# University of Southampton

# Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology


**Title:** Academic Critique: Nurture groups

**Author:** Cora Sargeant

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**Introduction to the Case**

The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) at a Junior school asked for help from Educational Psychology because they were concerned about the behaviour of a young boy named Jacob (pseudonym used to preserve anonymity) in class. Jacob had been receiving a nurture group intervention for the past two terms and, though his behaviour in class had improved as a result, his teacher was having more difficulties as she attempted to reintegrate him back into the mainstream classroom.

At the initial meeting with the school SENCo and class teacher I helped them to frame their concerns in the form of a question. The question they were particularly interested in considering pertained to the reasons why Jacob was having trouble reintegrating into his mainstream class when he had been so successfully integrated into the nurture group. I agreed to conduct four separate observations of Jacob and to use these as an opportunity to meet and work alongside him in both his nurture group and mainstream class. I also met with his class teacher and nurture group staff to talk about Jacob and the progress he had made.

Before attending the nurture group Jacob had been very anxious and distressed. Jacob had joined the school at the beginning of year two, having never really settled in at his previous school. He had been the target of bullying, perhaps facilitated by his anxious and sensitive nature, and his mother had moved him to his current school in response. Upon arrival at the new school Jacob hid in the corner of the room in distress, crying and striking out at anyone who approached. This continued for some weeks, even after he became a member of the nurture group. At the time of my involvement he had been present in the nurture group for two terms and, though he remained anxious, he was able to participate fully in all of the nurture group activities. During my observations I saw that Jacob had a positive

relationship with the nurture group staff and his peers in the group, all of whom seemed to hold him in positive regard.

Jacob's experience in the mainstream classroom appeared quite different to the nurture group. Jacob seemed much more anxious in the larger group. He was not able to participate fully in all of the classroom activities and remained quiet and withdrawn during group tasks. I observed Jacob spend a lot of time in the mainstream class talking and working with another nurture group member, who was simultaneously being reintegrated. Their relationship was helping them both to manage in the mainstream environment, though together they were visibly separate to the rest of the class and were struggling to be truly integrated.

One of the main difficulties I identified was that the mainstream class had not incorporated many of the nurturing practices I had witnessed in abundance in the nurture group. As a result my hypothesis was that both Jacob's learning and behaviour were benefitting from nurturing practices and that, consequently, adopting these practices in the mainstream class might be a way to help him to integrate. My intervention focussed on helping the nurture group staff to share and disseminate their nurturing practices to the mainstream class teachers in the hope that they would incorporate them into their own practice.

I attended a review meeting for Jacob five weeks following my intervention. Jacob's class teacher reported that, though he remained visibly anxious, Jacob and his friend had both been able to be fully reintegrated into the mainstream class. The class teacher reported that Jacob's behaviour in class was now often very positive, with him adopting certain nurturing practices of his own, including offering chairs to visitors in the class. The class teacher reported that one of the catalysts for success was the incorporation of some nurturing practices from the nurture group (including breakfast) into the mainstream classroom.

**Review of the Literature Pertinent to the Case**

Jacob appeared to benefit from both the initial nurture group intervention and the incorporation of nurture group practices into the mainstream environment.  As such it is pertinent to review the literature supporting the use of nurture group practices, both in the form of nurture groups per se and how those practices can influence the mainstream classroom environment.

Nurture groups were originally designed by Margorie Boxall (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996), as an attempt to meet the needs of an increasing number of primary school-age children showing signs of behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties (BESD).  Boxall's primary aim for nurture groups was to give children access to nurturing experiences they might have missed out on in their home environment.  The theory that most heavily influenced this aim was attachment theory (see Bowlby, 1975).  The theory describes how children's experiences of people's reactions to them, particularly in times of distress, assist them in forming an understanding of how they, their environment, and significant people around them can be expected to behave.  This internalised model, and the predictions drawn from it, then continues to influence the behaviour of the developing child as they grow.  Thus children with BESD can be seen as having an unhelpful internal working model of the world, drawn from harmful childhood experiences.  Though Bowlby initially saw these effects as unyielding, subsequent authors expanded the theory to appreciate the role of later experiences in influencing this internal working model (e.g. Rutter, 1997).  Thus nurture groups were designed to take advantage of this possibility, by providing children with BESD the healthy nurturing experiences that they might have missed out on, and that were developmentally necessary for social competence and learning in school.

One of the main criticisms that can be levelled at the aforementioned use of attachment theory is that it emphasises a deficit within the child as the source of their experienced difficulties in school.  However, attachment theory can also be seen as an interactionist theory that considers the behaviour of children to be the result of an interaction between their needs and the environment (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).  From this perspective, as well as being a form of 'within child' intervention, nurture groups can also be seen as a form of environmental change. Consequently, they can be seen as providing additional positive impacts on the behaviour and learning of children in accordance with both Maslow's (1943) understanding of the hierarchy of needs, and Vygotsky's (1986) focus on the importance of interpersonal relationships and dialogue.

Maslow (1943) considered that both children and adults have a number of needs, hierarchically organised by their fundamentality.  Maslow's theory describes people's behaviour as heavily influenced by their most fundamental unmet need, thus if a child feels unsafe in class they will be motivated to make themselves safer rather than to learn or achieve academically.  Only when they feel hydrated, satiated, warm, awake, safe, and that they belong and are loved will they be motivated to learn (Maslow, 1970).  Nurture groups provide breakfast, predictable routine and boundaries, and a strong sense of belonging (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996), thus it is possible that nurture groups facilitate learning by actively meeting these fundamental needs.

It is also possible that nurture groups facilitate learning by fostering a caring relationship between the teacher and learner.  Vygotsky (1986) theorised that learning was possible through the internalisation of a co-constructed interpersonal dialogue between teacher and learner.  This dialogue allows for the mediation of learning experiences, though this is only possible by a teacher that knows the child well and is aware of their current ability and proximal stages of development.   In addition, the process of learning is difficult and

often involves contention and conflict.  As a result these tasks necessitate a caring

relationship between teacher and learner (Noddings, 1995), something fostered within the

small nurture group environment where the quality of relationships is paramount (Bennathan

& Boxall, 1996).

Whether due to the within-child or environmental changes associated with nurture

group interventions, the efficacy of nurture groups has been well documented in research.

The first large-scale study to investigate the longitudinal effects of nurture group

interventions was conducted by Iszatt and Wasilewska in 1997.  The researchers reviewed six

nurture groups set up between 1984 and 1994 in Enfield.  The authors looked specifically at

the nurture groups' ability to successfully reintegrate the 308 children attending them back

into mainstream classes.  Their data indicated that 86.7% of the children were successfully

reintegrated.  Iszatt and Wasilewska also revisited these children in 1995 and found that 83%

of their original sample had remained in their mainstream placements.  Though their control

group was very small, the authors concluded that the nurture groups had reduced their

attendees' likelihood of needing statutory assessment by a factor of three, and of their

needing specialist school provision by a factor of seven.

One of the main criticisms of the research of Iszatt and Wasilewska (1997) was that

they lacked an appropriate control group.  In response to this, Cooper and Whitebread (2007)

conducted a large-scale study interpreting the outcomes of 359 pupils attending nurture

groups alongside 184 matched controls.  Using the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties

Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) the researchers identified that children with SEBD

attending a nurture group demonstrated a significant improvement in hyperactivity, conduct

problems, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and pro-social behaviour during two terms of

attendance.  These findings have been supported in more recent research (e.g. Binnie & Allen,

2008; Scott & Lee, 2009; Seth-Smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy, & Jaffey, 2010).

Some recent research has also suggested that nurture groups have a demonstrable effect on the academic abilities of attendees (e.g. Mackay, Reynolds, & Kearney, 2010). Seth-smith, et al. (2010) found that children attending nurture groups made significant academic gains during the intervention as measured by their national curriculum levels. The academic benefits of nurture groups can be partially explained by their small group size (Mackay et al., 2010) and more effective differentiation of learning tasks. Academic benefits have also been linked to other effects of nurture groups such as an improved quality of attachment (Mackay et al., 2010), sense of belonging (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), and perceived affective support (Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). In addition to the academic benefits, nurture groups have also been shown to be of benefit to the home environment of the child, both in terms of the child's behaviour and in terms of parental perceptions and expectations of the child (Binnie & Allen, 2008).

Nurture groups also effect positive change in the mainstream classrooms of the schools in which they are located (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). Within their large-scale study Cooper and Whitebread (2007) demonstrated that the SDQ scores of children not attending a nurture group improved significantly more for those children attending a school with a nurture group than for those attending a school without one. As a result, Cooper and Whitebread concluded that the presence of a nurture group in school benefits children who aren't attending it through the dissemination of nurturing practice to mainstream classes. In fact, Cooper and Whitebread demonstrated that this effect was so profound that those children attending a nurture group did not improve significantly more than those BESD children attending mainstream classes in the same school.

Many nurture group researchers drew their control groups from mainstream classes in schools with nurture groups and failed to control for the presence or absence of nurturing practices in the mainstream environment (e.g. Scott & Lee, 2009; Seth-Smith et al., 2010). As

such it is possible that many of the outcomes associated with nurture groups can be attributed to the adoption of nurturing practices more broadly.  Doyle (2004) described the broader adoption of nurturing practices as the emergence of nurturing schools. These schools allow for the nurturing ethos to positively influence a wider array of children than nurture groups could work with directly.

**Critical appraisal in relation to the case process**

Following the literature review I considered the extent to which the progress Jacob had made in the nurture group could be supported by the evidence base for the intervention.  Jacob's initial presentation in school could certainly be framed within attachment theory as an ambivalent attachment style (see Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978 for a description). Jacob was clingy at home and, when distressed, was difficult to console and could strike out violently at attempts to comfort him.   As such it is possible that Jacob had missed out on early nurturing experiences that would usually have given him an internal sense of safety and security.  If this were the case then the nurture group intervention would be well supported by the literature as an intensive method through which educators could provide some of those missing experiences.  Indeed Jacob's time at the nurture group did help him to settle in school successfully, his ambivalent attachment behaviours subsided and he was able to engage with and learn within the nurture group.

Jacob's successful experience in the nurture group could also have been explained by the environmental change associated with the intervention.  Following Jacob's difficult experience at his previous school and subsequent transition it is quite possible that he perceived his safety to be compromised at his new school.  Therefore, following Maslow's theory of a hierarchy of needs, it is possible that Jacob's initial behaviour in school was an

attempt to protect himself in an environment he perceived to be threatening, meeting his most

fundamental unmet need, that of safety.  The nurture group intervention provided a number of

environmental changes, including the introduction of predictable routines and clear

boundaries, that would have helped to improve his sense of safety.  In accordance with

Maslow's theory, the meeting of these needs would have led Jacob's behaviour to be more

heavily influenced by higher order needs, such as that for esteem and mastery, which could

be met by engaging in learning.  Another environmental change that the nurture group will

have provided is the nurturing of a caring relationship between Jacob and the nurture group

staff, something that has been considered particularly beneficial in learning environments

(Nodding, 1995; Vygotsky, 1986).

Whether due to an internal change or because of a more appropriate learning

environment, Jacob certainly benefitted from the presence of nurturing practices.  The

academic literature clearly supports the use of these practices and has been particularly

helpful in understanding the possible mechanisms through which Jacob had such success in

the nurture group.  However, Jacob had great difficulty reintegrating into the mainstream

environment.  This impels the question of whether it is always helpful to remove children

from their mainstream environment in order to provide them with nurturing experiences.

There are arguments against removing children from their mainstream class.  First, it

can interrupt the relationship with the class teacher (Sanders, 2007).  This will make effective

teaching upon reintegration more difficult as a caring relationship between teacher and

learner, where the teacher knows the learner well, is paramount for the creation of efficacious

educational dialogue (Vygotsky, 1986).  Second, removing the child from the mainstream

class can inhibit the development of a sense of membership and belonging to the class.

Though the nurture group is particularly well suited to developing a sense of belonging to the

group, this poses a problem for reintegration where a sense of membership and belonging to the mainstream class will need to be reconstructed.

The academic literature demonstrates that nurturing practices have a number of positive effects for children with BESD but that many of these effects can be replicated in mainstream classes that adopt the same nurturing practices (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). Consequently, I wonder whether it might have been possible to encourage Jacob's mainstream class teacher to adopt more nurturing practices in the class rather than to provide these in a separate environment. I wonder whether removing Jacob from his class could be even considered a form of exclusion, fostered under the banner of inclusion. Perhaps now that the mainstream class has adopted some of the practices of nurture groups, both Jacob and his classmates may benefit from the presence of a more nurturing ethos.

**Implications for future practice**

The academic literature supports the use of nurturing practices in school, and shows that there are a number of positive outcomes that are possible for children with BESD as a result. The literature shows that this doesn't necessarily need to be deployed in the form of nurture groups, and that adopting these practices in mainstream classes can be equally effective. As such I will endeavour to promote the use of nurturing practices in school, particularly where children are presenting with difficult behaviours that might be associated with either missing early nurturing experiences or with currently unmet fundamental needs.

Though mainstream classes adopting nurturing practices are demonstrably effective, nurture groups have been shown to be able to encourage mainstream class teachers to become more nurturing in their approach simply through conversation and the sharing of experiences within the school. As such I will continue to promote nurture groups as an effective form of

intervention for many children with BESD.  However, I will remain mindful that the aim of

nurture groups should not just be to provide nurturing experiences for children, but also to

provide experiences of nurturing practice for school staff.  With this aim in mind, Doyle

(2004) designed a social development curriculum to help mainstream staff to adopt practices

more commonly seen in nurture groups.  As such I will endeavour to make mainstream staff

aware of this resource and will promote its use.  I will encourage the implementation of

nurture groups in school paired with efforts at a systemic level to help nurturing practices to

be disseminated throughout the school, and imbuing an understanding and appreciation of

these practices within the leadership team.

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