Research and Library Service
Briefing Paper

Jennifer Betts, Research Officer

Education Nurture Groups

1. Background

On 3 February 2010 the Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network gave a briefing to the Education Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The group advised the Committee that its activities in schools across Northern Ireland have, to date, been supported by funding outside the core education budget. These sources of funding are coming to an end with the nurture groups they are funding at risk of imminent closure.

This Briefing Paper provides information for the Education Committee prior to their visit to view the work of nurture groups in a number of Primary schools in Northern Ireland. The Briefing Paper contains information on the origin of nurture groups, their cost-effectiveness, various sources of funding and research studies that have been conducted in England and Scotland.

The Department of Education (DE) consultation document for the Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion[1] states that *"…it is proposed that where the need is identified and certain conditions fulfilled, ESA will establish a number of nurture groups."* In a letter to the Education Committee in February 2010, DE said that this is *"only a high level proposal, which will need to be fully considered in the context of the responses received to the policy consultation".* The letter went on to say that DE had

---

[1] *Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion* (August 2009) available at:
http://www.deni.gov.uk/every_school_a_good_school__the_way_forward_for_special_educational_needs__sen__and_inclusion___8211__consultation_document__english__pdf_434kb.pdf

---

made a bid for additional resources to begin nurture group provision across all Board areas in the Spending Review 2007, but had been turned down[2]. This position was re-affirmed by the Minister in a letter to the Education Committee in May 2010.

At the end of March 2010, the Social Development Minister opened a nurture classroom at a primary school in West Belfast. The Department for Social Development (DSD) provided £19,226 from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund for the total cost of fitting out the classroom. The Big Lottery Fund contributed funding of £188,548 over a three year period to cover the revenue costs of the unit as part of a wider Neighbourhood Empowerment Project in the area which has secured almost £1m from the Big Lottery Fund's 'Live and Learn' programme[3].

Correspondence to the Social Development Committee from DSD in March 2010 confirmed that between 2004/05 and 2009/10 DSD had awarded £973,698 to nurture groups from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund. Although a further £116,389 has been allocated for 2010/11, the correspondence re-iterates the Social Development Minster's position that DE should be funding educational programmes and that DSD will expect them to maintain these services after 2011.

2. Origins of Nurture Groups

Nurture groups were developed in 1969 by Marjorie Boxall, an educational psychologist working with children with a range of social and emotional difficulties. Boxall established the first groups in inner London in the early 1970s. She believed the source of the pupil's difficulties could be traced to poor nurturing experiences in early childhood. Having failed to develop positive nurturing bonds with a significant adult, the children were unable to make attachments and develop emotionally. When they reached school age they were not ready to meet the social and intellectual demands of the school curriculum. Their experience of the classroom often led to disruptive or withdrawn behaviour. In developing nurture groups to address their needs Boxall noted that:

> *The emphasis within a nurture group is on emotional growth, focusing on offering broad-based experiences in an environment that promotes security, routines, clear boundaries and carefully planned, repetitive learning opportunities.*

> *The aim of the nurture group is to create the world of earliest childhood, build in the basic and essential learning experiences normally gained in the first three years of life and enable the children to fully meet their potential in mainstream schools.[4]*

---

[2] Correspondence from the Department to the Education Committee, 24 February 2010.
[3] http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-dsd/news-dsd-300310-ritchie-opens-new.htm
[4] Boxall, Marjorie (2002), Nurture Groups in Schools: Principles & Practice; Sage Publications.

The first nurture groups established by Marjorie Boxall consisted of classes of 10 – 12 children with a teacher and an assistant. Their brief was to engage with the children at the developmental stage they had reached and to support them in meeting their learning goals. As the children's confidence grew they were able to learn and 80% of them were able to return to their normal class and make progress. The children were not stigmatised by attending the nurture group as they registered with their normal class in the morning and returned there each day for the last part of the afternoon[5].

Having gone through an initial period of popularity for almost a decade, nurture groups dwindled in numbers and many of the original ones closed down[6]. A national survey conducted in England and Wales in 1998[7] found fewer than 50 nurture groups.

However, there are indications that a massive commitment to Nurture Groups has developed since the late 1990s with the national umbrella organisation, the Nurture Group Network[8] claiming that there are now around 1,000 groups, not only at Primary, but also at secondary school level, in the United Kingdom.

When the national survey was conducted in 1998[9], it was found that four basic variants had developed on the nurture group theme:

- *The classic Boxall nurture group:* involving temporary and part-time placement of pupils (eg nine out of ten half-day sessions per week) in a setting designed to meet their specific developmental and educational needs;

- *New variant nurture group:* based on the classic model but differing in structure and/or organisational features from the Boxall groups; for example the time pupils spend in the group can vary from half a day to four days per week; may serve a cluster of schools; may be located in a special school or in an off-site unit. One Local Education Authority had a 'travelling nurture group' moving from school to school.

- *Groups informed by nurture group principles:* Often depart radically from the organisational principles of the classic and new variant. They may take place outside the normal curricular structure at lunch-time, break-time or after-school groups. They may also take the form of 'sanctuaries' that can be accessed by pupils at different times and may be run by a non-teaching adult such as a counsellor. Their emphasis is on social and developmental issues rather than academic.

- *Aberrant nurture groups:* Although called 'nurture groups' and claiming to be a variation on the concept, according to the survey's authors, they undermine the key

---

[5] A Brief History available on the Nurture Groups website at:
http://www.nurturegroups.org/data/files/downloads/a_brief_history.doc
[6] Cooper, P. and Whitebread, D. 'The effectiveness of nurture groups on student progress: evidence from a national research study' in *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2007, pp. 171-190.*
[7] Cooper et al (1998) *The nature and distribution of NGs in England and Wales* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge School of Education).
[8] Nurture Group Network website at: http://www.nurturegroups.org/index.php
[9] Cooper et al (1998) *The nature and distribution of NGs in England and Wales* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge School of Education).

defining principles of the classic nurture group. These groups that can be found in any of the above configurations lack an educational and/or developmental emphasis and are devoted to control and containment.[10]

Principles for the allocation of Nurture Groups

The Education Authority for Hampshire specifies **what a school requires to be allocated a nurture group**[11]:

- A minimum of 10 children;
- A long term and whole school commitment;
- The support of the governing body;
- Evidence of existing good practice in behaviour management;
- A large room that can be used flexibly;
- School's policy for SEN recognises the role of nurture groups within the Policy Framework and accepts the LEA Policy and procedures for nurture groups;
- Good links for transition;
- Significant levels of deprivation; and
- A clear financial plan for sustaining the project for at least one year beyond the funded year.

If a school is successful in its bid there will be a requirement that:

- The Principal (or a senior member of staff) will attend the steering group;
- The school will provide data to the project team at the beginning and end of the project to support on-going evaluation;
- The school will release one member of staff to attend the 4 day certificate course on the dates given; and
- The school will provide information about how the pump-priming funding has been used.

Schools will be supported by:

- Opportunities to attend countrywide support group meetings and steering group meetings.
- Two visits from an Educational Psychologist to offer consultation and support for the nurture group.

---

[10] Cooper et al (1998) *The nature and distribution of NGs in England and Wales* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge School of Education) pp 176-178.

[11] Available at:
http://www.education.hants.gov.uk/intranet/communications/schools/attachments/004347Background_and_rationale_updated_Jan09_for_SC.doc

Secondary schools

The Nurture Group Network reports a growing interest in the role that nurture groups can play in secondary schools:

> As a school based intervention nurture groups have been demonstrated as extremely effective in reducing behavioural problems and helping children to access opportunities for learning. Research shows how nurture groups can have a positive impact on the ethos and culture of schools and support closer working relationships with parents[12].

Learning behaviour: Lessons learned (April 2009)[13] is a review conducted by Sir Alan Steer into the progress made in raising standards of behaviour and discipline in schools since his original Steer Report was published in 2005[14].

Recommendation 20 of the 2009 report states:

> Headteachers report that nurture groups can be important in supporting pupils who display poor behaviour. Building on previous research DCSF should undertake an assessment of the impact of nurture groups in schools situated in areas of high deprivation. This might be via an Ofsted survey of the effectiveness of nurture groups and other additional provision in schools that support good behaviour, an independent evaluation or a pilot programme which could be evaluated by Ofsted[15].

The Nurture Group Network website[16] refers to a 2008 Ofsted report[17]. The report studied the methods used in 29 secondary schools in England, resulting in them reducing absenteeism in the period 2004 – 2006.

The Ofsted report highlights a variety of approaches employed by the schools with nurture groups as a temporary option. Methods the schools employed to improve behaviour and absenteeism rates included the recruitment of support staff, pastoral care, close links with parents and outside multi-agency support.

The schools inspectors reported that *'Specific support, such as temporary withdrawal from classes and training in life skills to help students change their attitudes and improve their learning, was very effective.'* The report described nurture groups in secondary schools differently from those in primary schools. While in primary schools pupils generally attend nurture groups for a prolonged period and with a holistic approach taken to their development, in secondary schools there appears to be an emphasis on specific areas of educational, behavioural or emotional difficulties. The report states that:

---

[12] Nurture Group Network website.

[13] *Learning behaviour: Lessons learned* (April 2009), Sir Alan Steer available at:
http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/13514/8208-DCSF-Learning%20Behaviour.pdf

[14] *Learning Behaviour: The Report of the Practitioners Group on School Behaviour and Discipline* (2005) available at:
http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-1950-2005

[15] *Learning behaviour: Lessons learned* (April 2009) Sir Alan Steer.

[16] http://www.nurturegroups.org/index.php

[17] Good practice in re-engaging disaffected and reluctant students in secondary schools (2008) available at:
http://www.nurturegroups.org/data/files/downloads/good_practice_in_reengaging_disaffected_and_reluctant_students_in_secondary_schools.doc

All the schools visited had dedicated areas where students with difficulties were able to have some respite from their peers and receive early, short-term intervention for behavioural, academic or emotional problems before being re-integrated. One of the schools, for example, provided three sessions of intensive literacy support each week for a group of disengaged students, where they took part in reading and writing on topics that they found particularly interesting. The sessions took place in a room that had been specifically designed to support students who had low self-esteem. Such areas were highly valued by all students, not just those who had become disaffected. Provisions led to a reduction in the number of all types of exclusions because it acted as a base for re-integration.

All the schools in the survey adapted the curriculum to meet the specific needs of their students. At Key Stage 3, this most commonly involved the use of carefully chosen reading schemes, nurture groups, quality circle time and materials relating to the social and emotional aspects of learning.

In Primary schools where a nurture group exists it is the key strategy for improving behaviour, whereas where it is seen as a strategy in a secondary school it appears to run on a more part-time ad hoc basis and be combined with other strategies as shown in the Ofsted report.

The standard method of assessing a child to attend a nurture group is the Boxall profile which was developed in the 1970s. It consists of 68 descriptions of behaviour and the class teacher, SENCo and an Educational Psychologist may all be involved in an assessment.

3. Research

An article published in 2007 by Professor Paul Cooper (University of Leicester) and Professor David Whitebread (University of Cambridge) deals with the University of Leicester Nurture Group Research Project[18]. This was a national study of the personal, social and educational outcomes associated with nurture group placements between 1999 and 2001.

The article discusses some of the main studies that have been conducted on nurture groups in England since 1997 and this section of the Briefing Paper draws extensively from the Cooper and Whitebread research and the research cited by them.

The Cooper and Whitebread research found significant improvements in terms of social, emotional and behavioural functioning in the nurture groups studied. It was found that nurture groups that had been in existence for more than two years were significantly more effective and social, emotional and behavioural improvements were

---

[18] Cooper, Paul and Whitebread, David (2007) 'The effectiveness of nurture groups on student progress: evidence from a national research study', Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 12:3, 171-190.

found to be most marked in the first two terms, while improvements in cognitive engagement and learning tasks continued to improve in the third and fourth terms.

Interviewed about the research for the Times Educational Supplement[19] (TES), Professor Cooper highlighted the 'whole school effect' of nurture groups. His research found that the difficulties children with behavioural and emotional disorders face worsen in a school that does not have a nurture group. However, the behaviour of children in schools that did have nurture groups improved, whether they attended the nurture group or not. This was seen as an important finding by the researchers.

In the TES interview Professor Cooper said that another striking effect appeared to be the *"very quick turnaround in terms of kids' attitude to school".* Children changed from trying to avoid school to being *"very pro-school"* within a few weeks.

While Professor Cooper's research found that nurture groups were *"extremely successful",* two distinct groups of children had less positive results. Those with severe emotional difficulties and children with particular types of hyperactivity, although showing improvements within the group, were unable to maintain improvement back in the classroom.

The findings of a study[20] in Enfield, north-east London looked at 308 children who had been in six nurture groups in the 1980s. Results showed that 87% returned to mainstream classes within a year and, of these, 83% required no additional help, while 11% went on to special schools.

These results were compared to the outcomes for 20 additional children assessed as suitable to be placed in a nurture group, but for whom no places were available. It was found that of the children who did not attend nurture groups, 50% (compared to 87%) were able to stay in mainstream classes without additional help and 35% (compared to 11%) went on to attend special schools[21].

A study in 2002[22] assessed the performance of 68 five-year-old children in three nurture groups. Using Boxall Profile data, they found statistically significant improvements in terms of cognitive and emotional development, social engagement and behaviours indicative of secure attachment. Twelve of the original cohort were assessed again after two years and findings suggested that many of the improvements had been maintained, although there was evidence of relapse in social and emotional functioning.

---

[19] 'Nurture Groups' Article published in Times Education Supplement on 17 September 2004, by Harvey McGavin available at: http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2033253

[20] Iszatt, J. and Wasilewska, T. (1997) *NGs: an early intervention model enabling vulnerable children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to integrate successfully into school,* Educational and Child Psychology, 14(3), 121-139.

[21] The research methodology for this study has been criticized because the 20 children used for comparison had not been cross-matched with the children who did attend nurture groups.

[22] O'Connor, T. and Colwell, J. (2002) The effectiveness and rationale of the 'NG' approach to helping children with emotional and behavioural difficulties remain in within mainstream education', *British Journal of Special Education, 29(2), 96-100.*

A recent evaluation in Glasgow[23] of a pilot initiative begun in 2001 studied179 pupils aged between five and seven years. Approximately half were attending 16 schools with nurture groups and the others were attending 16 schools with no nurture group provision. It was found that the children who had attended nurture groups had made significant improvements in self-esteem, self-image, emotional maturity and attainment in literacy when compared with the other group.

In light of this positive evaluation, Glasgow City Council prioritised nurture group provision in its Service Development Plan 2004-2007, providing funding to consolidate and expand the initiative. From August 2004, 29 nurture groups were established. In April 2005 the Education Services Committee approved the establishment of a further 29 groups. As of 2005, Glasgow has 58 Nurture Groups and an agreement that each new Learning Community would have two identified schools to host Nurture groups[24].

4. Cost – Effectiveness

The Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network told the Assembly Education Committee[25] that schools with nurture groups in Northern Ireland have set them up without core funding, but with the conviction that this is the only approach that will work for their pupils. The money has been raised by using the LMS budget, holding fundraisers, using 'Extended Schools' money, applying for time-bound grants, searching out short-term donors and operating nurture groups in store-rooms. There are currently 21 nurture groups in Northern Ireland, none of which receive funding from DE.

Information provided on the cost-effectiveness of nurture groups tends to be speculative; for example the cost incurred if a pupil goes on to offend or ends up in a secure unit rather than spending time at an informative stage in their development in a nurture group.

In a presentation by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) Educational Psychology Service in May 2007, it was stated that a nurture group programme costs 10 – 30 times less than residential school placement, four times less than the cost of statementing and half the cost of temporary placement at Primary Behaviour Support Services set up to support Primary schools experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

In 2001 Hampshire LEA offered £7,000 each to schools willing to set up nurture groups. In 2000-01 one infant school had 45 exclusions, but when a nurture group was established in 2001, the school had only had one exclusion in the following four years[26]. The school believes that the £50,000 per year that it costs the school to

---

[23] Reynolds, S and Kearney, M (2007) 'Nurture Groups: the answer to everything?, paper presented to the *British psychological Society Division of Educational and Child psychology Annual Conference,* Glasgow.

[24] Glasgow City Council, 'Nurture Groups Report' (February 2007).

[25] Northern Ireland Nurture Group Network presentation to the Education Committee 3 February 2010.

[26] Full article on Teachernet website at: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/schoolinfocus/shepherdsspringinfantschool/

provide a teacher and learning support staff is worth the cost in the benefits it provides to the whole school. Tips that the head teacher offers to other schools who may be interested in starting a nurture group are:

- You need to have teachers in charge who genuinely care for the children;
- You need to have the commitment of the whole school and perseverance as *"it is certainly not easy"*; and
- You need to be able to juggle the budget as the group is expensive if it is run properly.

Under the heading 'How Cost Effective are Nurture Groups', the Nurture Groups Network admits that there are no up to date figures available, but that they are currently working to collate information on comparative service costs over time[27]. They also admit that to give a "*properly scientific answer to this question"*, there would have to be "*agreed means of measuring all the factors in a child's educational and home life"*.

The cost analysis the website quotes is taken from an LEA evaluation of nurture groups in Enfield from 1996. In comparing the nurture groups with other provision, the evaluation points out that the cost of a statement of special educational need, estimated to be between £2,000 and £4,000 in 1996, is not incurred when a child can attend a nurture group. The evaluation in 1996 gave an estimated comparative breakdown of the costs as follows:

- Placement in an Emotional Behavioural Disorder (EBD) residential school = £20,000 - £60,000 per anum;
- Tuition for a statemented child from BDO support service for a period of three years (excluding the cost of statementing) = £12,000;
- Given that a child in a nurture group normally returns to mainstream class within a year, it is estimated that 13 children are supported annually. Staffing costs of a nurture group are £36,992, so the average cost per child is estimated at £2,845.

As stated above, these figures refer to 1996 and are only of use as a comparison of costs at that time.

Recent cost analyses for individual Groups

A report for the members of 'Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel' of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, in June 2009, highlighted the success of a pilot scheme to provide nurture groups in the Borough. The groups were introduced in 2006 as part of a preventative strand of the Behaviour Support Plan. One of the schools; the First School and Middle School in Dedworth so impressed the Ofsted inspectors that they returned to observe the work the nurture group in the school was carrying out.

---

[27] http://www.nurturegroups.org/data/files/downloads/cost_effectiveness_of_nurture_groups.doc

The groups were initially funded by the Educational Psychology Service and the report shows that the Dedworth School nurture group costs approximately £20,000 per annum to run. This was currently being found from the special needs budget and other elements of the school's resources. However, despite the continuing commitment of the school's Governing body, the Headteacher admitted that it would be difficult to continue resourcing the group.

A Report[28] presented to the 'Schools Forum' of Herefordshire Council in December 2009 provides a further indication of the costs involved in establishing and sustaining nurture groups. The purpose of having the report compiled was to:

- Fund the implementation of five trial nurture groups to be established in five Hertfordshire Primary schools;

- Support the implementation of the five nurture groups and to facilitate development, networking and ongoing support for the five groups as well as the recently established trial group; and

- Monitor and assess the applicability of nurture groups as a means of meeting Additional Educational Needs in Herefordshire.

The single recommendation of the Report[29] was that a funding request of £100,000 be approved to facilitate the implementation of nurture groups for 2010-11 only. The schools would then require an exit strategy to mainstream their provision and ensure its sustainability. The funding for the one-year period would be matched by the schools.

The Report states that:

> *Research suggests the establishment of effective nurture groups requires good support. The intention is to grow a network of support so that schools implementing nurture groups may aid each other, and to offer external monitoring and support from the Educational psychology Service. This would include support in the area of monitoring individual children's development and progress in order better to meet their developmental needs.*

Bearing in mind that the Report is biased in favour of the funding and establishment of the five nurture groups, it goes on to provide what the author sees as the alternative option:

> *The alternative to promoting group interventions for meeting Additional Educational Need (AEN) is to continue to make a series of reactive individual interventions for children which can be very resource-heavy and piecemeal. A group intervention such as a Nurture Group offers a proactive*

---

[28] 'Establishing Nurture Groups in Primary Schools & developing an Appropriate Support Network'; Report presented to the Schools Forum, Herefordshire Council, 7 December 2009.
[29] Presented by the Secondary School Improvement manager.

and structured way of meeting children's needs. It also promotes early intervention.

A breakdown of the financial implications in the Report provides an indication of the planning and costs involved. Parts of the estimated costings are specific to the establishment of the nurture groups referred to in the Report. However, they show the sort of resources that need to be considered when planning for nurture groups generally. Also provided (at section 2) is a general costing estimate for establishing a 'typical' nurture group.

1) Proposals relevant to this particular proposal include additional funding to:

- Support the costs to schools of nurture group staffing;
- Set up costs of limited room refurbishment and equipment;
- Establishing a central Resource Bank to support schools; and
- Provide
  - Training for colleagues staffing nurture groups;
  - Training for colleagues managing nurture groups;
  - Briefing for the whole staff of schools implementing the groups;
  - Structured networking opportunities for colleagues; and
  - Opportunities for dissemination of good practice to other schools.

Resources required but not provided by the Additional Funding:

In support of the additional funding schools will have to provide:

- Additional financial resources in order to meet the costs of the nurture group.
- Management time.

2) Typical Nurture Group costings include:

Staffing including ongoing costs	£20,870
Room refurbishment and set-up equipment	£ 1,500
SENCo or other management time	Variable
Training (staff time)	£ 470
<u>Typical Total</u>	<u>£22,840</u>

NB: This is a typical costing and will vary from school to school. It assumes management time can be provided from within school's existing resource allocation. It assumes staff at SEN 1. If school's employ staff on SEN2 then staffing will be 6% higher. Set up costs too will vary from school to school.

Conclusion

Research shows that nurture groups are successful, not only for the children in the group, but for the whole school. Since their success in addressing behavioural and social problems in Primary and, more recently, secondary schools, the issue that remains is how they will be resourced.

Favourable evaluations have led to funding by local authorities in some cases, most notably Glasgow. However, this Briefing paper illustrates that there are many different sources of, mainly short-term funding by, for example the Educational Psychology Service, followed by the cost then being borne by schools themselves. However, schools struggle to sustain their groups and have to raise funding from charitable sources and through their own fundraising activities. This is not seen by schools as a feasible long-term option, despite high levels of commitment from the school staff and Governors.

An article in the Times Educational Supplement (December 2008)[30] reported that the headteacher of a primary school in Wales could *"no longer afford to pay for a nationally recognised nurture group out of his ailing budget".* He argued that it should be subsidised by his local education authority.

---

[30] Times Educational Supplement, 5 December 2008, 'Nurture group grows needy'