



From mountain to sea

## **Nurture hubs in Aberdeenshire Evaluation Report September 2017**

### **Nurture Hubs**

A nurture group or hub is an in-school resource for children whose emotional, social, behavioural and cognitive learning needs cannot be met in the mainstream classroom (Boxall, 2002). Nurture groups were started in the late 1960's in England as a result of work done by Educational Psychologist Marjorie Boxall in the East End of London. Boxall viewed the behaviour of children differently. She realised that some of the difficulties presented within school were the result of impoverished early nurturing. She understood that when children had not had their early childhood needs met, for whatever reason, they were unable to form the trusting relationships needed to learn within school. They were also unable to regulate their behaviour in a social and cooperative context. Many schools in London adopted the nurture group approach and discovered that they had a huge impact on those on the verge of exclusion.

Broadly speaking, the same reasoning and methodology is used in nurture groups today. The emphasis is on emotional growth, focusing on offering broad based experiences in an environment that promotes security, routines, and clear boundaries and carefully planned repetitive learning opportunities (Boxall, 2002). The children spend a proportionate part of each week in the nurture group but remain part of their mainstream class, joining the other children daily for planned activities. The traditional nurture group is hence known as the Boxall nurture group and is usually run alongside the use of the Boxall profile. This is an assessment tool which aims to capture the specific emotional and social needs of the child. It is used pre- and post-intervention to assess the impact over time of the nurture group. More recently a tool called Beyond the Boxall has also been developed which aims to share strategies for managing behaviour with teachers.

### **Aberdeenshire context**

In 2013, Aberdeenshire Council made the decision to set up ten Nurture Hubs as part of their early intervention framework to support children. They were established in ten schools. The ten schools cover a wide geographical area and were selected according to local need within the community.

The 10 schools are:

#### **North:**

Fraserburgh cluster: Fraserburgh North School

Peterhead cluster: Central School, Clerkhill School, Meethill School, Dales Park School, and Buchanhaven School

#### **Central:**

Huntly cluster: Gordon Primary School

Kemnay cluster: Kintore Primary

**South:**

Portlethen cluster: Portlethen Primary

Stonehaven cluster: Mill O'Forest Primary

Funding was made available for a Nurture Teacher and a Pupil Support Assistant for each Nurture Hub, as well as physical resources. Operational Guidelines to support Nurture Hub practice were published in May 2014 (See Appendix A).

It was agreed at Committee that the Nurture Hubs would be evaluated in terms of their impact on children and young people. A multi-disciplinary working group was established in 2016, consisting of an Educational Psychologist, a Quality Improvement Officer (ASN) and a Head Teacher with expertise in Nurturing approaches.

**Current situation**

All 10 Nurture Hub Schools were asked to provide information on the current status of their Nurture Hub. Two schools did not respond to the request. Three Nurture Hubs were no longer running, as staff shortages had resulted in Nurture Teachers being transferred back to mainstream classrooms. The remaining five Nurture Hubs were operational, although one had only recently been re-established. Evaluative information was therefore only sought from the four Nurture Hubs that had consistently operated since being established.

**Methodology**

**Qualitative Data**

A semi-structured interview was used to gather information from the Nurture Teacher of each school (Appendix B). Two of the Nurture teachers had been in post for three years, and two had been in post less than a year. The interview took around two hours and attempted to establish the participants' views on how Nurture Hubs are operated, and impact of Nurture Hubs on individual or groups of children. Their views on factors that helped or hindered outcomes were also explored, as well as ideas regarding future directions.

**Quantitative Data**

The Boxall profile is a diagnostic tool which was initially developed in the 1970's by Marjorie Boxall. It aimed to provide a "framework to establish a precise assessment of children who have Social, Emotional and Behavioural difficulties....(and) provides the teacher with insights ...into the child's world-it makes people think about what lies behind the behaviour" (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998). Teachers complete the Boxall profile for each child when they enter the Nurture Hub and when they exit the Hub. For the purposes of this evaluation, a sample of Boxall profiles were gathered from Nurture Hubs in order to assess the impact of the Nurture Hub on children's social and emotional wellbeing. All data was anonymised.

**What makes a Nurture Hub successful?**

The ten key themes identified are listed below

### 1. **Staffing within the Nurture Hub:**

- Ideally two consistent adults need to be maintained within the Hub on a long-term basis.
- Lack of a consistent adult results in the Hub not operating successfully.

### 2. **Communication with the child's class teacher:**

- The Nurture Hub is more effective when planning and timetabling are shared between the Nurture Teacher and the Class Teacher.
- Success also relies upon the Class Teacher being open to learning about the difficulties faced by children, and a willingness to try strategies identified in the Hub. This supports the child to have a more coherent and understanding experience of school.
- It is less helpful when the class teacher sees the child's time in the Hub as a "break" for them, or sees it as necessary time-out.

### 3. **Importance of sharing training, stories and ethos with wider school staff** – it is essential to get the wider school involved in the nurture hub.

Some examples of good practice would be:

- Inviting school and support staff into the hub for a morning to see the children in a different context.
- Sharing stories of the children outside the hub.
- Training whole school staff in nurturing approaches.
- Making sure there is a shared understanding about the ethos of the Hub.
- New staff need to be trained on entry to the school.

### 4. **Nurture hub success is dependent upon the support of the school leadership team**

- The Senior Leadership Teams benefit from being trained in nurturing approaches
- Nurturing approaches need to be included in the School Improvement Planning cycle in order to remain a live priority throughout the school
- Nurture hubs need to be supported financially and logistically by management teams. This might include for example the provision of toast and tea at breakfast time, healthy snacks for social meal times, craft materials for parent engagement sessions, and maintaining small pets within the Hub such as a rabbit or hamster.

### 5. **Use of Boxalls and Beyond Boxall materials:**

- When the Boxall profile is used rigorously it provides a robust measure of progress for each individual child. However, it is not currently consistently used for all children accessing Nurture Hubs in Aberdeenshire due to the flexible nature of the provision.
- When used, the Boxall profile allows information to be recorded and also shared with the class teacher which is helpful
- "Beyond the Boxall" allows class teachers to take concrete steps to address difficult behaviours that certain children may struggle with on returning to class (Colley, Rae, Stollery, Roden and NGN, 2013).

### 6. **Personal development of Nurture Hub staff:**

- The need for personal development, through peer mentoring opportunities and other training opportunities is important.

- This includes specific training on positive behaviour management, on attachment theory, resilience and positive mental health. It also involves being responsive to other needs that staff may come across as they arise.
- It may involve the input from other professionals such as educational psychology, health professionals, social work etc.
- It also includes the sharing of good practice between school with Hubs
- Where this works well, e.g. a cluster of schools meet up and share good practice, this helps all staff in the cluster to develop.
- This in turn helps to safeguard staff mental health
- Nurture staff have ongoing development needs in terms of supporting children’s social, emotional and mental health needs.
  - Supervisory support is important as the role is a departure from mainstream teaching, and can be emotionally demanding.
  - There was evidence that experience within the Nurture Hub can transfer back into mainstream classroom practice. As one participant reflected, it had *“enhanced and deepened my Class Teacher nurturing approach. I realised it’s a waste of your breath shouting and I am more comfortable using other strategies”*

#### **7. Transition back to mainstream class full time:**

- The Nurture Hubs interviewed have had around 85 children over the last three years accessing regular nurture input using the recommended model outlined in the literature e.g. mornings in the Hub and afternoons in their mainstream class.
- Most children stay 2-6 terms but some have stayed as long as three years.
- Nurture teachers were clear that many of these children have transitioned successfully however they sometimes “need to push for this” to happen with mainstream staff.
- Some transitions have failed and the child ends up in the Nurture Hub for longer. This is often due to a lack of training or understanding on the part of the class teacher and differences in priorities between the Nurture Hub and the class e.g. in their approaches to ‘academic’ work.
- Schools are currently trialling different approaches to this model e.g. mornings in class and afternoons in the Hub in order to facilitate access to different parts of the curriculum.

#### **8. Nurture Hub outreach:**

- All four schools interviewed were using the Nurture Hub flexibly to provide outreach to various groups of children alongside the children who were formally accessing the Nurture Hub.
- These groups have included: groups of bereaved children, children who have experienced loss and trauma using Seasons for Growth, teaching empathy using Roots of Empathy, group running to engage children who struggle in the playground, social skills, early intervention with groups of P1’s who are struggling with interactions/behaviour and other planned targeted outreach.

#### **9. Practicalities of running the Nurture Hub:**

- When funding for food, activities, crafts and play is streamlined within school budgets and prioritised by senior management this makes running the Nurture Hub much easier. In some areas Nurture Hubs are reliant upon fundraising efforts, which makes running the Nurture Hub much more challenging for the staff involved.

#### **10. Engagement of the wider community:**

- When Nurture Hubs are understood by the wider community outside the school, this helps them to function better. This is because it allows for consistent approaches used between home, school and other professionals involved with the child or family. One example of this is Nurture Hubs that invite Family Support Workers termly for breakfast or have a parent craft session termly to engage parents in their children’s learning.
- Engagement of other professionals creates better multi-agency working and creates ripples of nurture which extend beyond the school. It was clear that without this engagement, or when this disappears things become harder as there are less opportunities to share strategies from school to wider professionals, e.g. social work/family support workers. In turn this causes the experience of the child to be more fragmented.

## What about the children? (Impact on pupils)

The other major theme was the **impact on the children** that staff have seen accessing the Nurture Hubs. This was evaluated both qualitatively through the interview and by sampling some of the Boxall data which was available for children.

Staff said:

*“It gives us a chance to look at behaviours and work out how to help”*

*“Pupils are using more emotional language”*

*“Pupils are able to play outside again”*

*“They are sharing coping strategies and reminding others of them”*

*“They can speak through situations more readily instead of showing us by their behaviour”*

*“Can cope with losing”*

*“Feel valued within the group, one of the cogs that make it run”*

They talked about: developing basic attention, concentration and focus, time to talk, security and trust through consistent routine, building confidence through experiencing success, developing intrinsic motivation-not reward based, children feeling valued and respected, building self-esteem, understand others feelings, increased attainment, less emotional outbursts and shorter incidents, more sharing, improved resilience and ability to identify their own targets and recognise when they need support.

Visible things like eye contact, heads held high, more verbal contributions, turn taking were also mentioned and one school said that beyond the Hub it also impacted parents well-being stating *“Parents are happier because their children are included”*.

The Boxall profiles reviewed by the group provided some evidence of the development of key skills for children and reduction in barriers to learning. Pre- and post-Boxalls were not available for all children that had been through the Nurture Hubs and obviously were not appropriate for all those within the school who were supported by Nurture Hub outreach. Thus, the evidence of nurture hub impact was primarily based on professional judgement. Whilst such professional judgement is extremely important, a more concrete data-driven approach to nurture hub impact may be helpful in the future.

## Recommendations for Learning Hubs

- **Senior management** need to be able to fully support and prioritise the Nurture Hub in order for it to be effective. This includes keeping Nurture on the Development Plan staffing, staff development and funding for the Hub.
- **Nurture Hub staff development** needs to be a priority for in order to ensure they are learning and their mental health needs are met.
- **Ethos of Nurture Hub** (Nurturing Approaches) need to be shared with the wider school
- **Good relationships** with class teachers need to be cultivated to enable smooth transition
- Staff need to be **consistent** and work well together (Teacher and PSA) as well as with the wider school.
- Staff need to be **reflective** and willing to learn.
- Where there is a Nurture Hub, **clear guidelines** need to be in place about how the Nurture Hub operates e.g. the ages of children, the length of time that children can stay in the Nurture Hub.
- **Shared strategies for management of behaviour** by Nurture Hub and class teacher works best.
- Need to find creative ways to **engage the wider community**, including parents, social workers, family support etc. within the Nurture Hub
- If Nurture Hub workers are used flexibly, **clear delineation of roles** needs to be outlined so that they are working to their strengths with the right children and to avoid overlap with Support for Learning or Intervention and Prevention work.

## Recommendations for Local Authority

It is clear from the information above, within the report and recommendations that there are several elements that are contributing to the success of Nurture Hubs, and a number of factors that may inhibit or occlude their impact on outcomes for children. Overall, a nurture hub is more likely to be successful in supporting outcomes for children when it is situated within an inclusive school that views nurture as a priority for the whole school.

The limitations of the current report are that on some occasions robust quantitative data is not being reviewed regularly. This has resulted in limited tangible evidence about the gains that children have made in terms of social and emotional development as a result of accessing the Hubs. Moreover, the findings of this report are based on the views and experiences of only four Nurture Hubs. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with the findings of Lucas (1999) and Doyle (2003) both of whom have carried out research on the impact of Nurture Hubs within the wider school community.

It is the recommendation of the evaluation working group that the outcomes of this study are embedded within future Aberdeenshire nurture group training and guidelines.

## References

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