



“Fantabulosa!” Children’s perceptions of one secondary school Nurture Group

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**ABSTRACT**

In the current educational climate, with high exclusion rates and fears over disruptive behaviours in schools increasing, research into interventions such as Nurture Groups (NG) designed to help children cope with behavioural, emotional and social problems, is increasingly important. The current study has built on research into NG effectiveness, looking at children’s perceptions of a NG in a secondary school, through questionnaires and interviews. It was found that many children felt the NG has helped them with behaviour and confidence, and particularly liked the home environment of the NG classroom; however, their opinions of the NG were often difficult to separate from affection for the NG teacher, suggesting teaching style is essential to NG effectiveness. Implications for teacher training are discussed, and conclusions also emphasise the importance of whole-school support for NG success.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>NURTURE GROUPS</b>	<b>ATTACHMENT THEORY</b>	<b>PUPIL OPINION</b>	<b>SOCIAL EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES</b>
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## **Introduction: My Reasons for Studying Nurture Groups**

I have always been particularly interested in children with special educational needs, including behavioural and emotional difficulties; fostered by topics covered in my PinE degree, as well as a range of work experience I have undertaken. My interest in Nurture Groups (NG) as a strategy for helping children with emotional and behavioural problems started upon viewing a Channel 4 dispatches documentary named "Britain's Challenging Children" (January, 2009), which follows schools who were attempting 'innovative' methods to tackle growing behavioural problems. This led me to read some of the academic journals discussing NGs as well as information provided on the Nurture Group Network website. Reading that NGs are based primarily on attachment theory further caught my attention as I have studied Bowlby and attachment ideas fairly extensively over the past few years. I noticed that the evaluative research on NGs is rather limited; especially considering that the intervention has been around for nearly 40 years; and therefore felt it would be a good area to conduct further research. Specifically, it appeared that insight into the children's own perspectives on the intervention was scarce and having discussed the importance of listening to children in research during a research methods module of my degree I decided this would be important to explore.

## **Literature Review**

Although challenging behaviours have long been prevalent within schools, the last decade has seen a growing public concern with young persons' problem behaviours (Gray, Miller & Noakes, 1994). Boxall and Bennathon (2000) highlight the difficulty obtaining accurate statistics of the prevalence of behavioural difficulties, however, a recent survey of teachers' views on pupil behaviour found that almost two thirds believed disruptive behaviour to have increased since they began teaching, particularly the severity of misbehaviours of a minority of students (Derrington, 2008). Exclusions from school on behavioural grounds have been seen to rise year by year, enhancing the public concern (Gray et al.). For example, in 1993/4 the number of permanent exclusions had risen by almost 5,000 compared to three years previously (Boxall & Bennathon). Following a report by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998) recommending that schools reduce the number of permanent and fixed-term exclusions by a third before 2002, exclusion rates were seen to decline. However recent statistics suggest that although the number of permanent exclusions had fallen to 8,130 in 2007/8 (DCSF, 2009), compared to over 12,000 in 1998 (DCSF, 2010), they have fluctuated through the years, and still remain relatively high. High exclusion rates may only be partly due to increasing incidents of difficult behaviour, also possibly caused by more punitive public attitudes; emphases on comparing school performance; and a narrower view of education (Gray et al.), however Boxall and Bennathon maintain that children are not excluded "without good reason" (p.2) and avoiding permanent exclusions is extremely important due the long term negative effects, both for the individual and society. What is more, they point out that for every child with extreme enough problems to be excluded are several more "not quite at that point but still drastically failing to achieve adequate standards of work and behaviour and often seriously effecting the progress of their classmates" (p.3). Similarly, Derrington highlights that of the 30,600 pupils with statements of

behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) in 2008, a majority are taught within mainstream schools where many teachers feel there are “insufficient levels of support and specialist help for pupils with BESD” resulting in “a negative impact on teaching and learning, not only for the pupils with BESD but also on the rest of the class” (p.26). In fact, children with BESD are claimed to be “the group of pupils with SEN least likely to receive effective support and the most likely to receive support too late” (Ofsted, 2006, cited in Derrington, p.26); emphasising the importance of research into the reasons behind children’s emotional and behavioural issues as well as into interventions that can attempt to alleviate them.

Many different interventions aimed at tackling children’s challenging behaviours in school have been designed based on various theoretical grounds, such as genetic theories, or social explanations that blame problem behaviours on family or schools (Gray et al., 1994). One intervention method which has become increasingly popular is the Nurture Group (NG), which is based primarily upon attachment theory (O’Conner & Colwell, 2002). NGs have been recognised by the DfEE (1997, cited by Sanders, 2007) as a useful early intervention for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and an effective method for achieving inclusive educational goals (ILEA, 1985, cited by Boxall & Bennathon, 2000). O’Conner and Colwell suggest that NGs have maintained the interest of “researchers, policy makers and practitioners” (p.96), however the published research on NGs is actually fairly limited and is often conducted by persons already involved in particular groups (e.g. Cooke, Yeomans & Parkes, 2008) or using measures taken by teachers who run the NG (e.g. O’Conner & Colwell, 2002; Sanders, 2007), thus reducing the reliability of research due to increased possibility of bias. What is more, there is a lack of in-depth research into children’s perceptions of the groups. The current study has therefore aimed to build on research into the effectiveness of NGs and focus specifically on children’s perceptions. The following literature review will highlight the historical context of NGs, findings of existing research into their effectiveness, and the importance of listening to children’s opinions in the context of education before outlining aims of the current study.

### **What are Nurture Groups?**

Nurture Groups were initially set up in the early 1970s by Marjorie Boxall, an Educational Psychologist working in the Inner London Educational Authority (Boxall & Bennathon, 2000). However popularity of the groups has been more recent, with numbers growing rapidly in the past ten years reaching over 1000 in the UK in 2009 (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Colley, 2009). Initially, the groups were set up in primary schools, involving around 12 pupils and run by one teacher and an assistant (Boxall & Bennathon). The intervention was designed based on principles from developmental psychology, predominantly attachment theory (see for example Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby emphasised the importance of creating early attachments with a primary caregiver on later mental adjustment, as this attachment provides an internal working model of relationships affecting all consecutive social interactions. Creation of a positive internal working model is argued to be reliant on sensitive and appropriate responses by the caregiver to the infant’s needs, and unsupportive attachment experiences can develop a model of others as unavailable and may lead to low self-esteem and viewing oneself as unworthy and unlovable (O’Connor &

Colwell, 2002). NGs aim to make up for early attachment insecurities believed to lead to problematic behaviours, by providing a secure environment and a trusting supportive relationship with the teacher as a replacement attachment figure (O'Connor & Colwell). Counteracting negative infant attachment experiences is aimed to be achieved through maintaining consistent staffing; modelling of positive behaviour between teacher and assistant; emphasising organisation and routine; small group size; matching curriculum to the developmental level of each child; and providing a secure base (Cooke et al., 2008). NG staff have been found to use a greater amount of positive verbal and non-verbal communications than teachers in normal classrooms, creating an environment "conducive to fostering positive self-esteem" (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003, p.119), thus also following Maslow's (1970, cited in Cooper, Arnold, & Boyd, 2001) hierarchy of needs through offering support for self-esteem and self-actualisation within a context of safety and security which provides the necessary foundation for higher level needs.

A 'classic' NG will be set out like a home environment with a comfortable sofa area and kitchen as well as a working area, and follows principles of understanding and the importance of communication in allowing developmental progression in a safe environment eventually leading to reintegration to mainstream classes. Whole-school support is important, as is parental involvement, and many groups will be part of the Nurture Group Network (NGN) which offers training courses as well as a Boxall Quality Mark Award for groups found to be effectively following the nurture criteria (Colley, 2009). An important aspect of NGs is record-keeping usually through use of the Boxall Profile, a diagnostic tool developed to help assess the needs of each child and the progress made in the group (Boxall & Bennathon, 2000). Other important features include the use of a mirror to help children become aware of their emotions; games that emphasise self-control; breakfast time to teach turn-taking and allow informal conversation and enhance trust (Boxall & Bennathon); and developing emotional literacy (Colley, 2009). Cooper et al. (1998, cited in Cooper & Whitebread, 2007) found that NG aims and principles should be integrated into the school as well as LEA policies and structures to avoid becoming an exclusionary provision; and have identified four variations of NG currently running in UK education including the classic model; variations of structure (e.g. part-time or with different age groups); groups that don't adhere to *all* the Boxall principles; and finally groups that distort the principles and are argued to be "potentially dangerous" (Cooper & Whitebread, p.178).

## **Research Base**

### ***Primary Schools***

Early research into the effectiveness of NG provision was positive, showing success in keeping children within mainstream education and improving morale of the school staff (Boxall & Bennathon, 2000). A small study in the 1980s of a NG in Enfield, London, found greater improvements for pupils in the NG in IQ and general response to school than the control group (Holmes, 1982, cited in Boxall & Bennathon). Over ten years later, another study found that in 1995 83% of pupils who had attended NGs in Enfield since the 1980s had reintegrated without any additional support

(Iszatt & Wasilewska, 1997, cited in O'Conner & Colwell, 2001). In comparison, 35% of a control population, who had been assessed as having similar levels of difficulty to those attending NGs, had been placed in special schools and only 55% were coping in mainstream education without additional help (Iszatt & Wasilewska, cited in Cooper et al., 2001).

Recent research has revealed a more complex picture. O'Conner and Colwell (2001) found short term gains in behaviour and emotional stability improvements for all twelve participants, enabling return to mainstream classes. However, in the long-term, they found less consistent results, with pupils maintaining improvements in some strands of the developmental diagnostic profile measurements after two years but not in all areas, particularly when compared to measures taken on first exiting nurture provision. They suggest that continued nurturing may be needed to maintain changes for some children, especially in cases where home environments remain disruptive. They also argue that despite the regression in some areas of behaviour and emotional stability, the real effectiveness of NGs is highlighted by the fact that the majority of NG students remain in mainstream education when they likely would have been excluded or placed in special school provision otherwise. There are a number of limitations of this study as it has a very small sample size, and increased possibility of bias in the measurements as they were taken by the NG teacher. However, similar short-term results have been found in other studies, such as Cooper et al. (2001) who found social, emotional and behavioural progress for a significant proportion of the 216 NG pupil participants. Sanders (2007) also found short-term social, emotional, behavioural and academic gains for all their participants; significantly greater than improvements in their control group. Although the sample in this study was also small, assessing the Boxall Profiles from only one NG, Sanders also included observation measures which allowed for greater insight into which areas showed the greatest improvements. It was suggested that children's concentration, interactions with each other and with staff, cooperation, confidence, ability to empathise and to describe their own feelings, and control of behaviours were all reported to improve greatly. Additionally, both Sanders and Cooper et al. found positive effects of the NG provision on whole school attitudes and teachers' confidence in dealing with children's difficult behaviours, as well as positive effects on parents' attitudes toward their child and schooling. In a continuation of Cooper et al.'s research, Cooper and Whitebread (2007) found significant improvements over four terms in the children's social, emotional and behavioural functioning, with greatest behavioural improvements occurring in the first terms and mainly cognitive engagement continuing to improve in the last two terms. They also noted that NGs which have been established for more than two years were more effective, suggesting increased teacher competence and confidence with time. Teacher style has also been emphasised as particularly important to NG effectiveness, suggesting that NG teachers tend to use more statements focused on supporting autonomy, giving specific praise, and encouraging belonging in a class, than normal class teachers (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003). Additionally, NG teachers have been found to use more positive non-verbal behaviours that convey feelings of warmth, and tend to deal with inappropriate behaviour more calmly and positively than teachers in the normal classroom. These forms of communication and teaching style have been linked to increasing self-esteem in previous research, suggesting they may be the key to positive effects of NGs on pupils' self esteem (Colwell & O'Connor).

Some negative aspects of NG provisions have been identified by Sanders (2007), who found that some NG teachers could feel isolated and sometimes undermined by other teachers in the school, emphasising the need for whole-school understanding and support for the intervention. It is suggested that some teachers were not fully supportive of the NG as they felt they lost their own relationship with NG children; were expecting immediate gains and did not appreciate small step changes; and worried that the children would “play members of staff off against each other” (p.56). Some staff members also expressed feeling NG staff had ‘an easy time’ since they only had to manage a small number of children and had less curriculum pressure. Sanders argues that allowing other teachers access to the NG may help alleviate tensions, and it is also important to give NG staff additional support from outside agencies. Sanders also highlighted curriculum pressures as a source of stress for NG teachers, as other teachers were concerned pupils would have limited access to the curriculum, and NG teachers themselves claimed to have difficulty in committing to NG principles whilst still being seen as ‘teaching’. She suggests that part-time NGs may be more effective for generalisation to mainstream classes and later reintegration, and may also reduce friction between teachers since pupils spend more time in mainstream classes allowing teachers to share responsibility more equally. Supporting this suggestion, Cooper et al. (2001) found that some part-time NGs, where pupils attend for ‘half’ the week compared to the usual 4.5 days, were seeing faster improvements, although they highlight that one school with particularly high scores inflated the overall results. Nonetheless, all the part-time groups were at or above the mean improvement level. Likewise, Binnie and Allen (2008) found a significant positive effect of part-time NGs across six schools (with pupils attending for a maximum of 4 mornings a week), measured by improvements on the Boxall Profile. They also found similar positive responses from parents and teachers and perceptions of whole-school impact to research on full-time groups. They therefore argue the part-time model does not compromise any of the gains found from full-time NGs and, as argued by Sanders, can in fact be more effective for generalisation of behaviour and providing more positive transitions for children back into mainstream full-time. They do however warn that schools need to “give careful consideration” (p.214) to the challenges of a part-time NG model, particularly organising liaison time with class teachers.

### ***Secondary School Nurture Groups***

Recently, there have been a growing number of NGs introduced in secondary schools, adapting the ‘classic’ model to suit the differing developmental needs of older pupils (Colley, 2009). Boxall and Bennathon (2000) caution that ‘replicating of early mother-child relationships central to nurture group thinking does not easily translate to adolescence’ (p.130), however they tentatively suggest that NGs using the original principles as ‘inspiration’ with more appropriate variations of the activities may be successful at secondary school level. For example, having breakfast with toast and tea rather than milk and biscuits (Boxall & Bennathon), and including group discussions that reflect adolescent interests and needs (Cooke et al., 2008). Although research on the effectiveness of secondary school NGs is very limited, it so far appears to support this proposal. A case study of one NG named ‘The Oasis’ has suggested that there can be gains for Key Stage 3 pupils, although improvements may take longer and may be less significant in certain areas such as self-negating

(Cooke et al.). Steer (2009, cited in Colley) reports that head teachers have recognised the importance of NGs for supporting secondary pupils who are most at risk, and Ofsted reports have acknowledged the success of NGs in a number of secondary schools (see Colley for examples). Interviews with secondary practitioners has emphasised positive experiences of NGs in secondary settings, and they have been suggested to be particularly useful in helping adolescents deal with bereavement, loss and trauma, and the stressful transition from Primary to Secondary school (Colley). However, Colley stresses that it is important to take account of additional issues which arise in adolescence not necessarily as related to Attachment Theory, such as peer relations and self-image. Cooke et al. also argue elements of the diagnostic profile section of the Boxall Profile are inappropriate for assessing adolescents. Accordingly a new version of the Boxall Profile for older pupils is due for release later this year. As yet, no other research is available on secondary school NGs, suggesting this is an area where further research is greatly desirable, particularly to see if results are as positive as research into primary NGs and what variations prove most effective for this age group.

### **Researching Children's Perceptions**

A number of studies into NG effectiveness have included parent's perceptions of the impact of NGs on their child and impact of the group in home life and family relationships, finding a majority of positive responses (see for example Binnie & Allen, 2007; Cooper et al., 2001; March & Healy, 2007, cited in Binnie & Allen). In contrast, very little exploration has been done into children's perceptions. Only two studies have included research into children's views of their NG, both of which summarise the responses very briefly. Cooper et al. (2001) found positive references to a number of aspects of NGs such as the relationships, calm atmosphere, pleasant physical environment and play opportunities. However, they note that there was difficulty interviewing many of the children as they were guarded, not wanting to be disloyal to their teachers or school. Sanders (2007) also conducted interviews with children, finding that the children liked school more on exiting NG than previously; had better friendships; and better concepts of themselves as learners. She suggests that further research into what children value from their NG experience and the reasons they were in the group would be helpful for teachers and schools to identify success factors of the NGs.

Recently legislation and policy has moved towards acknowledging the importance of listening to children's contributions when making decisions over their welfare and education. For example, the 1989 Children Act (cited in Lloyd-Smith & Davies, 1995) and 2003 DfES publication *Every Child Matters* (cited in Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007) highlight the importance of giving young people the opportunity to put forward their opinions and take part in decisions important to them. Lloyd-Smith and Davies suggest this represents an ideological shift towards promoting pupils as active and important "consumers of education" rather than "passive recipients" (p.9). Similarly, James (1999, p.231) argues that along with a realisation that 'childhood' is a socially-constructed phenomenon has been the acceptance of recognising children as 'social actors' and persons in their own right who have their own views and opinions which do not necessarily correlate with those of adults around them. Pupils' perceptions



have been recognised as fundamental to the effectiveness of schools, as although their observations may not always be accurate, they reflect attitudes toward school which can have a large effect on pupil behaviour (Keys and Fernandes, 1993, cited in Lloyd-Smith & Davies). Additionally, increasing pupils' involvement in their education is argued to foster enhanced commitment to learning (Rudduck & McIntyre) and contribute towards promoting good-behaviour in schools (Elton Report, DES, 1989, cited in Lloyd-Smith & Davies). Additionally, researchers have found that many young people clearly appreciate having the 'opportunity to talk and be listened to' (Cooper, 1993, p.47).

Wade and Moore (1993, cited in Lloyd-Smith & Davies, 1995) suggest that some teachers view pupil consultation as time-wasting and disrupting the power balance of traditional teacher-pupil relationships, and research has suggested that pupil consultation in most areas of education is uncommon especially with children who are considered disruptive or have SENs (Garner, 1992; Wade & Moore; both cited in Lloyd-Smith & Davies). In comparison with participation, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) suggest that consultation is more risky for destabilising traditional teacher-pupil relations, however they argue that it can provide the opportunity for teachers to learn from their pupils how both teaching and learning can become "more effective, more meaningful and more enjoyable" as well as creating a task "teachers and pupils can undertake collaboratively" (p.10), "creating a climate for mutual respect between teachers and students"(p.11), whilst allowing pupils to better understand their learning, and feel more confident in contributing to the improvement of learning conditions. Similarly, Lloyd-Smith and Davies (1995, p.11) argue that empirical research is an important tool for providing children with space "to reflect on their educational experience and provide insights for policy makers and practitioners into the adequacy and effectiveness of provision". Research would therefore suggest an important aspect of evaluating NGs as an educational provision is the perceptions of children affected by it.

## Summary

Overall, the research on NGs appears positive, showing gains for children in the groups as well as for whole-school attitudes and teacher confidence. However, there have been a number of cautions outlined by authors, such as the difficulties of juggling curriculum demands with emotional needs of the children, other teachers undermining the NG, and difficulties with generalising behaviours to mainstream settings. Additionally, very little research has been done on the effectiveness of NGs in secondary schools, which are becoming increasingly prevalent; and there is limited effort to discover the views of children on the intervention. The present study has thus aimed to address these gaps in recognition both of the growing importance placed on children's opinions and the importance of assessing the effectiveness of interventions which could help to reduce emotional and behavioural problems in schools.

## The Present Study

In attempting to fill the gaps outlined above, the main research aim is to look at the perceptions of secondary school pupils on NGs including their effectiveness and purpose. Within this, the main research questions are:

1. *Do the perceptions of children within a NG confirm the positive evaluations found from teachers, parents and developmental scores in previous research?*
2. *What aspects of NGs do children identify as particularly positive and do they identify any negative aspects?*
3. *Are the perceptions of current NG attendees similar or different to those of pupils who have reintegrated into mainstream classes?*
4. *How do children in a school containing a NG, but not directly involved themselves, perceive the group?*

The fourth question was added following interviews with NG attendees due to emphasis given by these pupils on perceived negative opinions of the NG by other students in the school. It thus appeared valuable to see how prevalent such negative opinions actually were. Considering the perceptions of children affected both directly and indirectly by NG provision has important implications for the successful running of groups and evaluation of their effectiveness from a different angle than previously researched. Looking at the perceptions of secondary pupils will build on the limited study in this area and may provide valuable comparisons to perceptions of children in primary schools found in previous research.

## Method

This research has mainly followed the qualitative research discipline. The main aim of the study in focusing on perceptions invites a more qualitative, interpretive design as the data will be subjective in nature. As the aim of researching perceptions was situated within the context of exploring the effectiveness of NGs, it was viewed as important to include a number of measures to allow for triangulation. Therefore, along with the main interviews conducted with pupils; informal interviews with the teacher and a number of questionnaire forms were also used. Additionally, a small amount of quantitative data has been included to provide triangulation between research disciplines as well as within the qualitative method, as combining qualitative and quantitative measures has been argued to be more powerful than the use of each in isolation (Gorard & Taylor, 2004).

## Participants and Design

Participants were from one secondary school in the North West of England, chosen after searching school websites and contacting the NGN for a list of schools in the area registered as having a NG. Focus was placed on the secondary school for two reasons. Firstly as there has been generally less research done on NGs in secondary schools, and secondly due to the view that a greater quality of data could be gained from older pupils, particularly with a sample of individuals with emotional

and behavioural difficulties. This assumption was based on personal experience as well as other research, for example Cooper (1993) who interviewed boys with behavioural issues and suggested an older sample of 13-17 year olds was used since they would likely cope better with an interview situation and give lengthier responses.

The NG was in its fifth year of running when research took place. The group was run by a female teacher who had previously run a NG at the connected primary school, and two teaching assistants. Previous to this teacher taking over, the NG had been present but not run with all the nurture principles. At the time of research, the group fell under 'new variant Nurture Group' as classified by Cooper & Whitebread (2007), following the core principles and structure of the classic approach but with older pupils and part-time attendance of on average two out of five lesson periods a day. The group is for year 7 and 8 pupils only; older pupils have a similar facility labelled 'Enrichment' which has a greater focus on curriculum. The NG room is open to all pupils at break times through the school day. A summary of the participants from each research method used is displayed in Table 1 and additional information is provided in the following paragraphs.

**Table 1**  
**Participant summary**

Participants	Focus Groups		Individual Interviews		Questionnaires		Teacher Presented Questionnaires	Free-Written Statements	RRS Scores	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total	Total	Male	Female
<b>Year 7</b>										
Currently in NG	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	Unknown**	1*	1*
Reintegrated from NG	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	Unknown**	-	-
Never In NG	-	-	-	-	9	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Year 8</b>										
Currently in NG	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	Unknown**	2*	1*
Reintegrated from NG	-	-	-	-	4	1	Unknown**	Unknown**	-	-
Never In NG	-	-	-	-	3	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Year 9</b>										
Currently in NG	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Unknown**	-	-
Reintegrated from NG	4	1	1*	1*	4	1*	Unknown**	Unknown**	4*	1*
Never In NG	-	-	-	-	2	2	-	-	-	-
<b>Teacher</b>	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>

Note. \*Same pupils that participated in the Focus Group(s). \*\*Actual number unknown as all responses were made anonymous by NG teacher.

## ***Interviews***

Overall, ten students were interviewed either individually or in groups, five of whom were currently in NG, and five who had reintegrated back into mainstream classes full-time. Three small focus groups were undertaken lasting around thirty minutes: one containing four year 7 and 8 pupils; one with four year 9 pupils; and a smaller group of two boys, from year 8 and 9. Additionally two individual interviews of around fifteen minutes were obtained with two year 9 pupils who had already participated in a focus group of four, in order to allow for greater exploration of sensitive issues. All the children interviewed voluntarily agreed to talk, after being asked by the NG teacher. A number of current NG pupils, particularly those in Year 7, refused to participate. The selection of re-integrated children asked to participate in interviews was somewhat biased, as the group teacher asked specific children who she suggested would feel more comfortable talking with me. The implications of this are acknowledged in the Discussion section.

A semi-structured set of questions were used, altered slightly dependent on whether the children were currently attending NG or had integrated back into mainstream full-time. All children read and signed a consent form. Due to the vulnerable nature of the participants, their right to withdraw was particularly emphasised, with great attention paid during the interviews and focus groups to each child's outward display of emotion to ensure none of the children experienced distress during the process. All interviews and focus groups were tape-recorded, although one individual interview failed to record and was therefore written up from memory immediately following the end of the interview. Letters were sent home to the parents or guardians of all children who participated in the interviews, informing them of the nature and purpose of the research and that their child would be recorded. No real names of the children interviewed, nor children, teachers, and schools mentioned during interviews were used in the written transcript.

## ***Quantitative Measures***

Reintegration Readiness Scale (RRS; Doyle, 2001) scores were obtained for the ten pupils interviewed. The RRS was developed to specifically plan for reintegration, allow more detailed analysis of children's progress at shorter intervals, and enable more specific targets for improvement (Doyle). The scale was developed using nurture principles and a number of previous developmental progress scales; it has been found to be successful in accurately measuring readiness for reintegration of NG pupils into mainstream classes. Five main areas are measured on a scale from 1 (rarely fulfils criteria) to 4 (almost always fulfils criteria), including: self-control and managing behaviour, social skills, self-awareness and confidence, skills for learning, and approach to learning (Doyle). The scores were used in the present study to allow for some triangulation of methods, however as such data was not the main focus for this study, the overall Boxall Profiles or RRS scores for all NG pupils were not collected. Instead, the overall perceived effectiveness of the NG by the school was assumed to be high based on the NG teacher's assertions and the continuation of the group in the school over a number of years.

### ***Teacher-gathered Information***

Twenty-six pupils across years 7 to 9, who had been involved in NG at some point, gave written responses either free-written or answers to a short questionnaire. These responses were all made anonymous, so some of them are likely to be from the same children as those interviewed. Questionnaires containing four open-ended questions were completed by eight students who had 'graduated' from NG. This questionnaire was written by the NG teacher and presented by her. Additionally, I was provided with eighteen free-written statements by children under the title 'How Nurture Helped Me'. These statements were by both re-integrated pupils and current NG pupils, collected by the NG teacher over the past year and a half. Both the questionnaires and free statements were collated by the teacher for use as evidence for gaining the Boxall Quality Mark Award (NGN, 2009), which requires "evidence regarding student assessment, resettlement, and evaluation" (Colley, 2009, p.292). The children were not aware that their responses were for this particular purpose, however may still have been biased as they were thought to be for future NG students or for the NG teacher; and responses less appropriate for the quality mark sample could have been removed. Therefore, the data from these sources was only used as an addition to the interview responses, and analysed with awareness of possible bias.

### ***Questionnaires***

Questionnaires were obtained from three of the mainstream classes, created and presented by myself during each class' Citizenship lesson. A total of thirty-one pupils filled out a questionnaire; seventeen of these pupils had never attended NG, the others had attended NG at some point but the majority were currently in mainstream full-time (see Table 1). One class out of the two in each year group was included, opportunity sampled based on availability of time. All thirteen of the year 7 pupils were boys with an average age of 11.5 Years. The year 8 class had two girls and seven boys, mean age 12.3 years, and the year 9 class had six boys and four girls, mean age 13.5 years old. The majority of the sample was male, however this was representative of the sample population as the school's male pupil population is larger, particularly in year 7. In the year 8 class, one pupil refused to fill out the entire questionnaire on account of boredom and tiredness and one pupil had to be taken out of the class for bad behaviour so did not finish the questionnaire. Answers to the completed questions were included in analysis.

The questionnaire included open-ended questions to determine general opinions of the NG, as well as multiple choice questions on the most important activities and purposes of NG; choices given in order to prompt students who may be having difficulty describing the NG. Scenario questions were also included as an alternative way to assess pupils' perceptions of the purpose of NGs, including examples of pupils with varying difficulties including lack of confidence and social difficulties; trouble with work; and aggressive behaviour. These aimed to check whether students had misconceptions of NG provision, such as it being *only* for children with behavioural issues, and not emotional problems; or being a group for pupils having

trouble with work but no SEB issues. See Appendix E for an example of the questionnaire.

### ***Teacher Perceptions***

A number of informal conversations took place with the NG teacher, and were used for triangulation. Additionally, one Teacher's Assistant who had been previously involved in NG voluntarily filled out the questionnaire on perceptions of NG and was included for some comparison.

### **Analysis**

The interviews were fully transcribed and initial analysis was data-driven, identifying main themes highlighted by the children, such as the comfortable atmosphere of NG; increasing pupil confidence; and other children viewing NG as fun and games. Similar repeated themes were also identified across the teacher-presented questionnaires and free statements, as well as the questionnaires presented by myself (using responses from the pupils who had been involved in NG) and compared to those mentioned in the interview data. The themes brought out of the research were then used to answer the first two Research Questions and compared within the sample to answer Research Question 3. The questionnaire data from pupils not involved in NG was used to answer Research Question 4, with open-ended questions analysed in a similar manner to the interview data and the multiple choice and scenario questions analysed by totalling proportions of answers given. RRS scores were used to identify individual differences, and effectiveness of the NG for pupils interviewed, as triangulation along with teacher perceptions.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Ethical considerations were taken very seriously in this study due to the vulnerable nature of many of the participants in addition to the power issues between researcher and participant that are already heightened in research with children and young people. A number of authors have outlined difficulties with conducting research with young people and even more so when they have emotional and behavioural problems. Lloyd-Smith and Davies (1995) suggest that talking with 'problem' pupils can be difficult as "subjects are often resentful, defensive, alienated and in some cases, disturbed. Their educational careers have invariably involved individual and family stress and invitations to discuss them are not always welcomed" (p.11), emphasising the importance of being sensitive and patient as a researcher in this area. Informed consent has been particularly recognised as a sensitive issue when researching with children and young people (James et al., 1998) and care was therefore taken to ensure the children themselves were happy to participate and understood the aim of the research as finding out their opinions of NG for discussion in university coursework. Additionally, the majority of interviews were done in groups, as it has been argued this can diffuse some of the power imbalance between adult researcher and child participant since they have support from their peers (James et al.). A less structured interview schedule was also used in order to give greater control to the participants and permit them to "become

enthusiastic informants rather than reluctant subjects” (James et al., p. 190). In analysing the data collected, further ethical issues arise in the interpretation of information. Connolly (? , cited in James et al., 1998, p.191) highlights that “it is not simply a question of choosing the right methods in seeking out the authentic voices of young children but is rather a matter of engaging with the underlying and pre-existing values and assumptions that researchers have about childhood and the influence they may exert within the research process”. Thus, in interpreting the results of this study, care has been taken to expose how my involvement and teachers’ involvement in the research may have influenced responses given.

## **Results**

### **Teacher Perceptions**

Conversations with the main NG teacher suggested that she is very enthusiastic about the group, and has seen many highly ‘at risk’ children helped by the intervention. The teacher suggested that with the school being situated in a poor socio-economic area, many of the children have behavioural issues and low self-esteem as a result of difficult home circumstances and find NG a comforting and supportive resource. She emphasised that pupils who had left the group knew they could still come and talk with her about any problems, and many students who had never been part of NG would also come to the room as a refuge at break times. The teacher also pointed out, however, that the intervention is not perfect, and does not necessarily work for all students. Additionally, as has been reported in a number of other studies, she highlighted that fitting curriculum around NG activities can be difficult, but that she felt it was particularly important to place the emotional needs of the children first as they would not be able to work well anyway if upset or angry. A teaching assistant who had worked in the NG also suggested it was a positive intervention for helping vulnerable pupils, particularly emphasising increasing self-esteem and confidence. She also suggested that children with more severe behavioural issues should receive alternative measures such as behaviour plans and one-to-one support, with NG only as a possible last resort.

### **RRS Scores**

The RRS scores for the children interviewed showed all had made improvements (see Table 2). The average entrance score was 45%, demonstrating these pupils were scoring very low on a significant number of the reintegration scales. For the five children who had re-integrated into mainstream education at time of interview, this had increased to an average of 82% on leaving (with 70% being the minimum score to allow reintegration), demonstrating these children had high scores of 3 or 4 in almost all areas. The time spent in the NG at the time of RRS assessment ranged from 8 months to 2 years, the longest time resulting from a pupil who had left NG but re-entered following a family bereavement. For the pupils in the NG, small improvements had been seen by all at the time of interviewing, with one pupil having been in a year, three had been there for 3 months and one pupil had been in for only 3 weeks at time of monitoring. Their average improvement was 10%, although the pupil only attending for 3 weeks had only improved by 4%.

**Table 2**  
**RRS scores for pupils interviewed**

	Pupil	Time in NG	Score on Entering NG (%)	Most Recent Score/ Score on Exit from NG (%)	Improvement (%)
<b>Currently in NG</b>	1	3 Weeks	41	45	4
	2	3 Months	42	57	15
	3	3 Months	52	64	12
	4	3 Months	42	50	8
	5	1 Year	44	53	9
<b>Reintegrated into Mainstream</b>	6	8 Months	49	90	41
	7	10 Months	43	92	49
	8	1 Year	37	70	33
	9	2 Years	48	86	38
	10	2 Years	49	90	41

### Children's Perceptions

1. *Do the perceptions of children within a NG confirm the positive evaluations found from teachers, parents and developmental scores in previous research?*

Overall, the majority of children appeared to have very positive perceptions of the NG, with the exception of one Year 7 boy who wrote in response to the questionnaire that NG is 'boring'. In contrast, a couple of the children suggested that they felt special and privileged to be a part of NG, and it was claimed to be 'amazing', 'fantabulosa', and 'the best'! One boy commented that "I used to run to school in my Nurture days", and another expressed "my life's changed, started being good and that". It was clear from this that the children enjoyed being a part of the NG, suggesting on the surface a confirmation of previous research findings. However, the picture is inevitably more complicated, as will be demonstrated in the rest of the results and discussion<sup>1</sup>.

2. *What aspects of NGs do children identify as particularly positive and do they identify any negative aspects?*

<sup>1</sup> All names used in are pseudonyms.



Looking first at activities, breakfast, social games and work games were highlighted as favourite and most useful, with emphasis placed on allowing relaxed conversation and helping to make friends and talk about problems, as well as games being good motivation to do work. Pupils also stressed the importance of having a homely, family atmosphere, as well as the relaxed nature of teaching (See Table 3 for examples).

**Table 3**  
**Examples of comments on relaxed atmosphere**

**Bradley:** ... we do the same work like in other lessons but we do it in a different way like we can play games but like it could be involved with our work.

**Josh:** People think it's just games but it's like helping you because like you're not allowed to laugh in other lessons and that can make you laugh more.

**Bradley:** It's got a fish tank that no other class has. And it has a cooking corner. It's just like better than my house.

**Hannah:** It's like when you go in and everyone's like sat down and you say sorry I'm late Miss and everyone smiles at you...

In the teacher-presented written responses, the majority of children mentioned improvements in confidence and attendance as ways NG had helped them. Similarly, in the interviews, confidence, attendance and self-esteem were frequently mentioned as particular areas of improvement, although a number of students also highlighted that their behaviour had improved, suggesting they would likely have been expelled or get in a lot of trouble had they not been in NG (see Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**Examples of comments on personal improvements**

**Bradley:** I didn't have any self-esteem but now I've got loads.

**Josh:** In Primary my attendance was bad, and now it's, I come in every day.

**Jenny:** I think my behaviour would have got worse [if I hadn't gone into NG] because I think I would copy other children 'cause I've got mates that think they're 'it' and that just go into classroom and show off, so I think I would've gone along with them instead...Nurture's helped me...think for what I've got to do instead of for other people.

**Interviewer:** Do you think you needed to go into Nurture Group?

**Bradley:** Yeah coz if I didn't I don't know what I'd do.

**Jason:** If I didn't I think I would've been chucked out of school.

Many of the children also claimed NG had benefitted their work, particularly as they felt the teaching style and greater attention received helped them to understand better than they had done in normal classes. For instance, Hannah, year 8, claimed that “your work feels easier when you're in nurture than when you're in normal lessons it feels harder...” In the questionnaires, improving behaviour, self-esteem and confidence were highlighted as the main aims of NG, although a couple of pupils suggested that the female student in one of the examples given who has lots of friends but misbehaves a lot, should be able to control her own behaviour without any help. Mentions of how NG can help improve friendships and social skills were also common in interviews as well as the written responses.

One of the most prominent positive aspects of NG brought up by the children as the main reason for effectiveness and enjoyment of the group was the NG teacher (Miss Jackson). Countless comments were given both in the written responses and all the interviews about how much they liked the NG teacher (see Table 5 for examples), with a couple of children suggesting that if another school set up a NG it could never be as good as theirs as they would not have Miss Jackson. It was commented that the NG teacher was less strict and treated the children with respect, which they really appreciated. Additionally, they claimed they could tell her anything that was troubling them, and many of the children suggested she had a good relationship with their parents which they felt had helped them. A couple of the boys also appeared very protective of the teacher, suggesting they would behave well in other classes to ensure other teachers respected what she did in NG, also suggesting they behaved well at home because otherwise their parents would tell Miss Jackson they had been naughty, and they didn't want to let her down.

**Table 5**  
**Examples of comments about NG teacher**

**Ben:** We've got loads of respect for Miss [Jackson] so we learn more.

**Jason:** Miss [Jackson] has just like, in other words she's just like changed my life...

She just like laughs with us and does things that other teachers don't.

**Bradley:** She's not our teacher she's like our best mate in school you can come to her with problems.

**Jenny:** Having a teacher that's not as strict...that can understand children and talk to children like their not stupid, like normal people, that's how Miss [Jackson] gets more of our attention 'cause she talks to us like she knows us.

**Jenny:** [Another teacher] ...used to come in and teach us a different subject but... she didn't listen to what we had to say.

**Ben:** She just wanted you to get on with the work.

**Jenny:** Mmm, block you out and didn't let you have time to say what you had to say.

Many comments made during the interviews would discuss the NG and the NG teacher interchangeably, making discussion of good aspects of the NG difficult to separate from the teacher. For instance, labelling the NG as Miss Jackson's class, and discussions of how certain activities are helpful combined with emphasis on how the activities are run by the NG teacher.

When asked directly if there was anything they disliked or thought was negative, the majority of the children answered 'No' immediately, demonstrating a similar wish to be loyal to their teacher and group that Cooper et al. (2001) found when interviewing primary NG pupils. However, when given some suggestions as prompts, a couple of the younger children suggested that they would like to be with friends from their mainstream class more often. Some of the older pupils who had reintegrated claimed it was sad when friends they had made in NG moved back to mainstream full-time and equally when they had left friends to re-integrate to mainstream themselves. Other answers given referred to washing up and tidying, as well as written responses that included "working as a group", "having to work" and "geography lessons".

Many of the more negative aspects of being in NG were also identified by the children through the more indirect questions about other peoples' perceptions of the NG. A main issue highlighted by all the students interviewed was the negative views of some teachers and pupils who suggest that they only play games in NG, a contention that made many of them very defensive and some angry. When asked what their least favourite part of NG group was, one girl answered "when teachers make comments" (p.6), and questions about teachers' perceptions brought out similar negative connotations of some teachers' opinions of the NG, examples given in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
**Examples of perceived teacher and friends' views**

**Ben:** Some of the teachers like Mr [James]. He'll turn around and say "You're not in nurture now, get on with your work".

**Jenny:** Some teachers are pathetic like that but I don't know why.

**Jason:** Some teachers just think like the same as the kids but some teachers think it's helping us.

**Jason:** They [friends] just think... nurture's just like games and games and games but we do more work than them.

...

**Interviewer:** Do you get upset or annoyed that they think that?

**Bradley:** Yeah I go mad, I'm like we do more work than you and their like alright then yeah

...

**Jason:** Their jealous 'cause they're not in here...Just jealous I think.

However, it was also maintained by the children that many other teachers view NG as helpful and a positive intervention. In contrast, the children viewed all their friends and other students from mainstream classes as having a view of NG as only fun, and easy in comparison to other classes, a perception that appeared particularly significant to many of the children, as it was often highlighted at the very beginning of the focus groups before any direct questions about others' perceptions. Their observations of children's negative views of NG were always followed with earnest reassurance that they do work very hard in NG, highlighting their annoyance of this opinion.

Many of the children mentioned that they felt scared and nervous on entering the group, but settled in fairly quickly. Fear of secondary school in general was a major theme brought up by the pupils, and they suggested that NG helped them to feel more comfortable and less worried when they moved schools.

A number of different reasons were suggested by the students as to why they thought they had been placed in nurture provision, including for behaviour and attendance problems, not being able to make friends and having low confidence. One boy claimed it was because he was quiet; however he also suggested that he had behaved badly at primary school but he seemed reluctant to acknowledge behaviour as a reason for joining the NG. When asked directly what the purpose of NG was, the children emphasised similar points to what they felt they had improved in, including to help learning, social skills, and behaviour. It was also suggested to be a group for "people that are having problems" or who have "difficulties...not like bad disabilities".

*3. Are the perceptions of current NG attendees similar or different to those of pupils who have reintegrated into mainstream classes?*

In the interviews, similar responses were given by children within the NG and those who had left, although the pupils who had reintegrated mentioned wishing they could come back, and gave insight into some of the issues involved with leaving that the current NG pupils had not experienced. For example, Jenny suggested that returning to mainstream full-time was worrying as she no longer had the security of NG routine, and another boy mentioned that the work was more difficult now he had left NG. Importantly, the pupils who had left the group emphasised how they felt they could still come and talk to the NG teacher, and a couple of the pupils were still receiving one-on-one counselling support. In the questionnaires, although all the pupils had left NG, there were a number of differences between older and younger students. For example, many of the older students emphasised making friends as an important aspect of NG, whereas none of the year 7 or 8 pupils selected this. Additionally, several year 7 pupils found it much more difficult to explain the purpose of NG and appeared more confused about why certain pupils might benefit from NG more than others, suggesting the older pupils had a better understanding of NG.

*4. How do other children in a school containing a NG, but not directly involved themselves, perceive the group?*

The majority of pupils questioned (77%) answered that NG was a 'good idea', the others either leaving the question blank or claiming 'not sure'. Only one participant suggested that NG was not good, arguing it was unfair to higher achieving pupils who "feel left out" since they do not "get to play games and be in a group with friends". Opinions of the activities and purpose of the NG appeared to differ across the year groups. 'Fun Games' were selected most often by year 7 pupils, whereas only one year 8 and one year 9 pupil thought this was one of the most common activities in NG. Additionally, a number of year 7 and 8 pupils suggested 'Relaxing' was a common activity in NG, whilst no year 9 pupils selected this option; and all of the year 8 pupils chose school work as a common activity compared with 50% of year 9 pupils and only 22% of year 7 pupils. The year 7 boys particularly emphasised learning to control behaviour and calming pupils down as a main aim of NG. A number of year 7 and 8 pupils suggested that NG was put in place to keep 'bad' children out of mainstream class. In contrast, one year 8 pupil specifically commented that NG was not for children with behaviour problems. Misconceptions of who the NG aims to help were particularly apparent in comments by the younger pupils; with a number of year 7 pupils suggesting that NG is for pupils with disabilities and learning difficulties.

## **Discussion**

### **General Conclusions and Implications**

In line with the limited research on secondary school NGs, the RRS scores for the selected pupils, along with teacher comments on the NG in the current study suggest the group is successful for helping vulnerable children improve emotional and behavioural issues, reintegrate into mainstream classes, and avoid exclusions. A similar conclusion is reflected in the widely positive responses of the children, including children of various ages and who had been part of the NG for a different

periods of time and for both behavioural problems and social and emotional difficulties. A number of the children's comments are in line with issues brought up by secondary practitioners in Colley's (2009) research such as NG helping them feel more secure when they first moved to Secondary school, as they had been particularly nervous and scared of this transition. Additionally, the NG teacher highlighted how one pupil had returned to NG following family bereavement, another issue highlighted in Colley's research. Some children also suggested that they were well-behaved in Primary school but this changed when they entered secondary school, suggesting that despite the emphasis on early intervention (Boxall & Bennathon, 2000), some children may experience later traumas and stresses which could not have been predicted and NGs at secondary level are therefore a useful intervention for such children, as well as for children whose problems have persisted from earlier childhood.

In comparison with previous research into the perceptions of children in primary school groups, many similar themes were identified. For instance the positive references to: the engaging nature of snack times (or breakfast in this study), the opportunity for play (or games), the calm atmosphere and comfortable physical environment, and the fondness for NG staff (Cooper et al., 2001). Additionally, the children commented on how NG helped them to make friends, an issue that was also raised by primary school children in Sanders (2007) research. It appeared that the children in the present study had a better understanding of why they were in the group than the younger children in Sanders' study, although a couple of the pupils appeared reluctant to attribute their attendance in NG to behaviour, focusing instead on suggesting they had low confidence despite commenting on their disruptive behaviours at other points in the interviews. The causal attributions given by pupils for entering NG are important to consider as they can have differing connotations and consequent reactions. For example, if they view themselves as having been placed in NG for bad behaviour and the group existing as a punishment this is likely affect how they respond to the group, such as with hostility or defence, and therefore how much they get out of it (see for example, Försterling, 2001, for a discussion of attribution theory and psychological consequences of causal attributions). Additionally, the reasons provided for entering NG may affect both how the children view themselves and how they believe others to perceive them, which could affect their behaviour and self-esteem (see Felson, 1993). This may explain why a number of the children emphasised their lack of confidence rather than bad behaviour, as this may be viewed as a more acceptable characteristic, and thus it would be seen as a better aspect to highlight in situations where they are motivated to protect their self-concept (Osborne, 1996).

As well as highlighting issues important to the children, the comments given during the interviews allowed interesting insight into the possible reasons for improvements in their behaviour. Whilst one of the older girls emphasised how NG had taught her to focus on herself and the importance of learning, helping her ignore the influence of friends to misbehave or not pay attention in class; a couple of the boys interviewed suggested that they behaved in class and at home as a result of respect for the NG teacher and not wanting to let her down. These differences may be important for the long-term effectiveness of NG provision, as it is likely to be more difficult for pupils to consistently behave better to please their teacher than if they have an understanding

of why it is helpful to them to behave in certain ways in certain social situations. Consequently, it could be useful for teachers to check with students why they feel they have altered their behaviour in order to ensure the pupils understanding of the principles which are being taught in the NG.

In terms of children's comments that focused on self-esteem, confidence, and managing behaviour it is difficult to determine whether children truly feel they have gained in these areas or if they are simply citing key terms. Many of the children claimed that NG had helped their self-esteem and boosted their confidence, however the majority of pupils also recognised one of the main aims of NG as helping students improve in these areas, suggesting their understanding of this aim could cause demand characteristics, especially due to the very apparent loyalty to the NG teacher. Emotional literacy, defined as "the ability to recognise, understand, handle, and appropriately express emotions" (Sharp, 2001, p.1, cited in Burman, 2009) and develop an "accurate and positive view of ourselves" (Weare, 2006, p.3), is a more recent principle of NGs (Colley, 2009). It is difficult to ascertain from the interview responses whether children had really fulfilled these goals of understanding and managing emotions or had just learned to say as such, however the RRS scores provide one source suggesting such improvements have in fact occurred for many of the children interviewed. More in depth discussions with the children would be useful to discover particular activities they felt had helped them with their emotional development. Despite the RRS scores and many students claims that their self-esteem had improved, some elaborations suggested the students no longer cared about problems that had upset them before, such as finding work difficult, which may indicate shifting of the importance placed on these issues, as a self-worth protective strategy, rather than improvements in self-esteem per se (Osborne, 1996). This self-protection strategy may help to reduce knocks to self-esteem; however in an academic context it may also lead to disaffection would be counter-productive for learning. What is more, other self-protection strategies may come into play if the pupil finds it difficult to maintain a view of academics as unimportant, such as work avoidance and disruptive behaviours (Jackson, 2006). Therefore, it is important to emphasise pupils' strengths, and place emphasis on effort over ability in order to raise academic self-esteem (Jackson), and ensure pupils are not simply devaluing important domains.

One important aspect that this research has highlighted which was not previously found is that pupils within the NG experience many negative views of the NG from other pupils in the school, which create defensive attitudes and upset a number of the students. In contrast to these perceptions, the majority of the sample of pupils who had never been part of the NG suggested they thought the group was a good intervention to have in their school. Confusion about the aims of NG and emphases on games and relaxation as the main activities of NG were mainly evident in the younger pupils, suggesting that pupils gain a greater understanding about the group the longer they are at the school. Despite this, comments of perceived negative attitudes of other pupils was given by all interviewed NG pupils implying that some older pupils also make claims that NG is easy and only for games. It could be that such comments are only made by pupils not included in this sample, or it may demonstrate that older pupils voice such opinions as a tease, whilst under the surface recognising the value of the NG. Additionally, it is possible that the pupils

claimed the NG was helpful because they thought this was what I would want to hear. However, a few pupils did suggest the group was not a good intervention; and questionnaires were anonymous, which should reduce the likelihood of social desirability or demand characteristics effecting responses. Sanders (2007) suggests that allowing children from other classes to join in NG at snack times or during activities may help increase understanding about the NG and reduce misconceptions. This may be an important implication since such misconceptions have been found to have a profound impact on the children in the NG. However, in larger schools this would be particularly difficult to implement, as only a small number of pupils would be able to go in the NG at a time. Additionally, having unknown pupils in the NG at regular intervals may be detrimental to the effectiveness of the group by reducing the safe-haven atmosphere. Alternatively, I would suggest that the principles of NGs and the work that goes on in the group could be clearly presented to all pupils, and support for the worth of the group emphasised by all teachers in the school. It may also be important to ensure that NG pupils do not boast about experiences in NG, as this may make other pupils jealous (Sanders) and more likely to respond with negative comments about the NG, as was in fact suggested by a couple of the NG boys interviewed in this study: "they're jealous 'cause they're not in here".

Children in this study have indicated that negative views expressed by teachers about the NG can be upsetting, and demonstrated defensive attitudes in response. It is likely that other pupils in the school are also affected by teachers' negative comments about the NG, reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of NG as only games and no work. Negative attitudes of some teachers towards NGs was similarly found in Sanders (2007) research, where some teachers voiced concerns over curriculum, effectiveness of the NGs on behaviours, and perceptions of the NG teachers having an "easy time". Such conflicts are arguably enhanced in a secondary school environment where curriculum demands are increased and classes tend to be larger than at primary school. The concerns highlighted in Sanders' research reflect the negative teacher comments emphasised by the NG pupils in this study, and stresses the importance of having whole-school support for the intervention, both for the groups' overall effectiveness and for the children feeling comfortable being part of the NG. The importance of whole-school support has been highlighted in previous research (e.g. Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Sanders, 2007; Boxall & Bennathon, 2000); Sanders particularly emphasising the whole-school approach as "critical" to the "success of a NG", and suggesting "all staff (including the lunch time supervisors and learning support assistants)" should be fully "briefed about the principles of the group and types of provision it offers" in an attempt to increase understanding and thus reduce stigma (p.57). The current research further emphasises that it is important to encourage communication between mainstream staff members and NG staff, and it may be necessary to implement certain additional measures to increase the acceptance of the group. For instance, it could be useful to allow other teachers to take part in NG sessions (as similarly suggested by Sanders), although this may be difficult time-wise and could be disruptive for the students. Alternatively, it could be useful to video record some NG sessions for other teachers to view and thus improve their understanding of what goes on in the NG; provide teachers with developmental profiles which demonstrate the effectiveness of the group; and emphasise to teachers that even if they are not fully on board with the scheme it is counter-productive to voice such opinions to the children.



The importance placed by the children on the relationship with the NG teacher is unsurprising since one of the NG aims is to provide a trusting relationship with the teacher as a replacement attachment figure for the children, to counteract early attachment insecurities (O'Connor & Colwell, 2002). However, comments by some of the older children that a previous NG teacher had been much less liked suggests that teacher personality, skills and pedagogical style are particularly important in creating secure relationships with the children, an aspect which is integral to NG success. Emphasis on teacher skills and style is in line with previous research that found groups were more effective when they had been running for longer as teachers were more confident in their methods and the NG principles (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). Additionally, the children interviewed particularly highlighted that the NG teacher listened to and respected them more than other teachers, supporting research by Colwell and O'Connor (2003) that found NG teachers were more likely than normal class teachers to use statements that reinforced children's opinions as accepted and understood. Thus the current findings support their suggestion that such use of language is very important in providing the effectiveness of NGs. Therefore, the need for good training with particular emphasis on teacher communication styles appears integral to NG effectiveness, possibly through shadowing of a more experienced NG teacher. Additionally, in support of the above suggestion to provide NG training for all teachers in a school, Colwell and O'Connor argue that 'nurturing' communication practices can have a positive effect in all classrooms, suggesting that many NG principles may be beneficial for the whole-school and thus training could reduce conflict as well as enhancing whole-school effectiveness.

### **Limitations**

The sample was small and restricted, focusing only on one school and one NG and themes highlighted cannot therefore be generalised to all NGs. However, the intention of the research was to bring to light some of the perceptions of children involved in NGs, rather than to find overarching issues or to evaluate the effectiveness of NG provision as a whole. As mentioned in the method, the sample was somewhat biased, and as demonstrated by the RRS scores all children interviewed appeared to have benefitted from the NG. Therefore I am cautious to generalise the opinions of the children questioned to all those in the school, as other children may well have had more negative views, particularly children who appeared to have benefitted less from the intervention. It is also important to recognise that the NG in this school was one part of a whole-school ethos that aimed to improve social and behavioural problems in the school, including other provisions such as a behaviour team, enrichment program and one-to-one counselling schemes; which may have provided additional support and benefits for the children in NG.

### **Further Research**

It would be useful to extend this research to include a much wider sample of children, looking at comparisons between secondary schools as well as to primary schools and between different types of NG. Additionally, it may be useful to look at the effect of NGs from other psychological perspectives in assessing their

effectiveness. For instance, this research has suggested that many of the children felt that work was easier in NG due to different teaching methods and it could be argued that this altered their learning self-concepts, which could have been a major cause for improvements in behaviour, based on theories of achievement motivation and self-worth protection (Covington, 2000; Jackson, 2006). It would therefore be beneficial to explore how NGs may affect children's self-concepts as it may provide a different explanation to attachment theories for the effectiveness of the group, particularly in secondary schools.

## Conclusion

This research has offered important insights into some of the aspects viewed by certain children as particularly positive providing support for previous research and for particular NG principles and activities. Additionally, it has highlighted some areas that may need further investigation and given suggestions based on the children's responses of ways that the NG experience could be improved for pupils, particularly through teacher training and emphasising whole-school support for the intervention.

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