EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE

"The Case for Nurture"

Attainment, Equity and Mental Health

Across Scotland there is clear evidence of a significant and persistent gap in attainment between children and young people from the wealthiest and the poorest households (Sosu & Ellis, 2014). Children from higher income families significantly outperform those from low income families at ages 3 and 5 years. By age 15 years, children from low income families are around 2 years schooling behind their peers. They are significantly less likely to progress from school to further or higher education, employment, training or voluntary work, increasing the likelihood that the poverty gap is perpetuated through the generations. This equity gap extends beyond the most deprived 20% of Scotland's population, holding true for school leavers at every single decile of area deprivation.

The National Improvement Framework sets out a vision for Scottish Education of raising attainment and achieving equity in the system, which ensures that every child has the same chance to succeed regardless of family background and socio-economic status (Aberdeenshire National Improvement Framework Plan, 2018-19 Scottish Government, 2019;).

Improving mental health outcomes for children and young people is also a significant priority at both local and national level (Aberdeenshire Children's Services Plan 2017-2020; Scottish Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027).

Emotional wellbeing and educational attainment are inextricably linked. Children and young people with emotional and mental health difficulties are more likely to have disrupted education, behavioural issues, school attendance issues, and general lower educational attainments and achievements (Knapp & Lemmi, 2014). Mental health outcomes are also poorer for those living in less affluent circumstances, which serves to further compound the poverty related attainment gap (Black & Martin, 2015).

Teacher wellbeing has an important impact on student wellbeing and academic achievement (Wellbeing Australia, 2011) and effective teaching can significantly improve outcomes for children (Hattie, 2012). A recent study of teacher wellbeing in the United Kingdom, revealed correlations between teacher wellbeing and student attainment (Education Support Partnership, 2017).

Strong teacher-student relationships are also correlated to teachers' motivation. Klassen, Perry & Fretzel (2012) suggest that strong relationships can lead

to increases in student engagement, learning and motivation, as well as teachers' self-reported measures of positive emotions.

In an American study of 492 teachers from primary and secondary schools, who had four years or less experience of teaching, Chang (2013,) provided evidence which showed the correlation between teachers' self-reported levels of feelings of burnout and stress following one disruptive incident in the classroom which had self-reported high levels of intense unpleasant emotion. This supports the finding of Klassen et al. (2012) and the importance of strong teacher-student relationships.

Nurture in Aberdeenshire

Aberdeenshire Education & Children's Services view "nurture" as a key approach to supporting the social and emotional needs of children and young people, thereby laying the foundations for equity and improved attainment outcomes (Aberdeenshire National Improvement Framework Plan, 2018-19).

The Scottish Government's "Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Promoting and Managing School Attendance" Guidance (2019) makes explicit reference to nurture, alongside solution-oriented and restorative practices, as effective whole school approaches to improving relationships and behaviour, and subsequently, school attendance. As such, nurture is identified as one of the key pillars of inclusion within Aberdeenshire's emerging "*Promoting an inclusive culture and ethos through positive relationships*" strategy.

Universal Nurture

Universal nurture describes whole school approaches that draw on attachment and resilience theory in order to benefit every child or young person in the establishment. Within a whole school approach to nurture, every member of staff views interactions with children and young people through the lens of 6 key nurture principles – (1) Learning is understood developmentally; (2) The school and classroom offers a safe base; (3) Nurture is important for the development of self-esteem; (4) Language is understood as a vital means of communication; (5) All behaviour is communication; and (6) Transitions are significant in the lives of children. Positive relationships across the school that are characterised by attunement, caring and empathy are central to universal nurture.

Research has found that positive relationships correlate with academic outcomes, with teachers who frame practice in relational terms being more likely to foster motivated, engaged and achieving pupils (Boyd, MacNeill & Sullivan, 2006; Martin & Dowson, 2009). In his seminal research into the factors that make the most difference to student achievement, John Hattie (2009) found that teacher-pupil relationships yield a highly significant effect size of 0.72 (anything above 0.4 is regarded as being worthy of

attention). In other words, the relationship that teachers have with their pupils dictate the impact they will have on their pupils' educational achievement.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, positive relationships also play a vital role in our physical and mental wellbeing, providing us with a sense of belonging and purpose in life. However, the Mental Health Foundation (2016) describe relationships as the "forgotten" foundation of wellbeing, with more people feeling lonely and disconnected than ever before, despite the extensive evidence base (Harvard, 2010) showing that good-quality relationships can help us to live longer and happier lives, with fewer mental health problems.

Within the school context, feeling safe and connected to school through relationships can provide young people with the environment and social support that is essential for positive mental health outcomes (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). In addition, positive attachments between pupils and teachers have been linked to lower levels of misbehaviour and delinquency at ages 13 and 15 respectively (Smith, 2006).

For children and young people who have experienced adversity and emotional trauma, safe adult-child relationships, underpinned by an understanding of the principles of nurture, become even more important in helping to ensure positive outcomes. Every single adult-child interaction, no matter how small, can have a huge impact on the child – for better or for worse. We now know that the brain continues to develop well into adulthood and is changed and influenced by all of our interactions, demonstrating the importance of implementing approaches such as nurture at a whole-school level (Gage, 2004).

Targeted nurture
Targeted nurture interventions are designed to support individual children and young people with relationships, emotional regulation and self-esteem. Often, although not always, these children and young people will have experienced some degree of adversity in their lives.

A nurture group is an in-school intervention for children whose emotional, social, behavioural and cognitive learning needs cannot be met in their entirety within a 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).

Research has consistently shown that targeted nurture groups are most effective when implemented within a culture of universal nurture (Lucas, 1999; Doyle, 2003; Aberdeenshire EPS, 2017).

Conclusion

The case for nurture is perhaps best summed up by Dr Eric Jensen, author of Teaching with Poverty in Mind (2009), who explains, "*Not getting the opportunity to form solid attachments initiates a stream of long-term physiological, psychological, and sociological consequences for children…no curriculum, instruction or assessment, however high-quality, will succeed in a hostile social climate*."

Nurture is founded on sound, evidence-based, psychological principles which help foster a whole school culture of positive relationships. Nurture approaches enable a holistic approach to understanding and supporting children and young people, thereby laying the groundwork for improvements to both wellbeing and learning. As such, the philosophy of nurture approaches articulates perfectly with the principles and values of Getting It Right For Every Child, and Curriculum for Excellence.

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