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Key words

Nurture groups, parent involvement, family learning

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Abstract

This article draws on the findings from a small qualitative study which focused on gathering perspectives and accounts of experiences from nursery practitioners, health and third sector professionals and parents. It explored the ways in which parents/carers and practitioners experienced the nurture approach developed in preschool settings in Glasgow, Scotland and their perspectives on the impact that this provision has had on the development and well-being of young children and family engagement in learning. The findings provided some insights into the specific ways in which settings involved parents and worked towards developing a nurturing ethos towards parents themselves, underpinned by the following three elements: a welcoming setting, sensitive and empathic staff and creative practice. The study identified challenges for some nurseries in achieving this, such as the limited scope for nurture corner practitioners in some of the settings to fully utilise their skills with parents due to accommodation constraints.

Introduction

Intervening at an early stage in children's lives to address inequalities and disadvantage is a central plank of government policy across the UK. At national and local government level this strategy is being translated into a range of initiatives which aim to ensure that children's development is supported through provision that meets needs and is appropriate for families' circumstances.

In Scotland, the legislative framework for this work is the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 which enshrines the principles of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) in law (Scottish Government, 2012a). GIRFEC's well-being indicators identify the need for each child to be: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, responsible, respected and included. Within this, the Scottish Government is promoting an agenda of preventative support to children and their families underpinned by the Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2008). This is based on evidence that financial investment in the earliest years can secure better outcomes for children (Scottish Government, 2008; Early Intervention Foundation, 2011).

Practice in all nurseries in Scotland is shaped by the Early Level of the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2007) and by national guidance about appropriate early learning and childcare experiences for children from birth until the start of primary school (Scottish Government, 2014c). These pedagogical practices are concerned with supporting learning through play, ensuring a balance between child- and adult-initiated activities, encouraging children to participate in learning across all the curriculum areas

and sensitive and responsive interactions between adults and children. Preschool pedagogy construes learning as a process of construction rather than transmission and processes such as exploration, creativity and problem-solving are highly valued (Scottish Executive, 2007; Stephen, 2010). The children spend most of their time in activities which they have chosen from a range of playroom possibilities planned by the practitioners to reflect the young learners' interests and motivations. There are brief adult-led small group activities to provoke children's engagement in particular curriculum areas such as language and literacy, mathematics and science, but typically children spend the bulk of their time in the nursery exploring activities and resources provided by practitioners to stimulate their curiosity, imagination and creativity. Additionally, individual settings may offer a range of services to support families and will be engaged in collaborative working with other professional such as health visitors and speech and language therapists, community work agencies and with local primary schools.

The nurture corner initiative, which is the focus of this paper, arose in response to the Scottish Government's policy goal of ensuring a good start in life for all children and reducing the impact of disadvantage. The Scottish Government (2014c) has set targets for children's developmental progress, one of which is that 90% of children reach the milestones expected for their age and stage at the point at which they begin primary school.

In order to move towards this goal and support the well-being of families, Glasgow City Council Education Services have extended the nurture and family learning approach from primary schools to the city's preschool provision. Of approximately 96,000 children aged 0-15 living in Glasgow, more than 36,000 are living in poverty – the highest rate of child poverty in Scotland (Spencer, 2015). In some areas of Glasgow, over 40 percent of children are living in low income households (ibid.). In 2014, approximately 5.8% of Glasgow's population was aged 0-4 years, slightly higher than the national average (Glasgow City Council Education Services, 2014). Glasgow aims to be a Nurturing City, and more than 3500 staff from over 200 schools have attended nurture training (Glasgow City Council, 2015). In 20 selected early years settings in the city the nurture corner initiative aims to support children who find it 'difficult to play and learn with others' and to ensure that they can remain in and benefit from mainstream early years education. Two further policy concerns underpin the provision of nurture corners in Glasgow City Council Education Services. Firstly, ensuring that the impact of nurture provision will extend beyond the children who find playing and learning in nursery difficult to the families in which they are growing up, and in particular to families who are 'just coping'. Secondly, to meet the nationally agreed aim that children and their families should receive integrated services which are readily accessible and designed around their needs (Scottish Government, 2012a; 2012b and 2014). To this end nurture approaches and family learning schemes can be linked with the wider range of early years and parenting initiatives within the city.

This article draws on the findings from a small study, commissioned by Glasgow Centre for Population Health and undertaken from May to July 2014 as part of an evaluation of nurturing practices within the city. It was undertaken by a research team from the University of Stirling. The study explored the ways in which parents/carers and practitioners experienced the nurture approach developed in preschool settings in Glasgow and their perspectives on the effect of nurture corners on children's wellbeing and development and on family engagement. The findings revealed how the settings engaged parents, in part by adopting a nurturing approach towards them, as well as their children, and it is this focus on parents that is developed as the main theme in this article.

Background

What are nurture groups?

The Nurture Group Network[1] characterises nurture group experience as offering an effective short-term intervention to reduce the barriers to learning which social, emotional and behavioural difficulties create (Bennathan and Boxall, 2012; Nurture Group Network, 2016a). Nurture groups are designed to offer the opportunity to establish a relationship of trust with specific adults and target identified immaturities in development or difficulties with the regulation of social and emotional behaviour while remaining included in mainstream educational provision. Attachment theory, as developed by Bowlby and elaborated later by Ainsworth and others, describes the centrality to a child's healthy development in all domains of a secure attachment to at least one caregiver (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Secure attachments have been shown to be nurtured by warm, sensitive and responsive care giving, coupled with the establishment of clear boundaries. A secure attachment provides the secure base that supports the child to feel safe to explore the wider world and to play and learn. Explicitly acknowledging the social and emotional aspects of teaching relationships, staff in nurture groups aim to offer provision that meets children's unmet developmental needs and to build on their knowledge and understanding of the context in which they are growing up. In the context of primary school, a nurture group aims 'to create the world of early childhood in school and so provide the broadly based learning experience normally gained in the first three years' (Boxall, 2002, p.3). Key features of nurture groups include:

- A separate room or corner for the nurture group
- Small group size

[1] The Nurture Group Network exists to promote the development of nurture groups and to ensure the continuing quality of their delivery through accredited training programmes, research on effective practice, relevant publications and information exchange. http://www.nurturegroups.org/about-us

- One or two trained adults
- Integration of time spent in the nurture group and the main playroom or classroom
- Children's needs and targets are identified by the Boxall Profile.

The six guiding principles of nurture groups include the conceptualisation of the group as a secure base; that nurture is important for the development of self-esteem; that language is a vital aspect of communication; and that all behaviour is seen as communication (Nurture Group Network, 2016b). The Boxall Profile (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998) is used to guide structured observations of children in the school setting, enabling targeted intervention, the measurement of progress and for planning intervention. There are two sections in the profile. Section 1 involves assessment on a range of developmental strands arranged in two clusters – the organisation of learning experiences (paying attention, connecting ideas) and internalisation of controls (emotional security, responsiveness to others). Section 2 involves ratings on behaviours that can impede engagement with school and learning gathered into three clusters: self-limiting features (levels of engagement), undeveloped behaviour (patterns of attachment) and unsupported development (sense of self and regard for others).

Glasgow City Council Education Services has developed these expectations and principles to create targeted guidance for nurture provision in the city's preschool settings. This nurture provision is one element in the local strategy focused on helping children overcome aspects of their social circumstances or developmental delay which can inhibit their educational progress and constrain their wellbeing during the developmentally important early years (Boxall, 2002; Glasgow City Council, undated). *Nurture corner* (a space for targeted, responsive and inclusive provision) is the term used in Glasgow City Council preschool provision to differentiate it from nurture groups in the city's primary schools.

The key features of nurture groups have been interpreted in preschool nursery corners as including: a separate room or corner which is furnished in a relaxing, cosy and child-focused way with the provision of creative and sensory-based materials, small group size, 'free' play and the integration of nurture corner time and time spent in the main nursery for all children, clear and consistent routines and qualified practitioners who have completed specific nurture group training. As well as using careful language to explain, narrate and manage the events of the nurture session, the practitioners praise children, encourage them to make their feelings explicit, gently discipline and urge good manners and healthy or safe choices. Involving parents in their child's learning and supporting them to extend some of the benefits of the nursery through replicating activities and approaches at home, is also an important component of most nurture

provision. The nurseries have developed the Boxall Profile to guide selection for admission to nurture provision and to structure children's developmental profiles.

Evaluating nurture provision

The academic literature that discusses the nature of nurture provision and its outcomes is typically limited to provision in primary schools, and to what are described as classic forms of nurture groups. These are defined by maintaining the children in the mainstream system, time in the nurture setting, and attentions to material conditions, as well as the activities in which children are involved. Characteristics of the classic nurture group model, as defined by Hughes and Schlösser (2014, p.3) in the context of primary school provision, include a focus on educational attachment, positive and trusting relationships with adults, settled routines, eating together as a group and some time spent in a mainstream class each day. Not all of the nurture corners in Glasgow adhered to this 'classic' model. In their innovative move to establish nurture provision in preschool settings the local authority made pragmatic decisions in the light of local circumstances which influenced the frequency and length of sessions in the nurture corner and in mainstream provision, the number of practitioners available for the nurture corner and the location of the corner as a distinct space at each of the participating settings. There are some references to alternative models but in the education literature this does not extend to preschool provision. Although there is some evidence of nurture groups in a small number of countries outside of the United Kingdom (Cefai and Cooper, 2011), the literature is predominantly concerned with nurture practices here in the UK.

Evidence of the positive impact of the nurture approach in Glasgow schools was published in 2006 following the evaluation of the pilot study of nurture group provision in the city's primary schools (Gerrard, 2006). Using evidence from quantitative measures of behaviour and development, the evaluation was able to conclude that for almost all of the children included in a nurture group for whom data was available, there were significant improvements in behaviour. No significant changes were found at the control schools. The questionnaire responses from teachers confirmed this view of nurture groups as being beneficial to children and suggested that the approach also had the support of parents.

Differences in the evaluation methods employed, the age of children studied and the forms of assessment used make it difficult to draw firm conclusions across authorities about the benefits of a nurture approach. Seth-Smith *et al*. (2010) found improvements on some dimensions of development in nurture and control group children but pointed out this was more consistent for those in the nurture group. Some studies offer evidence of improvements in academic attainment too. For instance Sanders (2007) found academic gains and progress in metacognitive skills. There is some suggestion that children in nurture groups in primary schools make more progress in the first two terms

than in the third and fourth spent there (Cooper and Whitebread, 2003). However, there is little or no evidence from longitudinal follow up work of continued progress once children have returned to mainstream provision for all of their time in school. Sanders (2007) suggested that it was quiet and withdrawn children who made the most progress but went on to point out that these gains were less visible in the playground. Cooper and Whitebread (2003) found that those children who had global emotional, social and behavioural difficulties showed some continued improvement in their mainstream setting but children considered hyperactive showed fewer signs of change in their mainstream classrooms.

Hughes and Schlösser (2014) describe their difficulties in conducting a systematic review of the effectiveness of nurture groups due to the variability of the studies. However, they were able to conclude that most studies they included provided some evidence of significant improvement in children's social, emotional and behavioural development (at least in the short term) after spending time in a nurture group. Among the benefits they list: becoming more engaged; better able to concentrate; more likely to resolve conflicts with peers and having better control of impulsive behaviours. Unusually, Hughes and Schlösser (2014) included an examination of the ways in which teachers interact with children in nurture groups, arguing that this may throw some light on the processes which drive the improvements noted. Drawing on studies by Bani (2001) and Colwell and O'Connor (2003), Hughes and Schlösser (2014, p 21) felt able to conclude that nurture group teachers adopt communication styles that are similar to parenting styles "known to facilitate secure attachments between parents and infants". Compared with mainstream teachers, those working in a nurture group more often communicated with children in positive verbal and nonverbal ways, used 'informative' rather than 'bland' praise, and made comments that built self-esteem. Importantly, a number of studies report that schools with nurture groups benefit from improvements in whole school conditions. Hughes and Schlösser (2014) report what they describe as a "whole school" effect, while Sanders (2007) reports that the atmosphere in schools become calmer and staff absenteeism fell when a nurture group was introduced. A study of nurture groups in secondary schools concluded that, when viewed by secondary staff as "an integral support structure for the whole school", such schools become nurturing (Colley, 2009). There have been other calls (see, for example, Binnie and Allen, 2008) to conceptualise nurture *schools* rather than *groups* which, it is argued, places nurture provision in the mainstream and makes it possible to implement more widely.

The importance of encouraging parental involvement with children in nurture groups to ensure a consistent approach at home and school was emphasised by Bennathan and Boxall (1998). There is evidence in the literature of positive changes in the ways in which parents of children in nurture groups engage with teachers and of parents reporting children as becoming more confident and behaving more appropriately at home (e.g. Sanders, 2007). Very little research has been undertaken, however, exploring the involvement and support of parents in the nurture group context (ibid.). Kirkbride's

(2014) study of parental involvement in nurture groups in primary schools found that parents were largely positive about their experiences, although some experienced barriers in the form of communication, feeling welcomed into the group and in relation to their understanding of the function of nurture groups. Parents and practitioners interviewed for the study identified communication, developing positive relationships and working together collaboratively as key elements of nurture group success.

Beyond evaluations of nurture provision there are a growing number of studies which highlight the types of support parents and carers value from services designed to help them (Burgess and Walker, 2006; Aldgate et al, 2007). Parents report that they are most likely to accept support from professionals who approach them with respect and empathy and in a way which builds on their strengths (C4EO, 2010). Evaluations of family support services show that many parents respond well to practitioners who adopt a nurturing approach to them, as well as their children (MacQueen et al, 2007; Burgess et al, 2011). By role-modelling nurturing relationships, professionals can show parents how to provide the same for their children. It is widely recognised that many families find it hard to ask for and accept help and that 'targeted' services sometimes struggle to make themselves accessible to the families who may need them most (Daniel et al, 2011; Melhuish et al, 2012). Services which are provided locally in a non-stigmatising setting have been found to be effective in enabling socially isolated parents to access them (Horwath, 2013). In Scotland the universal setting of the local pre-school nursery and children's entitlement to a place for 600 hours per year for the two years before they begin school would seem to be well-placed in this regard.

Methodology

The study described here adopted qualitative methods to explore the ways in which the principles of nurture are operationalised in the demanding contexts of preschool settings and ways in which outcomes for children are described and valued. The research team was commissioned to explore the perspectives held by parents and staff about changes in behaviour which they attributed to or believed to be associated with nurture provision. The scope of the study did not allow for including children's perspectives on their nurture experiences, which we acknowledge is a gap in the findings.

The study was carried out in six Glasgow City Council nursery settings in locations across the city. The specific case study sites included were chosen in consultation with Glasgow City Council Education Services with the objective of covering the range of forms of pre-school provision offered by the authority and including settings from all geographical regions of the city. All were situated in areas of predominantly social housing, either in inner or edge of city locations. Most of the nursery settings were in purpose-built

premises and co-located with primary schools. Most offered full-time or sessional placements for children aged six weeks to age five, although two catered for a narrower age group, namely two to three and/or three to five year olds. Given the limited scale of the study and the range of influencing criteria we do not make any claims of representativeness for the settings selected. Rather each setting was treated as a case study designed to allow exploration of the innovations which were the focus of enquiry and to yield the kind of rich situated data which is the strength of the qualitative approach (Bryman, 2001).

As the selection of cases was carried out in consultation with the commissioning authority it is possible that the settings invited to participate were known to be enthusiastic and positive about nurture provision. At each setting, interviews were conducted with the head of the setting and two practitioners, one with responsibility for the nurture corner and one whose work focused on the mainstream playroom. We worked with staff to recruit as many parents as possible for a focus group discussion in each setting. The sample of parents was purposive and was comprised primarily of parents who were available to meet with us during nursery hours and who were willing to talk with us about their experiences of nurture corner provision. We met with nine parents individually or in small groups and undertook telephone interviews with two parents. The groups and interviews were held at the setting in a private room such as a staff-room, interview room or parents' meeting room. A topic guide was followed with opportunities given for parents to discuss the issues of importance to them. We conducted the groups and interviews in a sensitive and respectful way; we were given permission by all participants to take notes as a record of the discussions.

We also interviewed by telephone a total of three health visitors and four voluntary sector staff members who were associated with the settings. The remit of the study did not include gathering the views of children directly involved in nurture and family learning. While we acknowledge the agency, preferences and competencies of the preschool child and have developed expertise to help young children articulate their perspectives in this study the work commission was to focus on adult evaluations.

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Stirling's School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

All interviewees received an information sheet about the study and the nature of the offer of confidentiality and anonymity being made by the research team was explained in person and in writing. All participants gave their explicit consent to participate and to their views being included in the research data. Information and consent leaflets relating to parents'/carers' participation in interviews or focus groups were written in accessible language. Confidentiality and the limits of confidentiality were explained carefully, both in written information distributed in advance and at the beginning of each parent interview or focus group. It was also made clear that potential participants were under

no obligation to take part in the research and that receipt of a service was not affected if consent to participate was withheld. The interview responses and focus group discussions were subject to thematic content analysis (Guest et al., 2012). We identified key perspectives shared across participants, within settings and among particular participant groups. The observation data were used to produce an understanding of nurture practices in each setting and gather illustrative examples of practice. The process of identifying and categorising themes in the data was an iterative one, initiated by one team member and extended or challenged by others in the research team until all were satisfied with the resulting analysis (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). Within this collaborative analytical process, study aims and research questions were foregrounded and findings emerged both across participant groups (the range of professional staff and parents) and discretely within groups (notably parents). The research team discussed and agreed on the presentation and placement of findings in the commissioned report (Stephen et al, 2014) and in this article.

Across data collected from staff, parents and partner agencies there was a strong expression of enthusiasm from parents, nursery practitioners and nursery managers for the nurture approach and satisfaction with the outcomes which it can achieve for children. The report of this study (ibid.) explores perspectives across the range of participants more fully, whereas the focus of this article is on parental involvement. A close analysis of discussions with parents found that they identified three main elements in feeling supported and, in some respects, nurtured by staff working in the settings; these findings will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Findings

Nurturing parents: is this important and how can it be achieved?

Working closely with, supporting and nurturing parents appeared to offer 'added value' which enhanced the nurture provision for the children. The elements can be categorised as:

1. setting

2. staff attributes

3. practice

The particular characteristics of these three elements seemed to support some parents in developing the parenting skills which were required to consolidate the benefits experienced by their children in the nurture corner. These benefits included parents being supported to replicate some of the practices at home and, by so doing, become more involved in their children's learning.

Setting

The pre-school nursery setting is a universal one, attended by children from all social groups and with no stigma associated with it. We know that 98% of three and four year olds in Scotland were registered for local authority early learning and childcare provision in 2014 (Scottish Government, 2015). In this respect, it is often more acceptable for parents to enrol their children in nursery than to attend a service which may be seen as 'targeting' their family and labelling it as one which is considered by professionals to be 'in deficit' and requiring extra support. The importance parents place on a non-stigmatising setting is a theme which emerges in research which explores what is most effective in family support (Davies and Ward, 2012). As a consequence, the nursery setting is potentially an ideal one within which to offer support to parents who need it but who are apprehensive about asking for or accepting it. As might be expected, many children who require nurture corner support have parents who themselves may benefit from help, not just with parenting but with wider social, emotional and practical difficulties (McCubbin et al., 1999).

The pre-school nurseries visited for the study, in common with most other nurseries, were designed to be accessible and welcoming. Their entrance halls were colourful; by their very nature they aimed to spark children's interest and help to make them feel comfortable. While the lay-out of the entrances and playrooms varied across settings, some nursery staff had made efforts to provide a welcoming and engaging environment for parents also, with displays of children's work, examples of children's progress towards learning objectives and notice boards with useful information for parents. Practice experience, as reflected in research, indicates that parents and carers appreciate an accessible, comfortable and welcoming environment which makes it easier for them to ask for and accept support (Hoy, 2011; Burgess et al, 2011).

Although some sites were constrained by lack of space, others had allocated a room for parents to meet and talk and which, staff resources permitting, enabled them to hold activities and classes for parents and carers. The heads of each setting had clearly recognised the potential role that the nursery could play in supporting the parents of the nurture corner, given its accessibility within the community and its acceptability to parents. In some instances this took the form of help and advice given on an individual basis to parents or by offering a practitioner-led and structured group work approach, if resources permitted. This also aided the process of the development of peer support, building on that which often takes place informally in the playground when parents drop-off and collect their children. A number of parents credited the nursery with making them feel welcome at all times, and with encouraging them to use the parents' or family rooms to get to know other parents. It was clear, from parents' accounts, that these connections with other parents, as well as with nursery staff, were valued and particularly helpful for those new to the community.

The staff want you to stop and have a cup of tea. They welcome you and really want to hear about your life. It can help if people have just moved here. It helps you meet people and get settled. (Parent H)

***** [the nurture corner practitioner] is always at the front door wanting to talk to parents. You feel like you can tell her anything, talk to her about any problems. She is good at picking up if you are stressed and she wants to know why and wants to help. (Parent D)*

Some parents credited the nursery with supporting their return to work or into training, with a flexible approach to their children's attendance which enabled them to work or study. The evidence suggested that, given the will, ethos and creativity of nurture corner staff and their managers, even nurseries with space constraints could find a way to accommodate regular parent meetings and activities – the crucial factor appeared to be that a comfortable and nurturing atmosphere was created.

Staff attributes

Most heads of the settings participating in the study commented that their most precious resource was their nurture corner staff. During their interviews for the study, the key attributes which came across were their great enthusiasm and commitment, coupled with warmth and compassion. Head teachers talked about finding 'the right practitioner' to run the nurture corner, usually from existing staff, who were then trained in nurture principles and practice. They highlighted the low turn-over of staff undertaking this role, despite its challenges – one of the structural factors associated with better quality provision (Phillips et al, 2000). Nurture corner practitioners reported the benefits they had derived from training and experience in working with parents. The responses they gave when asked about their work reflected their enthusiasm: 'The nurture corner is an asset in every way – I love that it is making a difference for the children – seeing that wee person growing.'

The qualities of the nurture corner staff, and how these benefitted the children, were highlighted by all of the parents consulted. They reported how much they valued the positive and trusting relationships they themselves developed with nurture corner staff. These staff were clearly able to approach parents using the same sort of nurturing and empathic qualities which they used with the children. In the course of the study nurture corner practitioners were seen to converse with parents in a way that was warm and encouraging. Practitioners displayed a good understanding of the needs of many of the parents and the lack of good parenting role models many of them had experienced themselves. The development of a warm and trusting therapeutic relationship between

parents and the professionals who work with them is increasingly recognised as a crucial ingredient in family support (Barrett, 2008).

A good example of nurture corner practitioners' skills was the sensitive way in which the subject of a child being a candidate for the nurture corner was introduced and discussed with parents. Reassuring parents about the reasons for including their child and taking a non-judgmental approach to explaining this was crucial in building a co-operative relationship with them and in gaining parents' permission for the extra support to be put in place:

> *He was in the three to fives and the [practitioner] said he was not progressing as much, concentration was a problem. They said he could get more support, two adults to four children. They said they thought he would benefit. I wasn't sure because I didn't want him singled out. I wasn't too sure when they put him in there but it was the best decision. It has really helped him. (Parent A)*

Most of the parents consulted in the study felt able to approach nurture corner staff to discuss a range of parenting and family issues. In many cases, these staff knew a great deal about the family's circumstances because they took time to listen to parents and demonstrated an understanding of the pressures some families were under. They were able to assess what strategies and learning methods were best suited to parents and which they might be able to undertake with their children at home. One parent explained: 'I've been given good advice about behaviour - she (daughter) can be hyper and fidgety - and how to handle it. They always try to help. They're really supportive here.'

The non-stigmatising nature of nurturing support to parents – including in instances when parents were unsure of their responses to behavioural issues at home – was highlighted by one third sector worker as critical:

> *With nurture because it is modelling [for parents] it is all about warmth, it is unconditional. If something has gone wrong at home staff ask, 'Okay, that's happened, now how are we going to deal with this?*

A nurturing approach towards parents, reflecting that which was provided for children in the nursery, offered parents positive role-modelling to help them provide a similar care-giving model for their children. It was arguably as important as the practice described below of supplying resources for parents to use with their children at home.

Practice

Helping parents to become more involved in their children's education, even in the early years, has been shown to be beneficial to both parents and children in enabling them to see the potential advantages of education (Desforges, 2003). The nursery settings

employed a range of practices which helped the formation of co-operative relationships with the parents of children attending the nurture corner and provided them with parenting and educational support. All the nurture corner practitioners gave regular feedback to parents about children's progress and made use of other mechanisms to aid home/nursery communication, such as a diary about the child's activities and behaviour for completion at school and at home. Practitioners provided parents with resources for use at home including books and educational toys, to which they might not otherwise have access. This provided parents with opportunities for positive play and encouragement to share enjoyable activities with their children. A nurture practitioner explained that some parents lacked the confidence to engage in play with their children, and had observed several parents gain confidence through regular involvement in the nurture corner. One parent reported: 'It's quite enjoyable actually, what they do [in the nurture room]. They have wee goody bags to take home – he shows his sister and teaches her using the bag.' The health visitor for that setting expressed the view that engaging parents in play in the nurture setting 'helps parents to understand the importance of talking to their children and really engage in child-led play, which a lot of parents don't understand as parenting.' The third sector worker for the setting-expressed a similar view:

> *One of the main strengths is that it is fun activities. Routines and consistency are very important, so it is about building those with parents. It's also about breaking cycles with parents who take punitive approaches to behaviour, maybe where discipline has been unsuccessful. It's about having positive experiences, having fun, and sharing good things.*

Over and above this, the settings varied in the extent to which they felt able to develop their wider family learning role. Some of the managers talked about trying to offer parent education programmes and groups, though few of them expressed any confidence in the efficacy of this provision. Some nurture practitioners were able to identify what they saw as deficits in parenting in general and in particular instances but beyond encouraging warm personal relationships with parents and trying to stimulate interest in each child's development there was little scope for them to extend their existing focus on the children. Some settings lacked the necessary resources, and their staff the experience of working directly with parents, and considered, quite reasonably, that their priority should be to spend all their available time with the children.

However, others saw scope for greater involvement of parents and arranged events for them and their child in the nurture corner, explicitly focused on activities to share with preschool children. At one setting, parents were invited to come to the nurture corner at fortnightly intervals to join activities such as baking, using particular resources or to go on trips to the park or further afield. The emphasis was on having fun together and each family received a pack containing all that was necessary for children and their parents to

repeat or extend the activity at home. Role-modelling positive ways of interacting with children was an important component of this.

> *We are concerned with family health and well-being and have a half- time practitioner who works with parents e.g. offering workshops (such as first aid) and Triple P Parenting Programme sessions, including summer clubs. Parents of children in nurture are often 'difficult to reach' parents. (Head Teacher)*

We know that parents often need an approach which builds on their strengths and helps them solve the social, emotional and practical difficulties they may face (Daniel and Rioch, 2007). At one nursery the nurture corner staff had arranged a number of specific events, such as a 'pamper day' and open day for parents of children in the nurture corner, as a complement to the programme of courses and social occasions organised with all parents whose children attended the nursery. This was a good example of a nursery where the approach was underpinned by a strong ethos of nurturing parents, as well as their children. It was felt that the nurture setting offered parents more than standardised parent education programmes, such as Triple P, which many lacked confidence to attend or found either stigmatising or not designed in a way which addressed their difficulties. One health visitor expressed the view that 'By using this approach [Triple P] we are closing doors for some families… one shoe doesn't fit all… so nurture groups might be another option for families.'

This reflected the view of practitioners that some parents need their confidence and skills boosted before they are able to find the personal resources to nurture their children.

Discussion: can the nurturing approach towards parents be built upon?

This was a small-scale study which investigated the views and experiences of practitioners, parents and associated professionals involved with nurture corner provision in six case study settings. This innovation was welcomed and positively evaluated by parents, practitioners, head teachers and associated professionals. There were also tensions and points for development of course. For instance, practitioners had very limited opportunities to share and develop nurture practice across settings, the resources and range of activities were limited in some nurture corners, staff absences could disrupt the continuity of provision and there was a need to consider what lessons from nurture provision could be extended to all children in preschool settings.

Nevertheless, we consider that this study offers some interesting indications and illustrations in relation to the ways in which the nursery settings were able to meet the aims of developing parental involvement in learning and enhancing parenting skills. It seemed to us, as the authors of the study, that nursery settings were ideally placed to offer such support to parents, given their non-stigmatising nature. We know from research studies that many parents feel a sense of shame and stigma when approaching

professionals about parenting difficulties and challenges in coping with children's behaviour (Broadhurst, 2003; Daniel et al, 2011). Parents report ambivalent feelings about asking for help and advice, anticipating a loss of control and a fear of negative consequences which they perceive as not outweighing the benefits they may derive from such support. Once parents were 'through the doors', all the settings were able, to some extent or other, to work towards the development of a nurturing ethos towards parents themselves, underpinned by three key elements: a welcoming setting, sensitive and empathic staff and inclusive practice.

Several areas for further research are proposed:

- a follow-up study with parents and primary school teachers, which would enable a consideration of whether nurture corner attendance led to longer-term effects for children
- further study of the ways in which relationships between time in the nurture room and time in the main playroom are managed and what is needed for children to make a successful return to full time mainstream provision
- more research is needed on the efficacy of efforts to engage parents in learning
- as this study was conducted in one geographical area in Scotland a larger study exploring nurture approaches across the country could be useful
- although not a main focus of this study, the project recognised the importance of the involvement of other practitioners such as health visitors; further research exploring the role of health visitors working with nurture groups would be of benefit.

This critique of the policies which promote parenting as a skill that professionals can 'teach' parents must be balanced with the need many parents express for empathic support, which places the challenges many encounter in caring for their children firmly in the context of their everyday lives (Burgess et al, 2014). The staff in the pre-school settings, and those working in the nurture corners specifically, talked about the pressures individual families were coping with in raising their children and which included social, emotional, financial and environmental factors. For instance, they demonstrated awareness of the impact on children of a parent returning from prison, substance abuse in the family, changes in foster care and difficulties engaging with other government agencies. They adopted a holistic approach to parenting practices rather than conceptualising parenting as a set of skills.

The study identified challenges for some nurseries in meeting the parent-focused aims. One of these was the limited scope for nurture corner practitioners in some of the settings to spend time with parents due to staff time and accommodation constraints and there were tensions between targeted and universal provision in preschool settings. However,

all nurture provision in Glasgow was being offered in a policy climate which explicitly claimed to promote a nurturing approach across educational services. In cultures where 'performativity' is prevalent, for example in the English educational system, there is considerable pressure on schools to meet assessment targets mandated by the government (Ball, 2003). When key performance targets are set for curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy, educators might find it difficult to prioritise social and emotional aspects of children's learning (which are not similarly measured) due to regulatory pressures. When accountability is the dominant educational discourse, testing is paramount and places considerable strain on innovative pedagogical practices such as nurture provision. Furthermore, it can place considerable strain on educators who are prevented from using nurturing approaches in their own practice (Bennathan and Boxall, 2012).

The nurseries participating in this study had made inroads into achieving the parent-focused aims and the key factors which appeared to contribute to this are helpful when considering how this aspect of practice could be further addressed. The importance of involving and showing an interest in the whole family (parents and children) was recognised by many managers and staff who appreciated that children would be likely to derive maximum benefit from the nurture corner experience if their parents could replicate this experience at home. The recognition that parents need to feel nurtured themselves in order to be nurturing in turn to their children can be developed in a range of ways, as this study showed, in settings which clearly place high value on the concept and practice of whole family nurture.

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