

Part-time secondary school nurture groups

An analysis of participant outcomes and possible mechanisms of change

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ABSTRACT

Nurture groups (NGs) are an intervention implemented to improve the social, emotional and behavioural functioning of vulnerable children and they are increasingly being used within secondary school settings (Colley 2009). The psychological processes underpinning change within a NG intervention for adolescents has been identified as a topic that warrants further research (Garner and Thomas 2011). This study aimed to explore the processes involved in promoting change in participants of secondary school NGs through evidence provided by questionnaires and through a thematic analysis of NG practitioners' perspectives.

Participants were identified through SDQ screening and teacher referral; there were 29 male and 20 female young people aged between 11 and 14 years in part-time NGs for two terms. In addition, nine NG practitioners took part in semi-structured individual interviews. This study used questionnaires completed pre- and post-intervention by young people, parents/carers and teachers to explore changes in observed attachment-related behaviours and social, emotional and behavioural functioning in young people following NG participation. In addition, a thematic analysis was completed to explore NG practitioners' perspectives on change and secondary school NG processes. The measures were the Boxall Profile for Young People, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Social Skills Questionnaire. The results showed that parent, teacher and young person emotional symptoms scores and total difficulties scores reduced following NG participation. No significant changes in social skills levels or attachment-related behaviours were seen. From a thematic analysis of interviews with NG practitioners, themes of change and mechanisms of change emerged. Findings are discussed in terms of attachment theory and social learning theory. Limitations are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

In a county we will call Greenshire, to ensure the anonymity of participants in this study is preserved, the educational psychology service had been supporting primary schools to run part-time nurture groups (NGs) and decided to extend this support to secondary schools. NGs are a school-based intervention that aim to address key relationship and developmental factors underlying social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that prevent children from fully participating in learning at school (Seth-Smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy and Jaffey 2010).

This pilot project was started in response to a request from school staff for a group approach that would support vulnerable young people in secondary schools. At the time, there was very little published research available about secondary school nurture groups, except for 'The Oasis' (Cooke, Yeomans and Parkes 2008). Even recently, further research into NGs within secondary schools has been called for (Hughes and Schlösser 2014). Therefore, as part of the project, an evaluation process that included quantitative and qualitative methods was designed, to explore the outcomes and possible mechanisms of change for young people attending part-time NGs in secondary schools.

Nurture groups

NGs were originally devised by Majorie Boxall to provide inclusive support to young children who were struggling to access learning opportunities due to unmet early learning needs (Bennathan and Boxall 2000). Colley (2009) identified that many secondary schools offered nurture provision that differed significantly from the original or 'classic' NG model. In Greenshire, primary school NGs had been offering a part-time model and therefore the secondary NG model that was developed was also based on the intervention being delivered on a part-time basis. Given the curriculum pressures in secondary schools, as well as the availability of staff to run the group, it was felt that secondary schools would be more likely to implement and maintain NG provision if the model were a

part-time one. NG principles were adhered to within the model (Lucas, Insley & Buckland 2006), table 1 (p.16). In addition, a NG working agreement was devised so that schools would also provide two dedicated NG practitioners who were released for training, supervision, as well as delivery times. Schools also agreed to implement the key structural features of NGs, such as to provide a dedicated and appropriately furnished nurture room e.g. with facility to make hot drinks and snacks, a seating area, a table and games and other resources; stable group membership (i.e. not a 'drop-in' facility) and a regular session time and session structure for the group. These reflect the features shown by other secondary nurture groups deemed to be genuine NGs (e.g. Garner and Thomas 2011). The aim of the sessions was the development of social and emotional skills within a comfortable setting.

Table 1: NG Principles (Lucas, Insley and Buckland 2006)

- **Learning is understood developmentally.**
- **The classroom offers a safe base.**
- **The importance for nurture for the development of self-esteem.**
- **Language as a vital means of communication.**
- **All behaviour is communication.**
- **The importance of transitions in the lives of children and young people.**

Nurture group outcomes

Large-scale evaluation studies of primary school NGs have reported social, emotional and behavioural improvements in participants when compared to controls, as well as improvements in academic attainment (Seth-Smith, Levi, Pratt, Fonagy and Jaffey 2010, Reynolds, MacKay and Kearney 2009). MacKay, Reynolds and Kearney (2010) argue that attachment theory underpins NG interventions, as attachment theory informs the understanding that NG staff have about the factors underlying the children's difficulties, and the assessment processes used by the groups and the strategies used to address identified needs of children within the group. Attachment theory describes the process by which an infant and caregiver develop a relationship in which the child elicits caregiving behaviour to meet their needs and which becomes the basis of the child's internal representation of relationships that allows the child to explore the world, enabling them to learn and form relationships with others. As well as the initial bond with a primary caregiver, the child forms other attachment relationships, for example with family members and teachers (Pearce 2010).

Seth-Smith et al (2010) have suggested that further research needs to take place to explore the social skills mechanisms involved in changes observed in NGs. Published research into secondary school NGs has been on a small scale and has not established whether similar outcomes are observed for the young people who participate in these interventions. Qualitative research has suggested that secondary NGs had led to perceived beneficial outcomes for the young people, such as greater confidence and levels of participation and engagement, increased motivation and independence and feelings of happiness (Garner and Thomas 2011, Kormoulaki 2012). The outcomes reported have been discussed in terms of attachment theory as well as other frameworks, such as social skill development. It was identified that further research was needed in order to explore the outcomes of secondary school NGs for participants and the processes involved in promoting change for young people within secondary NGs.

This research was designed to measure social skills changes as well as changes in attachment-related behaviours, as previous research has identified social skill change as an area that should be explored further (Seth-Smith et al, 2010). In addition, given the part-time nature of secondary school NGs and the developmental phase of the participants, it was hypothesised that it might be more difficult for an attachment mechanism to bring about change for this age group and that NGs in secondary schools might be working more like a social skills group, as they provide an opportunity for direct teaching and practise of social competencies.

Method

This study employed a multi-strategy design, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data.

It was a non-randomised, prospective, pre-test, post-test design. The Boxall Profile for Young People (BPYP, Bennathan, Boxall, & Colley 2010) was used pre- and post NG participation. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman 1999) and the Social Skills Questionnaire (SSQ, Spence 1995) were also completed by parent/carers, teachers and young people before and after the NG intervention. This range of evaluation measures allowed changes in attachment-related behaviours (MacKay, Reynolds & Kearney 2010) and social, emotional and behavioural functioning to be measured, as well as enabling triangulation of different perspectives across two of the three measures chosen. Not enough data was collected from a wait-list control group to enable comparisons to be made; therefore the study was exploratory in nature.

The research questions were:

- Would changes in social skills and pro-social behaviour be observed?
- Would changes in emotional distress be observed?
- Would changes in attachment-related behaviours be observed?
- Would other changes in social, emotional and behavioural functioning be observed?

The qualitative element of the study took the form of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of semi-structured interviews carried out by the researcher with nine female secondary school NG practitioners. Practitioners were self-selecting, and represented the range of NGs that contributed quantitative data on young people. The semi-structured interview elicited views about observed changes in the young people and the types of NG processes felt to be contributing to any changes described.

The NG participants were all in Key Stage Three at mainstream secondary schools in Greenshires aged between 11 and 14 years during the two-term intervention period. There were 29 males and 20 females. The smallest group had four participants; the largest had nine. Six schools contributed data to the study from nine NGs. The young people, who were identified for NG intervention by their schools on the basis of perceived need, were from a variety of social backgrounds and had a mix of presenting needs. They were also generally seen as vulnerable young people who struggled socially.

Some had experienced bereavement or loss, some were in local authority care, some had learning or attention difficulties, some had poor attendance levels. All were identified as struggling to fully participate in lessons, as it was felt that withdrawing young people from some lessons to attend the NG regularly would not have been appropriate for pupils who were successfully accessing the curriculum.

Fidelity to the NG principles and model were assured through the close contact the nurture team had with nurture practitioners, through providing training and networking support, as well as through the completion of the NG working agreement and the self-evaluative framework (the Nurture MOT).

Results

Quantitative analysis

As the data did not meet assumptions for the use of parametric statistics, a non-parametric alternative to the t-test, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, was used in the statistical analysis of pre- and post-measures.

The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests were used to analyse the SDQs completed by parent/carers, teachers and young people. These showed significant decreases in 'Total difficulties' scores and in 'Emotional symptoms' scores across all respondents. Additionally, parent questionnaires showed a decrease in 'attentional/hyperactivity difficulties' (See Tables 2, 3 & 4 and Figures 1 & 2). No significant changes were seen in the behavioural difficulties scale, the social difficulties scale or the pro-social behaviour scale.

The Boxall Profile for Young People (BPYP) scores did not show significant changes on any of the developmental or diagnostic strands.

The Social Skills Questionnaires (SSQ) also did not reveal any significant changes, suggesting no improvement in social skills. Baseline means for the SSQ were found to be significantly lower for the NG cohort than for the standardisation sample, suggesting that social skills were less well developed for these young people (Chiappella 2014, unpublished doctoral thesis).

Table 2: Parent-completed SDQ Mean and Median Scores and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests

SDQ Parent (n = 26)	Mean Pre-NG (SD)	Mean Post-NG (SD)	Median (IQR) Pre-NG	Median (IQR) Post-NG	Wilcoxon Test	Significance (p) Effect size (r)
Parent total	15.15 (5.51)	13.17 (7.35)	14.00 (10.50 – 18.50)	12.00 (6.00 – 19.25)	Z = -2.507	p = 0.012 * r = 0.35
Parent emotional symptoms	4.15 (2.82)	3.40 (2.82)	4.00 (2.00 – 6.00)	3.00 (0.75 – 5.25)	Z = -2.158	p = 0.031 * r = 0.30
Parent behavioural difficulties	2.81 (2.70)	2.33 (2.04)	2.61 (1.00 – 4.00)	2.00 (1.00 – 4.00)	Z = -0.985	p = 0.325 n.s.
Parent attention/ hyperactivity difficulties	5.17 (2.44)	4.17 (2.47)	6.00 (3.00 – 6.00)	4.00 (2.00 – 6.00)	Z = -2.672	p = 0.008 ** r = 0.37
Parent social difficulties	3.37 (2.32)	3.20 (2.34)	4.00 (1.00 – 4.50)	3.00 (1.00 – 5.00)	Z = -0.950	p = 0.342 n.s.
Parent pro -social skills	7.78 (2.12)	7.57 (2.33)	8.00 (7.00 – 9.75)	8.00 (6.00 – 10.00)	Z = -0.566	p = 0.571 n.s.

Table 3: Teacher-completed SDQ Mean Scores and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests

SDQ Teacher (n=35)	Mean Pre-NG (SD)	Mean Post-NG (SD)	Median (IQR) Pre-NG	Median (IQR) Post-NG	Wilcoxon Test	Significance (p) Effect size (r)
Teacher total	15.84 (6.79)	14.65 (7.50)	15.00 (12.00 – 19.00)	13.00 (9.50 – 20.00)	Z = - 2.033	p = 0.042* r = 0.24
Teacher emotional symptoms	5.22 (2.76)	3.73 (2.66)	5.00 (3.00 – 7.50)	3.00 (1.00 – 6.00)	Z = - 3.231	p = 0.001** r = 0.39
Teacher behavioural difficulties	2.18 (2.29)	2.76 (2.29)	1.00 (0.00 – 4.50)	3.00 (0.50 – 4.50)	Z = - 1.211	p = 0.226 n.s.
Teacher attention/hyperactivity difficulties	4.42 (3.12)	4.62 (3.02)	4.00 (2.00 – 7.00)	5.00 (2.00 – 6.00)	Z = - 0.187	p = 0.852 n.s.
Teacher social difficulties	4.49 (2.68)	3.54 (2.47)	4.00 (3.00 – 6.00)	3.00 (2.00 – 5.00)	Z = - 1.730	p = 0.084 n.s.
Teacher pro-social skills	6.42 (2.45)	6.00 (2.94)	6.00 (5.00 – 9.00)	6.00 (4.50 – 8.50)	Z = - 0.229	p = 0.819 n.s.

Table 4: Young person-completed SDQ Mean Scores and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests

SDQ Young Person (n=40)	Mean Pre-NG (SD)	Mean Post-NG (SD)	Median (IQR) Pre-NG	Median (IQR) Post-NG	Wilcoxon Test	Significance (p) Effect size (r)
Young person total	16.24 (5.76)	13.95 (6.21)	16.00 (12.00-20.00)	13.00 (10.00-20.00)	Z = - 2.044	p = 0.041* r = 0.23
Young person emotional symptoms	4.56 (2.58)	3.72 (2.65)	4.00 (3.00-6.00)	3.00 (1.00-6.00)	Z = - 2.210	p = 0.027* r = 0.25
Young person behavioural difficulties	3.04 (2.17)	2.53 (2.09)	3.00 (2.00-4.00)	2.00 (1.00-4.00)	Z = - 1.555	p = 0.120 n.s.
Young person attention/hyperactivity difficulties	5.40 (2.47)	5.07 (2.36)	5.00 (4.00-7.50)	5.00 (4.00-6.00)	Z = - 0.924	p = 0.355 n.s.
Young person social difficulties	3.38 (2.22)	2.86 (2.21)	3.00 (1.00-5.00)	2.00 (2.00-4.00)	Z = - 1 022	p = 0.307 n.s.
Young person pro-social skills	7.64 (2.04)	8.09 (2.16)	8.00 (6.00-9.00)	8.00 (6.00-10.00)	Z = -0.585	p = 0.558 n.s.

Figure One: SDQ Emotional Subscale Scores Pre and Post NG Intervention

Mean parent, teacher and young people SDQ 'Emotional Symptoms' Subscale Scores Pre and Post NG Intervention

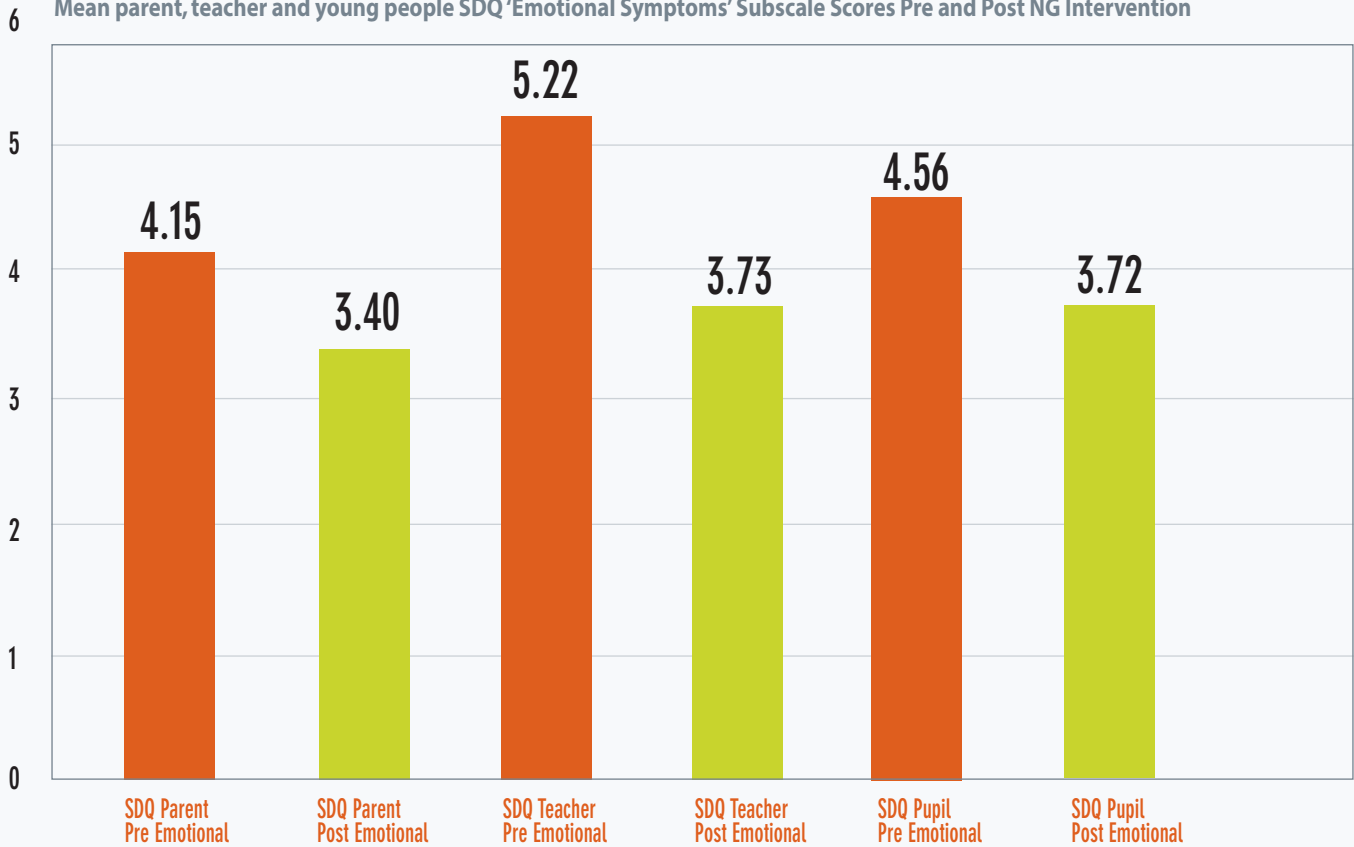
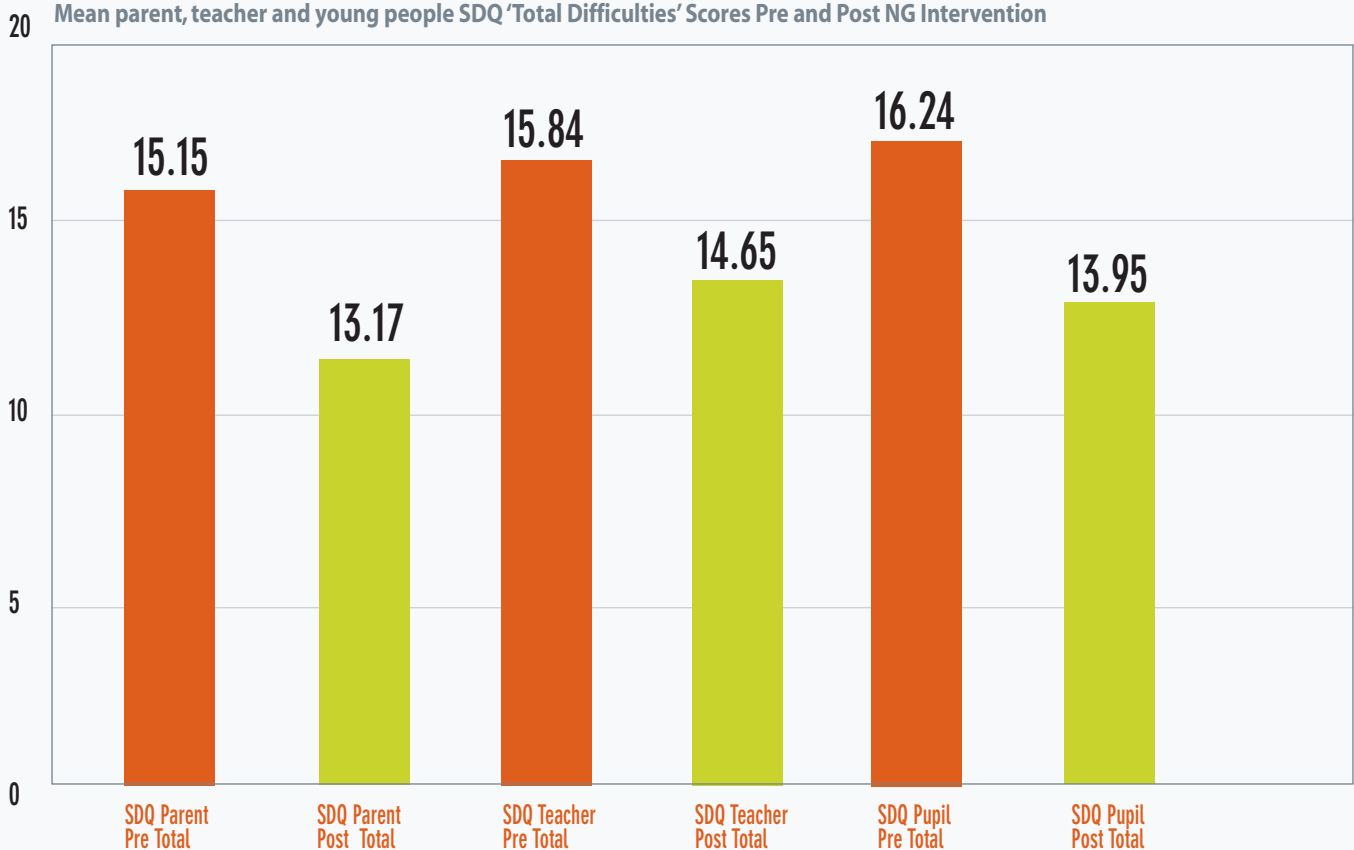


Figure Two: SDQ Total Difficulties Scores Pre and Post NG Intervention

Mean parent, teacher and young people SDQ 'Total Difficulties' Scores Pre and Post NG Intervention



Discussion of quantitative results

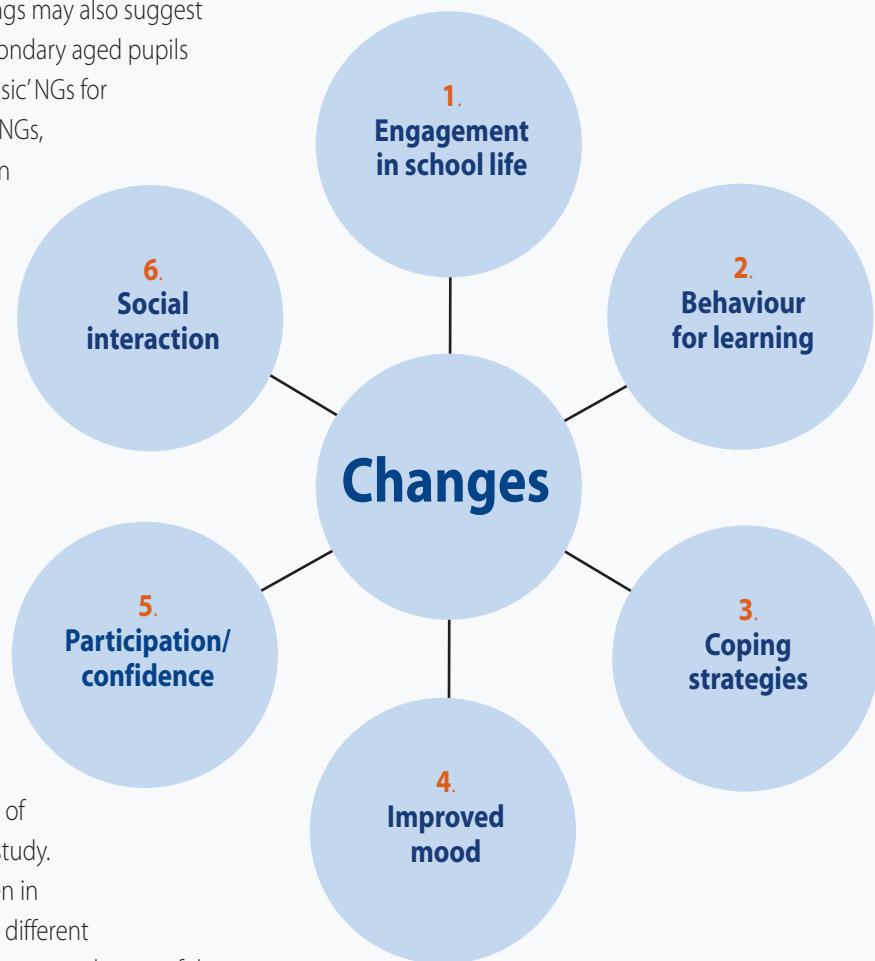
The main findings can be summarised as being that young people who participated in secondary school NGs experienced significant reductions in levels of emotional distress as well as improvements in overall levels of emotional, social and behavioural functioning as indicated by the SDQ emotional symptoms scale and the total difficulties scale. However, no improvements in social skills were found on the SDQ or SSQ measures. In addition, the BPYP strands did not show any significant changes, which could be interpreted as showing that attachment-related behaviours did not improve following the NG intervention. However, it may be that aggregating scores to produce a median means that changes observed in some individuals are lost within a group median. The BPYP are relatively lengthy questionnaires to complete and within a secondary school environment, teachers may find the behaviour ratings difficult to complete with confidence, which may reduce the likelihood of any changes being measured using this tool.

The interpretation of these findings must be done with caution, as it did not prove possible to collect data for a waiting list control group for comparative purposes. Given the consistency of findings across different respondents however, the picture of positive benefits to young people's emotional well-being are encouraging. These findings may also suggest that the impact of part-time NGs for secondary aged pupils are different from those observed in 'classic' NGs for primary aged pupils. For 'classic' primary NGs, social skills changes have been found (on SDQ social difficulties and pro-social scales) in Seth-Smith et al's (2010) study. Changes on four strands of the Boxall profile were also reported and interpreted as lending strength to the finding of improvements in social interaction skills observed using the SDQ. This finding was not replicated by the current study of part-time secondary NGs. In another study of 'classic' primary NGs, changes in social, emotional and behavioural functioning as measured by the Boxall Profile, but not the SDQ, were reported by Reynolds, MacKay and Kearney (2009). This pattern of change is different to that found in this study. The change in 'emotional symptoms' seen in part-time secondary NGs may be due to different mechanisms of change due to the developmental stage of the young people, who as adolescents undergo significant changes

to the frontal cortex, as well as other physical changes (Blakemore and Frith 2005) or due to changes in the nature of the NG as an intervention when delivered part-time to secondary school pupils.

An attachment theory framework is usually associated with NGs, and the improvements in emotional well-being observed might be a result of compensatory attachment relationships formed within the NG (Allen and Manning 2007, Thomas and Garner 2011). A reduction in anxiety related to social situations may be what is reflected in the SDQ results, which could be due to the social learning opportunities within the NG that have enabled the young people to challenge negative attributions and begin to feel more confident in social situations, perhaps as a result of positive feedback from other members of the NG (even if their actual social skill level is not seen to have improved) (Seth-Smith et al 2010, Lemerise and Arsenio 2000, Chiappella 2014). Without a control group, it could be argued that these improvements could have occurred as a result of maturational effects and certainly the results should not be generalised.

Figure 3 – Thematic map of changes; six themes were identified about outcomes of NG participation



Qualitative analysis

From the interviews with NG practitioners six themes emerged relating to changes observed in the NG participants, **Figure 3** p.20.

The first theme reflected the practitioners' perspective that the young people in the NG had changed in their level of engagement with school life. The young people were described as having improved attendance levels and greater motivation. For example:

“she has not missed a day at school since... this girl is now engaging with her learning.”

“they wanted to be in and they wanted to be there... there was... more motivation in school.”

The second theme emerging was about improved behaviour for learning; practitioners felt that the young people were more likely to comply with teacher expectations and they were less disruptive of the lessons. For example:

“There is definitely less friction within the classroom, they are more inclined to follow what the rest of the class is doing rather than put themselves to one side and let that create an issue because they've got to be redirected into what they were supposed to do.”

“Certain teachers have seen an improvement in lessons; a calmer approach from them.”

Coping strategies was the third theme. The NG practitioners felt that the young people were showing signs of being able to reflect on difficult situations and begin to problem-solve, as well as demonstrating strategies to manage negative feelings. For example:

“They're doing that themselves, a bit more now, rather than us... having to guide them through step-by-step. They are... able to reflect on that themselves and... I am going to be in this room with this person and how can I sort this out.”

“She can talk about it to a certain extent but then she can put aside those feelings, even of sadness, she's learned to be able to put those aside for a little while and then continue with things.”

The fourth theme was improved mood. The young people were perceived as being happier, less likely to cry and generally more comfortable. For example:

“They seem much happier.”

“She's been smiling a lot more... when she meets you during school she'll say “Hi, Miss”, like she's more comfortable at school, more settled...”

Increased participation and levels of confidence was the fifth theme. The NG practitioners felt that the young people were more confident, more willing to try new things and participate in the group and in lessons. For example:

“they've just grown in their confidence...”

“he is willing to do that in the classroom now, whereby he's got confidence... in science he is willing to do experiments and he will take a lead on things...”

Improved social interaction was the sixth theme. NG practitioners described how the young people's social skills had increased and that they were better able to consider other people's perspectives and needs, as well as think about the possible consequences of their own behaviour. For example:

“Their social skills have increased... “wait your turn”, sharing...”

“... thinking of how people might react, being more aware of each other...”

“... getting on and understanding that they need to give each other an opportunity to talk and not to dominate too much...”

As well as themes of change, the transcripts were scrutinised for themes relating to mechanisms and promoters of change in the NG. Seven themes emerged (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Thematic map of change processes and promoters; seven themes were identified that described possible mechanisms of change with secondary NGs.



One of the important themes was identifying the trusting relationships that were developed within the group, with both the adult practitioners and peers. The quality of the interactions was commented on as well, with sensitive responding described, in which the young people feel cared about and listened to. This fits with the core idea of NGs as being designed and implemented in a way that replicates a positive, home-like environment and a relationship that reflects a positive parent-child one, rather than a typical teacher-student relationship, particularly that of a secondary school pupil.

For example:

“I think somebody cared about them, that they felt nurtured, I think the idea of a family unit, that they are a little unit, not that they are a team, they see themselves as a family, they talk in terms of them as a family. They love the fact that somebody has put time aside for them.”

“It has given them an opportunity to see us in a different way and then to approach us more.”

“...they're all getting to know a little bit about each other and they are asking questions of each other when you did this and how did that go and because they're all taking an interest in each other and are bonding as a group I think that is what is building their confidence.”

One practitioner spoke about how during every nurture session the young people completed activities with a 'beany baby' – such as relaxation with the 'beany' on their chest or circle time while holding a 'beany'. These had been brought in from the practitioner's own home to be shared with the group and the practitioner was struck by how much this gesture had meant to the young people, 'It was like I had given them gold, those 'beany babies' had become nearly a lifeline for them'. She was also struck by how much comfort and security the young people gained from these soft toys: 'it was like a comfort blanket, I suppose'. It seems as though the physical affection that might be present in a home environment, or even within NGs that are targeted at children who are just starting school, was provided through these cuddly toys in the secondary school NGs.

Within this trusted relationship, other change-promoting approaches were present. For example, the practitioners saw themselves as able to provide a scaffold to the young people's thinking and support the development of their perspective-taking capabilities. This was theme two, for example:

“I really can see that I'm adding some sort of value to their day, even if its making them think, think for themselves about certain situations think for themselves, think from another person's perspective.”

“I have at first hand seen them in a very different light and I have been able to say to them hang on a minute let's pull this apart and let's look at it and I think that has been helpful in itself.”

Practitioners also provided explicit teaching of, as well as opportunities to practise, socio-emotional skills and coping strategies. This often took the form of regular activities within the NG sessions, such as circle time and planned activities to develop a skill, such as identifying emotions, as well as the chance, particularly within the 'tea and toast' time, to learn and practise social skills. Examples of theme three were:

“...their understanding that they need to get on and how they can meet the needs of other children and we've worked really hard you know just on things like when we are doing tea and toast, just doing things like get them to do the basics like get them to ask each other what they want and just sort of be polite and courteous and those kind of activities have facilitated that, I think.”

“...letting each other talk, they've actually, one of the things they've done themselves. We may have kind of set it off in a very informal way, at the beginning but they've kind of really picked up on it. Because we've got one of those beany baby toys in the room and they've started... at circle time... and they chuck it between each other and... the person who's talking holds this beany baby. And they've really done that themselves. But it's really worked for them because they've realised now not to interrupt each other and those kind of things, so that's been quite useful.”

Theme four reflected the focus of the NG on the young people's own experiences and the activities and the way group rules are guided by the young people themselves, which allows the young people to develop a sense of ownership, feel listened to and express themselves. The atmosphere of feeling listened to was linked to the attuned responsiveness of the practitioners, who reflected on the fact that working in the NG had resulted in a greater use of active listening skills than had been the case in previous roles within school.

“I think they've all been given an opportunity to speak and be who they are.”

“being more aware... what I always did anyway, which is listened, but I think I listened with half an ear and I think I have got big Dumbo ears now.”

A fifth theme reflected the importance ascribed by practitioners to good communication with school staff and parents/carers of the NG participants.

For example:

“...communication is good between staff...”

“...the liaising with parents, parents are aware of what is going on, and the support, the support of the parents that they agreed to let us do this.”

The nature of the group as a secure, predictable setting also emerged as a sixth theme.

“The two-hour NG is quite unique in that the setting is very much not a classroom setting, it is more a homey setting... we have built on the principles of nurture in that they trust us as practitioners, they have seen and experienced different things within the group where we have always endeavoured to resolve things and that there's no pressure on them, I guess and... it's a time for them just to be.”

“We have this certain routine that we follow each week”

The final theme related to the opportunities that the NG provided for young people to observe social behaviour and problem-solving and see adults 'thinking out loud' and labelling their own and others' emotions. In addition, NG practitioners encouraged and praised young people when they noticed them engaged in positive interaction (such as taking turns) or sharing their experiences or views.

For example:

“He's got confidence... we praise him for things because he says “I'm not good at anything”... he'll come out with such a wonderful word and I'll say, “that's such a good science word.”

“And I think for him, listening to how others talk about their time and the sort of language they use to explain about what they've done, I think that has helped him, because you can sometimes pick up that he has used some of those to talk about his own time, so I think that has been good for him.”

Overall, in the practitioners' accounts, the relationships developed within the NG appear to act as a foundation for the other processes of change. The practitioners felt that the relationships formed within the NG enabled them to talk to the young people about issues or difficulties in a way that would not have been possible without the NG. For example, 'I would not have had that relationship with that girl to be able to talk to her like that without the NG. The practitioners also observed that the relationships the young people formed within the group helped them develop an awareness and acceptance of other people.

“I think they've learned from each other as a group, without a doubt, because they are so different... levels of maturity and their own skills, I think their tolerance has increased of each other at different times and in different social situations.”

The practitioners spoke in a way that suggested the relationships formed within the group were qualitatively different from the usual staff-student relationships. For example, they commented that the students experienced 'being able to be listened to and have their thoughts considered being given more time and given more opportunity to express themselves' and that the NG was like a family unit, 'I think somebody cared about them, that they felt nurtured, I think the idea of a family unit, that they are a

little unit, not that they are a team, they see themselves as a family, they talk in terms of them as a family. They love the fact that somebody has put time aside for them'. Another example given was when a NG were given soft toys to use within the group sessions, 'They asked me where I'd got them and I said I'd brought them from home, that my children had had them and they said "you're so kind to give us these beany babies. They're really receptive of them. They understood that I was giving it to them as a gift.'

Practitioners also commented about changes in themselves as a result of NG work. 'I think it's made me more aware and I guess, more aware of me and, I guess, more aware of the young people'. This is again suggestive that the nature of the relationship was special and that it illustrates that the relationships are dyadic and that the young people had an impact on the practitioners too.

The practitioners were talking about their own experiences within the group and were probably less likely to emphasise their own direct role in creating these change-promoting relationships. However, one NG co-ordinator who was interviewed clearly felt that the relationships between the NG practitioners and the young people were key. In response to being asked, 'How would you explain the changes you've seen? What's supported or led to those changes?' She said, 'Definitely the relationship with the ladies who run it...'

Discussion of qualitative results

The finding that the quality of the relationships formed over time within the group, between practitioners and young people and among the young people themselves lend support to the view that even with adolescents, NGs are an intervention best understood through an attachment theory framework (Bowlby 1969, MacKay Reynolds and Kearney 2010). The members of the NG become attachment figures for the young people involved, and they are able to explore their environment from this secure base as well as better regulate their emotions with this support (Allen and Manning 2007, Garner and Thomas 2011).

Social learning mechanisms are also present, as practitioners clearly describe processes involving explicit teaching and feedback and opportunities to practise social skills as core parts of the NG interventions (Seth-Smith et al, 2010). Kourmoulaki (2012) also highlighted the role secondary NG practitioners played in teaching functional social skills, as well as the value participants gave to developing social skills and making friends.

CONCLUSION

In isolation, the findings from the two strands of this research study provide exploratory descriptions of the changes seen in young people participating in part-time secondary school NGs. However, when taken together the findings provide a convincing picture of NG interventions as having directly brought about the changes observed. The reduction in emotional distress levels and total stress levels observed by teachers, parents and the young people themselves on the SDQs were reinforced by the qualitative themes that emerged of 'improved mood', 'participation/confidence' and 'engagement in school life'. As well as supporting the quantitative findings, other changes were described, for example, 'social interaction' emerged as a theme and it may be inferred that these changes were linked to improved mood and confidence, resulting in greater levels of participation and engagement as well as improved social skills. A picture emerged of more confident and comfortable children who were able to sit with their friends in class and take part in conversations (see examples discussed in theme four). In other words, the qualitative findings provide us with an understanding of the processes by which the NG intervention brings about the positive outcomes observed. The trusting relationships formed within the group appear to act as a particular catalyst for change and are a particular feature of NGs compared with other school-based interventions. The integration of findings provides a strong case to suggest that the NG intervention is at the route of the changes observed in the young people.

Further research with a comparison group, such as a waiting-list control group, is needed to determine whether these findings can be replicated and whether they can be ascribed to the NG intervention, rather than being due to maturational effects. Including additional alternative measures would allow for the influence of NG interventions to be more completely evaluated. Follow-up data would also be helpful to determine whether the outcomes observed are maintained after the young people leave the NG provision. It would also identify whether some benefits of NG provision are only seen after more time has elapsed, for example, improvements in social interaction skills. This would help schools and educational psychologists involved in training and supporting NG practitioners to decide the ideal length of part-time nurture provision. Further research to look at whether there are differential outcomes in NG participants with different profiles of need would also be valuable.

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