An Evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot

ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners

eti

The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

CSE

Contents

Section	Page

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels in reports:

Outstanding[1]
Very good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

The main purposes of the report:

  i.   To outline the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) key findings in relation to the current Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot provision in primary schools.

  ii.   To identify the key strengths and areas for improvement, in relation to current practice.

  iii. To make a set of recommendations in relation to the key findings.

---

[1] The evaluation of the nurture unit provision was conducted across the academic years 2014 and 2015 when the descriptors above were being used by the Education and Training Inspectorate in all of their evaluations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evidence base for this evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot gathered over the period September 2013 to June 2015, comprised of:

- twenty evaluation visits to the primary schools in the pilot across the Education Authority (EA);

- forty-nine direct lesson observations in classes made up of children from key stage (KS) 1; and

- discussions with children, co-ordinators, teachers, principals, representatives of the EA, parents and other stakeholders including, educational psychologists, members of the nurture unit steering groups; and school governors.

Main findings

- While the participating schools had different starting points in the implementation of the nurture practice, by June 2015 all of the schools were implementing fully the nurture guidance which had been provided by the Department of Education (DE).

- Overall, the practitioners are more confident about the quality of their provision and there is clear evidence that the principles are either well, or fully, embedded in each of the schools.

- The ETI's evaluations of the lessons observed indicate that high quality, well planned and progressive learning experiences contribute significantly to the children's personal, social and emotional development and their overall learning.

- The benefits to the children's learning in both the nurture unit and their mainstream classes were maximised when all of the staff worked collaboratively to develop a specific programme to meet the individual needs of all of the children. In a majority the schools, it was noted that the staff have developed innovative practice, based on the nurturing principles, that have been adopted successfully by other class teachers. A small number of the schools require further development in this aspect of their practice.

- The benefits were further highlighted in discussions with groups of the re-integrated children who were very positive about their learning experiences and could articulate well the strategies that they had learned and that they were continuing to use in situations that they found challenging.

- In discussions, the school staff expressed their commitment to the further development of the nurture principles across the school. Several of the staff reported the positive impact that small changes were having on the working relationships between the children, their peers and the staff and, in most cases, the school ethos.

- The steering group model is particularly effective in bringing together the senior management, governors and relevant support agencies to oversee and develop high quality nurture provision within the school.

- The inspectors observed a range of nurture practice that included an emphasis on the development of the children's literacy and numeracy skills, personal, social and emotional development and life skills. In the sessions observed, the quality of the teaching ranged from satisfactory to outstanding with most either good or better.

- The opportunities to link with, and support, the families are very good. All of the parents and carers, who engaged with the inspectors, were very positive about the nurture programme. While some expressed initial reservations about their child being involved in the programme, all of them highlighted the positive impact the programme had on their child's attitude to their learning. In particular, they welcomed the strategies provided in helping them to manage their child's behaviours and learning at home. All reported the significant improvement it had on their family relationships and their children's eagerness to attend school.

- All of the nurture staff were very positive about the quality of the training provided and felt that overall it prepared them well for their work in the unit. While a small number of teachers felt there was initially an over emphasis on theory, as the programme progressed, cluster groups were established, relationships were formed and their confidence and capacity grew.

- Another positive outcome from the training was the opportunities afforded to the nurture staff to share their knowledge, expertise and best practice with their colleagues.

- There was evidence in the second cohort of visits that the DE and EA Officers, responsible for overseeing the development of the nurture provision, took account of the interim findings at the end of the first year of the pilot. As a result, changes were implemented to the practice which had a positive impact on the quality of the provision in year two of the pilot.

Recommendations

For DE

R1   As an equality issue, consideration needs to be given to extending the training for, and provision of, nurture units beyond areas of social and economic disadvantage as nurturing needs are increasingly evident in all schools and can arise at any time.

R2   It will be important that the schools involved receive information regarding any future nurture provision funding in a timely manner in order to plan strategically.

For EA

R3   There is a need for the EA Officers to provide the nurture staff with further information about what to record, how to record observations of the children's responses to their learning and how to use the information to inform future planning.

R4   The 'Steering Group' model is very effective in monitoring, evaluating and developing the provision within the units. It will be important that all of the members of the group can attend regularly the meetings. Other methods of providing the information for members who cannot attend should be considered.

For Schools

R5   Due to the intensity of the nature of the work within a nurture unit, school leadership and management needs to consider appropriate measures to ensure the care and well-being of the staff deployed within the nurture group.

R6   Consideration needs to be given by leadership and management to a rolling deployment of staff within the unit; with due care and attention given to ensuring that at least 50% of the staff remain within the unit in order to ensure continuity and the up-skilling of new members of the staff.

R7   It will be important for the staff, in the units and mainstream, to liaise closely to develop further their planning, to ensure that it meets effectively the needs of all of the children.

R8   All of the schools need to ensure that the good practice within the unit is disseminated fully to all of the staff, teaching and non-teaching. Where necessary, staff need to receive appropriate nurture training in order to ensure that the principles of nurture are used to build a nurturing ethos in all aspects of the life and work of the school.

R9   As they develop further the practice, the primary schools should liaise closely with the receiving post-primary schools in order to ensure that they are aware of the nurturing principles and can build on the best practice from the primary sector when required and so help ensure that smooth transitions are made by the children.

For ETI

R10   To identify, through inspection, examples of effective and innovative practice in the nurture provision, including, where possible, examples of transition arrangements between primary and post-primary schools.

1.   Introduction

1.1   Nurture provision offers a short term, focussed, intervention strategy which addresses barriers to learning arising from social, emotional or behavioural difficulties in an inclusive and supportive manner. Central to the philosophy of nurture provision is the theory of attachment, and the need for a child to be able to form secure and happy relationships with others in the formative years of their lives. The nurture group provides an opportunity for a child to re-visit early nurturing experiences.

1.2   The main purpose of nurture provision is:

- To provide a flexible and preventative resource that is responsive to the particular needs of the children attending.

- To provide on-going assessment and support for early years children showing signs of emotional stress and behavioural difficulties with the aim of enabling the child to access the curriculum and return to full participation in his/her mainstream class.

- To provide a secure and predictable small class 'setting' where children can learn by re-experiencing pre-school nurture from two caring adults who work actively towards enabling their successful integration into their mainstream class.

- To help the children to learn to behave appropriately, use their curiosity constructively, improve their self-esteem and develop confidence, through forming close and trusting relationships with adults.

- To work in partnership with class teacher(s) parents, school staff and other Education Authority services to enable consistency of approach both at home and school.

1.3   In October 2012, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister announced the development of six Signature Projects under the Delivering Social Change framework to tackle matters, such as, improving literacy and numeracy levels, family support and pathways to employment for young people. This included the 'Nurture Unit' Signature Project which provides funding for 20 new nurture groups for which the funding was made available until the end of June 2015; it has been extended subsequently to March 2016.

1.4   Guidelines were developed to provide information and advice to those schools identified as the locations for the new nurture groups, to ensure that a consistent approach was adopted in the planning and practice of nurturing provision.

1.5   Since the start of the pilot, the ETI has been evaluating the quality of the nurture group provision.   The findings from the ETI evaluations will be used by the DE to inform the future policy position.

2.   Context

2.1   The DE has been working jointly with the Department of Social Development (DSD) to develop and implement this project. Initial funding of £3 million was allocated to the project to be implemented until June 2015; however, additional funding has been provided allowing the pilot to continue until March 2016.

2.2   Through the initiative which involved 20 schools, each school received a range of support from the EA Officers which included educational psychologists. The purpose of providing advisory support is to quality assure and ensure that the practices within each unit are fully consistent with the ethos and principles of the nurturing approach outlined in the guidelines.

3.   Methodology

3.1   A core team of two inspectors supported by associate assessors and other members of the ETI visited all of the new and a representative sample of established, nurture units across the two years of the pilot. During the visits, the ETI observed the unit's practice, scrutinised all relevant documentation, held meetings with key personnel and provided oral feedback to the staff. The ETI met with individual groups of the parents who had, or have, children supported within the nurture unit, and with groups of children, to seek their views about the quality of the provision and the impact on their learning. In addition, the ETI attended training sessions, conferences and meetings with the steering group. Meetings were held with the relevant EA Officers and a group of educational psychologists who were supporting the nurture staff. Evidence relating to the quality of provision was also gained through additional visits to the nurture units that were participating in the pilot during the scheduled inspections of primary schools. The longitudinal evaluation was undertaken in two distinct phases across two academic years, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

- Phase 1 in 2013-14, the ETI carried out visits to four established nurture units to evaluate the quality of the provision and to baseline current practice.

- Phase 2 in 2014-15, the ETI carried out visits to all of the nurture units in the pilot to evaluate impact and early outcomes and to inform future developments. In May 2015, a second visit was carried out to a selection of the nurture units to evaluate the progress made to date.

3.2   During the second year of the pilot, the ETI team focussed on transition arrangements and tracked the progress of the children who had been involved in the first year of the pilot. Evidence was collated, analysed and used to inform emerging findings. The interim findings were shared with DE, the EA Officers and Educational Psychologists involved in the pilot, and a representative from the Queen's University Belfast research project.

3.3   In its evaluation, the inspection team has taken account of the delays in getting the project started, largely due to circumstances beyond the control of the pilot schools; for example, the need for building and refurbishment work to provide suitable accommodation for the nurture units.

4.   Summary of the main findings

This section takes account of the findings throughout the two years of the pilot. A key finding in the second year of the pilot was that improvements had been made in the provision and there was a significant development in the staff's confidence and capacity to address the areas for development identified in the earlier visits.

4.1   Leadership and management

4.1.1   All of the principals, governors and senior leadership teams are highly committed to the further development of the nurture units and a whole school nurturing ethos. The ETI teams found that, in almost all of the schools, the staff working in the nurture units were very well suited and committed to working in this particular field.

4.1.2   In the best practice, the principals and senior management teams provide strategic leadership for the nurture unit. The development of the nurture unit is given a high profile on the school development plan with associated action plans which outline a clear pathway for the further development of the nurture provision. In addition, there is rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the provision and the outcomes for the children.

4.1.3   A particular difficulty encountered by many of the schools was the fact that a significant number of classroom assistants, with a special educational needs specialism, opted not to take on the role of classroom assistant in the nurture unit due to the resulting reduction in salary and changes to their contractual conditions. It will be important that account is taken of this, so that school management groups are able to deploy the member of staff they deem most suited to the position, in the best interests of the children.

4.1.4   Almost all of the staff report that the specialist nurture training provided by the Nurture Group Network was useful, of a high quality and has had a positive impact on the quality of their work. The establishment of cluster groups has provided the nurture staff with valuable opportunities to meet with others, to share ideas, to discuss issues and disseminate best practice. The quality of experience does vary, however, depending on the size of the cluster and extent of external support available. In addition, some of the staff have developed their own individual support networks to develop further aspects of their provision and to disseminate their practice. The sharing of practice, ideas and expertise is having a beneficial impact on the quality of the provision and in raising standards for the children.

4.1.5   All of the schools have steering groups in place that monitor continuously the work of the nurture units and plan for improvements. In almost all of the schools, the steering group worked extremely well; however, in a small number of the schools, the staff reported concerns that arose from the inconsistent attendance of some of the members which, on occasions, impacted negatively on the pace of change within the units.

4.1.6   Each school gave careful consideration to the selection of children that they felt would benefit most from attending the nurture unit. During the first visit to the new units, it was evident that more consideration needed to be given to the composition, the size and gender balance within the group to maximise more fully the learning opportunities for the children and to support them more effectively in their personal, social and emotional development. As a result of sharing the interim findings with DE and the EA Officers, this area for improvement had been addressed by almost all of the settings by the time the second visits were undertaken by the ETI.

4.1.7   Due to the complexities faced by a small number of the units, in relation to acquiring or renovating suitable premises and resources, a few of the groups were unable to have their nurture provision in place in September 2014. The delayed start had a negative impact on the pace of the reintegration aspect of the pilot. In addition, in a few of the units, the children stayed in the unit beyond their expected time-frame and this delayed the intake for the new group of children. At the time of ETI's second visit, the staff reported that they had received training from the EA on the process of the children's reintegration into their mainstream class; the staff reported to the ETI that they found the training very useful. As a result of the training, this area for improvement was addressed successfully, in most of the units.

4.1.8   A high priority is given to the continuous professional development of the nurture unit's staff and includes regular information and updates provided for all of the staff. It will be important for the management groups in the schools to develop a long-term strategy regarding the future sustainability of the nurture provision, including the deployment of the staff given the particular professional intensity required for their specific roles.

4.1.9   All of the schools have developed very useful and effective links with a wide range of external support agencies for example, The Incredible Years, Rights Respecting Schools, Think you Know and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), whose tried and tested approaches and methods contribute to positive outcomes for the children in the units.

4.1.10 In the best practice, the involvement of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) was an integral part of the life and work of the unit. During the ETI evaluation, the SENCO's involvement was considered a particular strength in most of the units; however, on a few occasions, the SENCO was not involved sufficiently in supporting the nurture staff in planning for the children's specific needs.

4.1.11 All of the principals, staff, governors and parents raised concerns regarding the uncertainty about the continuation of the nurture provision and the negative impact such an outcome would have. In all of the schools, the senior management team and the governors are highly committed to developing sustainable nurture provision and many are already trying to find ways to continue the provision should the funding be withdrawn. They all reported that the longer they have the provision, the stronger the evidence of the positive impact for the children within the unit and the benefits to the whole school community.

4.1.12 During the evaluation of the nurture provision, a small number of schools, reported to the ETI that they had difficulty accessing the educational psychology service due to the increasing demands on the service.

4.2   Provision for learning

4.2.1   At the outset of the pilot, all of the nurture groups were provided with core high quality resources that contributed to creating a welcoming and caring environment. Almost all of the staff, within the units, used these resources well and gave careful attention to providing an attractive and homely environment which was enhanced by the children's work, interesting displays and appropriate visual prompts. In a small number of the units, the choice of learning resources provided by the staff needed to be reviewed to ensure they were appropriate for the children's age and stage of development.

4.2.2   In most of the units, careful consideration was also given to the organisation of the daily timetable to provide the children with an appropriate structure to their day and smooth transitions to and from the unit. In the best practice, a good range of opportunities was provided for the children to work in small and large group activities which met effectively their specific needs.

4.2.3   In the sessions observed, the quality of the teaching ranged from satisfactory to outstanding with most either good or better. The quality of the staff interactions with the children was consistently of a high standard. They engaged readily with the children in their work and often acted as role models encouraging good behaviour, extending the children's responses and developing their thinking skills.

4.2.4   The staff within the unit had a collegiate approach to working with the children; they provided a good balance of care whilst also setting high expectations for what the children could achieve. They implemented consistent strategies to manage the children's behaviour and supported them well with their learning. On a few occasions, where practice was less effective, it was noted that the children engaged in too many adult-directed activities, and, as a result, they were overly dependent on the adults and unwilling to engage productively in the tasks provided.

4.2.5   In almost all of the schools, the mainstream class teachers liaised well with the staff in the nurture unit to ensure the children had access to an agreed programme of learning that reflected what was taught in mainstream lessons. In the best practice, the staff in the unit modified the teaching of the programme to meet effectively the needs of the children and placed an appropriate emphasis on activity based learning.   The mainstream and nurture unit teachers liaised closely to ensure a smooth transition back to lessons in the mainstream class, for example, when the children joined their peers for the World Around Us topics that had suitable activity-based or practical learning opportunities that involved an element of paired or group work.

4.2.6   As they continue to develop their use of observations, it will be important for the staff to demonstrate how the observations of the children's responses to their learning will be used to inform the future planning to raise further the standards in literacy and numeracy.

4.2.7   In almost all of the nurture units, the teachers and classroom assistants worked together very effectively to plan a programme to meet the specific needs of the children. While there were many good examples, in a significant minority of schools, the joint planning was underdeveloped and in need of improvement. For the most part, improvements were noted in the planning by the time the second visits were undertaken; however, it remains an area for further development.   In the less effective practice, the planning was written retrospectively, consisted mainly of lists of activities and whole class teaching that did not meet the specific needs of all of the children. In such cases, it will be important for the staff to indicate clearly the learning, to guide them more effectively in their interactions with the children.

4.2.8   In a small number of schools where the transition process to the mainstream was not managed well, the children found it difficult to re-establish friendships. Where the planning for the children's reintegration was not effective enough, and the pace of reintegration to the mainstream class was too slow, there was a negative impact on the planning for, and transfer of, the next group of children entering the nurture unit. In addition, the over use of unnecessary classroom rules interrupted the children's concentration, learning and the flow of the day. During the second phase of visits, the schools had given more consideration to planning for the children's reintegration into the mainstream classes.

4.2.9   Overall, the quality of the arrangements for pastoral care within the nurture units was good or very good and, on occasions, it was outstanding. This was based largely on an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. The class teachers reported that the learning experiences for the children in the mainstream class were also greatly enhanced.   A particular strength was noted where the whole school staff, including the ancillary and auxiliary staff, had nurture awareness training, which resulted in a nurturing ethos permeating the life and work of the entire school.

4.2.10 Nearly all of the staff reported that due to the good quality of the training received, they have developed the capacity to deal with the challenging behaviours of some of the children. During the evaluation, excellent use was made of a range of appropriate behaviour management and self-regulation strategies, as well as schedules and other visual aids to help the children manage their own behaviour. Most of the groups established positive reward schemes. In the best practice, the children understood fully the rewards and consequences of their behaviours; the scheme was implemented regularly and the children recognised that it was fair. In the less effective practice, the scheme was not implemented effectively and the children did not have ownership of it.

4.2.11 Most of the schools have established very positive working relationships with the parents of the children in the nurture units. The parents who spoke to the inspection team reported that the staff supported them well in developing positive strategies for dealing with their child's behaviour at home in an attempt to ensure consistency of approach with the school. The parents also highlighted the benefits that they derived from the support and information provided by the nurture team in building their capacity to support their children with their learning and development at home. All of the parents reported a significant improvement in their children's behaviour and social development both in school and at home.

4.2.12 In their discussions with the ETI, the children indicated that the strategies they had developed were beneficial to them when they returned to their mainstream classes; they were able to demonstrate some of the strategies and were very positive about how these were helping them to cope better when difficult situations arose.

4.2.13 In many of the schools, excellent targeted in-house training for the staff and external support for the children and the staff were provided by counsellors and other specialists, such as educational physiologists and speech and language therapists, to meet the often complex needs of the children attending the unit.

4.2.14 In the best practice, the mainstream teachers, with the support of the nurture staff, had designed a tailored programme of topic-based learning to support the children in their reintegration. The ETI visited the mainstream classes to observe the effectiveness of the reintegration strategies and found that most of the children were well settled and fully reintegrated. A small number of the children continued to need additional support with aspects of their learning and behaviour. The mainstream teachers reported that they were now more aware of the children's backgrounds and the 'triggers' that resulted in their challenging behaviours. In these schools, appropriate strategies were in place to allow those children who required it to revisit the nurture unit for short periods of time to address their current needs.

4.2.15 It was noted during the evaluation that a small number of the written comments recorded by the staff about the children were overly negative and not balanced enough to meet the children's needs. The staff in these nurture groups reported that they would welcome additional guidance and support on how to record the children's achievements and standards in an appropriate manner.

4.2.16 While a majority of staff have developed effective and innovative methods of helping the children to reintegrate, for example, 'bring a buddy to nurture' it will be important for all of the teachers to continue to plan activities, both in the classroom and the playground, that will support the reintegration of the nurture group children more fully with their peers in mainstream.

4.3   Achievements and standards

4.3.1   All of the units use the Boxall Profile[2] each term to monitor the children's progress. Other relevant professionals are involved appropriately and formal reviews with the parents are carried out on a regular basis. In the best practice, the initial assessment incorporating the Boxall Profile together with the teacher's professional judgement were used to select the children whom they felt would benefit most from inclusion in the nurture group. Through this practice, all of the staff were involved in observing the children and collating a useful bank of first-hand evidence to inform the future planning of effective strategies to meet the children's personal, social and emotional needs.

4.3.2   The teachers' evaluations indicate that most of the children are making progress in English and mathematics.   However, in a few of the units, the staff missed valuable opportunities to observe and record the children's development using a variety of less formal methods to inform future planning.

4.3.3   The children's attendance has improved significantly since attending the nurture group and this has had a positive impact on their attitude to learning. In all of the schools, the progress made by the children is being tracked and, in the best practice, their progress continues to be monitored when they return to mainstream class.

4.3.4   Nearly all of the children are happy and confident in the nurture environment and generally displayed very good behaviour. Most of the children settled quickly, were eager to participate in the activities, engaged readily with the staff and were willing to take on roles of responsibility within the group.   The children participated well in group sessions, demonstrated good listening skills and showed high regard for others, their opinions and their environment. Increasingly, the children demonstrated their ability to self-manage their work and behaviour and showed a good understanding of the targets set to help them achieve positive outcomes. The children's independence, self-esteem, positive attitude and behaviour were developed well through the thoughtful use of visual prompts that acted as reminders for acceptable behaviour and outlined progression in activities and the daily timetable.   They were often happy to explain and discuss their work with the staff and visitors. In a small number of groups, the staff needed to have higher expectations of the children and to empower them to take more responsibility for their own actions.

4.3.5   On the few occasions when the ETI had an opportunity to meet with small groups of children, to seek their views about their nurture experience, they talked enthusiastically about their experiences and were able to articulate well the benefits they had gained from their time spent within the nurture unit. They were able to talk about and demonstrate the skills they had been taught to help them cope with stressful situations, particularly those they were able to use when they returned to their mainstream classes.   The children also indicated that they felt they could approach the nurture teacher for support even when they had been reintegrated to their mainstream class. Although a small number of the children still present with challenging behaviours, they reported that the strategies they had learned enabled them to cope and manage their emotions better within their mainstream class.

---

[2] The Boxall Profile is a resource for helping teachers to develop an accurate understanding of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties, which supports them in planning interventions and support activities.

5.   Conclusion

Throughout the pilot, the emerging evidence indicated that the staff were totally committed to the children in their care. The school senior leadership teams were committed to using the knowledge, skills and experience of nurture principles gained through the pilot to develop further a nurturing ethos across the whole school. The nurture training, provided to the staff, has impacted positively on their practice. Almost all of the staff reported that the training was very useful and of a high quality. While most staff were confident and competent in their planning and methods of observation, a small number still need to develop further this aspect of their work. The staff in the units are fully committed to developing the nurture principles within the school. To this end, a small number of units reported that they have begun to network, within and outside their clusters, to disseminate best practice and learn from others.

Case Study 1

Background

Child A had many difficulties both at school and at home and he was a very easily identifiable as a child who was in need of nurturing. His behaviour in the mainstream classroom was extremely disruptive, to the extent that neither he nor his classmates were able to gain access fully to the curriculum.

In the nurture room

Child A came to the nurture room as a very angry and temperamental child. He was always eager to help and to please and in time he became very familiar and comfortable with life in the nurture unit, benefitting greatly from the routine of eating together, sharing and taking turns. His focus on the curriculum improved and he developed a keen interest in numeracy in particular. He became more self-aware and crucially less self-negating, and was able to realise that he was improving academically; he grew to love praise.

Child A's mainstream teacher had much difficulty at the beginning of the year trying to keep him on task and remain focused, but as time went on, she noted significant improvements in his attitudes and behaviour in class, both in the way he reacted to teaching staff and the way he behaved towards his peers.

Outcome

As a result of his time in the nurture room, Child A has become a happier child. He still needs strong boundaries and firm routines, but is much more willing to listen and to improve. His moods have become less changeable and he has developed better self-control. The Boxall Profile results show he has made significant improvements in all aspects of his learning and development.

Case Study 2

Background

Child B was five years old when he was considered for the nurture group. He is the youngest of three boys. Child B's attendance caused concern during his first year of school. He was frequently late arriving to school and was late being collected. His year 1 teacher was concerned over his lack of communication and interaction; for the first eight months he did not communicate with anyone in school. Towards the end of year 1, he began to respond with one-word answers; however, his speech was poor and he was very difficult to understand. He also displayed difficulty with his fine and gross motor skills, such as holding a pencil and walking or running. Child B's year 1 teacher was unsure of his academic ability as she found him difficult to assess, due to his lack of communication. Evidence from assessment indicated that he would benefit from time in the nurture room.

In the nurture room

An individual education plan was created by the nurture staff and his mainstream teacher. Targets were created using the information from the Boxall Profile. The main focus was to build relationships in order for him to trust the adults and eventually verbally communicate with others. Within 6 weeks, Child B had achieved his targets and had exceeded expectations. He began to communicate regularly with the staff in the nurture room expressing how he was feeling and his choice of snack. He began gradually to communicate with his peers during play and eventually spoke to his mainstream teacher.

In the second term he sang to his mainstream class, a huge achievement for him.

Outcome

After four months in the nurture room, he was freely communicating with adults including the supervisory and canteen staff, and even visitors to the school. The large classroom was too much for him and he needed the smaller group setting that resembled home. He communicated daily around the breakfast table. The staff developed a trusting relationship with his parents and invited them in to school for parent and child activities once a month. They organised speech and language support and occupational therapy for him and supported his parents in referring him to an Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) clinic. Child B spent two and an half terms in the nurture room. His attendance improved from 87.85% to 91.41%. He made excellent progress socially and emotionally. This progress was reflected in his academic work.

Case Study 3

Background

Child C is the youngest sibling in a family of four. Staff at his nursery shared concerns with the year 1 teacher. In year 1, he presented as socially immature, had difficulty in forming friendships and his academic performance in literacy was very poor. There was very little home support in terms of completing homework. Child C's initial Boxall Profile indicated that he was well below the 'normal' range in the developmental strands. His diagnostic profile also indicated that he displayed social, emotional and behavioural challenges. Initial observations of Child C within his mainstream class showed bouts of aggression, impulsiveness and agitation when he had to wait for anything. He used very basic language during the observations and required a lot of verbal prompting from the teacher throughout.

In the nurture room

Child C settled very well into the nurture group. He particularly enjoyed the smaller setting and formed good friendships with the other children in the room, thriving on the praise and positivity within the room. His mother became more engaged with school and took part in a number of parenting programmes over the year and was also more open to advice from staff.

Outcome

When he reintegrated into his own class, he settled quickly and developed a great rapport with his male teacher and there have been no serious concerns about his behaviour. His performance in numeracy and many other areas is good. However, he continues to have difficulties in literacy. He attends a withdrawal group and continues to enjoy sensory motor movement sessions.

On the whole, nurturing has had a profound impact on the holistic development of the children in the school. Staff are more confident in applying the principles of nurture into their teaching approaches. The nurture room is an inviting, relaxed, rich learning environment that all children in the school feel ownership of. It celebrates success whilst developing coping strategies, allowing the children to become more resilient. The true essence of the room was summed up by Child C who stated, "This room makes my brain smile!"

Case Study 4

Background

Child D is five years old; the reports from his previous school indicated incidents of neglect. He settled well into class, although his teacher could see that he had potential to become very emotional. After completing a Boxall profile, a strengths and difficulties questionnaire and observations in the playground and in the classroom, it was clear that he was extremely impulsive and hyperactive. He sought attention to gain recognition and admiration, was restless and erratic and his behaviour was without purposeful sequence or direction. He showed no fear and was keen to impress and have the approval of the other children his Boxall Profile showed scores below the desirable norms across the developmental strands and scores above the desirable norms in the diagnostic profile, which reflected what was observed in the nurture room on a daily basis. His score indicated that he was developmentally immature, inattentive, lacked concentration, was unlikely to follow simple instructions, showed little interest in activities and would use a range of tactics to get him away from lessons

In the nurture room

The staff set about developing and involving him in activities to help his language and short term memory skills through lots of games and interactive lessons. His low scores also indicated that he lacked trust in adults and couldn't predict what would happen next. His high diagnostic scores indicated that he was impulsive driven; he could not reflect on, monitor or direct his own behaviour. While his personal organisation and identity were under-developed, there was potential for attachment and growth if the appropriate relationships and experiences were provided. It was necessary to provide him with a warm, secure attachment as he has an insecure, fragile self-image and he lacked interest and motivation. Tasks were set with guaranteed success and he was given a practical job to do within the school environment, giving him an interest that was on going. An individual education plan was drawn up in response to the assessments carried out.

Outcome

As a result of the many strategies used, Child D is now a reliable child who responds immediately and listens attentively. He is responding to the non verbal rewards such as 'thumbs up' when he is behaving appropriately. He is engaging fully in all the various activities, especially cookery and gardening. He enjoys the space outside where he can play games and invite one of his friends in. The close environment and structured play enables him to listen to rules and adhere to them. He is happy to take on a variety of helpful roles around the school and is very proud of this environment. There was a dramatic improvement especially in the specific strand (G) of the Boxall Profile which was targeted[3].

---

[3] Boxall Profile, Strand G: "Is able to function and conform in a group, has regard for others and accepts organisational constraints."

Child D remains in the nurture room and is beginning the process of reintegration. By the fourth Boxall, what started out as red scores right across the Boxall had now all turned green. He is very settled now and on one particular occasion I overheard his parent say, "I'm proud of you son!"

Schools participating in the evaluation

1. Ballycraigy Primary School - Antrim

2. Blackmountain Primary School - Belfast

3. Currie Primary School - Belfast

4. Edenbrooke Primary School - Belfast

5. Fountain Primary School - Londonderry

6. Harmony Primary School - Belfast

7. Harpur's Hill Primary School - Coleraine

8. Harryville Primary School - Ballymena

9. Holy Trinity Primary School - Belfast

10. John Paul II Primary School - Belfast

11. St Clare's Primary School - Belfast

12. St Joseph's Primary School, Slate Street - Belfast

13. St Malachy's Primary School - Belfast

14. St Malachy's Primary School, Carnagat - Newry

15. St Oliver Plunkett Primary School - Londonderry

16. St Patrick's Primary School - Belfast

17. St Paul's Primary School - Belfast

18. Taughmonagh Primary School - Belfast

19. Tullygally Primary School - Lurgan

20. West Winds Primary School - Newtownards

An Evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot