Report summary

Supporting children with challenging behaviour through a nurture group approach

The aim of this survey was to analyse the elements of successful nurture group provision and the difference that nurture groups make to the outcomes for pupils. Nurture groups are small, structured teaching groups for pupils showing signs of behavioural, social or emotional difficulties, particularly those who are experiencing disruption or distress outside of school. They aim to provide a predictable environment in which pupils can build trusting relationships with adults and gain the skills they need to learn in larger classes. There is an emphasis on the systematic teaching of behavioural and social skills, on learning through play, and on sharing 'family-type' experiences, such as eating food together. Over time, schools have taken and adapted this approach to meet their own requirements, though many across the country still base their work faithfully on the original nurture group model.

Between November 2010 and March 2011, inspectors visited 29 schools to explore their use of nurture group provision. In most of these schools, between five and 10 pupils attended the nurture group at any one time. Pupils spent at least half of each week with the group and the rest of their week with their mainstream class. It was common for pupils to spend two to three terms in the nurture group. All the groups visited had been established to cater for pupils whose behaviour was causing concern. The concerns fell into three main categories. The first concern was overt, 'acting out' behavioural difficulties, such as aggression, which led to disruption in lessons. The second was behaviour that was not particularly challenging but over time interfered with the pupil's learning and that of others, such as not being able to work independently or continual interruption. The third was very withdrawn behaviour and a reticence to interact with others.

Pupils who were selected for the groups visited had sometimes previously been excluded from school on a fixed-term basis, were in danger of permanent exclusion, or were being considered for a move to a special school. Many were poor attenders at school. Others had experienced severe trauma outside of school. Almost all the nurture group pupils in the schools surveyed were working below the academic level expected for their age, because they were not taking a full part in lessons. The most

common aim for the nurture group provision was to give pupils the skills and strategies they needed to enable them to remain in mainstream education both in the short and long term.

The schools sought to provide a safe, comfortable, home-like environment, with clear routines and adults modelling positive relationships, in line with nurture group principles. Leaders and staff of all the schools saw a core purpose of the group as supporting pupils to improve their behavioural, social and emotional skills. They set pupils personal targets and gave them a range of strategies to help them to improve their behaviour. In the best practice seen, these targets and strategies were used in the pupils' mainstream classes and at home by their parents and carers. This helped to ensure that the pupils experienced some consistency in the approach to their behaviour, and supported parents and carers to develop their own strategies. Typically, the pupils improved their behavioural, social and emotional skills as a result of the nurture group provision.

The amount of academic learning in the nurture groups varied from school to school. The best schools visited aimed from the outset to ensure that pupils made progress with their literacy, numeracy and other academic skills, so that they did not fall behind while they were in the nurture group. To make this work, these schools had to plan very carefully so that both the nurture group staff and the class teacher knew who was responsible for each aspect of the pupil's learning. Where this happened, the nurture group helped pupils to make good progress with their behaviour and with their academic learning at the same time. Where this did not happen, pupils sometimes missed out on important parts of the curriculum and did not make the progress that they should have done, for example with their reading and writing.

The 95 parents who met with inspectors during the survey were very positive about the difference that the nurture group had made to their children. Many spoke of their previous concerns and sometimes distress at their children's behaviour and their apparent failure in school. They emphasised the way in which the school, and in particular the nurture group staff, had worked supportively yet firmly with their children. Many said that they had seen their children's behaviour transform over time. They spoke of their children being calmer, happier and more confident, both at home and school, and of their own greater confidence in managing their children's behaviour. One parent summed it up for most of the parents spoken to when she said, 'The change in my child is amazing and unbelievable.'

Nurture group intervention involves a considerable investment from schools in terms of finance, time, planning, resources and staff training. However, the survey illustrates that, when successful, the impact on young children and their families can be highly significant and far-reaching.

Key findings

- When the nurture groups were working well they made a considerable difference to the behaviour and the social skills of the pupils who attended them. Through intensive, well-structured teaching and support, pupils learnt to manage their own behaviour, to build positive relationships with adults and with other pupils and to develop strategies to help them cope with their emotions.

- At its best, the nurture group was part of a genuinely 'nurturing' school, where all members were valued, but where this value was imbued with a rigorous drive for pupils to achieve their very best.

- The schools that were the most effective at 'nurturing' had a clearly defined, positive but firm approach to the way in which they spoke to pupils, gave them clear boundaries, praised them for their efforts and achievements, ensured that they made academic progress, and worked with their parents. They saw each pupil as an individual and planned and implemented additional support accordingly.

- The nurture groups gave parents practical support, including strategies that they could use at home with their children. Parents felt more confident about being able to help their children and they valued the nurture groups highly.

- All the schools visited judged the success of the group in terms of the pupils' successful reintegration to their main class. However, ensuring that the pupils made progress in their academic learning often did not have as high a profile as the development of their social, emotional and behavioural skills. Almost all the schools saw this as part of their purpose to some extent, but its prominence varied.

- The effectiveness with which literacy, numeracy and other academic skills were taught varied. Occasionally, it was seen as acceptable to put academic learning 'on hold' while the pupils were in the nurture group. This led to them falling further behind.

- Daily informal communication between the class teacher and the nurture group staff was common and helped staff to know how well the nurture group pupils were doing on a daily basis. However, communication about pupils' academic progress was not as strong as about their social and behavioural progress.

- Where pupils in the nurture group were receiving a coherent and balanced curriculum, leaders, class teachers and nurture group staff had agreed where and by whom each element of the curriculum would be taught. Where curriculum planning was not clear, gaps emerged in the pupils' learning but were not always noticed.

- All the nurture group pupils in the schools surveyed retained at least some contact with their mainstream classes and with the rest of the school. The extent to which a sense of 'belonging' was retained depended on the attitudes of the school and the systems for communication. If these elements were positive, the

pupils remained a clear and visible part of their mainstream class even when they attended the nurture group for most of the time.

- The pupils' transition back to their mainstream class full time was planned particularly carefully in 14 of the schools. In the best practice, it was given a high priority and planned well in advance and included targeted support back in the class.

- Thirteen schools tracked the academic and the social, emotional and behavioural progress of the nurture group pupils thoroughly. These schools were able to demonstrate clear evidence about the progress made in each of these areas and knew where and why progress had not been made.

- The schools' evidence indicated that over a third of the 50 case study pupils who were attending the nurture groups at the time of the survey were making substantial progress with behavioural, social and emotional skills. Nearly all were making at least some progress.

- Academic progress was not as strong, though it was very good for some. For nine pupils, their progress in reading, writing and mathematics had accelerated since joining the nurture group. Twenty pupils had started to make at least some progress in reading, writing, and mathematics since joining the nurture group, having previously made none or very little.

- No school had evaluated thoroughly the progress of the former nurture group pupils as a separate cohort in order to analyse the long-term impact of this intensive intervention. However, all could provide case studies that showed considerable success.

- Almost all the schools recognised that the nurture group could not be the complete solution to the support that the pupils needed. They put in place a range of targeted support for these and other pupils, particularly when pupils left the group.

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