the use of a recognised assessment tool such as the Boxall Profile. However, their research has identified four distinct nurture group types or variants.

1) Classic 'Boxall' nurture groups, of the type established by Marjorie Boxall.
2) Nurture groups which adopt the key aspects of a Boxall group, but which may differ in structure.
3) Groups which are called nurture groups but which do not follow Boxall group guidelines.
4) Groups which are called nurture groups but which depart radically from key defining aspects of the Boxall groups.

Clearly variants 3) and 4) are likely to create some confusion over definitions of nurture groups, and conclusions on their efficacy in dealing with children who exhibit emotional and behavioural difficulties

Effectiveness of Nurture Groups

Despite the recent dramatic growth in the incidence of nurture groups, research on their effectiveness is fairly limited. In 1992 Iszatt & Wasilewska (1997) conducted an evaluation in the London Borough of Enfield. A successful reintegration rate of 88% was achieved with pupils attending nurture groups between 1984 and 1988, and a follow-up in 1995 found that 83% (of the original sample) were still in normal classrooms.

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A recent study by O'Connor and Colwell (2002) attempted to measure, for the first time, the difference between entry and exit scores in nurture groups, and also to see how exit scores compared to scores taken two years or more after leaving.

The first phase in this research was archival, in that an attempt was made to obtain data on children who had attended nurture groups in the London Borough of Enfield in the recent past. Such data was available on 68 children, 46 boys and 22 girls, from five infant or primary schools, with a mean entry age of 5.25 years and mean attendance of three terms. Scores were obtained on each sub-strand for each pupil and, as predicted, statistical tests (one-tailed t-tests) confirmed that scores on exit were significantly higher for all strands in Section 1 (Developmental Strands), and significantly lower in Section 2 (Diagnostic Profile) at exit compared to entry.

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Thus the children had shown a marked improvement towards the normal range of scores, to the extent that return to the mainstream classroom became possible.

In order to investigate long term effects of nurture group attendance current Boxall data on the sample were required. However, it was only possible to find twelve of the original sample, nine boys and three girls, and profile scores were supplied by the respective class teachers. The results of statistical tests showed that, since leaving the nurture group, there was no difference on sixteen of the twenty sub-strands. Thus, for those sub-strands, no deterioration had occurred. However, on four sub-strands, C (connects up experience), W (has undeveloped/insecure sense of self), X (shows negativism towards others), and Z (wants, grabs, disregarding others), a significant relapse had occurred. There may therefore be a role for some later nurturance 'back-up', though there was no evidence that this relapse was being expressed in maladaptive behaviour.

The theoretical origins of nurture groups can be traced back to the early work by Bowlby on the consequences of poor attachments for both social and developmental functioning and learning. Despite the documented shortcomings in attachment theory, it is clear that adaptive behaviour can be negatively influenced by poor early relationships with caregivers.

It is clear too that the effects can be reversed, at least to an extent, and that nurture groups would appear to be instrumental in dealing with such maladaptive behaviour. While research on effectiveness is still in its infancy, the dramatic increase in numbers of groups is itself an index of success. Of importance too is their contribution to the current emphasis on inclusive education, and the potential for nurture groups to help in the promotion of nurturing practices throughout a school.

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