



Cultivating Connection: A Study of Nurture Group Impact, Practices, and Pathways to Success

Katy Kelly

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Supervised by:

Dr Sarah O'Brien and Dr Aoife McLoughlin

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Abstract

Background: A Nurture Group (NG) is a school-based group intervention to support social, emotional and behavioural needs. Despite increased implementation, there is a critical lack of published data on the conditions, practices and effectiveness of NGs in the Republic of Ireland.

Aims: This research seeks to address this gap by examining the perspectives of Nurture Practitioners (NPs) to identify the impact of NGs to support children's social-emotional development, and key strategies and conditions contributing to success. This study further seeks to investigate common characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools to establish fidelity to the original NG model.

Methods: The study used a mixed-methods concurrent embedded design. Qualitative individual semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from NPs about the perceived effectiveness of NGs and the strategies and approaches associated with success. An online quantitative questionnaire was designed to gather information about the characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools. The questionnaire data was analysed for descriptive statistics and reflexive thematic analysis was applied to the interview data.

Sample: The questionnaire was completed by 61 NPs, who were SNAs, teachers or school principals with experience of working in a NG in a primary school in the Republic of Ireland. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 of these NPs.

Results and Conclusions: Five central themes were identified in relation to the impact of NGs for social-emotional development, as well as key processes and factors associated with success. Findings provide a compelling overview of current approaches, practices and areas for development in Irish NGs, representing the first systematic collection of data on NGs in the Republic of Ireland and contributing to the development of effective strategies to support children's psychological well-being in Irish primary schools.

Keywords: *educational psychologists, children and young people, nurture group, social-emotional intervention*

Declaration

This research is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology (DECPsy) at Mary Immaculate College. The work has not previously been accepted for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for any degree.

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. Where the use has been made of other people, it has been fully acknowledged and referenced. I hereby give my permission for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for reading and interlibrary loans, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Name: Katy Kelly

Signature:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Katy Kelly".

Date: 2nd May 2025

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List of Abbreviations

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
APA	American Psychological Association
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
DE	Department of Education
DECPSY	Doctorate of Educational and Child Psychology
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EP	Educational Psychologist
MIREC	Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee
MT	Microsoft Teams
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NG	Nurture Group
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
NP	Nurture Practitioner
NSI	Nurturing Schools Ireland
PPCT	Process – Person- Context- Time Model
PSI	Psychological Society of Ireland
ROI	Republic of Ireland
RQ	Research Question
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SEBD	Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
SEMh	Social, Emotional and Mental Health

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The current study focuses on a social-emotional school-based intervention known as a Nurture Group (NG), which has gained popularity in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) in recent years. The current study aims to explore the views of Nurture Practitioners (NPs) regarding the perceived impact of this intervention for children's social- emotional development, and conditions for success. The study also examines common characteristics and features of NGs in ROI, with a view to expanding and enhancing the existing literature. This chapter describes the national and international context and the researcher's personal interest in the research area. Details of the ontological and epistemological position and the theoretical perspective are provided.

1.2 Context of the Current Study

In recent years, parents, educators and psychologists have expressed increasing concerns relating to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experienced by children and young people in Ireland. These difficulties can be conceptualised as 'behaviours or emotions that deviate so much from the norm that they interfere with the child's own growth and development and/or the lives of others' (Cooper, 2017, p. 13). Similarly, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) describes SEBD as difficulties experienced by children that may act as a barrier to their personal, social, cognitive and emotional development (NEPS, 2010). These difficulties may be explained by a number of contributing factors, including biological and genetic influences, as well as temperament and disposition (Wichstrøm et al., 2012). Other research purports that childhood social and emotional difficulties may develop in the context of exposure to trauma and adverse childhood experiences (Doyle, Hegarty, & Owens, 2018; Jimenez et al., 2016). These difficulties are often expressed as behaviours that can be disruptive or challenging in the school setting (Hughes et al., 2019).

The identification of students with SEBD can be problematic due to concerns about bias and discrimination. Research consistently highlights the overrepresentation of children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority groups among those identified with

SEBD, raising concerns about systemic bias or inequities in schools (Gillborn, 2008; Strand & Lindsay, 2009). The process of identifying students with SEBD is often reliant on subjective observations by teachers or school management, which can be influenced by unconscious bias and cultural misunderstandings (Ford, 2012). Therefore, when making these judgements, teachers and school leadership should reflect on the potential biases within teacher perspectives and the wider school system.

Reflecting international trends, there is growing awareness in Ireland amongst school psychologists and education staff of the need for effective approaches and interventions to support children and young people who are having difficulties in school. The Department of Education (DE) Continuum of Support (2024) provides a framework for school staff and educational psychologists to identify and support the behavioural, social, emotional and academic needs of students, and the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DE, 2019) emphasises the role of school staff and educational psychologists in providing school-based intervention and support to meet these needs. In particular, a social-emotional group intervention known as the Nurture Group (NG) has been widely adopted in Irish primary schools. NG intervention is underpinned by the principles of Attachment Theory, and aims to provide students with a secure and nurturing relationship with school staff, thereby supporting optimal social and emotional development (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013).

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives

A social-constructivist paradigm informed the current research study. This position asserts that reality is subjective and differs from person to person (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Individuals construe reality through the lens of their unique perspective, and so different people may construct meaning in distinctive ways, therefore this paradigm holds that meanings are multiple and subjective (Krauss, 2005). Within this paradigm, meaning is constructed through the process of interactions with others, the environment, and the language we use (Crotty, 1998, p.42). Each individual's version of reality is constructed through lived experience and influenced by the social and cultural context. In the current study, these varying realities were elicited and examined to address the research questions. The present study utilised Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (2006) as a theoretical framework. Within this model,

child development is viewed in relation to contextual and environmental factors, including their home, school and community. This model aligns with the principles of social constructivism and the aims of the study.

1.4 Personal and Professional Interest

The researcher's interest in NGs stems from a professional background in primary teaching and experiences working in schools in Ireland and internationally. As a classroom teacher, the increasing number of children requiring social-emotional support in school directly influenced the current research study. The researcher completed training in Nurture Practice as part of the Educate Together Nurturing Schools Programme in 2021. Although the researcher did not work in the NG, this experience prompted further investigation about the practical applications and theoretical evidence base for trauma-informed and attachment-based interventions. Despite recent policy developments in ROI, including the Continuum of Support (DE, 2024), the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DE, 2019), and more recently, the NCSE Relate document (NCSE, 2025), the researcher was surprised to find a dearth of formal guidance, governance or supervision structures to support NGs in ROI and this motivated the current research study.

1.5 Overview of Thesis Structure

The current study is presented as a thesis in four chapters, including the present introduction chapter. The next section, Chapter 2, Literature Review, provides a background of the research topic with reference to the national and international context, followed by a focused and systematic review of the literature. Chapter 3, the Empirical Paper, provides details of the research process, including methods, findings and results. The empirical paper focuses on the following three research questions (RQs):

1. What is the perceived impact of NG for children's social-emotional development and behaviour in school?
2. What conditions, approaches or strategies are perceived to be most effective for NG success?

3. What are the common characteristics and practices of NGOs in Irish primary schools?

The fourth and final chapter comprises the Critical Review and Impact Statement, as well as implications for practice and future research. Researcher reflections on the research process and impact of the current study are also outlined in this chapter.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

It is widely acknowledged that SEBD exist on a spectrum, ranging from mild, transient needs to more pervasive and severe problems. Emotional difficulties can be described as ‘internalising problems’ including depression, anxiety and difficulties with understanding, identifying and regulating emotions, (Poulou, 2015). Behavioural difficulties can be characterised as ‘externalising problems’ including defiance, aggression, confrontational or oppositional behaviours (Willner et al, 2016; Bornstein et al, 2013). Difficulties with social skills refer to challenges in social interactions, developing and maintaining friendships and relationships (Goodman et al., 2015) as well as problems with sharing, cooperation and showing empathy for others (Gresham, 2016).

Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are sometimes also termed ‘social, emotional and mental health’ (SEMH) (Bayer et al., 2008). This alternative terminology reflects a growing awareness that challenging or disruptive behaviours can be perceived as an expression of an underlying emotional or mental health need. It also demonstrates a shift amongst professionals away from a ‘within-child’ model, where behaviours are attributed to internal or biological factors. Increasingly, children’s behaviour and mental health are understood to be influenced by, and exist within the context of a complex system, as described by Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (2006) bioecological systems theory. From this, we can account for the influences of environmental factors such as family systems, trauma, attachment, and social deprivation, and their impact on mental health and behaviour (Kennedy, 2015; Stanbridge & Mercer, 2022). The term SEMH is now widely used in the UK, while SEBD is more prevalent in Irish policy documents. The context of this research is within the Irish education system and therefore the term SEBD will be used here for consistency. Children and adolescents facing these social and emotional challenges can be withdrawn and isolated or display challenging and disruptive behaviour that impacts those around them at home, in schools and communities. These difficulties in childhood can have an adverse long-term impact on functioning into adulthood (Doyle, Hegarty, & Owens, 2018; Linsell et al., 2019; Poulou, 2015).

It must be noted that the manner in which children with SEBD are perceived and supported may be influenced by teacher bias, school ethos and social expectations. Educators

interpret behaviour based on their professional training, but can also be influenced by personal beliefs and unconscious biases (Taylor, 2021). Research demonstrates that teachers may unconsciously hold lower expectations for students from different social backgrounds or minority groups. In addition, these issues are compounded by the fact that schools operate as predominantly middle-class social institutions, where children who do not, or cannot, conform to the expectations of middle-class values may be pathologised rather than supported (Reay, 2006). This could lead to disproportionate referrals for behavioural interventions or special educational needs support (Gillborn, 2008; Strand & Lindsay, 2009). For children who do not conform to middle-class social expectations, the school environment can feel unwelcoming and this may further compound the difficulties they experience (Archer et al., 2010).

2.2 Childhood Trauma

Childhood psychological trauma can be defined as any situation, event, or experience that is damaging to a child's physical, psychological or emotional safety and wellbeing (NCTSN, 2008, 2019). A wide range of events may be considered as traumatic, and it is important to note that a wide range of experiences can be traumatic for children, as it is the individual's response to the event that determines whether it is traumatic or not (ChildTrends, 2019; Marich, 2019; Ogle et al., 2015). Felitti et al.'s (1998), Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study identified ten specific categories of childhood trauma and highlighted the potential life-long impact of ACEs. The ten ACEs identified included physical, sexual and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, domestic violence, substance misuse or mental health difficulties of a family member, parental separation or divorce, and the imprisonment of a family member (SAMHSA, 2018). Individuals who experience a greater number of these ACEs are at greater risk of developing mental health difficulties, such as depression, substance addiction, or suicide attempts, as well as increased risks for physical ailments such as cancer and heart disease (Felitti et al., 1998). A recent study (Hughes et al., 2019) found similar results, where individuals who had experienced four or more ACEs were 3.7 times more likely to seek treatment for a mental health illness and 9.5 times more likely to have self-harmed or experienced suicidal thoughts when compared to those with no ACEs. As a result of adverse experiences, individuals may develop detrimental patterns of thinking and behaving, outside of typical social norms (Felitti et

al., 1998; Treisman, 2016; Pallini et al., 2019). In terms of education, exposure to three or more ACEs is associated with below average academic progress, increased teacher-reported behaviour difficulties (Jimenez et al., 2016), and increased internalising and externalising behaviours (Hunt, Slack & Berger, 2017), all of which impact on the child's ability to engage in school life.

Given the current international situation, with war in Europe, the Middle East and thousands of displaced refugees, the impact of the recent global pandemic, cost-of-living crises, and the uncertainty of climate change, today's children are living in a world of unprecedented upheaval. In Ireland, it is estimated that 80% of Irish children will experience at least one ACE by the age of nine (Healy et al., 2022). The current social and economic climate makes this more likely, with 3,494 children currently experiencing homelessness (Simon Community, 2022), and 1647 children being housed in "an unnatural environment that is not conducive to positive development" in Direct Provision Services (Arnold, 2019). We know that at least 200,000 Irish children are living in homes impacted by alcohol harm (Hope, 2014) and that one in seven children are living in poverty (Social Justice Ireland, 2023). These challenging social circumstances increase familial distress and negatively impact attachments between children and their caregivers (Linsell et al., 2019).

2.3 Mental Health

Rates of mental ill-health and emotional distress are on the rise in many developed countries and it has been suggested by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that mental illness will be the leading cause of disability in many high income countries by 2030 (WHO, 2011). In 2020, Ireland ranked in the bottom third of 41 countries in the EU for child mental health services (UNICEF, 2020). However, this cannot be construed as a recent development, as a 2013 study found Irish children experienced higher rates of mental disorder (15.4%) than their USA (11.2%) and UK (9.6%) counterparts (Cannon et al., 2013). Similar findings were also reported in earlier studies, such as the Clonmel Project (Martin et al., 2006) which screened 3,374 children and adolescents in Ireland, and reported that almost 15% of children under 5, 19% of 6–11-year-olds and 21% of 12–18-year-olds met the criteria for at least one psychological disorder as defined in the *Diagnosics and Statistical Manual (DSM)* (APA, 2013). The most common

presentations were anxiety disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) (Martin et al., 2006).

In recent years the situation has worsened dramatically, with 78% of Irish children reporting that they have experienced some form of mental health difficulties (Ombudsman for Children, 2023), and 4,361 children and adolescents on waiting lists following referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) (Mental Health Commission, 2023). Research clearly demonstrates that children who experience emotional difficulties are more likely to struggle to achieve academically and have difficulty participating and engaging with peers (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2022). Early childhood difficulties can influence developmental trajectories, with lifelong consequences in terms of health, well-being, educational achievement and economic status (Perry, 2007; Poulou, 2015). Without timely support, these children will continue to suffer during adolescence and adulthood.

Childhood mental health difficulties typically present in social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (Bayer et al., 2009) and schools are increasingly being tasked with responsibility for meeting the needs of these children. Many developed countries, including the USA and UK, have begun to move toward implementing trauma-informed approaches to education, which aim to increase protective factors by providing safe spaces in schools and developing supportive, nurturing relationships between students and staff, that in turn support students to build resilience and develop coping strategies.

However, there are no government policies or guidelines addressing the issue of trauma-informed approaches to education, leaving Ireland lagging behind the international community in this regard. Nonetheless, trauma-informed approaches to education have gained popularity in recent years at primary and secondary level, with whole-school and classroom initiatives based on mindfulness, emotional regulation and social skill development being implemented under the umbrella term of 'wellbeing'. In particular, an intervention known as a Nurture Group (NG) has increased in popularity in Irish primary schools in recent years. School-based interventions such as Nurture Groups enable children to experience a safe, nurturing and trusting relationship with staff and to learn different ways of thinking, behaving and relating to others, that are more socially and developmentally appropriate (Treisman, 2016; Pallini et al., 2019; Perry, 2007). In time, these behaviours can be generalised to the mainstream classroom, facilitating further

engagement in school life. A review of existing policy and research reveals that the broad subject of trauma-informed approaches to education in Ireland is much-neglected, and literature examining specific approaches such as Nurture Groups is minimal.

2.4 Nurture Groups

A Nurture Group (NG) is a trauma-informed group intervention designed to support children who are experiencing social, emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties in school (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). Within the NG model (Boxall, 2002), small groups of 6 to 12 children are withdrawn from the mainstream classroom to receive social, emotional and behavioural support for a specific length of time, during the course of an academic school year. The intervention aims to strengthen children's attachments to significant others within the secure setting of the nurture group, supporting social and emotional development, and their ability to learn and achieve academically. The Nurture approach provides safe and supportive care that prioritises wellbeing and relationships (Nurture UK, 2019). By supporting children to develop relational and emotional skills, NG leads to improved behaviour and attendance in school, thereby enhancing academic engagement and achievement (Nurture UK, 2019).

The first NGs were established in the 1960s by Marjorie Boxall, an educational psychologist working in London, UK, as a short-term intensive and supportive intervention developed in response to the 'alarming prevalence of emotional problems and disruptive behaviour among children entering infant and primary schools' (Cooper and Whitebread 2007, p.174). Boxall identified that many of these children came from families who had experienced challenging social circumstances, including poverty, racism and social deprivation. High levels of familial stress compromised the quality of these child-caregiver attachment relationships. Consequently, the social, emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by these children hindered their ability to adapt to the school environment, to learn and socialise with their peers. According to Nurture UK, over 2000 NGs are established in schools and education settings across the UK. The model has been successfully adopted internationally in Canada (Lavoie et al., 2017), Malta (Cefai & Cooper, 2011), as well as in Northern Ireland (Sloan et al., 2020).

The intervention is targeted toward children who are trauma-experienced or who have been exposed to multiple ACE's (Hughes & Schlösser, 2014). The purpose of the NG is to support pupils in successfully regulating their emotions and managing their behaviour (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005), which in turn increases their capacity to attend to and engage in learning. Re-integration into a mainstream class is the main objective of a nurture group placement (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007).

2.4.1 NG Staff

The NG is staffed by two adults, usually a teacher and a support assistant (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006), known as Nurture Practitioners (NPs). Staff receive training on Nurture theory, principles and common practices, which include following a predictable daily routine, recognition of the child's developmental stage and focusing on emotional literacy skills to support the needs of the children (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). These adults model positive attachment relationships, provide opportunities for social learning and emotional literacy development as well as access to the mainstream curriculum. The small number of pupils allows for focused adult attention and establishment of clear, predictable routines and expectations about taking turns, sharing, choosing and taking responsibility for the physical environment by tidying away items after use. Relationships are the key feature of nurture group work, and the adults work closely together, modelling pro-social skills such as cooperation, sharing and discussion (Sanders, 2007). Crucially, staff are trained to respond to each child at their emotional stage of development (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013), enabling children to develop at their own pace, in a supportive environment. Activities within the NG provide opportunities for pupils to develop self-esteem, confidence and trust.

2.4.2 The Nurture Room

The NG provides a unique synthesis of the home and classroom environments to provide a therapeutic safe space for pupils (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). Strong emphasis is placed on the physical environment, as outlined by Colley (2009), the NG provides a safe, caring and welcoming space, with a focus on replicating a home environment with comfortable seating, a kitchen area for food preparation and a work space to enable formal learning. Parental

engagement is central to the process, and they are regularly involved. NG activities aim to develop trust, communication, confidence and self-esteem and may include shared meals or snacks, turn-taking games, sharing of news and emotional literacy activities.

2.4.3 Nurture Group Origins

The early success of the NG led to their expansion across London and the wider UK during the following decades, however, following a period of educational reform in the 1990s, school policies moved away from the practice of withdrawing student from the mainstream class to access additional supports, and with this, the number of NGs in the UK diminished rapidly (Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001). Following this period of obscurity NGs have re-gained popularity in recent years in the UK, with over 2,200 schools participating in the National Nurturing Schools Programme during the academic year 2021-2022 (Nurture UK, 2023). This expansion can be attributed to a number of factors, including the publication of a textbook on nurture groups (Bennathan and Boxall, 2013) and the development of the Nurture Group Network in 2001, an organisation dedicated to supporting and promoting NGs. In 2018, this organisation was renamed Nurture UK and is the foremost international authority on Nurture Group policy, practice and assessment. Nurture UK provides training and resources to thousands of school staff each year and access to the Boxall Profile, a specific tool designed by Marjorie Boxall to measure pupil progress.

2.4.4 The Boxall Profile

Children are selected for the NG intervention following assessment using the Boxall Profile (Bethannan & Boxall, 2013; Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006), a standardised framework used to identify a pupil's baseline for social, emotional and behavioural difficulties across two strands: diagnostic and developmental. The diagnostic strand identifies behaviours that act as barriers to the child's ability to fully participate in school across three areas: self-limiting features, undeveloped behaviour and unsupported development (Colley 2009). The developmental strand measures key developmental processes in social, emotional, behavioural and academic functioning across two domains: organisation of experience and internalisation of controls. The Boxall assessment is used to assess and monitor pupils' development and progress

over time and informs the Nurture Curriculum, which is individualised to the appropriate developmental level for each child (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006).

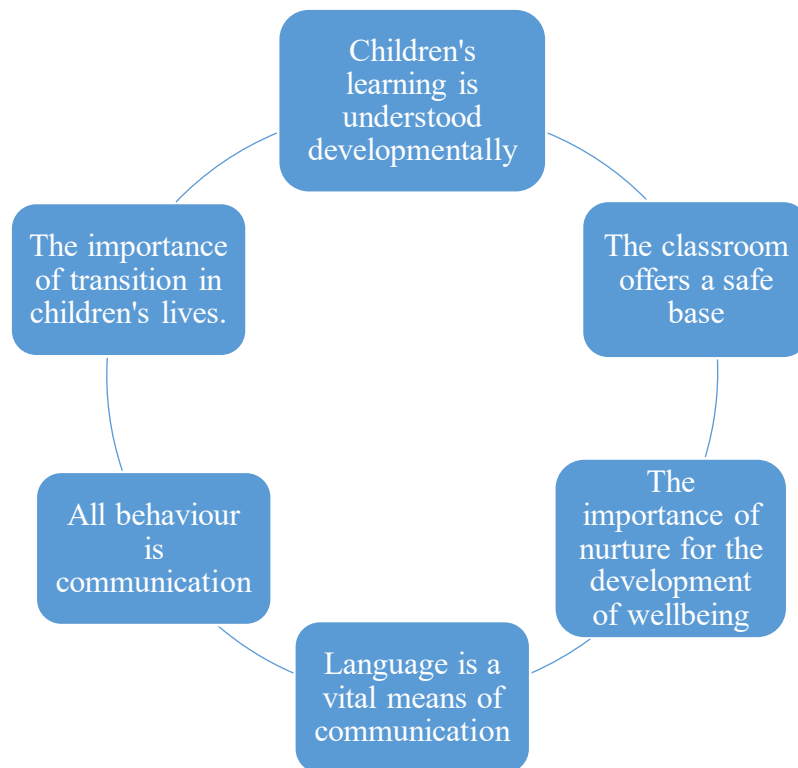
The Boxall Profile was designed to be used to inform referral to the NG and should be used to select the students with the highest needs. It can also be used to identify targets and monitor progress over time, thus contributing to success criteria when considering NG effectiveness and supporting transition back to mainstream class. The use of the Boxall Profile to identify students and set social, emotional, behavioural, and sometimes academic targets is associated with more effective interventions (Ofsted, 2011), particularly when these targets and success criteria are created and monitored in collaboration with students and parents. In practice, however, the referral and monitoring process is often more informal and the use of tools like the Boxall Profile to select children for NG is inconsistent (Dwyer, 2020, Sloane et al., 2020). In some cases, pupils are selected for NG through subjective assessments, such as teacher observations, while inadequate pupil monitoring may lead to inappropriate processes for student transitions between NG and mainstream classes (Dwyer, 2020). This raises concerns about equity, as these informal assessments may be shaped by teacher attitudes or bias and may lack rigour (Reay, 2006).

2.5 The Six Principles of Nurture

The six principles outlined in Figure 2.1 inform the context, climate and organisation of the NG and underpin all practices and approaches, including planning, assessment and record keeping (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006). The NG curriculum is embedded in these six principles, and school policies should be informed by these principles to guide nurturing policy and practice across different environments at the whole-school level. NG practice is guided by and grounded in the framework of the Six NG Principles, which are based on key concepts of child development. However, critics have noted challenges with how these principles can be operationalised effectively for use in daily practice (Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022), as they offer little in the way of practical guidance or curriculum. This can lead to inconsistencies in how these are interpreted by individual practitioners and the lack of practical guidance may impact the effectiveness of the intervention, particularly in ROI, as there are currently no national guidelines for NG practice.

Boxall's initial conceptualisation of the first NG focused on providing children with social and emotional experiences appropriate for their developmental level, rather than delving into the theoretical underpinnings of the model (Boxall, 2002). As the model developed, theoretical links to Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1978) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970) became apparent.

Figure 2.1 *The Six Principles of Nurture*



2.6 Nurture Group Models

2.6.1 *The Classic Boxall Model*

Cooper & Whitebread (2007) identified three varieties of NG. Firstly, the ‘classic’ NG follows Boxall’s original model as described above (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013); small groups of 10-12 pupils attend the NG for most of the school week, joining their mainstream class for registration, break and lunch times. The NG is staffed by two adults who have received training in nurture and pupil progress is measured using the Boxall Profile, with the goal to fully re-integrate into the mainstream class after two to four terms of NG provision.

2.6.2 *The New Variant Model*

The ‘new variant’ NG (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007) adheres to the same core principles of the classic approach, but differs in structure or organisation, such as part-time NGs. Students are withdrawn from their mainstream classes for part of the day to attend an intensive and supportive intervention, focused upon social and emotional nurturing, in order to enable their return to the full-time mainstream classroom as soon as possible (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). Part-time groups typically focus on nurture experiences and a particular area of development such as communication or language. Both the classic and new variant models align with Boxall’s original model, are underpinned by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1978) and are guided by the Six Nurture Principles (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006; Nurture UK, 2019).

2.6.3 *Aberrant Model*

These groups depart from the key defining principles and practices of nurture and may have dramatically different organisational structures, such as break-time groups or short-term group interventions for social and emotional skills. Although these may use the name ‘Nurture Group’, they do not adhere to the Nurture Principles and lack a focused approach toward teaching the Nurture curriculum (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007).

2.7 Theoretical Frameworks

When Marjorie Boxall established the first NG in London in the 1960s, she recognised the need to provide children with experiences appropriate to their developmental level, instead of their chronological age. She later described the underlying philosophy of NGs as one of ‘growth not pathology’, stating that the ‘perspective is forward looking from birth, not looking back from the present’ (Boxall, 2002, p. 10). Following the success of this model, links to theoretical models became evident in later years.

2.7.1 Attachment Theory

The most significant theoretical framework underpinning Nurture Groups is Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Attachment theory emphasises the essential nature of the caregiver-infant/ child relationship and outlines the essential nature of early parent-child bonding for later mental and emotional wellbeing (Bowlby, 1978; Ainsworth, 1969). The type of attachment formed during infancy and early childhood creates an internal working model for all future relationships. These working models provide an unconscious ‘template’ that allows the child to predict their caregiver’s likely behaviours and plan their responses. Therefore, the type of model created is highly significant as it provides the map for all future relationships and social – emotional interactions within the self and with others.

When the caregiver provides ‘good enough’ parenting by meeting a child’s needs for comfort, protection and independent exploration, the child’s internal working model of self will be positive, self-reliant and valued (Bretherton, 2013). If an ‘insecure’ attachment is formed, children are more likely to develop a negative internal working model of self, and may perceive themselves as unlovable or unworthy (Bretherton, 2013). Individuals with a negative internal working model are more likely to experience mistrust in relationships, low self-esteem and unresolved needs for nurturing (Bombèr, 2007). Defensive behavioural strategies may develop as an unconscious means of relating to inconsistent or rejecting caregivers (Linsell et al., 2019), impacting the child’s ability to regulate emotions, self-soothe and relate to others. An insecure or negative attachment style can impact the development of social, emotional skills and cognition, which consequently impacts an individual’s ability to engage in education (Bellis et al., 2014). Long before Felitti et al.’s (1998) seminal ACEs study, Boxall acknowledged that adverse

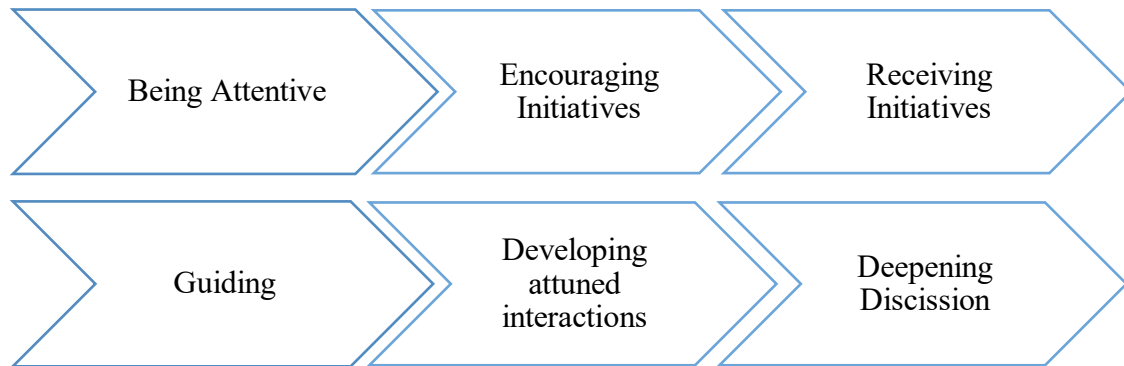
familial experiences such as poverty, abuse and economic stress compromised the attachment bond between parents and children.

Attachment theory is now considered in a broader, more flexible way (Bombèr, 2007; Parker & Levinson, 2018), as children experience multiple and dynamic attachments with those around them, including teachers and other caregivers. As Boxall recognised, teachers and school staff are well placed to create predictable, supportive relationships. Within the NG, children have the opportunity to develop and sustain positive attachments with adults, enabling them to better understand and manage their emotions, develop empathy and trust in others (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Sanders, 2007). A key element of this process is attunement.

2.7.2 Attunement

Central to the development of a secure attachment is the process of attunement, where the child's emotional and physiological state is recognised and sensitively accommodated by the adult (Kennedy, Landor & Todd, 2011; Siegel, 2007). Attunement is the core element of attachment development and promotes a sense of 'felt' safety and security between child and caregiver, enabling the development of a positive internal working model. These intersubjective interactions lay the foundations for the child to develop an understanding of other people's emotional states and develop skills to sustain healthy relationships (Schore, 2001). The principles of attunement (Figure 2.2) (Kennedy, Landor & Todd, 2011) provide a framework to develop attuned interactions. Research indicates that NG staff demonstrate these more frequently and consistently in their interactions with students in comparison to mainstream class teachers (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017).

Figure 2.2 *The Principles of Attunement*

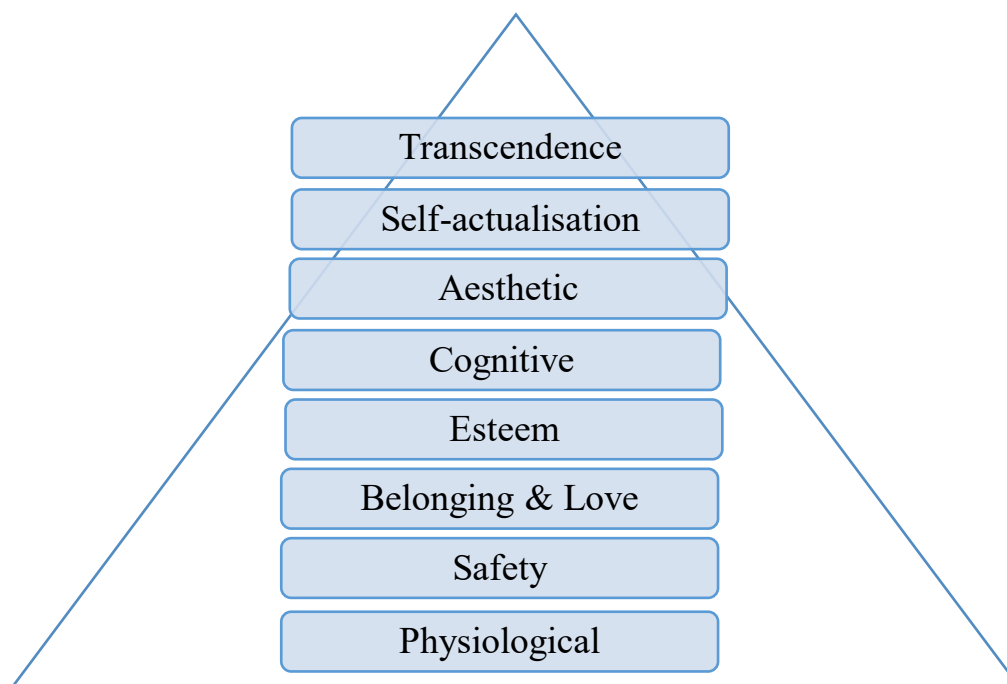


2.7.3 *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

The underlying philosophy of NGs also draws upon Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970) (Figure 2.3), as it is assumed that for children to be able to learn and connect with those around them they must first feel a sense of safety, security and belonging (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). Once these needs are satisfied, the child will be 'available for learning', thereby enabling engagement with the higher levels (Nurture UK, 2019), supporting optimal social and emotional development. The NG is specifically designed to meet the basic human needs identified in the lower part of the pyramid, such as a safe, predictable and secure environment, a place to rest, access to food, warmth and safety in relationships (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000).

While Maslow's theory is widely used in education and psychology, critics argue that it is western-centric and based on individualistic values that may not be representative of all cultural or social groups. (Wahba & Bridwell (1976). Furthermore, the rigidity of the model suggests that humans must pursue the basic needs before higher level needs can be attained, which over-simplifies the complexity of human motivation. While it is not expected that one would move rigidly up the pyramid in a linear fashion, research suggests that children who are tired, hungry or feeling unsafe are likely to experience emotional dysregulation, be irritable, or have difficulty concentrating (Maski & Kothare, 2013; Weinreb et al., 2022). Consequently, before a child can engage in the cognitive processes necessary for learning, they must first have their basic needs met. Therefore, while this theory provides a strong explanatory framework for NGs, its shortcomings should also be acknowledged.

Figure 2.3: *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970)*



2.7.4 Polyvagal Theory

NG's may also draw upon contemporary theories such as Porges (2011) Polyvagal Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework highlighting the biological, psychological and social underpinnings of emotion regulation and informs our understanding of the body's response to safety and threat. Polyvagal theory describes three branches of the vagus nerve, each with a role in regulating physical and emotional responses to the environment, sometimes known as the 'fight, flight, freeze' response (Porges, 2011; Porges & Dana, 2018).

The term 'neuroception' describes the process by which the autonomic nervous system monitors cues of safety or danger in the environment (Porges, 2011; Porges & Dana, 2018). In this way, neuroception facilitates communication between the nervous systems of individuals, influencing how we interact with and respond to others in our environment (Geller & Porges, 2014). Individuals who have experienced trauma or ACEs may be more sensitive to perceived threats in the environment (Porges, 2011). Polyvagal theory describes the process of co-regulation between individuals through activation of the social engagement system, which

soothes the defensive responses of the sympathetic nervous system, supporting physiological and emotional regulation. Within polyvagal theory, the child's need to experience 'felt safety' is emphasized (Porges & Dana, 2018) and this is established in the context of secure, consistent social relationships with others within a predictable and developmentally appropriate environment (Geller & Porges, 2014), such as the NG.

Critics of Polyvagal theory suggest that it over-simplifies the role of the autonomic nervous system on human behaviour, and that further empirical evidence is warranted to support the three-tiered functioning described (Grossman & Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, 'neuroception' is difficult to quantify, define or validate in neuroscientific literature, making it difficult to test the theory scientifically. Therefore, while this theory offers valuable insights in relation to the nervous system and human behaviour, a balanced view is taken in the current study, being mindful of its limitations.

2.8 Evidence for Nurture Group Effectiveness

A large body of work spanning several decades examines NG practices and outcomes for children with SEBD (Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001; Seth-Smith et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2020). Reviews of the literature conclude that attending NG supports self-confidence, self-esteem and communication skills for most children (Hughes & Schlosser, 2014; Bennett, 2014). Two systematic reviews were conducted to synthesise findings from studies investigating NG effectiveness. Findings from Bennett (2014) and Hughes & Schlösser (2014) systematic reviews demonstrated that NG intervention significantly improved children's scores in the Boxall Profile and SDQ in the areas of emotional development, social skills and behaviour in school.

Some evidence also suggests that NGs can have a positive impact on academic achievement for some children (Reynolds, MacKay & Kearney 2009; Scott and Lee 2009; Seth-Smith et al. 2010). A small number of studies indicated that NG attendance can in some cases support academic progress in literacy (Hosie, 2013; Reynolds, MacKay & Kearney, 2009). An interesting qualitative finding from Hosie (2013) demonstrates that children attending NG perceived a positive impact upon their language and literacy skills, and they were observed to have increased confidence and readiness to learn. These findings are further bolstered by

research suggesting that students who believe they can and will do well in school are more likely to perform better and engage well (MacKay, 2006; Pintrich, 2002).

Most studies investigating NG effectiveness employ quantitative methods to examine differences in pre- and post- intervention scores using the Boxall Profile or the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Sanders, 2007; Shaver & McClatchley, 2013; Sloan et al., 2020). There are no randomised controlled trials described in the published literature examining Nurture Groups. As noted by Reynolds et al. (2009) it would be a challenging undertaking given the difficulties associated with randomly allocating children to control and intervention groups. A further difficulty is the lack of coherent data about the number and characteristics of NGs in Ireland. A large-scale evaluation of NGs was recently conducted in Northern Ireland by Sloan et al. (2020). This study provided further evidence of the positive impact of NGs for children with SEBD, with significant improvements for a range of social, emotional and behavioural outcomes found on the Boxall profile and Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for NG children compared to a control group.

A number of qualitative and mixed-method studies have focused upon the views of key stakeholders, such as NG staff, children and parents. Findings demonstrate that NG staff consistently report improvements in SEBD amongst children attending NG (Birch, 2016; Sanders, 2007; Seth-Smith et al., 2010; Vincent, 2017), and the need for a whole school approach to support NG success (Colley, 2009; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). The role of parent-NG staff relationships is highlighted as a key feature of successful NGs (Birch, 2016; Sloan et al., 2020). Across a range of studies investigating the view of NG pupils (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Shaver & McClatchey, 2013; Vincent, 2017) children widely reported that they enjoyed attending the NG; in particular, hands-on and playful learning activities. Children reported that attending the NG helped them to improve their social skills and highlighted the importance of individual attention from caring adults and supportive peers as a key element.

In terms of generalisability of the evidence base, most NG research focuses on UK primary schools, often in urban or high-deprivation areas (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; O'Connor & Colwell, 2002). This raises questions about whether this research can be applied to rural settings or international educational systems, such as ROI. In addition, research shows

varied implementation fidelity in terms of referral, curriculum and practices (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Sloan et al., 2020), leading to weaker external validity across contexts. Furthermore, many studies use small, non-randomised samples (Binnie & Allen, 2008), which increases the risk of selection bias, so findings may not be representative of the wider population. Similarly, many studies use teacher or practitioner-reported data, which limits the objectivity and transferability of the data. Consequently, the generalizability and transferability of the literature should be considered in light of these issues. While the evidence base contains significant gaps and limitations, it still provides important insights into NG practice.

2.9 Critique of Nurture Groups

It has been suggested that NG practice could be used as an exclusionary measure if students with identified SEBD are removed from the mainstream classroom with the aim of excluding them from mainstream education (Slee, 2012). In ROI the use of special classes for students with identified SEN means that some students may be at risk of ‘internal exclusion’ if their placement within a special class is not appropriately managed and supported (Department of Education, 2024). While NGs are not a designated special class under the DE guidance, in instances where inclusion is treated as an individual experience, or if responsibility for a student or group of students is transferred to a separate space, there is a risk of fragmented, exclusive practice (Riley, Mendoza & Galdames, 2020). Withdrawing students from their mainstream class can result in missed learning opportunities. In addition, being withdrawn from class or separated from peers can make children feel different or less capable, which can negatively impact self-esteem and social belonging (Lindsay, 2007; Travers, 2023). Similarly, NGs have been confused with restrictive behaviour management practices, which are criticised due to the negative outcomes for student wellbeing (Matthews et al., 2015).

Therefore, good inclusive practice must ensure that the NG is integrated into the wider school practices and policies to ensure a sense of community and belonging. Part of this process is the use of clear structures and processes for pupil selection and return to mainstream classes, in line with current guidance on inclusive education (NCSE, 2020). Research demonstrates that NG implementation varies considerably across school contexts (Dwyer, 2020; Sloan et al., 2020). Disparities in how schools implemented NG referral, transition, and assessment processes are

highlighted by Dwyer (2020), who noted that some NGs lacked clear referral processes, instead relying on subjective or anecdotal data to inform decision-making. Without the consistent use of structured tools such as the Boxall Profile, decisions about NG placement may be influenced by teacher attitudes and implicit class and cultural norms (Reay, 2006).

2.10 Nurture Groups in the Irish Context

The first nurture initiative in Ireland was pioneered in 2008 by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in a primary school in Ballina, Co. Mayo. Subsequently, a 2011 report commissioned by the Irish National Council for Special Education (NCSE) outlined the merits of Nurture Groups as an effective emotional and behavioural intervention (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011).

Over the past ten years, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Nurture Groups have been established across the country in a variety of schools and education settings. The current Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice: 2018-2023 (DES, 2019) includes NGs amongst examples of effective practice within the school continuum of support. In 2020, Educate Together, an independent patron of 117 primary and second-level schools, established the Nurture Schools Project; the first to co-ordinate a structured adoption of Nurture Groups in Irish schools. This project aimed to establish Nurture Groups across 25 Educate Together Schools over this two-year period. Over 500 school staff received training on the principles and practice of nurture and trauma-informed care in education as part of this project.

Although there is no formal governing body for NGs in the ROI, Nurturing Schools Ireland (NSI) is a grassroots organisation that provides training on the Nurture approach and trauma-informed practice to Irish primary and secondary schools. NSI estimate that in 2022, approximately 1000 educators, including teachers, principals and SNAs from an estimated 350 schools attended training in Nurture Theory and Practice. However, outside of the Educate Together Project, there is no published data currently available on the number of NGs currently running in Irish schools. Despite extensive searching and enquiries from the researcher to a number of agencies including the Department of Education, NEPS special interest group for

NGs, and the NCSE, it remains unclear which agencies, if any, are involved in supporting, and supervising these groups.

2.11 Rationale for the Present Study

Much of the published research evaluating NG effectiveness suggest positive outcomes for children's social, emotional and behavioural development (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; Cooper and Whitebread 2007; Reynolds, MacKay, and Kearney 2009; Sloan et al., 2020). However, increases in psychometric scores using standardised instruments such as the Boxall Profile tell us little about how these changes are perceived by the nurture practitioners and students. Furthermore, the key ingredients for NG effectiveness and optimal conditions for success are yet to be fully explored (Bennett, 2015; Hughes & Schlosser, 2014), as well as specific information about the skills used by NG staff to bring about change (Kourmoulaki 2013). As highlighted in Bennett's (2015) systematic review, there is much to be gained by using qualitative methods to investigate the exact factors necessary for NG success. Furthermore, the bulk of research demonstrating NG effectiveness has been conducted in the UK, where it is a well-established and supported intervention. As noted by Cheney et al. (2014), evidence of intervention efficacy in one country does not necessarily mean this data can be generalised to a different academic setting. The Irish educational context differs from the UK in several significant ways. Firstly, schools in the UK have full autonomy over their staffing, budget, and expenditure, and therefore can choose to allocate funding to the NG for staffing, training, materials and resources. In Ireland, state-funded schools do not have autonomy over staff allocations, and apart from the Educate Together Nurture project, no additional funding is available to schools for staffing, training and resources for the NG.

Secondly, the current social climate in Ireland differs from the UK, the current shortage of affordable housing means that several thousand children are currently experiencing homelessness (Simon Community, 2022), while rising costs of living have increased the number of families currently living below the poverty line (Social Justice Ireland, 2023). Thirdly, a plethora of community and school-based mental health services are well-established across the UK and are unmatched in Ireland. For example, in 2023, 35% of pupils in UK schools had access to specialised Mental Health Support Teams (NHS, 2023). By comparison, a review of CAMHS

services in Ireland in the same year outlined long waiting lists and inadequate resources posing an increasing risk to the children it serves (Mental Health Commission, 2023). The role of educational psychology is central to provide support and supervision to the NG, however, according to figures from the Department of Education (DE) released in 2023, the ratio of educational psychologists to schools is currently 1:18, double that of the UK, which is 1:9. Increased pressures on families and schools leaves many struggling to cope, along with an increasing need for specialist supports. This disparity in access to psychological and mental health services further highlights the contextual and societal differences between the UK and Ireland.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that Nurture UK provide training, support, supervision and guidance to NG schools and staff, whereas no such governing body exists in the ROI. The DE do not have a formal position or policy in place to inform NG provision despite a 2011 NCSE-funded report (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011) highlighting the effectiveness of the intervention. This leaves schools and NG staff without guidance or supervision on how to best support the children using evidence-based practice. Given these vast differences in funding, systemic supports, access to psychologists and mental health services, training and supervision, it is clear that the landscape of Irish education is vastly different to that of the UK. It therefore stands to reason that the organisation, structure and effectiveness of the NG in Irish schools should be considered and examined within this unique context. Despite the increasing implementation of NGs, there is a critical lack of published data on the number, types, and practices of NGs in the Republic of Ireland. Consequently, this issue is ripe for further investigation.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining perspectives of Nurture Practitioners (NPs) to explore the impact of NGs for children's social-emotional development and identify key conditions that contribute to NG success in fostering positive change for pupils. The study further investigates common characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools, and will be the first to examine and identify common approaches currently in use in NGs in the Republic of Ireland, and their perceived efficacy in supporting children with SEBD. It is envisaged that this research will contribute to the existing literature on NG provision by expanding on current understanding of the nurture approach and to clarify processes, approaches and factors associated with success.

2.12 Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to examine the perspectives of Nurture Practitioners to explore the impact of this intervention for children's social-emotional development and to identify the specific skills and strategies that contribute to change. This research also aims to gather data pertaining to current NG provision in order to provide an overview of nurture provision and establish fidelity to the Nurture Principles and widely accepted NG model. This study is the first of its kind to systematically collate data of this nature in Irish NGs. It is envisaged that this research will contribute to the existing literature on NG provision by expanding on current understanding of the nurture approach and to clarify processes, approaches and factors associated with success. To this end, the current study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of NG for children's social-emotional development and behaviour in school?
2. What conditions, approaches or strategies are perceived to be most effective for NG success?
3. What are the common characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools?

2.13 Systematic review

2.13.1 Rationale

Following a broad review of the extant literature on NG effectiveness, it was identified that a focused review using a systematic approach would serve to collate, synthesise and critically analyse the findings of the available research on the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness. The aim of this review is to answer the review question:

What is known about the conditions necessary for nurture group effectiveness?

2.13.2 The Current Study

This systematic review aims to answer the review question by applying rigorous and systematic methods to identify, select, appraise and critically analyse the available literature, to synthesise results and collate information in a focused manner and to identify inconsistencies or gaps in the existing literature (Gough et al., 2017). As noted by Higgins et al., (2019), systematic reviews make use of “explicit, systematic methods that are selected with a view to minimizing bias, thus providing more reliable findings from which conclusions can be drawn and decisions made”. The aim of this study is to identify the conditions necessary for nurture group effectiveness, and to this end, a systematic approach was taken to conduct this review of the existing literature.

This systematic review section will be presented using the series of steps consistent with the process for conducting a systematic review as described by Petticrew and Roberts (2006). Firstly, the review questions are explicitly defined, the theoretical framework underpinning the review identified, and rationale for choice of methodology, in this case thematic synthesis (Tong et al., 2012) presented. The search strategy is clearly delineated, with inclusion / exclusion criteria specified and information sources or databases identified. Subsequently, a focused literature search is undertaken, and appropriate papers identified, which are then screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Subsequently each study is subjected to critical appraisal, and relevant data extracted and collated (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2018) was used in the present review to appraise and evaluate each

study. Finally, the discussion and synthesis of the review findings are presented with the aim of answering the specific review question.

2.13.3 Search Procedure

The following section describes the search strategy undertaken, including electronic databases, search terms and electronic filters used, along with the essential criteria used to determine eligibility for inclusion in this review.

Search strategy. Four scientific electronic databases were searched using the EBSCO host platform: Education Source, ERIC, APA PsycArticles and APA PsycInfo. These databases were selected due to their relevance to the field of educational psychology. A set of search terms related to the review question were identified, and appropriate truncations and Boolean operators were applied, as presented in Table 2.1. Each database was searched for articles with the terms located in the title or abstract, and only published, peer-reviewed journal articles were included. The time period was set from the year 2000-2024. This time frame was selected due to the resurgence in popularity in NGs in the UK since the late 1990’s, as noted in the literature (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Colley, 2009; Cubbedeau & MacKay, (2017). This was accompanied by an increase in NG research in this period The eligibility criteria applied during the screening and selection process and rationale for each are outlined in Table 2.2.

Table 2.1: Search terms and linkage

Participants	Intervention	Outcome
Nurture staff	Nurture Group	Effective*
OR	OR	OR
Teachers	Nurture Class	Success*
OR		
Children		

Table 2.2: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1. Publication		
Studies presenting primary data sources based on original research	Studies that do not present primary data (e.g. reviews or discussion articles)	Primary data is required to provide sufficient information on the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness
Published, peer-reviewed journal articles	Grey literature, including unpublished research (e.g. dissertation or thesis)	Published journal articles are subject to peer review, increasing quality of included studies. Additionally, grey literature may include duplication of research from different sources (Benzies et al., 2006)
2. Participants		
Participants who have attended or worked in a ‘classic’ or ‘new variant’ NG in a primary school setting	Participants who have attended an intervention that is inconsistent with the ‘classic’ or ‘new variant’ NG models, or in a setting other than a primary school	Only NG settings that meet the nurture guidelines and principles (Nurture UK, 2019) can provide sufficient information on the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness
Nurture group staff, parents or children with experience of or knowledge about the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness	Participants who do not have experience of or knowledge about the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness	Only participants with experience or knowledge about NG effectiveness can provide relevant data
3. Methodology		
Studies with the primary aim of eliciting the views and perspectives of participants with experience or knowledge of the conditions	Studies with a primary aim other than to elicit the views and perspectives of participants with experience or knowledge of the	Studies with the primary aim of eliciting the views and perspectives of participants can provide sufficient information on the

necessary for NG effectiveness.	conditions necessary for NG effectiveness.	conditions necessary for NG effectiveness
Studies that employ qualitative and/or quantitative methods to elicit the views and perspectives of participants with experience or knowledge of the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness.	Studies that do not employ methods to elicit the views and perspectives of participants about the conditions necessary for NG effectiveness.	Qualitative and quantitative methods enable collection of data relevant to the review question.

2.13.4 Selection of Studies

The search strategy is clearly delineated in the PRISMA chart in Figure 2.4. Initial searches returned 122 articles across all databases, and after duplicates were removed, 85 articles remained. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to screen the articles in a two-stage process. Firstly, 85 articles were screened based on the title and abstract, and review articles, editorials and commentaries were also removed at this stage. At the end of this process, 24 articles remained. The second stage involved screening the full text of these articles against the inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine eligibility. Following this process, 19 studies were removed (Appendix A) and five studies met the criteria for inclusion in the review (Table 2.3).

Figure 2.4 PRISMA flow diagram

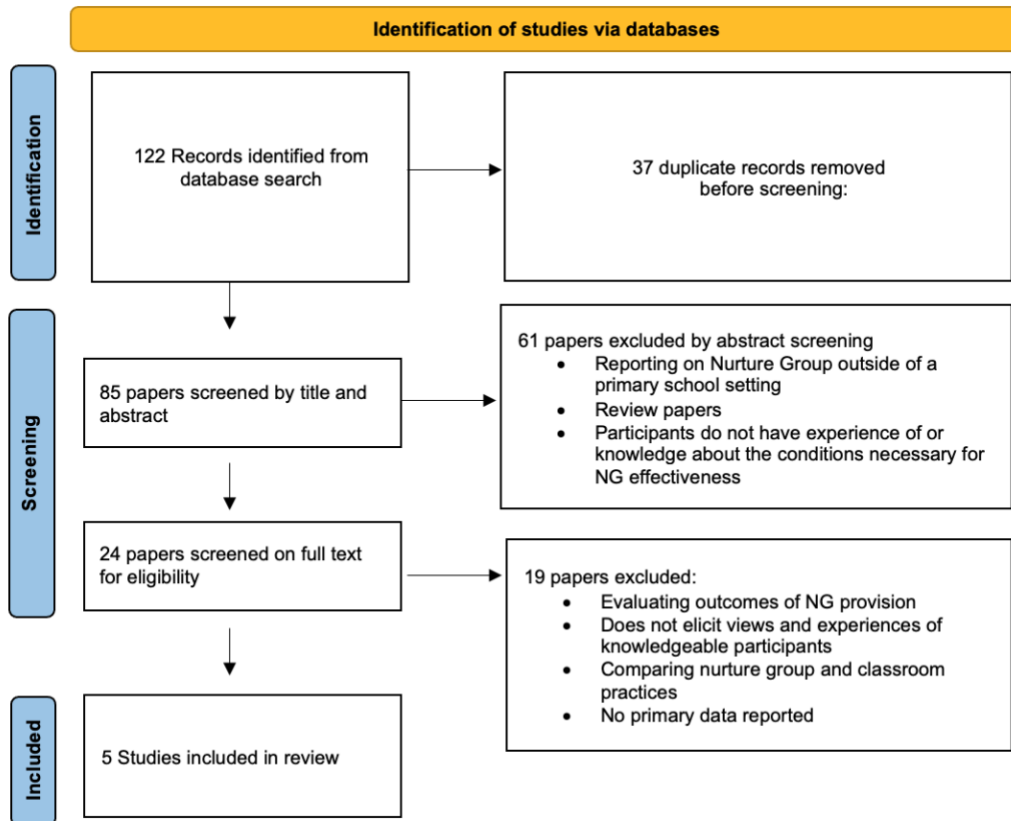


Table 2.3: *Included Studies*

Author and Date	Title
Cefai & Pizzuto, (2017)	Listening to the voices of young children in a nurture class
Vincent, (2017)	'It's small steps, but that leads to bigger changes': evaluation of a nurture group intervention
Birch, (2016)	'You do what you need for your children, don't you?': An exploration of the current range of practice and priorities of nurture group staff in a local authority
Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks (2014)	Hearing the unheard: Children's constructions of their nurture group experiences.
Cooper & Tiknaz, (2005)	Progress and challenge in Nurture Groups: Evidence from three case studies.

2.13.5 *Data Extraction*

These papers were subject to data extraction across three key areas. Firstly, an overview and general information about each study (Table 2.4), including author, year of publication, location, sample and methodology. Secondly, the quality and rigour of each research study was analysed and evaluated using the CASP checklist (2018). Subsequently, a systematic appraisal of each article was undertaken to aid comparison and synthesis of the research papers and to extract key data relevant to the review question.

Table 2.4: Overview of Included Articles

Author, Date & Title	Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017 Listening to the voices of young children in a nurture class	Birch, 2016 ‘You do what you need for your children, don’t you?’: An exploration of the current range of practice and priorities of nurture group staff in a local authority	Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005 Progress and challenge in Nurture Groups: evidence from three case studies	Vincent, 2017 ‘It’s small steps, but that leads to bigger changes’: evaluation of a nurture group intervention	Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014 Hearing the unheard: Children’s constructions of their Nurture Group experiences
Location	Malta	Wales	England An area of social and economic deprivation	England Socially deprived area	Wales An area of social deprivation
Aims	Capturing the views of children on their experiences as nurture group pupils	An initial exploration of the variance in nurture group practice, and of NG staff perceptions of the successes and challenges of running a NG.	Explore the perceptions of mainstream and Nurture Group staff about the nature, purposes and impact of Nurture Group practice.	To examine the impact of the NG and identify key factors that contributed to change	To examine children’s perceptions of their NG
Design	Qualitative Case study design Semi-structured focus group interviews with NG children	Qualitative Focus group (7 participants) Quantitative survey	Qualitative semi-structured interviews (Part of a longitudinal mixed-methods study)	Qualitative Case study design Semi-structured interviews over a two year period	Qualitative Focus group interviews
Sample	18 children from two NG’s in the same primary school. NG 1: 6 males & 4 females, aged 4-6 years NG 2: 5 males & 3 females, aged 6-7 years old	7 Nurture Group Staff from 3 primary schools 3 NG co-ordinators 4 NG assistants (ages, gender not disclosed)	Two infant schools & one primary school 9 NG staff 8 Mainstream teachers 3 Headteachers	3 NG staff 5 mainstream teachers 12 children aged 7-11 years 3 parents All from one school	8 children (2 female, 6 male) aged 7-11 years old All attending a NG in one school
NG Model	New variant / Part-time	1 classic 2 new variant	New variant /Part-time	Part-time/ New-variant	Classic model
Data analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Not reported	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis

2.14 Description of Studies

A systematic appraisal of each article was undertaken to locate and evaluate the key information relevant to the current review, and to enable comparison and synthesis of research findings across all of the included papers. All five of the studies in this review were qualitative in design. One study (Birch, 2016), used a quantitative survey to gather brief demographic and historical data but this information was not the main focus of the research paper, which was qualitative in design. All of the studies were conducted in European countries, with two in Wales (Birch, 2016; Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks), two in England (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Vincent, 2017) and one in Malta (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017). Three studies were conducted in areas that were identified as socially or economically deprived (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017).

The total sample across all 5 papers was 76 participants, representing a range of stakeholders in NG provision, including 38 children aged between 4 and 11 years old, 19 NG staff, 13 mainstream teachers, 3 headteachers and 3 parents of children who had attended NG. All of the studies explored participant views about the factors and conditions necessary for NG success. All 5 studies took a similar methodological approach to data collection and analysis, with three studies using focus group interviews as a means of data collection, and two with semi-structured interviews. Four of the studies used Thematic Analysis to analyse the data, but Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) did not provide details of the data analysis process.

When conducting the current review, the findings of each paper were carefully considered within the context of the details outlined above. These important contextual details can indicate if the findings of each paper may be transferred to other situations and circumstances (Shenton, 2004). Approximately half of the participants were children who had attended a NG, so the findings of this review may be taken as an accurate representation of the experiences of children, although the gender ratio of child participants included more males than females. All of the participating NGs were described as aligning with the practices and principles of classic or new variant NG models as identified by Cooper & Whitebread (2007). All of the included studies were carried out in European countries, therefore the findings may be applicable to NGs in primary schools in Europe. Caution should be taken before transferring the results to

other contexts, such as NGs that do not align with these models, Post-Primary schools, or NGs outside of Europe.

2.15 Framework for Review

Following study selection, the five studies that met the inclusion criteria were critically analysed for quality. A critical appraisal process is necessary to evaluate and critique each paper to determine the methodological quality and rigour of the research, and to make judgements about the implications of potential methodological limitations (Noyes et al., 2018). The application of frameworks and checklists enables consistency in systematic appraisal across articles (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) and facilitates evaluation of the relevance and quality of evidence in relation to the present review question. All of the included articles were qualitative in design, so one quality appraisal tool was utilised with all 5 studies.

2.15.1 Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Checklist (CASP)

All of the included studies were individually evaluated using the CASP Qualitative Checklist (2018). There appears to be little consensus regarding how to best judge the quality of qualitative research (Long, French & Brooks, 2020), and no consistently applied guidelines for appraisal of qualitative studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). However, the CASP is a commonly used evaluation instrument and has shown to be reliable for use when evaluating qualitative research (Long, French & Brooks, 2020). Additionally, it is recommended by Cochrane and the World Health Organisation for qualitative evidence synthesis (Noyes et al. 2018; Hannes & Bennett, 2017).

The CASP tool can be used to evaluate the strengths and limitations of any qualitative research study. It consists of ten questions, each focused on a different methodological aspect of the research. These questions provide a framework to facilitate evaluation by considering if the methodology was appropriate and whether the findings are meaningful and accessible. The evaluation criteria are set out across three areas: validity, clarity of results and value of findings. The questions relate to appropriate choice of design and methodology, such as ‘was the data collected in such a way that addressed the research issue?’, as well as broader items relating to

the aims of the study generally and the value of the research findings concerning existing literature. Responses to questions consist of ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘can’t tell’.

Although the CASP tool provides a valuable aid in the appraisal and organisation of the synthesis, it may not sufficiently distinguish papers by quality (Long, French & Brooks, 2020). Therefore, to further aid evaluation and appraisal of each study, a rating scale of 0-2 was used to evaluate the extent to which the study met each criteria and a total score, with a maximum of 20, was then calculated and converted to a percentage to establish a descriptive quality rating of high, medium or low (Noyes et al., 2018). The deciding criteria were necessary to establish study quality, and were based upon the following ratings presented in Table 2.5 and the quality ratings assigned to each study, using the CASP framework as an appraisal tool are outlined in Table 2.6.

Table 2.5: *Quality Rating Scale*

Score	Rating
0	Quality criteria not met
1	Quality criteria partly met
2	Quality criteria fully met
Total score	
0-6	Low
7-14	Medium
15-20	High

Table 2.6 CASP Appraisal

	Birch, 2016		Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017		Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005		Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014		Vincent, 2017	
	Response	Rating	Response	Rating	Response	Rating	Response	Rating	Response	Rating
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes	2	Yes but no research questions	1	Yes but no research questions	1	Yes but no research questions	1	Yes but no research questions	1
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	No	0	No	0	No	0	Yes	1	Yes	2
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Yes	2	Somewhat	1	Not discussed	0	Yes	2	Yes	2
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes	2	Yes	2
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes	1	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2
How valuable is the research?		1		1		2		1		1 (small scale)
Total score		16		15		14		17		18
Quality Rating		High		High		Medium		High		High

2.16 Quality Assessment

All studies clearly stated the study aims, but only one study (Birch, 2016) included an explicit statement of the research questions, which provided further clarification of the purpose of the study. The application of qualitative methodology was deemed to be appropriate for all five studies to address the aims of the research. Based on the CASP checklist, four studies were deemed to be of high quality, with Vincent's (2017) study rated as the highest quality. Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) received the lowest rating and scored as medium-level quality. The five studies included data pertaining to the views of a range of key stakeholders, including NG staff (Birch, 2016; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Vincent, 2017), other school staff such as mainstream teachers and headteachers (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Vincent, 2017) and Vincent (2017) also included parent participants. Four of the five studies included the views of children attending the NG (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017).

Vincent's (2017) study aimed to establish the effectiveness of a part-time NG in one school and to identify the factors contributing to change. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a number of key stakeholders including NG children, NG staff, mainstream staff, and parents. This study outlined clear implications for practice by providing detailed evidence of impact, enabling the school to make informed decisions about future provision. In gathering the views of NG pupils, the researcher- participant relationship was carefully considered, and the researcher joined in the NG as an 'interested outsider'. A range of child-friendly participatory methods were successfully employed, and the interview schedule was provided in an appendix. Key themes, including communication, goal-setting and adult modelling were provided and discussed in detail. This study provided perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders and was the only study that explored the views of parents. Involvement of numerous key stakeholders enabled triangulation of data from multiple perspectives. The small-scale nature of this study limits generalisability and although the data provides compelling evidence regarding NG conditions for NG success, inclusion of a control group would increase the validity of results.

Cooper and Tiknaz's (2005) study also provided multiple perspectives on factors contributing to NG success. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 NG staff, 3

headteachers, 9 mainstream teachers and some NG children. Participants were recruited across three schools and interview data was collected as part of a larger longitudinal mixed -method study along with 40 hours of unstructured observations. This paper provides interesting data regarding how NG success is construed by different stakeholders, and a number of contributing factors are identified, such as small group sizes and partnership between staff members. However, Cooper and Tiknaz's (2005) study lacks key details such as the time points at which interviews were conducted, the number of child participants and details of the data analytic process. Moreover, the inclusion of pupil views appeared slightly tokenistic within this paper as direct child views were underreported in favour of other key stakeholders.

Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks (2014) had the broad aim of eliciting children's views of their NG. A focus group was carried out with 8 children aged 7-11 years old, using child-friendly methods such as a soft toy mascot, paired discussions and scribing. This design was appropriate to meet the aims of the study. A number of ethical considerations for working with child participants were utilised, such as child-friendly information sheets with images. The researchers conducted the primary analysis separately, which increased the validity of the results. Four key themes are discussed and provide valuable information about children's views of conditions necessary for NG success. The themes included relationships, learning to regulate emotions and behaviours, the environment and learning supports available in the NG. Participants were drawn from one primary school in Wales with a well-established NG adhering to the 'classic' model. While this study contributes valuable data from the children themselves, the small sample size reduces the generalisability of the results. Details regarding consideration of the researcher-participant relationship were limited. This is of particular importance when conducting research that aims to eliciting the voice of the child.

Similarly, Cefai & Pizzuto's (2017) study also aimed to elicit children's views and experiences of their NG. This study was carried out in a primary school in Malta and utilised a case study design, appropriate for the aims of the research. 18 children aged between 4 and 7 years old participated in task-based focus group designed to elicit their views through drawing, colouring and pasting pictures. The study adopted several child-friendly data collection methods which were completed by the NG staff as part of the typical schedule of activities following training and guidance from the researcher. This enabled the tasks to be carried out in a familiar

way for the child participants and reduced the need for the researchers to be directly involved. However, the children's responses may be prone to social desirability bias. The young age of the children meant that the data collected was visual in nature, with maps and posters containing images. Consequently, analysis relied heavily on the researcher's observation and interpretation. This was a small-scale study with perspectives from one group of stakeholders from one school setting. Nonetheless, this study provides interesting perspectives from the children themselves about what they value in the NG.

Birch (2016) explored the practices and priorities of NG staff across three primary schools in one local authority in Wales. Demographic data was collected by means of a survey to establish common practices across different NGs, and a focus group carried out with 7 NG staff. While this was a small-scale study, participants were recruited across three schools, with 'classic' or 'new variant' NG models. The sample included NG teachers and NG assistants and these factors increased diversity across the sample. Birch (2016) noted that despite the inconsistencies in nurture practices across the sample, there was a great deal of consensus amongst participants as to the ideal conditions for NG success. A limitation of the study is that participants were self-selected so there may be a potential bias of NG staff who feel strongly enough to volunteer to participate. In addition, the analysis is brief and further details about the process and results would increase the value of the findings. Nonetheless, Birch (2016) provided a clear account of NG practices and priorities, which made a valued contribution to the current review.

2.17 Thematic Synthesis

Subsequently, a synthesis of all five studies was completed and the extracted data is summarised in Tables 2.7 to 2.11. This synthesis enabled a deep exploration of findings, themes and relationships across the articles and aims to answer the review question: *What is known about the conditions necessary for nurture group effectiveness?*

Table 2.7: Data Synthesis

'You do what you need for your children, don't you?': An exploration of the current range of practice and priorities of nurture group staff in a local authority (Birch, 2016)

Aims	Research question(s)	A summary of key findings
<p>To explore variance in NG practice in one Local Authority</p> <p>To explore views of NG staff about successes and challenges of running a NG</p>	<p>1. To what extent does NG practice vary between schools in a single local authority?</p> <p>2. Given this variation, to what extent do staff from different NGs agree on the characteristics of a successful NG, and on the benefits and challenges of running such a group?</p>	<p>Focus group findings</p> <p>Despite differing practices in timetabling, staffing and resourcing, all NG staff reached consensus on six factors necessary for NG success: suitable space, caring and consistent NG staff, resources such as games and materials, getting the right mix of children, support from management and other school staff and access to appropriate training.</p> <p>Key Themes identified:</p> <p>The need to work with and support parents was identified as key for success, with parental involvement viewed as leading to greater changes. This juxtaposed with feelings of frustration or judgement toward some parents and helplessness if parents were hard to engage.</p> <p>The need for support from management and other members of staff, and the role NG staff play in supporting one another.</p> <p>Pressures on NG staff were identified such as lack of resources and staffing issues. The emotional toll of running the NG, and difficulty switching off at the end of the school day were identified as challenges</p> <p>Another key factor centred around the theme of 'children' and included the need to understand child development and basic theories underpinning NG practice such as attachment theory. The importance of getting group dynamics right, and flexibility to ensure that NG provision is tailored to the needs of each individual were identified as key conditions for success.</p>

Table 2.8: Data Synthesis

Listening to the voices of young children in a nurture class
(Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017)

Aims	Research question(s)	A summary of key findings
To explore student views and experiences of attending a NG	Not provided	<p>Used child-friendly methods such as drawing, colouring and pasting pictures to elicit pupil views, the following themes were discussed:</p> <p>Favourite activities: Toys and play were highlighted as favourite activities along with drawing, colouring and circle time, which allowed a safe place to explore feelings and emotions. Children described positive experiences of attending NG, and described learning as fun, hands-on and playful.</p> <p>Relationships: Feeling happy in the NG, due to high levels of individual attention from caring adults and positive relationships with understanding staff and supportive peers. This contrasted with their desire for more well behaved classmates, less bullying and fighting in the mainstream setting.</p> <p>Food: Cooking and eating, having breakfast together and preparing food</p> <p>Some of the children implied that they wished their mainstream classes could operate more like a NG, with more playful learning and supportive peers. They feel happy, safe and relaxed in the NG. This study highlights the need to consult children about their learning, environment and to facilitate agency and empowerment.</p>

Table 2.9: Data Synthesis

Progress and challenge in Nurture Groups: Evidence from three case studies (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005)		
Aims	Research question(s)	A summary of key findings
Explore the perceptions of mainstream and Nurture Group staff about the nature, purposes and impact of Nurture Group practice.	Not provided	<p>‘Success’ constructed in several different ways by participants, including changes in pupil behaviour, self-esteem & confidence, social skills and engagement with learning.</p> <p>A number of factors contributing to success were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced group dynamics in terms of pupil needs, gender, age and behavioural presentation. Where too many children with externalising behaviours were in a group this was perceived by staff and pupils to act as a barrier to positive interactions and relationships. • Close, nurturing relationships built on trust were identified by pupils and staff as integral to NG success, though it was acknowledged that it can take time to develop these types of relationships. NG staff highlighted the importance of the emotional dimensions of pupil experiences and responsibility on staff to shape these in positive ways. • Staff partnership and collaboration in the NG, having a shared vision, purpose and plan and the need to work in a mutually supportive way was identified as essential for success. All of the NGs in this study were staffed by a teacher and teaching assistant and it was observed that NG staff consciously engaged in role modelling of appropriate, positive social communication. • The need for consistent communication between mainstream staff and NG staff regarding NG activities, pupil progress and roles and responsibilities for some curriculum subjects. This was perceived as particularly important when NG children were transitioning from NG to their mainstream class to ensure consistency in care and support. • Setting appropriate and individualised targets for children’s social, emotional and educational development was perceived to contribute to success and pupil progress in the NG.

Table 2.10 *Data Synthesis*

Hearing the unheard: Children's constructions of their nurture group experiences
(Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014)

Aims	Research question(s)	A summary of key findings
To elicit children's constructions of their NG	Not provided	Findings of focus group with 8 children aged 7-11: four key themes were found.
To adhere to the principles and legislation underpinning educational psychology practice in relation to eliciting and hearing the voice of the child		<p>Environment: Comfortable and familiar surroundings and space to relax, a small group size, predictability in the environment and routines and sharing breakfast.</p> <p>Learning: Scaffolding and support from teachers, receiving rewards and recognition. Children identified strategies that were conducive to learning such as regular breaks and reducing task complexity.</p> <p>Self-regulatory behaviour: Children identified that they had developed coping strategies, emotional awareness and behavioural and emotional control skills.</p> <p>Relationships: The NG was seen to represent friends and family and a sense of belonging, trust and predictability was found. Children placed high value on relationships.</p>

Table 2.11 *Data Synthesis*

‘It’s small steps, but that leads to bigger changes’: Evaluation of a nurture group intervention (Vincent, 2017)		
Aims	Research question(s)	A summary of key findings
<p>To examine the impact of a NG for children’s social, emotional and behavioural development and identify key factors that contributed to change</p>	<p>Not provided</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews with staff, parents and children reported the following improvements in NG children: better social skills, increased confidence, greater engagement with academic tasks and fewer incidents of undesirable behaviour.</p> <p>These changes were attributed to seven key practices in the NG: Embedding emotional literacy into all aspects of the programme to help children understand, recognise and accept a wide range of feelings in themselves and others. Explicit teaching of the differences between feelings and behaviour, and providing children with a range of behavioural responses for different feelings supported children to behave in more socially appropriate ways when upset or angry.</p> <p>Positive adult modelling, repetition and encouragement was perceived to support positive changes in how children listened to and spoke with one another. Children were encouraged and supported through repetition and consistent modelling. Staff recognised, accepted and built upon children’s starting points, often spending time focusing on skills that other children their age had already learned. This appeared to reduce frustration and increased self-esteem when children were encouraged and supported to attempt new tasks and activities that were developmentally appropriate.</p> <p>The quality of pupil-staff relationships was conveyed through staff responses to children being consistent, predictable, accepting and respectful. High quality relationships were perceived to develop when staff listened to children and valued their communication. This is hypothesized to meet their basic needs by providing attention and care. All of the children also highlighted the importance of ‘cosy’ times such as story time, when they could</p>

cuddle and show affection to staff and teddies. The small group size in the NG enabled more 1:1 time between students and staff.

Individual goals were set using a joint process between the child and NG staff, based around the results of an emotional literacy assessment. This was attributed to the positive impact of the NG as children felt a sense of agency and ownership, and demonstrates commitment to listen to and act upon the child's views.

Recognising that change may take a long time and importance of patience to allow the nurture process to develop,

Good communication between mainstream and NG staff and a teamwork approach, where all staff can work toward common goals for the children attending NG. Communication also facilitates successful re-integration to mainstream, which needs to be carefully planned and supported by all staff, so that individual needs are met even after the child no longer attends the NG.

2.18 Discussion

A synthesis of the themes across all five studies was carried out and these key themes and subthemes are summarised in Figure 2.5. The results of the synthesis highlight consistencies across all included studies in relation to the conditions and factors necessary for NG success. The findings can be grouped into four broad areas: relationships, nurture pedagogy, individualised supports and physical environment. These similarities were found across studies examining different NG models and with different stakeholders, including NG staff, mainstream teachers, parents and students.

Figure 2.5: *Key Findings of Thematic Synthesis*

Relationships	Physical Environment	Nurture Activities	Individualised supports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of fostering positive relationships within the NG between staff and children • Relationships between the NG and outside stakeholders, such as mainstream staff, management and parents • Factors supporting positive relationships: supportive management, good communication and teamwork, actively involving parents, listening to the children, valuing their voice, careful consideration of NG dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing and sharing food • Toys • Playful learning opportunities • Comfortable, predictable environment and soft furnishings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of behaviours and actions specific to NG staff, such as: • Modelling desired behaviours and interactions • Predictability in relationships, routines and expectations • Scaffolding, support, repetition and encouragement • Explicit teaching of emotional literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmentally appropriate tasks are set and focused upon individualised targets • Children's emotional needs are recognised and met by staff • Small group size enables more 1:1 attention • With good communication and support from management, these supports can continue following re-integration to mainstream

Five studies were included for review and findings were synthesised into four key areas relating to conditions for NG success. The theme of relationships was central to findings across all five studies and this broad concept was conceptualised in two ways. Firstly, the importance of fostering positive relationships within the NG, especially between NG staff and children, to enable feelings of safety and trust (Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017). This was reportedly achieved by actively listening to the children and creating a sense of agency and empowerment. NG staff also talked about needing partnership and support between the two NG staff members. The importance of friendships within the group was highlighted by pupils and staff (Birch, 2016; Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017), who acknowledged the need for careful consideration of group dynamics (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). Relationships were also conceptualised in terms of the rapport between the people in the NG and the other stakeholders, such as mainstream staff, school management and parents (Birch, 2016). It was identified that these relationships could contribute to NG success if management were supportive of the NG, when good communication and teamwork existed amongst NG and mainstream staff and where parents were actively involved.

The physical environment, including furniture, toys, and food preparation areas was identified as a key factor for NG success. Staff described the need for appropriate resources (Birch, 2016) and Cefai & Pizzuto (2017) found that children valued toys and play spaces in the NG. Children also described the importance of comfortable and predictable surroundings unique to the NG, such as a couch and cosy blankets (Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017). These insights indicate that the physical environment provides an important element of nurture and comfort to students, for example, cuddling up for a story (Vincent, 2017). Routines involving preparing and sharing food were also particularly significant, and this relates to the theoretical underpinnings of nurture supporting the pupil's basic needs (Bethannan & Boxall, 2013; Maslow, 1970). This is also in alignment with guidance stating that the NG space should be carefully structured and furnished to create a safe base for children (Boxall, 2013; Nurture UK, 2019).

A number of NG staff behaviours were identified as contributing to NG success. These behaviours and actions are synthesised and conceptualised under the umbrella term 'Nurture Activities'. These actions are likely to be observable in any school setting, but appear to be more

frequently used and to be of greater significance in the NG. This includes ways in which NG staff interact with children and with one another to model desired behaviours (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Vincent, 2017), and provide predictability in relationships and expectations (Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014). The provision of repetition and appropriate scaffolding to aid children as they attempt novel or difficult tasks as well as an abundance of encouragement and support (Vincent, 2017) was also highlighted. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating differences in teacher behaviour between NG and mainstream settings, in terms of practices supporting attunement (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017). NG staff also reported that explicit teaching of emotional literacy skills in the NG was perceived to be highly effective, especially when embedded in the nurture curriculum (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Vincent, 2017). Similarly, Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, (2014) found that children described learning new ways to understand and cope with emotions and behaviours in the NG.

Provision of individualised support in the NG was highlighted as a key factor for success. NG staff described the importance of setting developmentally appropriate, individualised targets for each child (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005) and this was found to be particularly effective when the child was consulted in the target-setting process (Vincent, 2017). This enabled each child to access what they needed at a developmental level, even where this meant engaging in tasks that same-age peers would have already mastered (Birch, 2016; Vincent, 2017). Smaller numbers within the NG enabled greater adult support and attention, so children's emotional needs can be recognised and met by staff (Birch, 2016; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). This demonstrates that nurture staff have a deep understanding of the NG Principles (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) and use these to inform their practice.

2.19 Critical Reflection

In considering the findings of the review, the four key elements identified for success are reflective of essential components of high quality teaching (Hattie, 2013; Tynan & Nohilly, 2018) and inform good practice in the mainstream classroom and elsewhere. As outlined by the Department of Education (2024) Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes, inclusive education is characterized by a positive learning environment, teacher-student relationships and access to flexible and

individualized learning opportunities. These key principles underpin inclusive teaching in the NG and across the wider school community.

Research consistently outlines the essential role of teacher-student relationships and nurturing pedagogical approaches in fostering motivation and engagement (Hattie, 2013). A positive teacher-pupil relationship contributes to students' sense of belonging in school (Blum et al., 2004). Furthermore, provision of a supportive, organised, high- quality learning environment is associated with positive student outcomes (Fraser, 2023) while individualised approaches are key for equity and inclusion. In an ideal classroom, all of these elements would be present. The key difference seems to be that the low teacher: pupil ratio enables NGs to provide these elements in an enhanced and intensive way. As highlighted by these studies, a key element of effective NG practice seems to be the provision of a specific space for Nurture, and the provision of comfortable and cosy atmosphere. These findings align with research indicating that classroom climate is created by the teacher through their attitude toward and interactions with students, as well as the language used (Tynan & Nohilly (2018), An interesting topic for further research would explore similarities and differences between the physical and emotional environment of typical classroom environments and NG.

2.20 Limitations of the Current Review

In reflecting on the review process, the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Systematic Reviews (Aromataris et al., 2015) was used to appraise the quality of the current review. A number of strengths and limitations were identified, as set out in Appendix R. In terms of strengths, the review question was clearly stated and adequate sources and resources utilized and a critical appraisal tool applied. A number of limitations were identified. The search terms could have been developed further in relation to participants. For example, while the term 'children' was used, by including the terms 'pupils' or 'students' may have returned further relevant studies for inclusion. In addition, the inclusion criteria, while clearly stated, could have been expanded to include not only peer-reviewed journal articles but also grey literature. The inclusion of unpublished theses or dissertations may have widened the scope of the review and returned further data sources for inclusion, which may have provided a more comprehensive view of the research area. Similarly, this review only included articles published after the year 2000, so

studies before that date were not included. The inclusion of earlier studies may have improved validity and reliability of the review findings. Finally, the use of two independent reviewers is recommended to minimize bias or systematic error, but this study was conducted by just one reviewer, which may have impacted on the validity and rigour of the review. If this review were to be conducted again, the use of two independent reviewers would be advised to reduce bias and increase validity of the process and the search terms and inclusion criteria could be altered as outlined.

2.21 Conclusion

The systematic literature review aimed to provide a focused overview of the existing literature in relation to the review question. Five studies were included, and findings were synthesised to provide information regarding conditions necessary for NG success. The four broad areas identified include relationships, individualised supports, physical environment and nurture activities. This review also highlighted a dearth of research examining the exact conditions necessary for NG success, and illustrates that practitioners and key stakeholders could benefit from a deeper understanding of contributing factors. The included studies offered qualitative information from a range of stakeholder perspectives across a number of NGs in England, Wales and Malta. However, none of the studies included in the review conducted research in Ireland; and future research should explore the impact of NGs on children's wellbeing and factors contributing to success in the unique Irish context, to inform policy and practice.

3 Empirical Paper

This chapter describes the research conducted in the present study. The philosophical position underpinning this research is clearly outlined. Subsequently, a detailed description of the methods employed for research design, sample, procedure, ethical considerations, and data analysis is provided. Research findings are shared and discussed in relation to the research questions.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The philosophical stance and worldview of the researcher influence and guide the research process. These views are illustrated by the research paradigm (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Mertens, 2015), which refers to the philosophical assumptions and beliefs that influence and guide the researcher's decisions and actions. In particular, the research paradigm influences how the researcher makes decisions regarding choice of methods, interpretation of findings and reporting of outcomes (Scotland, 2012). Each paradigm holds a unique and interconnected epistemology, ontology, and methodology (Crotty, 1998), which makes explicit the wider philosophical ideas they espouse.

The current research takes a social-constructivist position. This paradigm holds that reality is subjective and varies from one individual to another (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Within this paradigm, each individual experiences reality from their unique perspective, so each person may construe experiences differently, therefore, meanings are multiple and subjective (Krauss, 2005). The social-constructivist paradigm holds that meaning is actively constructed through social interactions with others, the environment, and shaped by language (Crotty, 1998, p.42). Individuals 'seek to understand the world in which they live and work, and different people may construct meaning in different ways' (Crotty, 1998, p.9), so there are as many realities as individuals.

The current research utilised semi-structured qualitative interviews as well as a quantitative survey to gather data. This mixed-methods approach draws on the social-constructivist paradigm and is aimed at understanding a phenomenon, in this case the NG, from an individual's perspective (Creswell, 2009, p.6). The quantitative survey data provided important contextual and demographic information which facilitated a deeper understanding of

the environment, individuals and interactions in the NG (Creswell, 2009). Open-ended questioning of knowledgeable individuals, with a heavy reliance on participant insights, enables exploration and examination of meanings ascribed to different practices, actions and interactions (Scotland, 2012).

3.2 Theoretical Perspective

The current study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) (Figure 3.1). Bronfenbrenner's original theory has evolved from an ecological framework into a bioecological model, incorporating four elements, the Process- Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. This model emphasises the role of proximal processes and captures dynamics and relationships between individuals and the systems in which they exist (Tong & An, 2024). It aligns with the social-constructivist design of the current study and provides a clear theoretical framework to understand the transactional nature of child development. The Bioecological PPCT model (2006) holds that child development is best understood within the unique and multi-layered systems of their lives, including home, school and wider community influences. It describes the influence of bio-psycho-social factors on child development, and the transactional nature of the interplay between different systems such as the family, school, local community and wider environmental factors.

The PPCT model suggests that the quality and nature of the proximal processes within a system can influence how contextual factors impact child development (Tong & An, 2024). NG practice is based on the interplay between a child's home and school life, as the NG aims to provide elements of both to support optimal development (Boxall, 2002). By investigating the practices, interactions and relationships in the context on NGs, this study explores the transactional nature of interactions and relationships at different levels of the ecosystem and their influence on child development. In this way, the Bioecological PPCT model (2006) provides a clear theoretical framework for the current study by emphasising the interactive and dynamic nature of contextual influences on child development. Critics argue that the PPCT model may be difficult to operationalise and provides little methodological guidance in empirical research (Tong & An, 2024). Furthermore, Tudge et al., (2016) pointed out that the complexity of the

model means that is rarely applied in full in empirical research. To safeguard against this and to ensure clarity, Table 3.1 sets out the application of each construct in relation to the current study.

Figure 3.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

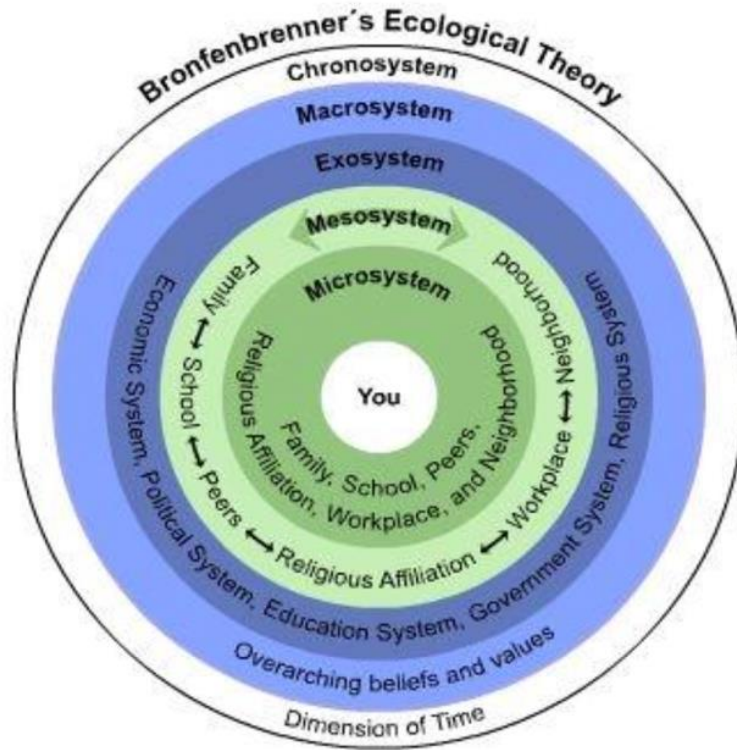


Table 3.1 *PPCT Model and application to the current study*

(adapted from Tong & An, 2024)

PPCT Model constructs	Components	Application in the current research
Process	Reciprocal interactions between individuals and their immediate environment	NP – pupil interactions Pupil-pupil interactions in NG Pupils - NG environment interactions Pupils – school environment interactions
Person	Personal characteristics, mental and emotional resources, behavioural or emotional dispositions or motivations	NP traits Child traits
Context	Environmental systems in which the individual develops	Microsystem: NG environment, NP-pupil relationship, school environment Mesosystem: Family – school relationship, School ethos, policies and procedures Exosystem: Education system, national supports (e.g. NEPS / NCSE) Macrosystem: Social and cultural beliefs about child development, behaviour, role of schools
Time	Periods of time over multiple levels	Micro-time: Moment by moment interactions with people and environment in NG Meso-time: Daily or weekly NG contact and changes observed over weeks Macro-time: Changes in pupil social-emotional development or behaviour in school over months or years.

3.2.1 *Ontology*

This study takes a relativist ontological position, underpinned by the assumption that reality exists in multiple constructions that must be explored and examined through the research. Multiple realities exist, each version influenced by the social, cultural and physical context of the individual (Scotland, 2012). The current study aims to elicit and examine these varying versions of reality to better understand the effectiveness of common approaches in NGs in Irish schools, and the perceived conditions necessary for success.

3.2.2 *Epistemology*

Epistemology can be described as the nature of knowledge and the means by which it is created or obtained (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). This influences how the researcher perceives the knowledge, or data, that is gathered or created during the research process, and how the researcher makes sense of it (Scotland, 2012). In this study, an interpretivist epistemological position will be taken because this paradigm maintains that reality is subjective and is constructed by exchanges between individuals, their world and the people they communicate with, within a unique social and cultural context (Krauss, 2005). From the interpretative position, meaning is embedded in an individual's lived experiences and can be elicited through interactions between participants and the researcher, and later influenced by the researcher's interpretations and insights during the process (Nembhard, 2009). As such, the researcher will be able to yield deep insights into individual perspectives of their social world and to identify the meanings placed upon events and actions in relation to NG practice (Chandler et al. 2015). This position recognises that the researcher has a role in the co-construction and interpretation of meanings throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and steps taken to ensure researcher reflexivity are detailed in Chapter 4.

3.3 *Method*

3.3.1 *Research Design*

This research examines the impact of NGs on children's social and emotional development and the conditions and practices deemed necessary for success. This research further explores common practices and organisational features of NGs in Irish primary schools. Initially, the design of this study was purely qualitative in nature. However, at the researcher's

annual progression panel in April 2024, the design was reviewed by the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and members of the panel. An outcome of this review was a suggestion to make amendments to the design of the study to include a quality criterion that could be used to identify knowledgeable NPs who could provide high information power, thereby minimizing the risk of including NGs that do not adhere to either the classic or new variant NG models (Cooper & Whitebread 2007). Based on feedback and deliberation, it was deemed appropriate to develop a questionnaire to gather quantitative demographic data from many NGs. Subsequently, this feedback was integrated and a mixed-methods design was developed to achieve the aims of the study.

3.3.2 *Concurrent embedded design*

Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative research methods in the same research project, in order to increase the overall strength of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). To address the research questions, a concurrent embedded design was employed. This approach involves a secondary method becoming embedded within the predominant method. For the purposes of this study, qualitative data was the primary method, with quantitative data providing supporting information. As outlined by Creswell (2009) this type of embedded design is appropriate when the secondary method addresses a different research question, as is the case in this study. This enables the collection and analysis of two separate data sources that can be integrated and compared to provide an overall composite view of the phenomenon under examination, in this case, NGs in Irish primary schools. In this study, research questions 1 and 2 could be addressed using qualitative methods to examine the perceived impact of NGs on children's social-emotional development and behaviour in school and to explore the conditions, approaches or strategies perceived to be most effective for NG success. Consequently, quantitative measures were used to address research question 3, to establish common characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools.

3.3.3 *Quantitative methods*

As outlined above, feedback from the researcher's Progression Panel in April 2024 deemed it necessary to include a quantitative measure as part of the research design. Subsequently, a quality criteria checklist from the UK Nurture Group Network (2022) (Appendix

B) was developed into an online questionnaire suitable for the aims of this study. The inclusion of the questionnaire serves two purposes, firstly, to identify NGs with high implementation fidelity to ensure recruitment of knowledgeable participants for interview. Secondly, to systematically gather information about common features and characteristics of NGs in Irish primary schools. As outlined in Chapter 1, this information is currently unavailable in ROI and this study would be the first to attempt to collect this data. The quantitative data would also provide a richer context for analysis of the qualitative data, thereby enriching the overall findings of the study.

The questionnaire (Appendix C) was distributed via email using the Google Forms platform. Questionnaire responses were analysed to provide an overview of the research area (Ivankova et al., 2006), in this case the characteristics and practices in Irish NGs. This enabled the researcher to gather relevant quantitative data from many knowledgeable participants over a short period (McCrudden et al., 2019) to address the third research question. Responses to the questionnaire were used to identify recruitment of high-quality participants who would be suitable for further data collection using qualitative methods.

3.3.4 *Qualitative methods*

Participants were selected purposively to provide high information power, related to the specificity of their experiences and knowledge about NGs as demonstrated in the questionnaire (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants to address the first and second research questions by eliciting detailed responses about the impact of NG and the conditions deemed necessary for success of the intervention. This qualitative data provides in-depth, detailed depictions of the topic of interest (McCrudden et al., 2019). Further detail on the methods used is provided in the data collection section of this chapter.

3.4 Ethical considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set out by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). Ethical approval was granted in February 2024 (Appendix D) and amendments to the questionnaire were made and approved by MIREC in April 2024

(Appendix E). In addition, the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) (2019) Code of Professional Ethics was adhered to throughout the research process. Further details and reflections on the ethical considerations associated with this study are available in the Critical Review section in Chapter 4.

3.5 Pilot Studies

The researcher engaged in several strategies to increase the validity and reliability of the current research study. A pilot study was undertaken in April 2024. The draft questionnaire and draft interview schedule (Appendix E) were piloted with representative sample of two qualified NP's (one SNA and one teacher), both with experience of working in an NG in an Irish primary school. Feedback was sought on topics relating to feasibility, accessibility, acceptability and interview style, with the intention of refining the instruments and process to enhance the quality of the collected data (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Participants were asked if the research tools facilitated expression of their perspectives, views, and reflections. This valuable feedback was used to refine and adjust the data collection instruments. Suggested changes were integrated into the final measures by adjusting questions in the interview schedule to enable further reflections from participants on the topic. An extract from the research journal is provided in Appendix G with further details on this process.

3.6 Sample

3.6.1 *Sampling strategy*

Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study to recruit a specific population of NPs in order to address the research questions. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that is appropriate for use with small-scale qualitative or mixed-methods research studies that aim to develop rich, detailed and contextualised insights about a particular phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is acknowledged that non-probability sampling methods are limited in terms of generalizability of results, and may be prone to some bias (Mertens, 2015). In this way self-reported data can be subjective and unreliable (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Similarly, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, leading respondents to provide answers that are perceived to be more socially agreeable, rather than truthful. Despite these

limitations, this approach was the most suitable way of recruiting knowledgeable participants with expertise on current approaches, practices and conditions necessary to support children in NGs in Irish primary schools. Chapter 4 provides further details regarding the risk of bias in the current study.

3.6.2 Quantitative sample

The quantitative online questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms, and a link was sent to 104 primary schools with a NG via email. 61 respondents (N=61) completed the questionnaire and provided information about the current practices in their NG. The inclusion criteria for questionnaire participants was NPs with experience of working in a NG in an Irish primary school for at least one school term. Those who volunteered for interview were contacted in a follow-up email.

3.6.3 Qualitative Sample

Interview participants were selected based on their questionnaire responses to ensure they worked in a Nurture Group (NG) that adhered to the NG principles (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) and aligned with the NG models described by Cooper & Whitebread (2007). A total of 11 participants took part in semi-structured interviews between May and October 2024 (Table 3.2). All participants had experience working as an NP for at least one school term and by chance, they had all been involved in establishing the NG in their school. Participants included two SNAs and seven teachers currently working in the NG, and one teacher and one school principal who had previously been in the NG. Two participants were from the same school, one was the current NG teacher, while the other was the school principal, who had previously worked in the NG when the NG teacher was absent for maternity leave. The NPs had varying levels of experience, ranging from 2 to 25 years working in schools. All of the teachers had completed a degree in primary teacher training, and all NPs had completed specific NG training with Nurturing Schools Ireland or Nurture UK. Five participants had completed further training and studies in relevant areas such as trauma-informed teaching, emotion coaching and Restorative Practice.

The schools varied in size, from approximately 110 to 800 students, and were located in both rural and urban areas across the Republic of Ireland. Eight were designated as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and three schools had Autism classes. Five schools had a large number of pupils from diverse groups such as the Traveller and Roma communities, students with English as an Additional Language (EAL), and refugees from Ukraine and other countries. Five NGs were full-time and six were part-time, catering to different age groups, with sessions structured around small groups and one-on-one support. The length of NG implementation varied, with some in place for a few months and others for up to seven years.

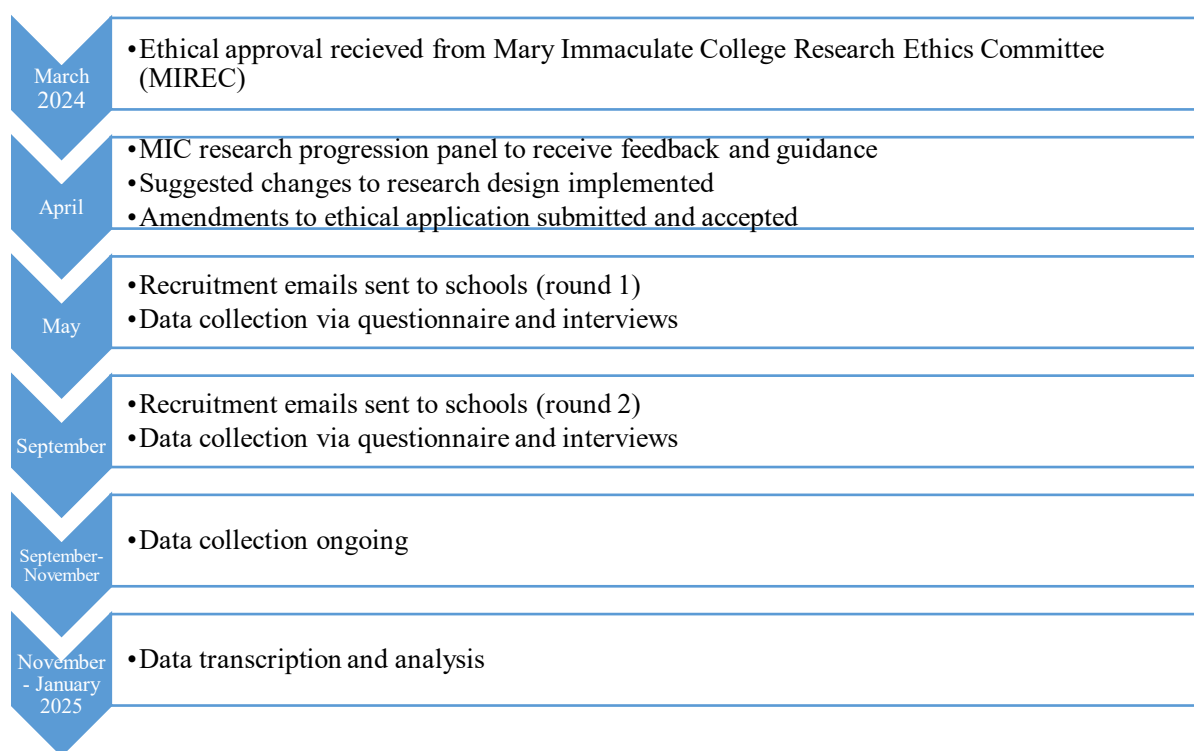
Table 3.2 *Interview Participant Information*

Pseudonym / Gender	Job role	Time as Nurture Practitioner	NG model	School type	DEIS status
Sarah (F)	NG teacher & Deputy Principal	6 months	Part-time	Mixed with special classes	DEIS rural
Tom (M)	NG teacher and Deputy Principal	2 years	Full-time	Mixed	DEIS band 2
Maeve (F)	NG teacher	3 years	Part-time	Single sex junior school	DEIS band 1
Maura (F)	NG teacher & school principal	3 years	Part-time	Single sex junior school	DEIS band 1
Kim (F)	NG teacher	1 year	Part-time	Mixed	No
Alice (F)	NG teacher	1 year	Part-time	Mixed with special classes	No
Lauren (F)	NG teacher	3 years	Full time	Mixed to 1 st class, single sex from 2 nd -6 th class	DEIS band 1
Remi (F)	NG SNA	3 years	Part-time	Mixed	No
Emma (F)	NG Teacher	4 years	Full-time	Mixed	Deis band 1
Caroline (F)	NG Teacher	7 years	Full-time	Mixed	Deis band 1
Brenda (F)	NG SNA	3 years	Full-time	Single sex school with special classes	Deis band 1

3.7 Procedure

A timeline of the research process is shown in Figure 3.2. Data collection was undertaken over a seven month period, from May to November 2024. Data was collected using the concurrent embedded strategy, with both quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously (Creswell, 2009). The questionnaire was circulated using Google Forms and the semi-structured interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams.

Figure 3.2: *Timeline of the research process*



In the first instance, a total 104 primary schools with a NG were identified. In the absence of any official guidance for NG provision from the Department of Education, or any official data pertaining to the numbers or locations of NG's in Irish primary schools, NGs were identified by internet searches for primary schools that made reference to their NG on the school website. A total of 87 schools were identified in this way, and an additional 17 primary schools were identified from the list of participating schools on the website of the Educate Together Nurture Programme. In this way, a total of 104 NGs were identified.

Recruitment took place over two time points. In May 2024, 45 NGs were contacted, but a low response rate was recorded (n=16). This was considered to be due to a busy time in the school calendar and the summer break in July and August. Therefore, the recruitment email was circulated to these schools for a second time in September 2024. The recruitment email was also sent to an additional 59 schools that had been identified. The second recruitment phase returned 45 responses. A total of 61 responses (N=61) were returned.

A recruitment email (Appendix H) was emailed to the school using the email address on the school website, outlining details of the study. This email contained a link to the online questionnaire and an attachment with the advertisement (Appendix I) and participant information sheet (Appendix J) outlining the aims of the study and details of participant involvement. Due to the school holidays, there was a low response rate during July and August, so

Signed consent was not required for those who completed the questionnaire because consent was implied by participating (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020), which is deemed to be appropriate for low-risk research (Lancaster University, 2023). However, it is important that participants are provided with written information detailing the background and aims of the study and participant requirements. Therefore, the participant information sheet was provided by email as outlined above, and also included in the introduction to the questionnaire. The information letter outlined the background and aims of the study, participant involvement, right to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality, data retention and dissemination of the research. Participants were reminded that consent was implied by completing the questionnaire. Those who were interested in taking part in a semi-structured interview were asked to provide their email address at the end of the questionnaire. A follow-up email was then sent to arrange a suitable time and date for interview. Prior to the interview, signed consent forms were collected from all participants (Appendix K).

3.8 Data Collection and Measures

The online questionnaire (Appendix C) was used to collect quantitative information, while the semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. The online questionnaire and interview schedule (Appendix L) were developed to facilitate a detailed

examination of current approaches and practices in NGs in Irish schools. Participants were informed of the time frame for the questionnaire (5 to 10 minutes) and the interview (30 to 45 minutes) prior to taking part.

3.8.1 Quantitative Questionnaire

The online questionnaire comprised 38 closed questions, mostly requiring a yes/ no response, and was designed to gather demographic information about NG features and characteristics. As identified by Cooper & Whitebread (2007), some groups bear the name ‘NG’, or claim to be variants on the NG concept, but do not align with the organisational principles of classic and new variant NGs. Due to the lack of guidance or information available from the Department of Education, it was necessary to devise a system to identify NGs that adhere to the accepted principles and organisational features. To this end, the questionnaire was designed based on a set of quality criteria outlined by Nurture UK (2022) (Appendix B). The information gathered was analysed to identify similarities, differences, and patterns in common conditions and practices. Participants were not asked to provide any identifying information, and the data collected was anonymous.

3.8.2 Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are an organised approach that allows for flexibility to gather individual perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This flexibility in approach also allows for unanticipated views and opinions to emerge (Breakwell et al., 2012). The interview schedule was developed and reviewed in consultation with the researcher’s supervisor and at the researcher’s Progression Panel in April 2024. The initial questions were general to facilitate rapport building (Braun & Clarke, 2013), followed by the main section of the interview which consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection and expression of perspectives and beliefs (Breakwell et al., 2012). Participants were encouraged to provide specific examples of practices and approaches where possible, to facilitate a deeper understanding. The interview concluded with ‘clean-up’ questions, to allow participants the opportunity to share anything that had not previously been discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Interviews lasted 35-50 minutes in length and were held via Microsoft Teams. Using the built-in software in Microsoft Teams (MT), all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Online videoconferencing platforms such as MT and Zoom are a highly satisfactory tool for qualitative data collection, due to ease of use, cost-effectiveness and security features (Archibald et al., 2019). The recordings and transcriptions were stored on the researchers password-protected laptop. The transcriptions were anonymised by removing names of people or places, and the researcher reviewed and edited the transcriptions using the audio recordings for accuracy. Subsequently, all original recordings and transcripts were deleted. The anonymised data was stored on the researcher's password-protected laptop.

3.9 Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods design, with qualitative and quantitative data collected for analysis.

3.9.1 *Quantitative Data Analysis*

The online questionnaire data was analysed using the built-in descriptive statistics software in Google Forms. The use of descriptive statistics enabled the identification of characteristics of the sample by providing an analysis and summary of common patterns, similarities and differences in the data (Mertens, 2015). Analysis provided a compelling overview of common characteristics in Irish NGOs. This also fed into the analysis of the qualitative interviews by providing a benchmark for the recruitment of knowledgeable participants and a rich contextual background for analysis of the interview data.

3.9.2 *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Interview data was analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-step Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). This framework provides a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data sets, and is described as a theoretically flexible approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA emphasises researcher reflexivity as the process and practice of critically reflecting on how assumptions, design choices and positionality within the data influence analysis, process and results. This aligns with the interpretivist epistemological position, which acknowledges the researcher's role in the co-construction and interpretation of meaning

throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In the current study, an inductive approach was taken to answer the research questions, enabling the generation of codes and themes that are grounded in the data. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that even inductive RTA is inescapably influenced and shaped by the researcher’s position and assumptions. The six phases of RTA were followed as set out by Braun and Clarke (2021) to guide data analysis, as detailed in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: *Process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the dataset	Interview transcripts were read and reviewed alongside audio recordings to check for accuracy. Transcripts were read several times for familiarity and to begin the process of immersion in the data. An annotated sample interview transcript is available in Appendix M. Initial notes, reflections and insights relating to each data item and the data set as a whole were recorded (see sample in Appendix N) and a number of questions suggested by Braun & Clarke (2021) were used at this stage to support critical engagement with the data.
Phase 2: Coding	The dataset was then worked through in a systematic and rigorous way to identify meaningful segments of data, which were then labelled. NVivo data management software (QSR International, 2022) was used to label and organise the data using codes. The codes created at this stage ranged in meaning from those at a semantic level to more conceptual, latent meanings. During the final step of this phase, all code labels were collated and relevant data compiled for each data set. A sample of the list of codes generated and the organisation of these is shown in Appendix O.
Phase 3: Generating initial themes	Next, patterns of shared meaning were identified across the dataset. Clusters of codes with a shared core idea or concept were constructed within the data. This process grouped the codes into blocks of broad shared meaning with a distinct central organising concept. Initially, this process was carried out using NVivo software to organise codes into different themes, however, upon reflection by the researcher it was decided to move to a manual method, grouping together codes into initial themes by hand. While NVivo enables efficiency, some research cautions that it may distract from thematic depth (Mattimoe et al., 2021). The use of both electronic and paper processes in this study enabled the researcher to physically group the codes together by hand. This supported theme development by enabling a deeper sense of how the codes fit together into meaningful themes and facilitated the dataset to be viewed as a whole. In this way, the use of both electronic and paper processes increased immersion in the data and was conducive to the recursive process of theme generation as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2021).

This process was supported by generation of thematic maps to see how codes and themes related to one another (Appendix P). To support this process the researcher also began to write a draft of the initial thematic findings at this stage.

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes Themes were reviewed and refined according to the dataset as a whole, and all codes and themes considered for conceptual depth. Some themes were merged or adjusted to ensure they highlighted the most important patterns of shared meaning in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). At this stage, the researcher identified the boundaries and central organising concept of each theme and made necessary revisions according to the quality of data in each. Careful consideration was given to the patterning of themes and how to organise these into sub-themes and over-arching themes.

Phase 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes Subsequently, the analysis as a whole was fine-tuned to make each theme as precise as possible and to consider how each of the overarching themes, and sub-themes uniquely contributed to the overall analysis. The quality and scope of each theme was validated and explored further to illustrate the richness and diversity of the data. As part of this process, an informative name for each theme was generated, and a thematic map used to consider how the themes could best tell the story of this dataset.

Phase 6: Write up Although the analytic writing process started as soon as the initial themes were generated, the final stage involved pulling together the themes to communicate the findings in a meaningful way, whilst being mindful of the researcher's position within the data. This stage also involved editing and reviewing the analysis to provide a coherent narrative in relation to the research questions.

3.10 Researcher Reflexivity

The process of knowledge creation through qualitative research is heavily influenced by the positionality of the researcher within the data, and researcher reflexivity is increasingly recognised as an essential element in this process (Berger, 2015). The process of reflexivity requires the researcher to intentionally engage with understanding and acknowledging their beliefs, values, assumptions, morals and biases (Braun & Clarke, 2019b), and these should be consistently and transparently acknowledged throughout the process. Doing so enables the researcher to thoughtfully and reflectively engage with the data and analytic process (Braun &

Clarke, 2019b). In the current study, the researcher was cognisant of this and made use of field notes (Appendix N) and reflexive journalling (Appendix Q) as measures to engage in reflexivity at every stage of the research process (Neuman, 2011). Further details of the reflexive process are outlined in Chapter 4.

3.11 Findings

Key findings from the data analysis will be presented in this section. As previously outlined, the qualitative interview data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while the quantitative questionnaire data was analysed using Google Forms descriptive statistics software to identify patterns and divergences in the data. The findings of the quantitative data results, will be described and outlined followed by the qualitative data analysis. The aim of the current study is to explore the perceptions of NPs and as such, the findings are subjective in nature. The qualitative data included just 11 participants from ten NGs. This small sample size, and the self-selecting sampling strategy used means that caution must be taken regarding the generalisability of the findings. Further details regarding participant bias and generalisability of results are outlined in section 4.2.6.

3.12 Quantitative Data Results

Quantitative data was designed to gather information regarding common characteristics and practices in Irish NGs to address the third research question of the current study. The questionnaire was completed by 61 NPs (N=61), and analysed for descriptive statistics with the aim of providing an overview of NG characteristics and common practice, results are shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Questionnaire Responses

Questions (N=61)	% Yes	% No
1. Is your nurture group referenced in some school policies? e.g. Wellbeing, behaviour, anti-bullying, inclusion, SEN	80.3 %	19.7
2. Does your school have a specific nurture group policy?	21.3 %	78.7%
3. Are there opportunities for mainstream staff to be involved in nurture activities?	77 %	23 %
4. Are parents and caregivers are regularly invited to join in for nurture group activities?	19.7 %	80.3%
5. Does your Nurture Group support parents and caregivers to develop appropriate management and interaction strategies?	36.1%	63.9%
6. Do the staff in your Nurture Group liaise with additional agencies where appropriate? e.g. NEPS, Tusla, NCSE	77%	23%
7. Is your school's NEPS psychologist involved in the Nurture Group? (e.g. advising, providing guidance or training)	31.1%	68.9%
8. Is the nurture group run for a minimum of 18 hours weekly with the same core group of children?	44.3%	55.7%
9. Do the children attending your nurture group remain members of a mainstream class?	100%	
10. Do most children attend the group for between two and four terms, depending on their individual needs?	93.4%	6.6%
11. Is the Boxall Profile assessment used to identify children for nurture group?	93.4%	6.6%
12. Is the Boxall Profile used to inform individual goals or student support plans?	91.8%	8.2%
13. Are regular assessments completed to monitor children's progress in Nurture?	77 % Boxall profile 14.8 % Other assessments	8.2%
14. Does the Nurture room provide an environment that incorporates aspects of both home and school?	95.1%	4.9%
15. Is a domestic setting provided with food and comfortable furniture?	98.4%	1.6%
16. Is a range of equipment for play and creative expression available?	100%	0%
17. Are predictable daily routines in place?	98.4%	1.6%
18. Do the children engage in everyday routines of tidying up, sorting, putting away?	100%	
19. Do nurture activities, resources and routines allow for frequent informal reinforcement of basic literacy and maths skills?	82%	18%
20. Are simple changes to routine planned for and introduced to accustom children to change?	88.5%	11.5%
21. Are plans in place to support children's reintegration to the mainstream class?	75.4%	24.6%
22. Are individual targets set for each child and reviewed regularly?	91.8%	8.2%
23. Does nurture group planning include both adult and child led activities?	98.4%	1.6%
24. Do the mainstream and nurture staff engage in joint planning as needed?	63.9%	36.1%
25. Do the adults working in the nurture group model positive relationships and interactions with one another?	96.7%	3.3%

26. Do the adults intentionally model appropriate non-verbal communication such as eye contact, facial expressions and tone of voice?	91.8%	8.2%
27. Are there opportunities for adults and children to share in reciprocal activities such as play, having meals, sharing books and reading aloud together?	77%	23%
28. Is Nurture group time used for children to talk about events and feelings?	91.8%	8.2%
29. Are words for emotions and feelings explicitly taught to the children in nurture group?	98.4%	1.6%
30. Do staff support children to regulate their emotional responses?	100%	
31. Are the school routines, rules and social behaviours explicitly taught to the children in nurture group?	82%	18%
32. Are play activities provided at the child's current developmental level? (this may be different to their chronological age)	100%	
33. Do the adults engage children in extended conversations, recalling, and planning for tomorrow?	80.3%	19.7 %
34. How many adults work in your nurture group?	2 adults	57.4 %
	1 adult	36.1 %
	3 or more	6.6 %
35. Have the nurture staff completed received specific Nurture Group training?	Both	75.4 %
	One	19.7 %
	None	4.9 %
36. The Nurture Group is:	Full time	44.3 %
	Part-time	55.7%
37. How many children in total currently attend the nurture group?	0-6 children	13.1%
	6-12 children	24.6%
	12+ children	62.3%
38. If part time, how many in each group?	0-6 children	75.4%
	6-12 children	11.5%
	12+ children	13.1%

Current findings indicate that a significant majority (80.3%) of the surveyed NGs are referenced in school policies, such as Wellbeing, Behaviour or Inclusion policies, though only 21.3% of schools have a specific Nurture policy. Amongst the surveyed NGs, there is substantial involvement from mainstream staff in nurture activities (77%), but engagement with parents remains low, with only 19.7% of NGs regularly inviting parents or caregivers to participate. Moreover, less than half (36.1%) of these NGs provide direct support to parents and caregivers for developing management and interaction strategies, though many NGs (77%) liaise with external agencies such as Tusla. However, just 31.1% receive direct involvement from their school's NEPS psychologists.

A majority (55.7%) of surveyed NGs are part-time and most run groups of six or less (75.4%). Just 44.3% are run with the same core group of children for a minimum of 18 hours weekly. Many (62.3%) have 12 or more children attending on a part-time basis. Just over half of NGs are staffed by two adults (57.4%), with 75.4% of staff completing specific nurture training. However, over a third operate with only one adult (36.1%), and 4.9% of NGs are run by staff with no specific training on the nurture approach. The Boxall Profile is widely used for both identifying children (93.4%), setting individual goals (91.8%) and monitoring children's progress (77%). Children typically remain part of their mainstream class (100%) and attend NG for two to four terms (93.4%). Most NGs plan for children's gradual reintegration into mainstream classes (75.4%).

Responses highlight commitment to creating a specific NG environment, with 95.1% incorporating elements of both home and school in the physical environment. Nearly all groups provide a domestic setting with food and comfortable furniture (98.4%) and opportunities for children to practice simple routines for putting away and tidying up (100%). Predictable daily routines are common (98.4%) and a significant majority (88.5%) plan for changes to routines to accustom children to change.

The vast majority of surveyed NGs provide opportunities for both child- and adult-led approaches (98.4%). The role of play is emphasised, with 100% providing play activities appropriate for the children's developmental stage and toys and play equipment widely available. Reciprocal activities between children and adults such as play, sharing meals, and reading books are common (77%) and NG activities allow for frequent reinforcement of literacy or numeracy

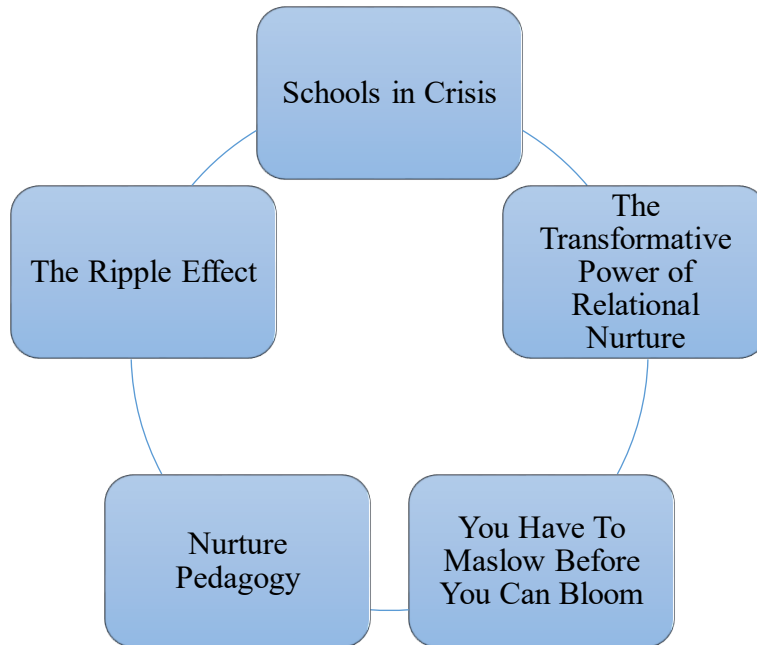
skills (82%). Adults in the surveyed NGs play a critical role in modelling positive relationships and communication, with 96.7% intentionally modelling appropriate interactions. A significant majority (91.8%) also intentionally demonstrate non-verbal communication such as eye contact, facial expressions and tone of voice. Children are encouraged to practice communication skills by engaging in extended conversations with adults (80.3%) and to talk about events and feelings (91.8%). Activities focus on emotional regulation, with 100% of staff supporting children in this area and explicitly teaching words for emotions (98.4%). School rules and social behaviours are explicitly taught in many cases (82%).

In summary, notable findings from the quantitative data demonstrate common characteristics including the use of the Boxall Profile assessment, focus on routines, consistency and language development. Other aspects demonstrate that NGs in the ROI are less closely aligned with accepted NG conditions, such as NP training and staffing, and the amount of contact time children have with NG settings. This quantitative data provides valuable and unique insights into NG structures and practices. It represents the first attempt to systematically collect, collate and analyse this information from NGs in Ireland and further details are provided in the Discussion section.

3.13 Qualitative Data Results

Five overarching themes were identified during analysis, as shown in Figure 3.3. These themes and relevant sub-themes will be described and discussed. As stated above, these findings indicate the perceptions of self-selecting participants who are currently involved with NGs and therefore provide a subjective view of the research area, therefore the reader is cautioned not to assume generalisability of these findings.

Figure 3.3 *Key Themes*



3.14 Theme 1: Schools in Crisis

This theme centres on an unexpected yet significant finding that emerged from interviews with NPs, who were eager to share the experiences that led to the establishment of the NG in their schools. Although the interview schedule did not include questions on this topic, its consistent emergence across all 11 interviews underscores its importance. Every NP interviewed had played a role in setting up the NG, and their reflections provide crucial insight into NG practices in ROI.

Participants consistently reported a noticeable increase in social, emotional, and behavioural challenges amongst their students in recent years. They described the immense pressure schools faced in addressing these escalating needs, which often exceeded their capacity. Anecdotes described children in extreme distress, displaying physical aggression toward peers and staff, engaging in highly disruptive behaviour, or lacking the skills to function in a traditional classroom setting. These children were not ready to learn. Schools frequently found themselves in crisis, unsure how to handle incidents such as students locking themselves in toilets or destroying classrooms. These accounts reveal a school system stretched to its limits, struggling to manage increasingly difficult behaviours yet determined to find a solution. NPs in this study described feeling at a loss and searching for ways to support children in distress:

“Throwing things across the room, being very defiant. Locking themselves in the toilet, refusing to come out, refusing to engage, using bad language in class” -Alice

“We were doing all that we could at the time in terms of taking them out for breaks and in class support, but just wasn't enough.” – Maeve

The impact of these challenges was keenly felt by both staff and students, and in all eleven schools, the NG was established as a direct response to these urgent needs. Many participants noted that the turning point for introducing NG was the increasing prevalence of physically aggressive behaviour. Participants recalled feeling a responsibility to support children whose behaviours had become increasingly aggressive, violent, and disruptive. The NPs perceived that these behaviours were outward expressions of deeper, unmet needs—signs of

children in crisis. While NPs were committed to supporting these students, many expressed feeling unprepared to address the root causes of their behaviours, which often stemmed from systemic and social challenges within families and communities. Some schools identified specific high-need groups within their student populations.

“He actually had to be restrained, that's how dangerous he was when he started. And after that I think the nurture room might have been set up over him.” – Brenda

“Every behaviour is a form of communication, so we would try to understand what was going on” – Maeve

“With the demographic that we have, that trauma is daily, you know, those children don't stop living in those situations.” - Emma

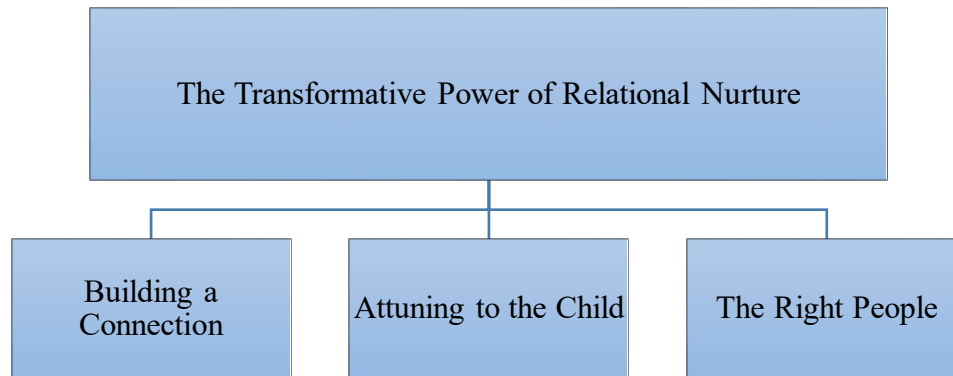
Caroline, the most experienced NPs who was interviewed, explained that over time, the NG intervention helped to reduce the most visible behavioural issues in her school. However, this revealed deeper emotional struggles among students, such as self-harm and depression, which had previously been overshadowed by more disruptive behaviours. Her account reveals layers of crisis, and children expressing their distress in varied ways.

“Girls who are self-harming or maybe feeling low and depressed... they're the ones we had space for then because we had quashed some of the other needs, the ones that were more visible in the school.”

3.15 Theme 2: The Transformative Power of Relational Nurture

This theme describes the distinctive and influential nature of the relationship developed between the NP and child. Participants discussed their perceptions of the nuanced and transformational nature of this bond, and how this was developed over time. Each of the sub-themes shown in Figure 3.4 will be discussed in turn.

Figure 3.4 *Theme 2*



3.15.1 Subtheme 1: Building a Connection

The relationship between NPs and children was perceived to go beyond the typical teacher-student dynamic, acting as a catalyst for change. Participant narratives described this relationship as an emotional and psychological space, fostering a sense of security and belonging, thereby enabling psychological growth and change in the child. This suggests that for these NPs, NG is more than a physical place; it is a psychological and emotional space and a way of being with others.

NPs emphasized the importance of investing themselves personally in the relationship to create a genuine human connection with children in the NG. Sharing their personal and emotional experiences enabled them to build stronger relationships with the students, and breaking down hierarchical barriers in the NG enabled students to see their teacher as a relatable person rather than just an authority figure. In doing so, participants perceived that the relationship was built on trust, empathy and understanding, thereby developing an increased sense of connection and belonging for children who attend NG. Part of this process included self-disclosure and sharing personal anecdotes. It was perceived by NPs that this intentional openness and honesty created an atmosphere where the children could also feel safe to speak openly. The process of investing oneself and bringing one's values and beliefs to the role was construed by participants as a necessary step in the process of relationship formation.

In this way, NPs intentionally and deliberately set about to foster a unique relationship, with an instinctual understanding of the primal need for connection, as expressed in the extracts below:

“We put huge investment into that pairing piece, where you're literally just forming that relationship. And that's us giving part of us to them as much as getting it back from them.” – Caroline

“That would be the main point of nurture, isn't it? We try to be a connection. We try to be a relationship with them, to feel that they belong here.” – Remi

NPs described developing trust through providing a safe, supportive and consistent presence, and being available for the child. This was perceived by participants to help children feel safe, valued, and understood by conveying to the child that they genuinely care for them, advocate for them, and look out for their well-being. It was perceived that feeling seen and supported in this way could have a powerful impact on a child's confidence, engagement, and overall well-being, particularly if they had felt overlooked or disconnected in the past:

“We've really made kind of a big effort to build upon that relationship and to show that we care. like we're constantly telling them that we do care for you. We do have your backs. We will look out for you.” - Tom

“I do think that's the main factor, I think building up that trust, building up that relationship with the child and you're here to listen to them.” – Alice

While talking about their students, NPs used non-judgmental language, indicating acceptance, empathy and unconditional positive regard, despite challenging behaviours. The influence of external perceptions on a child's self-image and the need to shift perspectives of the child and their behaviour were discussed, and NPs described taking action to encourage a more positive view of the child. This shift in mindset was perceived by NPs to support trauma-experienced children to feel less isolated and more understood, as they recognise they are not alone, thereby fostering empathy, connection and resilience. This is encapsulated in Lauren's statement below:

“Just trying to change the mindset, her mindset. And the focus maybe from others of her from the negative to the positive.” – Lauren

3.15.2 Subtheme 2: Attuning to the Child

An essential element of the nurture relationship suggested by NPs to involve recognising, understanding and responding empathically to the children, so that NPs could ‘attune’ to their emotional state, fostering a sense of being seen and feeling safe. This sub-theme encapsulates the ways that NPs described the attunement process and the meanings attached to it. What is striking is that none of these professionals used the language of ‘attunement’, indicating the instinctive nature of these responses to the children’s needs, as articulated by Remi: *“Some need much more time and some need constant nurturing, constant being there”*.

Participants articulated an instinctive, acute awareness of the needs of individuals in the NG and described a continuous intuitive process of tuning into students' needs on an ongoing basis. Their comments highlight the deep care, awareness and responsiveness of their interactions and illustrate their skill in recognising subtle emotional cues and adjusting teaching approaches accordingly. Participants described a constant process of observation and response, receiving cues from the children and responding with acceptance, understanding and empathy:

“It's that human element of looking at them consistently and saying what do they need from me? And I suppose we do that every day, every year, we would do it a million times a day,” -Caroline

This process of attunement and accommodation was perceived by participants to foster a sense of feeling valued, connected, seen and heard and to reinforce that the child’s thoughts, feelings, and preferences matter. Similarly, participants evoked the concept of being psychologically ‘held in mind’; the feeling of being recognised, valued, and considered by another person. In the context of this relationship this was seen by participants to implicitly communicate to the child that they are seen, understood, and important. It was understood that these practices supported children to develop a deeper sense of trust and attachment:

“There are children who sometimes just want to sit close to you, and they would behave better or be calmer, and then there are children who don’t need you...they don't need you near.” – Remi

“When we get to know information about the children and their interests, we’ll plan activities that we think that they will specifically enjoy and tell them we planned this because we thought that you would like this.” Lauren

3.15.3 Subtheme 3: The Right People

When asked about factors contributing to success in the NG, many participants perceived that people working in the NG need to possess a particular set of dispositions. The ‘right people’ were characterised using a combination of personal qualities and relational traits, including patience, persistence, empathy, understanding and a sense of humour. Participants suggested that the ‘right people’ for the job possess an innate ability to build trust, offer unwavering support, and maintain a strong commitment to the well-being of the children. Indeed, to lack these qualities in the position was perceived by participants as potentially damaging or even dangerous, as expressed in Sarah’s comment: *“I mean, the wrong person in nurture will actually do damage.”*

The interview participants in turn self-identified as possessing the ‘right’ set of personal attributes and competencies for the job, distinguishing themselves from mainstream classroom teachers in their focus on belonging, advocacy, and connection. This was illustrated in the shared understanding that behaviours of concern were a way of communicating distress and a need for security and connection. Participants also shared feelings of satisfaction and gratitude for their role as NPs, revealing a sense of symbiosis between child and adult as both began to blossom and flourish as a result of the NG. This shared sense of purpose and dedication was perceived to set the ‘right people’ apart and ensure that the children in their care receive the support, connection, and encouragement they need to thrive. Interestingly, these sentiments co-existed alongside an equally present awareness of the emotional challenges associated with working in the NG. This is illustrated by the quotations below:

“Mainly patience...I think patience in abundance. There does have to be a kind of resilience and stubbornness to making sure you can just stick at it.” – Tom

“You have to be positive, you have to have a good sense of humour.” - Brenda

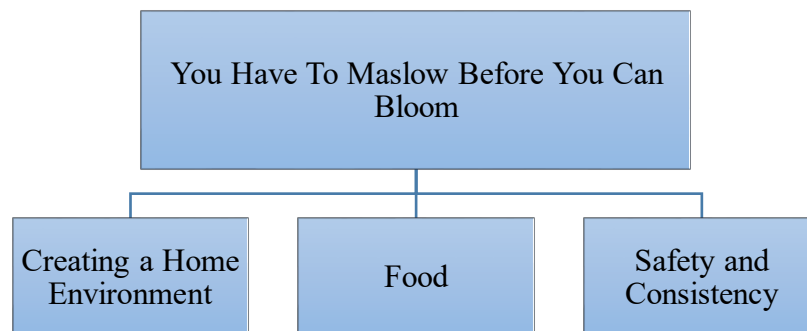
*“We are so lucky, these lives are given to us to make a difference in them, in these lives.”
- Remi*

“It can be quite draining because it does take a lot. Like if someone's upset, it can take a lot out of you for the day.” – Alice

3.16 Theme 3: You Have To Maslow Before You Can Bloom

The children attending NG had often experienced homelessness, food insecurity, family breakdown or substance abuse in their families or communities. Participants suggested that under these circumstances, children’s fundamental human needs for safety, food, shelter, and sleep were not met. Participants perceived that these unmet needs often manifested as challenging behaviours in school and they sought to address these deficiencies in NG by creating a warm, home-like environment that provided comfort, security, and nourishment. In NG these basic needs were prioritised ahead of formal learning, as expressed in Caroline’s observation: *“It’s that whole idea of Maslow before Bloom”*. Figure 3.5 shows the subthemes to be discussed.

Figure 3.5: *Theme 3*



3.16.1 Subtheme 1: Creating a Home Environment

Establishing a designated space for these needs to be met was perceived to be essential. The physical environment and furnishings of the NG were carefully chosen to replicate a home environment. A sense of comfort and homeliness was created using soft furnishings, and participants described that they displayed framed photos of the children in the room. This was perceived by participants to support children's sense of ownership and belonging in the NG space. The participants identified that the home-like environment supported children's basic needs for shelter, warmth and safety and provided a more relaxed environment for learning. The physical need for sleep and rest was also met in this space, with tents, couches, cushions and blankets provided. For some, the home-like environment also provided a setting for modelling and practicing social aspects of family life, as discussed in the following subtheme, Food.

“In nurture, it resembles the family home. Their photos are on the wall, it's a kitchen table, it's a safe place. The learning is happening, but there's a different environment around them, it's not as daunting and just suits certain kids much more” – Maeve

“There's pictures on the walls, and curtains, lamps and fairy lights and throws and cushions, and sofas and a play area kitchen. You know, it's all those homely kind of aspects” - Caroline

“He used not get very much sleep at night and he would come in to us and sleep for 6 hours.” – Brenda

“The SNA spent the whole day with him lying on the couch with the blanket because he hadn't slept.” – Maura

3.16.2 Subtheme 2: Food

The vital role of food in NG was consistently emphasised by all participants, who were acutely aware that some children arrived at school unfed and hungry. Participants noted that for children experiencing food insecurity, the assurance of regular meals may have helped them feel more comfortable and secure in school. Mealtime routines and the act of providing food were seen by NG staff as essential, not only for meeting children's physical needs but also for

fostering comfort, connection, and socialisation. Many participants recognised the importance of these shared experiences for children to learn how to take part in communal meals, such as sitting at a table with others, sharing food, serving one another, and making polite requests. Beyond social development, shared mealtimes may also play a crucial role in language and communication skill development. The simple practice of sitting together for a meal enabled children to practice reciprocal conversations, develop speaking and listening skills, and build relationships with both peers and adults. Through these interactions, NPs felt that children not only gain essential vocabulary but also develop foundational social and behavioural skills necessary for successful participation in school life.

“One child would have gone home and all he would have got to eat at home was a pot noodle” - Brenda

“Just knowing that that option is there and that they can have food, I think has made a huge impact”-Kim

“All the conversation happens around us, around the table and around the tea and the toast.” -Maeve

3.16.3 Subtheme 3: Safety and Consistency

The theme of safety was suggested by NPs as a fundamental aspect of the NG experience. Participants felt that for children to be open to learning, they first needed to feel safe and secure in school. To achieve this, NPs prioritised consistency, calm communication, and an open-door approach, ensuring children felt heard, supported, and respected. They endeavoured to cultivate a sense of ‘felt safety’ through conveying empathy and understanding in their interactions with students. The significance of a safe physical and emotional climate in the NG was identified, who observed that children needed predictability and consistency to foster a sense of security in the space. This was supported by the intentional design of a low-demand space where children could find peace and privacy, away from the demands of the classroom. Similarly, the NG was repeatedly described as a safe haven, a space where children could retreat when feeling upset, angry, or overwhelmed.

“I think there needs to be a place in a school where a child can feel safe” – Brenda

“Many of them do not feel safe and we didn't know that. It's not just physically safe, it's emotionally safe.” – Remi

This sense of security and safety was perceived to be further bolstered by consistent, predictable routines and approaches in the NG. Participants emphasised the importance of structure and organisation, which was provided through clearly defined weekly and daily schedules, and communicated to students using visual timetables and charts. These structured approaches were perceived to enhance children’s sense of predictability and emotional security, ultimately supporting their well-being and promoting positive behaviour in school. NPs noted that children had expressed their appreciation of the clear NG routines and expectations, recognising the benefits of having a clear timetable to help them feel organised and calm.

“It's definitely the routine, it's the comfort, the security, knowing what's going to happen next and the expectations” – Maeve

“I have a visual timetable for each group, and we talk through what our session is going to look like, and I find now they want that to happen” – Kim

In addition to NG-specific routines, participants highlighted the significance of broader school structures, including policies, rules, and procedures that provided a crucial framework for NG staff to establish stability and consistency. The NG was seen as playing a vital role in reinforcing school-wide behavioral expectations, helping children navigate and adhere to school rules in a safe and supportive environment. Participants consistently framed NG as a structuring element in these children’s school lives and this was seen to have a positive effect on their emotional wellbeing. NG was used to provide security, support and connection for students during times of transition, such as through ‘soft start’ or ‘breakfast club’, or preparing students

for other key life transitions such as moving from junior to senior school, or from primary to secondary school.

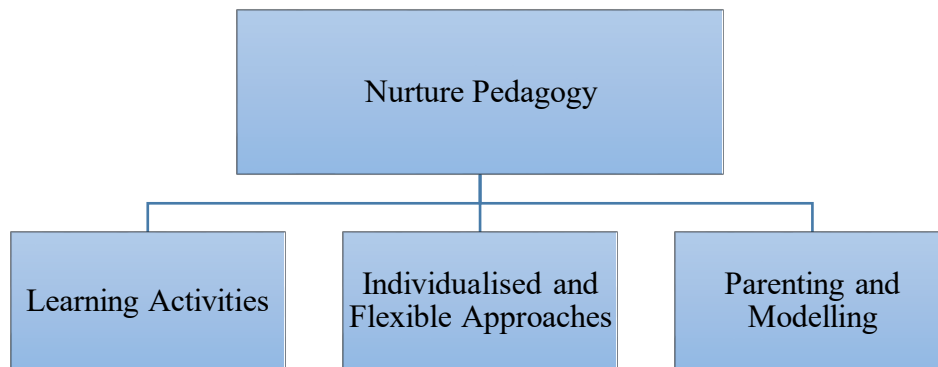
“They're happier in school now because they understand what they need to do, that there's a bit more structure to it.” – Tom

“They come in here first thing in the morning and just really helps with that transition into school. It kind of sets them up for the day.” – Maeve

3.17 Theme 4: Nurture Pedagogy

A common insight expressed by interview participants was that successful NG intervention extends far beyond a series of daily activities or tasks. Nonetheless, several commonly used approaches and strategies were shared, demonstrating a strong emphasis on creativity, communication, and social-emotional well-being in NG activities. The three subthemes shown in Figure 3.6 will be discussed in relation to this theme.

Figure 3.6: *Theme 4*



3.17.1 Subtheme 1: Learning Activities

In line with the NG Principles (Figure 2.1), communication skills were emphasised as a core objective. This included explicit teaching of skills to speak and listen effectively, ask and answer questions appropriately in social settings, and non-verbal communication skills such as

eye contact. Beyond explicit instruction, NG sessions aimed to provide a safe and supportive space where children could freely share their thoughts, reflect, feel heard and seen, and build meaningful connections. NG activities were also intentionally structured to help children develop behaviours for learning. Skills such as attention, concentration, and active listening were fostered through playful and interactive methods, including clapping games, listening exercises and shared reading. These elements were seen by participants as integral to behaviour change, helping children develop new ways of thinking and behaving, enhancing their ability to engage in school and social interactions.

“What we found made a big difference is giving them an opportunity and space to be able to talk and share their interests, frustrations, or events” – Tom

“We've worked a lot on listening, asking questions, follow-up questions to people's news,” – Alice

Explicit teaching of emotional literacy skills and understanding was also highlighted by many participants, who described that children were supported to recognise and name different emotions, understand bodily sensations, and express their feelings in a healthy manner. NG sessions often focused on explicit teaching of self-regulation strategies, using developmentally appropriate visual and non-verbal resources such as emotional check-in charts and well-known programmes such as *Zones of Regulation*. Participants observed strong engagement in these activities and noted that some children developed emotional literacy skills quite rapidly. Activities designed to enhance emotional well-being, confidence, and self-esteem, such as gratitude practices, affirmations, and emotional coping strategies were widely used. Mindfulness activities were among the most popular strategies, with seven participants describing the use of relaxation and mindfulness techniques to support regulation in NG.

Play was emphasised as a powerful tool for fostering enjoyment, social bonds and providing essential childhood experiences. Participants discussed providing sensory play, using natural materials such as water, sand, and soil in the NG. Others used structured play, such as board games and card games, to promote skills like turn-taking, cooperation, and coping with the

emotions of winning and losing. Creative activities such as art, music, gardening, and baking were widely used and perceived to have therapeutic benefits. These activities not only encouraged self-expression but also supported emotional and social growth in a meaningful way.

“I have a tuff tray with sand, shovels and buckets and they build sandcastles and different things, they love that. The sensory play changes throughout the year, it could be water play or lentils or beads” – Kim

“We do lots of emphasis on board games, baking, collaborative activities, sensory stuff, art, Lego” -Caroline.

3.17.2 Subtheme 2: Individualised and Flexible Approaches

When planning NG activities, participants used individualised approaches intended to provide children with differentiated supports and developmentally appropriate tasks. NPs demonstrated skill in identifying children’s areas of strength, need, and interest, and they used this information to provide individualised learning experiences for groups or individuals. Similarly, where a developmental gap had been identified, key social, communication or emotional skills that had not been learned at an earlier stage could be targeted. It was understood that some children’s social circumstances meant they had missed out on key life experiences. Where possible, these experiences were gently and sensitively made available, as illustrated in the following comments:

“I would have some kids in sixth class sitting playing with a dolls house. Because that key skill hadn’t been met, it hadn’t been learned.” – Emma

“Last year we did a big birthday party because some children had never been at a birthday party in their whole life. So we had a big birthday party for all of us, and we played the typical birthday party games...It was amazing.” - Remi

Participants repeatedly highlighted the significance of carefully considering group dynamics, observing that peer interactions could sometimes support or hinder progress. A

flexible and responsive approach was emphasised, ensuring that the NG timetable and session content were tailored to meet the unique needs of both the school and the children. In some cases, children attended for short periods or on a variable basis, which is inconsistent with the accepted models of NG. Nonetheless, the adaptability of NG intervention was perceived to enable a dynamic response to emerging needs across the school or for individual students—something classroom teachers often could not do within a rigid structure. This autonomy in shaping the intervention was valued by participants, who expressed satisfaction in their ability to adjust their approach as needed:

“It just really depends on what the needs are, so our timetables are redone several times during the year.” – Caroline

“Some children [attend] for coming into school, others might join in for yoga, other children come down for the tea and toast in the morning.” – Sarah

“Something I really enjoyed is that I felt I had a lot of freedom in that, and that it isn't actually very prescriptive” – Lauren

3.17.3 Subtheme 3: Parenting and Modelling

This key finding illustrates the overlap between the role of NP and parent, and recognises that the dynamics in NG involve merging personal and professional characteristics. Participants revealed a widely-held perception that their role involves acting as a pseudo-parent, by ensuring a child's well-being, acting as a role model and fostering self-care skills. This blending of professional and parental roles emerged as NPs described an instinctual understanding of what the children needed, comparing this intuitive approach to their own experiences of parenting. They pointed out that both roles meet children's needs through support, comfort, and guidance.

“When we started nurture we weren't trained for so many things, so when they brought up something we reacted or answered as a Mom would, what I would have said to my children” – Remi

“You're showing up every day and providing a parental experience for the kids” - Caroline

Furthermore, many participants discussed their role in modelling healthy relationships, friendships, and social interactions within the NG, particularly in handling conflict resolution and reinforcing positive ways of relating to others. NPs were acutely aware of their responsibility to model positive relationship dynamics between adults and children, but also between themselves as colleagues. The presence of two adults in NG facilitated demonstration of partnerships, conversations, active listening, and conflict resolution—all critical social skills for children to observe and adopt. These adult interactions were identified as crucial elements of social learning and emphasised the need for two adults in the NG to provide a consistent and unified approach, like that of two parents. In many cases, NG success was attributed to the dynamic between the two NPs, represented through mutual respect, cooperation, and nurturing behaviours. Some participants observed that children quickly absorbed these modelled behaviours and began incorporating them into their social interactions. Tom, a male NP working alongside a female colleague, remarked on his role in demonstrating healthy relationship dynamics and challenging outdated gender stereotypes about male and female roles in caregiving and emotional support. His reflections highlight the significance of male role models in providing nurture, warmth, and care, and challenging traditional societal norms.

“For a lot of these children that come to nurture, they might not see a true friendship too often, or connection, or what it's like to make someone a cup of tea and look after someone” – Maeve

“I suppose they may have never seen those behaviours modelled for them before, and now they're starting to use them independently, which is really nice.” - Kim

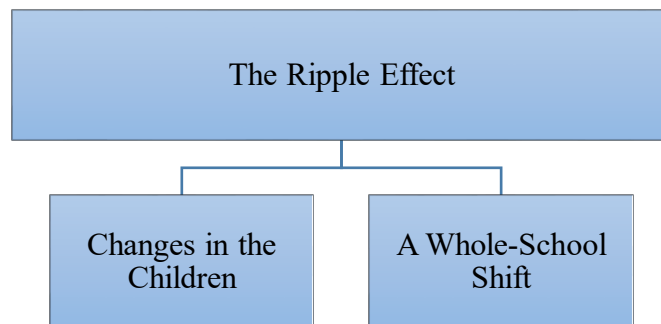
“Their understanding of a relationship between a male and a female is very limited, so the fact that there's two of us in the room, they have a male role model, they have a female role model, and the discussion between the two of us, and it's being seen as equals” - Tom

3.18 Theme 5: The Ripple Effect

This theme and related subthemes (Figure 3.7) describes the wider impact of NG, described by participants as beginning with the individual child and slowly rippling out to effect positive change across the wider system surrounding the child.

“In taking out that one child, that has a huge impact on not just the child, the class, the school and the teacher, but it's also the home life and the parents and so on.” -Tom

Figure 3.7: Theme 5



3.18.1 Subtheme 1: Changes in the Children

Participants reported significant improvements in the children’s behaviour as well as social and emotional development. Some children responded to the intervention quickly, within weeks, while for others, change occurred more gradually, but within the typical timeframe of two to four terms. Children’s attitudes to school were widely perceived to be more positive, with increased enthusiasm and enjoyment following NG attendance. Emma recalled some positive comments from children, articulating positive changes for their wellbeing:

“Hearing the children say, this is my favourite part of the day, hearing the children say, I can be really angry and then I come out of the nurture room and I feel nice and calm.” - Emma

Beyond NG sessions, NPs felt that this increased enthusiasm extended to school life as a whole, and some NPs recalled parents who had noticed a shift in their children's attitudes toward

school. NPs observed that children who had previously struggled with attendance became more engaged and willing to participate in school life. Several participants felt that NG played a pivotal role in helping children reintegrate into school routines following a period of absence or school reluctance. In addition to improved attendance, children demonstrated greater ability to focus, concentrate, and engage in learning, as these skills transferred from NG to the classroom. Some perceived that NG provided the experience of feeling seen, heard and ‘attended to’, which enabled children to engage more effectively in class. Participants reported that in their experience the children developed better listening and concentration skills, which were perceived to ultimately support academic progress in areas such as literacy and language:

“We did have school refusal, all that has stopped...He has made progress in leaps and bounds in every aspect of his learning. He's coming into school every day, his oral language has improved dramatically.” -Maeve

“His Mum has said he's happy in school, he enjoys school, he wants to learn, he wants to come into school.” - Tom

“They've been heard and listened to, and then they can go back in and be ready to engage with Maths or Gaelige or whichever subject they have. – Alice

Several participants perceived that children’s confidence and self-esteem markedly improved following their time in NG, enabling them to speak more positively about themselves and become more comfortable socialising with peers. Explicit teaching of social skills such as turn-taking was perceived to support children in playing cooperatively and sustaining friendships with peers. Similarly, children were reported to have increased capacity for emotional regulation and impulse control, and NPs described children beginning to self-monitor their behaviour and make socially appropriate choices. These new skills were perceived to strengthen friendships and relationships with staff, thereby enhancing children’s overall school experience. These positive changes extended beyond the classroom, as children developed resilience, confidence, and a greater capacity for social interaction. As a result, NPs felt that they were able to engage more fully in school activities, including playtime, sports, student council, and social events, further reinforcing their sense of belonging and participation in school life:

“Their self-esteem, I'd say even the language they use when they're talking about themselves has been more positive, which is lovely to see.” – Alice

“They'll catch themselves now and go, oh, yeah, OK, I know I shouldn't be doing that. I'm going to walk away.” Kim

“He participated in a handball tournament earlier in the year and a Gaelic football tournament as well. They're things we wouldn't even have dreamed of, we wouldn't have even thought he'd be able to do.” -Tom

3.18.2 Subtheme 2: A Whole-School Shift

Participants suggested that NG had a positive impact across the wider school community, noting positive improvements in student behaviour, staff wellbeing and the overall school atmosphere. Challenging behaviours were seen by participants to reduce dramatically, leading to fewer punitive responses, such as suspensions or expulsions. This was perceived to have a direct impact on staff wellbeing, fostering a more positive climate and contributing to a happier and more positive school environment for all. This reduction in conflict and tension between staff and pupils was associated with a calmer school, and children were observed to be more contented and comfortable. This in turn was perceived to contribute to stronger friendships, and better engagement with academic work and classroom activities, as well as increased participation in school life.

“They actually stopped fighting and causing trouble and getting expelled and suspended.” - Brenda

“In the classroom they just wanted to be disruptive and wanted attention, now they're helping out, they're cleaning up from the floor, their behaviours became more positive” – Sarah

“There's less stress, less behaviour problems, a happier school, I would say”- Maeve

In some cases, NPs felt that the improved atmosphere may have supported students in creating and sustaining social bonds with peers and staff. As children developed the social skills

necessary to manage friendships and resolve conflicts more effectively, behaviour in class and during yard time was reported to improve. Participants discussed that colleagues and other members of the school community had acknowledged these positive behavioural changes and felt that this further contributed to a more supportive and harmonious atmosphere. Subsequently, staff and leadership were perceived to be more open to expanding nurture-based approaches throughout the school. NPs with well-established NGs described a cultural shift, where nurturing principles became embedded in classroom practices and the overall school ethos.

“I think across the school the climate is a lot calmer.” - Lauren

“Staff have commented to myself and the principal, ‘God we don't see those boys outside your office anymore when we're going to lunch.’ So it's an obvious thing, they're not out in the corridor.”- Sarah

“They don't just get nurture in the nurture room, it's a whole school approach and I think we are very lucky that we have that in our school.” – Emma

3.19 Discussion

A defining motivation for this study was to begin to address the research gap on NGs in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) context. This study sought to examine the distinct experiences and perceptions of 11 NG practitioners in ROI regarding NG effectiveness and conditions for success. The lack of existing research or policy in the region has made it impossible to define the conditions and practices in ROI NGs, the effectiveness of current approaches, or the extent to which they align with accepted models, therefore this study sought to address this gap. In the following section findings and results are discussed in relation to the research questions and relevant literature. Findings from the qualitative data analysis will be used to address RQ1 and RQ2, while results of the quantitative data will be discussed in relation to RQ3. Where qualitative findings elaborate on the quantitative results, these will be integrated into the discussion with reference to relevant literature.

3.19.1 RQ1: What is the perceived impact of NG on children's social-emotional development and behaviour in school?

The NG was widely perceived to have a generally positive impact on the children who attended. As outlined in the theme 'The Ripple Effect', children were observed to be happier, more comfortable and confident in school, with greater self-awareness, demonstrating social, emotional development and positive behaviour change. Consistent with previous findings, NG staff consistently report notable improvements in SEBD among children who participate in NG (Birch, 2016; Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Sanders, 2007; Seth-Smith et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2020; Vincent, 2017).

While it was acknowledged that there were still occasional instances of difficult behaviour, all participants perceived that behaviour issues across the school had decreased, with a decline in the use of suspension or expulsions. The theme 'Schools in Crisis' outlined factors that precipitated NG establishment, including unprecedented behaviours and emotional difficulties. Porges (2011) suggests that certain early experiences can lead some children to display a heightened 'fight or flight' response, even in seemingly safe situations. These findings suggest that by fostering a sense of trust and security within the school environment, NG likely helped decrease the occurrence of these reactions. These findings align with perspectives shared

by teachers elsewhere (Macpherson & Phillips, 2021) who observed that pupils were more regulated and better able to cope with intense emotions following NG attendance. Similar findings were reported by Seth-Smith et al. (2010), who reported significant improvements in the ‘peer problems’, ‘pro-social behaviour’ and ‘hyperactivity’, as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). While these participants demonstrated a non-judgemental and compassionate response to the needs of their students, research shows that teacher perceptions of SEBD can be prone to structural or systematic bias (Taylor, 2021), therefore caution may be warranted when interpreting these findings as outlined above (Section 2.1).

In the current study, NPs perceived that students developed key emotional literacy skills, including recognising and naming emotions. Where previously there had been instances of challenging behaviour, NPs reported that children began to develop skills to manage and cope with emotions using self-regulation skills. In some cases, NPs reported that children were able to use these skills independently to self-monitor their emotional states, demonstrate impulse control, and cope with increased stress, as described in the sub-theme ‘Changes in the Children’. NPs reported an increase in children’s self-awareness and better understanding of the impact of their actions on others, as well as developing the ability to advocate for themselves. This finding links to Binnie and Allen’s (2008) study, which noted improvements in children’s emotional development and functioning, as reported by the teacher SDQ. Similarly, NG staff in the Vincent (2017) study observed enhanced self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation in children following NG intervention.

Reflecting the findings of Cunningham et al. (2019), participants in this study perceived that the children were happier and more enthusiastic about NG and school in general. NPs in this study described their role in fostering self-esteem by building trusting relationships, setting and consistently enforcing behavioural expectations, and creating a supportive and nurturing environment in the NG. This positive emotional shift was also attributed to improvements in the child’s self-concept, in line with previous studies (Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Vincent, 2017). A positive self-concept may serve as a protective factor against future stress and childhood depression (Jaureguizar et al., 2018). Over time, this was perceived to positively impact attendance, and a reduction in issues such as school reluctance was reported by seven NPs. Improved attendance, motivation and willingness to come into school were attributed to an

increased sense of connection and belonging to the school community, through initiatives such as ‘Soft Start’ and Breakfast Club. Increased connection to a community of peers increases the child’s sense of belonging (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015), which reinforces motivation to follow social rules of the group. These findings may indicate that the relationships established in the NG fulfilled these key psychological needs, which further enhances the likelihood of pro-social behavior, school enjoyment, and academic motivation (Maslow, 1970).

NPs also reported changes in social skills, such as improved eye contact, turn-taking, sharing with others and demonstrating empathy, care and kindness toward peers and adults in the NG. These positive changes in behaviour were widely reported by participants, who all outlined improvements in children’s social skills in class and at break time. Following NG intervention, children were perceived to have better play skills and were better able to interact with peers to solve problems, resolve conflicts and ask for help from adults when needed. Developing competence in social skills support children to form stable and reciprocal relationships with peers, staff, and family members (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015), therefore it is possible that the children's increased social skills may have played a role in some of the other reported changes. Collaboration between the two NG staff was viewed by participants as crucial to support pupils' social development, highlighting the significance of a unified and supportive staff dynamic within NG. Previous findings demonstrate a positive impact on children’s social skills (Cunningham et al., 2019; Vincent, 2017) and emphasise the importance of two NG staff to model pro-social behaviours (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005). As outlined by Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006), these reciprocal proximal processes between NP and children can positively support development.

A positive impact on children’s language and communication skills was perceived by these participants following the NG intervention. Children were reported to engage in reciprocal conversation and to ask and answer questions, with increased vocabulary following explicit teaching. It is possible that developing these key communication skills may have further bolstered their ability to engage with others socially and to participate in academic learning. Furthermore, NPs widely reported improvements in children’s attention, concentration and focus, which was perceived to support ‘readiness to learn’ in the classroom. An evaluation of the Educate Together Nurture Schools Project showed improvements in literacy and maths for a

majority of students following NG, though this data relies solely on teacher-reported data (Educate Together, 2023). This observation mirrors findings from Cooper, Arnold, and Boyd (2001), who reported a perceived improvement in academic progress following NG. Statistically significant gains in basic literacy skills and early reading readiness were also reported by Reynolds et al. (2009), though Sloan et al., (2020) found little evidence of gains in literacy or numeracy attainment.

It has been proposed that NG intervention supports children to develop skills to access the curriculum, which leads to related progress in academic achievement and attainment (Bennett, 2015; Hughes and Schlösser, 2014). The positive outcomes perceived by NPs in this study could be attributed to changes in the children's engagement and motivation following NG. NPs in this study identified that children benefited from the emotionally safe and nurturing climate of the NG, with observable changes in their ability to focus and attend when they returned to class. Children were better able to actively participate in class discussions and whole-class learning, where previously this had been an area of difficulty. Increased engagement and motivation have previously been reported by NG staff (Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Sanders, 2007) and have been attributed to improvements in self-efficacy following NG intervention (Sanders, 2007). A positive association has also been found between pupil confidence and academic attainment (Adams et al., 2020), while increased social relationships with peers predict academic success, according to Flook et al. (2005). Similarly, small group size, adult scaffolding, and emphasis on enhancing children's social and communication skills are associated with positive academic outcomes (Baines, Blatchford, & Chowne, 2007). Therefore, it is possible that the increased emotional and social supports, within the context of the NG may positively influence children's capacity to engage in academic work (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

By applying the Principles of Nurture across the school, a shift in atmosphere and ethos was observed, as outlined in the sub-theme 'A Whole-School Shift'. Positive changes were perceived by participants on a whole school level, as the emotional atmosphere and climate of the school was reported to shift, and an increase in staff wellbeing was widely reported amongst participants. As described by Coleman (2020), the NG principles can serve as a foundation for transforming an entire establishment into a nurturing school. Whole-school initiatives were also perceived to enhance children's attachment and connection to key individuals in school, further

developing emotional and social wellbeing. These findings suggest that NG fostered a sense of belonging for students who may have struggled academically in a traditional classroom setting. These positive changes are consistent with previous findings (Coleman, 2020; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005), demonstrating that NG can effect positive change on a whole-school basis.

3.19.2 RQ2: What conditions, approaches or strategies are perceived to be most effective for NG success?

Insights from participants provided important perspectives on factors contributing to NG success, including positive adult modelling, explicit teaching of emotional literacy, individualised approaches and the development of positive relationships with individual children. A central finding, outlined in the theme ‘The Transformative Power of Relational Nurture’, conveys the essential nature of developing a secure bond between NPs and individual children. Participants shared valuable insights into the significance of this connection, which was perceived to serve as a foundation for meaningful change and developmental progress, with nurture and the nurturing relationship viewed as synonymous, mirroring previous findings (Gibb & Lewis, 2019). In line with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1978; Ainsworth, 1969), these findings suggest that this human connection may have served as the foundation for transformation, shaping children’s development by creating a sense of security, trust and belonging, contributing to psychological well-being. In this way, nurture is the relationship, and the relationship itself provides nurture. The psychological process of ‘containment’ and ‘holding’ of the NG child is described elsewhere (Gibb & Lewis, 2019) and indicates the positive influence of multiple attachments to significant figures in a child’s life, including teachers, who are well-placed to affect change (Bombèr, 2007).

Findings indicate an intuitive understanding of attunement amongst NPs, as described in the sub-theme ‘Attuning to the Child’. Rooted in attachment theory, attunement is a fundamental concept in NG practice (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013), and has been organised under six principles: being attentive; encouraging initiatives; receiving initiative; developing attuned interactions; guiding and deepening discussion, as described by Kennedy, Landor and Todd, (2010). According to Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006), these enduring, reciprocal interactions, or proximal processes, are the key agents of change over time, supporting child development

within the context of the NG. The interview participants demonstrated their skill and expertise in applying these processes effectively to establish strong attachments with children in the NG. This mirrors findings from Cubeddu & MacKay (2017) who observed that NG staff utilised the attunement principles more frequently and regularly than classroom teachers, thereby enhancing attachment formation. Notably, however, none of the NPs in the current study described deliberate or intentional attempts to apply these principles. Instead, their language indicates a more natural and intuitive approach, using terms like "pairing" or "being with" rather than explicitly articulating the strategies and principles they were employing. This observation suggests the NPs may have developed their attunement skills informally, through experience and practice, rather than through a structured or theoretical understanding of the underlying mechanisms. As a result, while they effectively fostered secure attachments, they may not always be consciously aware of the specific strategies they are using or the rationale behind them. This finding illustrates the need for further training on the theorisation and exploration of positive attachments in the school context to support successful NG practice.

A balance of personalities and dynamics of the adults and children in the group, as articulated in the subtheme 'The Right People', was suggested to be key to successful intervention. Participants in this study talked about carefully selecting combinations of children to facilitate optimal learning experiences, mirroring findings from Birch (2016), Cooper and Tiknaz, (2005) and Vincent (2017). Many NPs self-identified personal attributes such as patience, authenticity, honesty and openness, which were suggested as integral to the success of their NG. Across the data set, NPs consistently expressed strong commitment to a values-driven approach based on acceptance, empathy, understanding, non-judgment, and unconditional positive regard for the children in their care. These values closely align with the core principles of Rogers' (1957) approach to fostering therapeutic change and personal growth, and evoke the psychoanalytic notion of the 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1945, 1956) as a way to contain a child's distress while remaining psychologically present. Interestingly, despite not having undergone any formal psychological or therapeutic training, these findings indicate that the participants demonstrated an intuitive grasp of these complex therapeutic principles. Their natural, empathetic approach to nurturing the children suggests an inherent understanding of the emotional and psychological skills necessary for children to form positive mental representations

of themselves to influence behaviour change, as outlined elsewhere (Gibb & Lewis, 2019; Hibbin, 2019).

Given the complexity of these core psychological processes and the strong reliance of NG relationships on certain personal traits, it is crucial that staff are carefully selected for their emotional intelligence, relational strengths, and interpersonal skills before NG is established. Furthermore, it is essential that NPs and school leaders receive specific training in relation to attachment and psychodynamic theory, so they can better understand the factors that shape and influence the NP- child relationship. This need is echoed by Gibb & Lewis (2019).

By identifying and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable children, these NPs described that they changed their approach to support trauma-experienced individuals. This concept is exemplified in the theme ‘You Have To Maslow Before You Can Bloom’. While Maslow’s (1970) theory is somewhat controversial, the well-known model was evoked by NPs, illustrating their understanding that the NG supports children’s development by meeting their basic needs, subsequently enabling them to engage with cognitive processes and school life. Bloom’s taxonomy (1956) refers to an educational framework outlining cognitive skills. The finding indicates the importance of carefully designing the physical environment of the NG and using home-like furnishings to indicate comfort and security. The provision of food, snacks and shared meals was also perceived as essential to create a comfortable and relaxed environment. The importance of a comfortable homely environment and routines involving food relate to the theoretical underpinnings of NG supporting the pupil’s basic needs (Bethannan & Boxall, 2013; Maslow, 1970) and has been highlighted elsewhere (Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017).

Furthermore, NPs identified the importance of safety and consistency both in the physical space and in the emotional tone of the NG. This emotional consistency was perceived to be created by careful consideration of group dynamics and by the presence of a calm, interested adult. These findings suggest that by providing a consistently stable, caring and interested presence, the NPs supported children through a process of co-regulation. Co-regulation involves being emotionally and physiologically calm, present and responsive to a child’s needs during moments of stress (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015; Porges, 2011). Through this interpersonal process, the NP could organise a child’s distress, thereby supporting them to move through and

manage emotional and physiological responses to stress (Delahooke, 2020; Geller & Porges, 2014). With repetition and consistency, the child can internalise this process and learn to self-regulate. The ability to self-regulate is essential to manage stress, emotions, behaviour and attention and maintain good relationships (Shanker, 2016). Boxhall (2002) hypothesised that consistent and predictable routines and relationships provide comfort and security and help build trust. Similarly, Garner and Thomas (2011) found an association between the safe environment and supportive relationships within the NG, and the development of emotional skills, indicating that this process contributes to emotional wellbeing and behaviour change in NG.

As outlined in the theme ‘Nurture Pedagogy’, learning activities were focused on the development of social skills and emotional literacy, mirroring previous findings (Cunningham et al., 2019; Vincent, 2017). A combination of formal explicit teaching and playful activities offer children the opportunity to make sense of and enjoy social interactions. NPs also described modelling appropriate interpersonal relationships, behaviours and responses and likened this to a parenting role. In line with previous findings (Gibb & Lewis, 2019), it was understood that the adults in the NG had a responsibility to demonstrate and model friendships, partnerships and challenge outdated gender stereotypes. These findings may indicate that by modelling appropriate emotional responses, the adults activated the child’s mirroring system, enabling them to mimic the behaviour of others. Mirror neurons play a crucial role in understanding the intentions of others, informing empathy development and prosocial skills (Decety & Meyer, 2008). Further, NPs emphasised explicitly teaching the skills of emotion regulation, how to respond to others and the environment in a socially appropriate way. Similarly, teachers in Vincent (2017) felt that embedding emotional literacy into all aspects of NG activities was essential to progress. This finding aligns with Boxall’s (2002) view that talking about feelings is important and contributes to children gradually learning to self-regulate their behaviour.

NPs repeatedly articulated the need for a flexible and individualized approach that is responsive to the needs of the children. This was seen to be facilitated by being psychologically present and planning time and opportunity for children to talk and listen in NG. They took account of children’s preferences, areas of strength and need and planned NG activities accordingly, with appropriate scaffolding in place. This was seen by participants to support children to build upon existing skills, even where these were below what might be expected for

children of a similar age. This finding is illustrated elsewhere (Gibb & Lewis, 2019; Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017) and highlights the importance of an individualized approach in developing the nurture curriculum.

3.19.3 RQ3. What are the common characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools?

Results demonstrate that NGs in ROI differ from a number of the essential criteria as set out by the Nurture Group Network (2022), indicating poor implementation fidelity in several key areas. Findings from the quantitative questionnaire indicate that a majority of Irish NGs depart from the accepted NG models in terms of staffing, organisation and structure, as shown in Table 3.5. The limitations of the sample must be considered when interpreting these findings, as the participants were self-selecting and from just 61 NGs, therefore may not be representative of the entire population.

Table 3.5: Essential Criteria

Nurture UK Essential Criteria	Questionnaire results
The establishment must be a member of Nurture UK	N/A – no such regulatory body exists in ROI
There must be two of the same members of staff working with the pupils at all times	57.4% staffed by two adults
At least one member of NG staff currently working with the children/young people must have completed Nurture UK’s Theory & Practice of Nurture Groups training course and passed the related assignment. It would be desirable for more than one member of staff per establishment to have completed the course	75.4% have completed Nurture Specific Training
The Boxall Profile assessment tool must be used to refer children to the nurture group, inform practice and support the process of reintegration	93.4% use the Boxall Profile assessment tool to refer children and 91.8% use this tool to set targets

There must be a minimum of six pupils in the nurture group for the majority of the time (with a maximum of 12 pupils)	75.4% have groups of six children or less
The nurture group must run for a minimum of four half-day sessions per week with the same core group of children	44.3% of NGs are run with the same core group of children for a minimum of 18 hours weekly.

While a majority of NGs are run by two members of staff, over a third operate with just one adult. NG guidance states that there must be two of the same members of staff working with the pupils at all times (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006). Furthermore, only three-quarters of NG staff have completed Nurture Specific Training. Having two full-time staff members, usually a teacher and a teaching assistant or SNA who are fully trained in the NG Principles is a crucial factor for intervention success (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005; Nurture UK, 2019).

In terms of structure, a majority of these NGs operate on a part-time basis. However, a minority operate with the same core group of children for a minimum of 18 hours weekly, and most part-time NGs have groups of less than six students. Guidance states that groups should consist of 6-12 students, who must attend for a minimum of 18 hours weekly (Nurture UK, 2019), so these key organisational features indicate a departure from the Classic and New Variant models described by Cooper & Whitebread (2007). While much of the literature indicates no significant differences between children who participate in the NG on a full versus a part-time basis (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cooper et al., 2001; Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Sanders, 2007), recent research from Northern Ireland suggests that students attending a full time NG made more progress than those who attended part-time (Sloan et al., 2020). Since most Irish NGs do not adhere to the 18-hour minimum guidelines, it is possible that this lack of compliance could negatively impact their overall effectiveness.

Interestingly, quantitative and qualitative findings from the current study reveal that despite significant differences in organisational structures, strong practices in fostering emotional and social development, consistent environments, and supporting children's engagement with school life were evident in this sample, indicating that approaches and practices amongst these

NGs broadly align with the NG Principles as set out by Lucas et al. (2006). While these principles are grounded in central concepts of child development, Cloran, Rivard and Bennett (2022) pointed out that they provide little in the way of specific guidelines for day-to-day NG practice. This limits their effectiveness in terms of operationalisation. These limitations notwithstanding, the NG Principles represent the best example of current guidelines and thus provide a suitable framework for consideration of NG characteristics in the context of the current study. In order to further examine the common characteristics of NGs in Irish primary schools, questionnaire responses were analysed in relation to these principles, as shown in Figure 3.8.

Figure 3.8 *Questionnaire Results and NG Principles*

Children's Learning is Understood Developmentally	The Classroom Offers a Safe Base	The Importance of Nurture for the Development of Wellbeing	Language is a Vital Means of Communication	All Behaviour is Communication	The Importance of Transition in Children's Lives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play activities provided at the child's developmental level: 100% Yes • NG activities allow for informal reinforcement of basic literacy and maths skills: 82% Yes • Boxall Profile used to identify children: 93.4% Yes • Boxall Profile used to inform individual goals or student support plans: 91.8% Yes • Individual targets set and reviewed regularly 91.8% Yes 	<p>Environment incorporates aspects of both home and school: 95.1% Yes</p> <p>Domestic setting with food and comfortable furniture: 98.4% Yes</p> <p>Range of equipment for play and creative expression available: 100% Yes</p> <p>Predictable daily routines in place: 98.4% Yes</p> <p>Children engage in everyday routines (e.g., tidying up, sorting): 100% Yes</p> <p>The NG is run for a minimum of 18 hours weekly with the same core group of children: 44.3% Yes</p>	<p>Adults model positive relationships and interactions: 96.7% Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff support children to regulate emotional responses: 100% Yes <p>Opportunities for adults and children to share reciprocal activities (e.g., play, meals, reading together): 77% Yes</p> <p>Planning includes both adult and child led activities 98.4% Yes</p> <p>Parental involvement in NG activities: 19.7% Yes</p> <p>Support provided to parents and caregivers to develop appropriate management and interaction strategies: 36.1% Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEPS psychologist directly involved in the NG 31.1% Yes 	<p>Adults intentionally model non-verbal communication (e.g., eye contact, tone of voice): 91.8% Yes</p> <p>Words for emotions and feelings explicitly taught: 98.4% Yes</p> <p>Time in NG is used for children to talk about events and feelings: 91.8% Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults engage children in extended conversations (e.g., recalling past events, planning): 80.3% Yes 	<p>Staff support children to regulate emotional responses: 100% Yes</p> <p>School routines, rules, and social behaviours explicitly taught: 82% Yes</p> <p>Individual targets set for each child and reviewed regularly: 91.8% Yes</p> <p>Adults model positive relationships and interactions: 96.7% Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff liaise with additional agencies where appropriate: 77% Yes 	<p>Plans in place to support children's reintegration into the mainstream class: 75.4% Yes</p> <p>Most children attend NG for two to four terms: 93.4% Yes</p> <p>Simple changes to routine planned and introduced to accustom children to change: 88.5% Yes</p> <p>Staff liaise with additional agencies where appropriate: 77% Yes</p> <p>Mainstream and NG staff engage in joint planning as needed 63.9% Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for mainstream staff to be involved in nurture activities 77% Yes

Results showed that NGs in this study are designed to meet children at their current developmental level, rather than their chronological age, in alignment with the first NG Principle: *Children's Learning is Understood Developmentally*. The use of play activities tailored to the child's developmental level was reported by 100% of questionnaire respondents. A significant majority (82%) incorporate literacy and numeracy skills in NG activities, thereby supporting academic growth at a developmentally suitable pace. Qualitative results also demonstrated commitment to differentiated tasks and emphasis on emotional literacy development. NGs that respond to the child in a developmentally appropriate way support positive emotional and social growth (Binnie & Allen, 2008). Additionally, the Boxall Profile is widely used to identify children's developmental needs and to inform individualised goals and support plans, reflecting an understanding of developmentally appropriate learning. As outlined by Boxall (2002), establishing developmentally appropriate goals based on psychometric assessments is essential to effectively address specific needs. In Irish NGs, this process could be developed further by including the child in the process of individual goal setting, which would likely increase motivation by creating a sense of autonomy and personal responsibility, as noted by Vincent (2017).

Almost all of the surveyed NGs provide predictable daily routines and schedules, involving the children where possible, demonstrating alignment with the second NG Principle '*The Classroom Offers a Safe Base*'. In terms of the physical environment, the quantitative as well as qualitative data showed that a vast majority (95%) of Irish NGs incorporate aspects a home environment by providing food and domestic furniture, as well as resources and equipment for play and creative expression. NGs are rooted in Bowlby's attachment theory (1969), with a significant emphasis on the importance of the relationship between the child and the adult in developing a sense of safety. This was repeatedly discussed by the interview participants, who collectively expressed their understanding that this safe and consistent base is essential for creating a secure attachment and described the use of structures and timetables to provide consistency and security. Many also identified the importance of food such as tea and toast in creating this sense of safety, connection and belonging. Other studies with parents, staff and children have highlighted the secure base and safety provided in the NG (Garner & Thomas, 2011; Griffiths, Stenner & Hicks, 2014; Vincent, 2017). However, the security of the NG may be undermined in circumstances where guidance for NG grouping is not considered. Successful groups are reliant on stability over time to develop trust, respect

and sensitivity for one another (Blatchford et al., 2003). However, just 44% of NGs in the current study have a core group attending for 18 hours weekly (half-time), meaning that pupils may not have repeated opportunities to work and have fun together, impacting the efficacy of the intervention.

Further details of the characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools were captured in findings illustrating awareness of the centrality of *Nurture for the Development of Wellbeing*. Both quantitative as well as qualitative findings emphasised modelling of positive relationships between staff and children, while 100% of surveyed NPs support children in regulating their emotional responses. These findings align with Boxall's (2002) emphasis on the significance of consistent modelling. Other activities common in all Irish NGs include shared meals, play and reading together all of which, according to Cooper and Whitebread (2007) help to develop a sense of belonging and promote emotional security.

An important element of NG practice relates to parental involvement, and findings from both datasets reveal that this key feature is widely neglected in Irish NGs. Sloan et al (2020) found that the most successful NGs proactively sought relationships with parents by extending invitations and spending time with them. The lack of emphasis on this element of NG in the ROI context indicates a missed opportunity to further enhance children's wellbeing through family engagement, and may also be reflective of a broader reluctance in Irish primary education to engage meaningfully and proactively with parents (Brown et al., 2020).

Furthermore, only a third of Irish NGs receive direct support from the school's assigned Educational Psychologist. Findings from Sloan et al. (2020) noted the effectiveness of a multi-disciplinary team, including an Educational Psychologist, parents and school staff in supporting NG effectiveness. This type of multi-agency approach to education has been shown to facilitate collaborative problem-solving, enhance understanding of pupils' needs, and expand knowledge on specific topics and issues (Abbott, Watson, & Townsley, 2005). The NCSE Guidelines Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs (2017) highlight the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to support identification of need and the development of interventions for students with significant and enduring needs in primary schools. This guidance also recommends regular parental engagement in relation to supports and strategies being developed to support their children. In this respect, Irish NGs have a responsibility to engage regularly with parents and a right to receive support from

Educational Psychologists. However, this wrap-around approach appears to be missing in the contemporary ROI context and likely limits the effectiveness of current NG provision.

In alignment with the NG Principles, *Language development* was prioritised by 90% of the study's surveyed population. Surveyed NG staff reported intentionally modelling non-verbal communication, such as eye contact and tone of voice. Additionally, words for emotions and feelings were reported to be explicitly taught in most participating NGs and time is commonly used to allow children to talk about their experiences. Similarly, interview participants emphasised explicit language teaching in their NGs. Intentionally promoting positive language and communication can support children to develop skills of reflection, self-awareness and communication skill (Hibbin, 2019) supporting self-regulation. Boxall (2002) identified that talking about feelings is important and contributes to children gradually learning to self-regulate their behaviour. The secure, calm NG environment provides opportunities for language development and enrichment that would not be possible in a busy classroom.

Findings from the quantitative data suggested widespread adoption of the fifth NG Principle, '*All Behaviour is Communication*' amongst survey respondents. The Boxall Profile is commonly used to set individualised targets tailored to meet unique behavioural needs, and explicit teaching of emotion regulation is provided universally. A large majority of these NGs emphasise school routines, rules and appropriate social behaviours, suggesting that children's behaviour is understood and addressed holistically rather than punitively. However, in terms of school policies and documentation, 80% reported that the NG was referenced in a school policy, such as Wellbeing or Behaviour Policies, but only 21% have a specific NG policy in place. This gap between policy and practice means that current approaches are not yet formalised. Without a clear policy and written procedure in place, the fidelity of the NG may be compromised, or give rise to significant variance in future NG provision. Boxall (2002) suggests that formal policy development supports systematic identification of children for NG intervention, ensuring they receive timely and appropriate support. This finding indicates an area for development in the ROI context.

In accordance with the sixth principle '*The Importance of Transition in Children's Lives*', quantitative and qualitative results demonstrate that transitions are a key focus for surveyed NGs. Most children attend NG for the recommended duration of two to four terms, reflecting the transitional nature of the intervention, with structured plans in place to support

reintegration into mainstream classes in 75% of surveyed NGs. Additionally, NG staff plan for changes in routine to help children adapt to change. A strong emphasis on transitions was also evident in the interview data, with approaches such as 'breakfast club' and 'soft start' providing much-needed security and support. By providing a sense of predictability and structure, NGs support children's social engagement system, enhancing their ability to cope with stressful life transitions (Porges, 2011). Furthermore, NPs identified the need for additional support for pupils when moving from junior to senior schools, or from primary to post-primary. Preparation included explicit teaching of social skills, self-awareness and advocacy skills and by inviting staff to visit the NG as part of transition preparation.

These results indicate that surveyed ROI NGs provide a safe and secure environment with evidence of commitment to the NG principles (Boxall, 2013; Nurture UK, 2019). Despite these attributes, the emergent findings highlight some inconsistencies with the accepted models described in Chapter 2, particularly in terms of parental engagement, understaffing, specific staff training, and time allocation. Other areas for improvement include the need for specific nurture policies and increased support from educational psychologists. Despite these key differences and inconsistencies, NGs in this sample are characterised by the use of relational approaches involving attunement and attachment as well as a physical environment designed to support social and emotional wellbeing. These essential structures are evident across the surveyed NGs, including activities such as group meals, comfortable furnishings and an emphasis on communication and language development. Results suggest a perceived positive impact at an individual and whole-school level. NPs in the current study demonstrated a clear commitment to meet the needs of individuals and groups in their school community, and this was prioritised over strict adherence to NG structures with some success. This balancing act between resources and emergent needs in the school community has been documented elsewhere (Birch, 2016) and illustrates the gap between practice and policy in ROI as well as in other contexts, including the UK. Considering all these factors, these findings suggest that NGs provide a meaningful and effective intervention that emphasises social and emotional development. Implications for practice, policy and development are discussed in the following section.

3.20 Critical Reflection on Findings and Results

While this research makes a valuable contribution and highlights the perceptions of NPs in ROI, a balanced view must acknowledge the limitations of the current study. In reflecting on the findings and results, a number of limitations were identified. Firstly, the subjective nature of the findings, compounded by the self-selection bias inherent in the sample. It is likely that the participants who volunteered to take part already had an interest in NGs, and many only shared their positive experiences. Furthermore, their motivation to participate in the current study could stem from a desire to showcase good NG practice, which may skew the data toward overly favourable interpretations. The risk of confirmation bias must also be acknowledged, if the participants consciously or unconsciously highlight successes and underreport challenges associated with NG practice (Grimm, 2010). Therefore, it is possible that the findings may lack critical or alternative perspectives, such as schools where NG implementation was inconsistent or unsuccessful.

Similarly, it must be acknowledged that self-report measures like questionnaires and interviews rely on participants being truthful, which can compromise their validity (Mertens, 2015); as a result, such data may be subjective and lack reliability (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This could impact the objectivity and representativeness of the study, making it difficult to generalise the findings beyond this specific group. Given that the aims of this research was to explore the perceptions of NPs, the findings should be interpreted with the risk of potential bias in mind.

4 Critical Review and Impact Statement

This final paper provides a critical review, including rationale for design and methodology, strengths and limitations of the current study. Following this, details of researcher reflexivity are presented and implications for practice, policy and future research are outlined. Finally, an impact statement outlining how this research contributes to the field of educational and child psychology and professional practice.

4.1 Critical Review of Study Design

4.1.1 *Mixed Method Design*

Research utilising mixed-method design (hereafter MMD) utilises a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect and analyse data, integrate results and draw inferences relevant to the research question (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Several advantages to using this approach have been noted (McCrudden et al., 2019), and in relation to the current study, MMD was deemed appropriate as it enabled the researcher to address multiple research questions (Mertens, 2015). Subsequently, this facilitated a more extensive and insightful exploration of the research than would have been possible with a purely qualitative or quantitative approach (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006; McCrudden & Marchand, 2020).

In relation to the current study, a quantitative approach would not adequately capture the complexity of processes taking place in the NG and would significantly underestimate the depth and individuality of NPs experiences. Likewise, qualitative methods used in isolation would not capture the breadth of information required to adequately address the research questions, particularly the question regarding the extent to which NGs in Ireland adhere to the NG Principles (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006). Additionally, most existing research on NGs use outcome-based evaluations, measuring student progress with instruments such as the Boxall Profile, SDQ and academic attainment methods (Billington 2012; Taylor and Gulliford 2011; Sloan et al.,2020). By utilising a MMD, the current study can explore the experiences of staff, provide insights into the complexity of relationships and behaviour, while simultaneously examining conditions and practices common to Irish NGs. Despite the numerous advantages of this design, several challenges were identified by the researcher in relation to MMD, including the substantial demands on time, effort, and expertise (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

4.1.2 Concurrent Embedded Design

A concurrent embedded strategy of mixed methods was considered to be the most appropriate design to address the research questions for the current study. In an MMD, the qualitative and quantitative data may be equally balanced, or one may be emphasised over the other (Creswell, 2009). A concurrent embedded design integrates quantitative and qualitative data by prioritising one method, while embedding the other to provide complementary insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Unlike a convergent design, where both methods hold equal weight, the embedded approach applies a dominant method, which is supplemented by secondary data that enriches interpretation (Ivankova et al., 2006). This strategy is appropriate if the secondary method addresses a different research question than the primary method (Creswell, 2009), as was the case in the current study.

In this study, the secondary method was the quantitative data, which was situated within the dominant qualitative method and given lower priority. By supplementing the qualitative data with quantitative information, the researcher could gain two distinct perspectives thereby developing a broader understanding of the research area. This model was suitable for the current study due to a number of identified advantages. Firstly, a single data collection phase was used, so the researcher was able to collect both types of data simultaneously. This facilitates the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data within a short time frame (Creswell, 2017). In addition, this strategy enabled the researcher to address different research questions by examining the two types of data side by side, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the research area. In this way, the concurrent embedded design harnessed the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the research questions. This further enhanced the interpretation and validity of the findings and facilitated a comprehensive assessment of the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

A key strength of this design was the integration process, which enabled the researcher to supplement the primary qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with the quantitative findings to enhance contextual understanding of NGOs in Irish primary schools. The integration of primary and secondary data can enhance the value of mixed methods research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

For the present research study, data integration took place at two points. Firstly, integration through ‘connecting’ occurred at the methods level; the semi-structured interview participants were selected from the sample of NPs who completed the online questionnaire via an ‘opt-in’ process. The use of the questionnaire facilitated identification of NGs that align with the widely accepted principles and practice of NGs as set out by (Lucas et al., 2006; Nurture UK, 2022). In this way, the researcher was able to ensure recruitment of NPs with high information power, thereby increasing the value and rigour of the research. Secondly, data was integrated at the interpretation level through an ‘interleaving’ approach. As such, the qualitative data analysis and results were presented first, followed by an analysis of how the quantitative results contributed additional meaning. As such, the secondary data was nested within the research process but did not drive the primary analysis. In this way, the embedded quantitative data within the primarily qualitative study enhances quality and validity by triangulating findings, and addressing different aspects of the research questions (Fetters et al., 2013). While integration strengthens the study’s comprehensiveness, several limitations were identified. A central challenge associated with an embedded design is the imbalance in data priority (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), where the secondary data may not be fully explored. Additionally, the process of data integration can be complex if qualitative findings contrast with quantitative results. McCrudden et al. (2019) also identified that embedding an additional method requires careful planning due to potential time and resource constraints.

4.1.3 *Alternative design*

During the research design process, an alternative MMD model utilising an exploratory design was considered. An exploratory design involves an initial phase of qualitative data collection, which is used to develop or inform the quantitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design can be valuable when little is known about the research area (Doyle, 2015). Strengths associated with this design include adaptability and flexibility of the approach. Additionally, this method is useful to identify insights and patterns in the dataset, leading to hypothesis generation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

However, this design was ultimately deemed unsuitable for this study because this strategy is often used to test elements of an emergent theory, or to develop a new instrument (Creswell & Clark, 2007), neither of which was the primary objective of the current study. Furthermore, this model requires a considerable time and resources to complete

both data collection phases (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which was deemed to be beyond the scope of the current study, which was undertaken by a single researcher alongside professional practice placements. Furthermore, this method requires the researcher to select a small number of findings from the initial qualitative phase to explore in the subsequent quantitative phase, which would have been unsuitable for the aims and research questions of the current study.

4.2 Critical review of Methodology

Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires are widely used together in MMD studies (Harris & Brown, 2010). In the current study, these measures were used to gather information about approaches and practices in Irish NGOs and the perceived impact of these on children's social-emotional wellbeing and behaviour, as described in Chapter 3. The strengths and limitations of the selected methodology are considered next.

4.2.1 Questionnaire

The use of a questionnaire enabled quantitative data to be gathered from a sizable number of participants ($N = 61$) over a brief period (McCrudden et al., 2019). A robust conceptual framework was used to design the questionnaire based on an existing set of criteria (Nurture UK, 2022) (Appendix B). This facilitated a clear and focused measure suitable to address the research questions (Price et al., 2017). Furthermore, the questionnaire was concise and short as possible (38 closed questions) and could be completed in under five minutes (Price et al., 2017). The validity of the questionnaire was further addressed through consultation with the research supervisor and members of a Progression Panel held in April 2024 at the research institution (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, the questionnaire was piloted with a representative sample in April 2024 and subsequent feedback was integrated.

Self-report measures such as questionnaires depend on participants' honesty, which can affect their validity (Mertens, 2015); in this way self-reported data can be subjective and unreliable (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Similarly, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, leading respondents to provide answers that are perceived to be more socially agreeable, rather than truthful. To minimise this risk, the questionnaire was anonymous, and a participant information form was provided outlining the aims of the study (Mertens, 2015).

Several limitations of the questionnaire were identified. Quantitative data may lack depth and context, limiting the capacity for complex data analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The questionnaire could have been developed further in a number of ways. Firstly, gathering demographic data about school population such as gender, number of pupils and DEIS status would have provided important contextual details for further analysis. Furthermore, the yes/no response could have led some respondents to provide a more favourable response where the question lacked specificity. The questions could have been designed with more clarity to ensure accurate responses. In addition, typographical errors were noted in the questionnaire. If this study were to be repeated, these factors should be taken into account to improve the effectiveness of the questionnaire.

4.2.2 *Semi-Structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework that facilitates open-ended responses from participants (Kendall., 2008) and enable the researcher to probe further into interesting or unexpected responses, leading to rich insights. Furthermore, this method facilitated new information about NGOs to be elicited and considered in relation to existing research. This is highly relevant given the scarcity of information pertaining to NGOs in the ROI context, as previously outlined.

The researcher has undertaken extensive training in interviewing and consultation techniques as part of the professional skills development for the DECPsy programme. During interviews, these skills were employed to make participants feel comfortable and willing to share honest insights and individual perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A pilot semi-structured interview was undertaken in April 2024, and feedback on the content, context and style of the interview schedule was subsequently considered.

A number of challenges associated with this method were also considered. Conducting, transcribing, and analysing semi-structured interviews is time-consuming for a single researcher (Kendall., 2008). The small sample size (N=11) can limit generalisability of results, findings were based on a small, purposive sample, making it difficult to generalise results to the broader population. Given the subjective nature of the data, researcher bias must be considered in relation to tone, wording and facial expressions which can unconsciously influence participant responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Similarly, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias if participants choose to provide responses that are favourable rather than their true beliefs (Grimm, 2010).

4.2.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was suitable for the current study as it is a widely used and flexible method, appropriate for the aims of the study and aligned with the data collection method. This flexibility means that RTA is suitable for mixed-methods studies as it can be used within different epistemological frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). Furthermore, RTA can provide context and depth to quantitative data results. RTA generates rich insights into similarities and differences across the dataset, enabling deeper understanding of experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about NGOs. This method acknowledges researcher subjectivity, encouraging critical reflection and reflexivity throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2019b) to increase rigour and validity of results. Additionally, the researcher had previously used this method in another research study, so they had some familiarity and expertise with this method, enhancing the rigor and application of the process.

The process of RTA emphasises the researcher's creativity, thoughtfulness and insight when engaging with the data and the analytic process (Braun & Clarke 2021) and discourages attempts to gain consensus through multiple coders. It is not expected that codes or themes created by one researcher would be reproduced in the same way by another (Byrne, 2022). Although RTA acknowledges the subjective nature of the process, there is a risk of confirmation bias where researchers may focus on responses that support their assumptions, overlooking contradictory data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Mertens, 2015). To address the issue of bias, field notes (Appendix N) and a reflexive journal (Appendix Q) were used to capture reflections, thoughts, feelings and initial impressions of the data to maintain reflexivity throughout the process. The journal was also used to consider relationships between the data and existing literature. This reflexive practice was further enhanced by regular consultations with the research supervisor with the aim of discussing and reflecting on researcher subjectivity and positionality. Previous research has posited that thematic analysis lacks clear definition (Holloway & Todres, 2003). To ensure a clear and thorough analysis, the six-phase framework was adhered to, and the core assumptions of RTA were carefully considered (Braun & Clarke, 2021) during analysis.

4.2.4 Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses were used in the current study to describe and summarise characteristics of the quantitative data sample (Mertens, 2015). The resulting data

was demographic in nature and provided key insights as this was the first study of its kind in Ireland. Descriptive statistics can be presented in table format as seen in Tables 3.3 and 3.4, enabling the researcher to present a broad overview of the research area (Mertens, 2015), with straightforward insights suitable for stakeholders such as educators, parents, EPs and policymakers. Descriptive statistics provide key contextual information, providing a foundation for understanding patterns, trends, and distributions, making it appropriate for use alongside qualitative data to provide a broad, balanced perspective. While descriptive statistics provide a broad overview, it is acknowledged that this strategy may not capture nuances in views and experiences, or contextual influences in educational settings (Bryman, 2006). In this way it is possible that complex realities may be oversimplified. In the current study this risk was ameliorated by including qualitative data alongside the quantitative overview, to provide further insights.

Alternative Design. A correlational approach to data analysis was considered, as this would have provided further details of relationships between two or more variables (Mertens, 2015). This could have supported the researcher to better understand the variables (i.e., number of NG staff) impacting on NG conditions and approaches. However, such an investigation was the not primary purpose of the current study. Consequently, it was decided that descriptive statistics were most appropriate for use here as it provided key information regarding current NG characteristics and practices among the sample.

4.2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted from MIREC in March 2024 (Appendix C), with subsequent amendments to the questionnaire approved in April 2024 (Appendix D). The current study adhered to ethical standards set out in the PSI Code of Professional Ethics (2019), ensuring ethical integrity throughout participant recruitment, data collection, and confidentiality measures. Consent was implied upon completion of the online questionnaire, therefore signed consent forms were not required (Manandhar & Joshi, 2020), but a participant information letter was provided on the first page of the questionnaire (Lancaster University, 2023). This contained information regarding the study aims, the researcher's role and made participants aware that due to the questionnaire's anonymity, withdrawal would not be possible after submission.

Prior to interview, participants provided written informed consent (Appendix K), confirming their voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence. They were also informed about how the research findings would be used. Confidentiality protocols were developed to protect participant identity and privacy. Research data was securely stored on the researcher's password-protected laptop, and no identifying details, such as participant or school names were recorded. Instead, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

4.2.6 Sample

It is acknowledged that non-probability sampling methods are limited in terms of the generalisability of results, and can be prone to some bias (Mertens, 2015). The validity of findings depends on obtaining a representative sample of the target population (Creswell, 2012). In this study NPs were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure recruitment of individuals with knowledge and experience of Irish NGs. A potential limitation of this sampling method is self-selection bias, which can occur when only highly motivated participants respond, leading to results that may not reflect the broader population of NG staff. The current study utilised self-reported data, which may be subjective and unreliable (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Self-report measures such as questionnaires are reliant upon the honesty of participants, which can compromise their validity (Mertens, 2015). In addition, participant responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, if participants provide answers that are perceived to be more socially acceptable, rather than entirely truthful.

Furthermore, the risk of self-selection bias is inherent in this sample. Self-selection bias occurs where individuals who choose to participate in research may differ significantly from those who do not. For example, the participants who volunteered to participate in the current study may be more interested in NGs and motivated to share their experiences. These characteristics can skew the data, as the sample may not accurately represent the broader population. As a result, the findings may not be generalisable and may overestimate or underestimate certain factors and elements of NG practice. It must be acknowledged that both self-report measures and self-selection bias are both at play in the current study, and this may influence validity and transferability of the findings and results.

In the initial stages of research design, child participants were considered for inclusion in the sample. However, as the research aims and questions were further refined

through discussions with the research supervisor and exploration of the existing literature, several challenges in obtaining pupil perspectives on NGs were identified. For example, Cooper, Arnold and Boyd (2007) found that students provided guarded answers when asked about their NG, as pupils may want to be loyal to their teachers, they may provide responses that they think the researcher wants to hear. Similarly, Sanders (2007) outlined challenges in accessing the views of students attending NG. Finally, children attending NG may be considered a vulnerable population, raising ethical concerns, as discussions of learning difficulties, emotional well-being, or school experiences may trigger distress or anxiety (Mertens, 2015). Furthermore, discussions of sensitive topics such as bullying, trauma, or exclusion may evoke negative emotions, so it would be necessary to provide psychological or pastoral support for all child participants. Given the limited time and resources available, the researcher was not in a position to guarantee such support. Due to these concerns about ethics and reliability, it was ultimately decided not to include child participants in the sample, as the research aims could be met by gathering adult perspectives.

4.2.7 Sample Size

A widely accepted principle for determining sample size in a qualitative study is that *N* should be sufficiently large and varied to elucidate the aims of the study (Kuzel, 1999; Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2014). The concept of data saturation has been described as the gold standard (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006) and is commonly used in qualitative data collection, indicating a point at which the data has been comprehensively explained, enabling a theory to arise (Morse 2015). However, data saturation originated as an element of Grounded Theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), while the current study used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The concept of data saturation is considered incompatible this method because of differing underlying assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019a; Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016). In RTA, meanings are generated through interpretation of the data using open and evolving coding, rather than by extracting themes. Furthermore, research with a social constructivist lens, such as the current study, considers knowledge as partial, subjective, and dependent on the researcher's position in the process, which is at odds with the idea that qualitative studies should aim to achieve a total or finite set of facts (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009; Haraway, 2013).

For these reasons, the Information Power Model (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016) was selected for use in the current study. Information power is determined by the

relevance of information the sample holds, and richness of data collected (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, 2016). This model conceptualises research as a reflexive and situated process of knowledge construction, rather than discovery, and emphasises the researcher’s interpretative engagement with rich and complex data, rather than a set number of interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). Within this reflexive, generative process, it is acknowledged that analysis can never be complete (Low 2019), but with sufficient data to provide a rich, complex and layered narrative relating to the research questions, a responsible and meaningful analysis can be conducted (Sim et al. 2018). Information power can be determined by items such as study aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, 2016). In the current study, these items were used to consider sample size throughout the research process, to determine that a total of 11 interviews provided a suitable sample for qualitative data analysis, as detailed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 *Factors influencing Information Power*

1. Study aim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims of the study were narrow and clearly defined • Interviews conducted were of high relevance to the research questions
2. Sample specificity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment of knowledgeable participants who could provide high quality information • Diversity of the sample in relation to age, gender, experience and role in the NG. • A range of diverse and dynamic perspectives and experiences were gathered in the whole data set
3. Use of established theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of theoretical frameworks and models were used to explain and deepen understanding of concepts and relationships between different aspects of the data in a coherent way • See Chapter 1 and Discussion section for further background on theoretical perspectives applied

4. Quality of dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lead researcher has a background in primary teaching and greater than average knowledge of NGOs, therefore could easily engage with and build rapport with the participants. • The lead researcher also has considerable professional experience interviewing and consulting with professionals about their practices. This enabled strong and clear communication and high quality dialogue between researcher and participants in all interviews • The chosen method of data collection facilitated rich and deep discussion
5. Analysis strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information power is compatible for use with Reflexive Thematic Analysis

In terms of the quantitative data, a sample size of 100-400 respondents is generally considered sufficient for educational survey research (Fink, 2013), depending on the scope of the study and diversity of the population. Given that no data exists to determine how many NGOs are currently established in the ROI, it was impossible to determine the size of the population. 100 schools were contacted with 61 respondents. The limitations of this small sample size are acknowledged, including reduced ability to generalise findings and potential susceptibility to selection bias (Creswell, 2012).

4.2.8 Theoretical Framework

The current study is underpinned by the BioEcological PPCT Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which describes the four key elements of Process, Person, Context and Time to be considered in relation to child development. The findings of the current study were considered in relation to this model and summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Findings in relation to PPCT Model

PPCT Model constructs	Components	Application to the current research
Process	Reciprocal interactions between individuals and their immediate environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Theme ‘The Transformative Power of Relational Nurture’ outlines how individual NPs forged a deep connection with students via a process of attunement, co-regulation and sensitivity. • Interactions between pupils and the NG environment are outlined in the theme ‘Nurture Pedagogy’, which describes individual nature of these interactions and specific processes of learning provided in NG. • Pupil interactions with staff and peers were observed to develop in NG, as outlined in ‘Changes in the Children’ and their interactions with the school environment generally became more positive.
Person	Personal characteristics, mental and emotional resources, behavioural or emotional dispositions or motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Sub-theme ‘The Right People’ describes specific NP character traits and emotional resources, and the way these influenced interactions at the Process level. • Similarly, the sub-theme ‘Parenting and Modelling’ outlines the behavioural dispositions of NPs who recognized the overlapping roles of educator and parent, and used these skills to influence change in the children.
Context	Environmental systems in which the individual develops	<p>Microsystem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Theme ‘Schools in Crisis’ outlines the fraught school environment that precipitated NG intervention. • ‘You Have to Maslow Before You can Bloom’ outlines the physical and emotional environment of the NG and how this positive context influences change in children’s behaviour and development.

Mesosystem:

- The relationship between family and school was supported through Nurturing initiatives such as Breakfast Club and ‘Soft Start’, to facilitate smooth transitions between home and school. The impact of NG on school ethos and environment is described in the sub-theme ‘A Whole-School Shift’.
- Areas for development were identified to further support development in this system: Increased parent involvement and policy development at school level.

Exosystem:

- The theme ‘Schools in crisis’ and findings of the questionnaire individuate the need for increased resources or support for schools from the DE to meet the changing needs of the population.

Macrosystem:

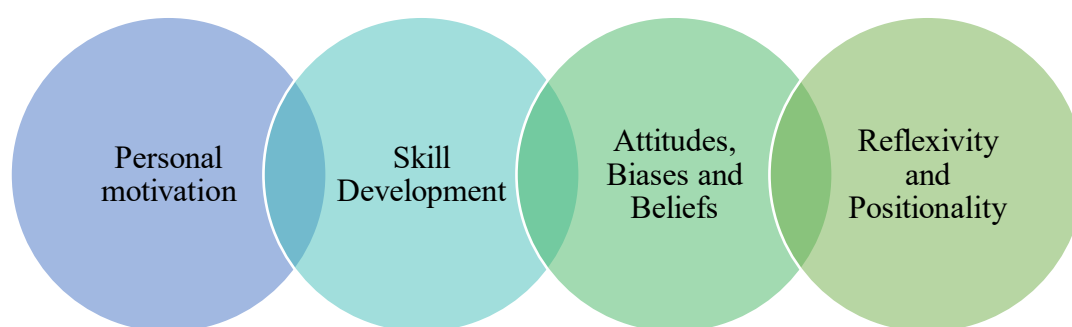
- Social and cultural beliefs about child development, behaviour, role of schools is touched upon in the theme ‘Schools in Crisis’ and sub-theme ‘Parenting and Modelling’, with these educators wondering what their role is in supporting vulnerable students.

Time	Periods of time over multiple levels	<p>Micro-time: Moment by moment interactions as described in the theme ‘The Transformative Power of Relational Nurture’ with people and environment in NG, and how these influenced positive changes in child behaviour over time.</p> <p>Meso-time: The NG timetable and how this was contracted to support individual and groups is outlined in ‘Nurture Pedagogy’</p> <p>Macro-time: Changes in pupil’s social-emotional development or behaviour in school over months or years is described in the theme ‘The Ripple Effect’</p>
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4.3 Researcher Reflexivity and Personal Reflection

Researcher reflexivity is central to RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), as the researcher plays an active role in interpreting and shaping the analysis. Throughout the research process, the researcher made conscious efforts to reflect on assumptions and biases and to critically engage with personal positionality and past experiences in relation to the research topic. In reflecting on the research journey and looking back through the research journal, four key domains were identified representing reflexivity and reflections throughout the research process, as shown in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.1: *Four Domains of Reflexivity and Reflection*



4.3.1 *Personal motivation*

My past experiences as a primary teacher undoubtedly influenced my interest and motivation for this study. While teaching in a primary school in England, I attended a workshop on Attachment Awareness. This information changed the way I understood behaviour and influenced my teaching approaches. More recently, I was lucky to be working in a school in the west of Ireland that was chosen to be part of the Educate Together Nurturing Schools Programme and received training on NG intervention. These experiences led me to become more curious about the factors and variables involved in attachment-based interventions and their benefits for students with SEBD. My interest in Attachment Theory and school-based interventions for attachment difficulties influenced the current study. My curiosity led me to review the literature and consequently, a rationale for the current study was identified.

4.3.2 Skill development

As outlined by the PSI (2022), trainee EPs should develop skills relating to devising and conducting rigorous research and demonstrating knowledge of research paradigms, methods and designs that are relevant to the field of educational psychology. This research journey has provided ample opportunity to develop and enhance my research abilities and expertise. Although I had prior experience in conducting qualitative research, this was my first experience with data management software such as NVivo. To develop my skills and knowledge in this area I engaged in two training workshops organised by the Research and Graduate School in Mary Immaculate College.

Similarly, feedback from the Progression Panel in April 2024 led to a change in research design from qualitative to mixed methods design. This decision increased the validity of the findings and provided a unique set of findings, relative to the Irish context. I was not familiar with MMD and so I was required to develop new skills and knowledge relating to the use of Mixed Methods approaches for data collection and analysis. These learning opportunities supported me to significantly develop my skills as a researcher and will benefit my future practice as an ECP and research-practitioner.

4.3.3 Attitudes, Biases and Beliefs

Engaging with this research process had a significant impact on my attitudes and beliefs and has influenced my emerging practice as a trainee ECP, particularly in how students with SEBD are identified and supported, evidence-based practice and implementation fidelity.

Reflecting on my experiences as a teacher, researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist, it is clear that biases in the school system can significantly impact how children are perceived by school staff, particularly in relation to SEN and SEBD. I have seen first-hand that judgments can be made about children based on subjective observations and influenced by unacknowledged cultural and class-based assumptions. Over the past year on placement I have at times been shocked to hear how some students are unfairly labelled or overlooked due to being from certain backgrounds or social groups. This can lead to unfair treatment of children or lower expectations of their academic or social development. In undertaking this research I reflected on my own position in this system and how the use of the term 'SEBD' in the current study may be problematic if it is used to unfairly perpetuate

expectations rooted in dominant norms of behaviour and achievement. This experience has deepened my awareness of the need for culturally responsive practices and the importance of critically examining my own role in this. This led me to consider the ways that my own biases were reflected in my perceptions of best practice and evidence-based practice, and how these may have been rigidly aligned with traditional practices, influenced by my own experiences and expectations of the school system.

At the beginning of the research process, I viewed evidence-based practice as a rigid framework and valued practices with strict adherence to established interventions. However, through engaging with the participants and analysing interview data, I began to recognise the nuanced relationship between fidelity and flexibility, especially when supporting students with SEBD in settings such as NGs. I now recognize that while fidelity ensures consistency and validity, a degree of adaptability is crucial to meet the diverse and dynamic needs of individual children and the wider school community. Additionally, my understanding of the practical barriers in implementing evidence-based practice, such as practitioner knowledge, staffing and resource constraints, has deepened. While I had experienced some of these barriers in my previous work as a teacher, my role as an interested outsider/researcher enabled a new perspective on the constraints and barriers associated with rigidly conforming to a framework. Going forward, this new understanding will undoubtedly influence my practice as an ECP, and I will advocate for a balance between strict intervention fidelity and sensitivity to flexible, context-dependent approaches.

4.3.4 Reflexivity and Positionality

Engaging in critical discussions with peers and with my research supervisor was helpful in developing my awareness of potential biases and alternative interpretations of the data. A research journal was a valuable tool in the process, and this was used to record and reflect on thoughts, decisions, and challenges encountered (see Appendix Q). During data analysis and interpretation, I repeatedly questioned and considered decisions made about codes and themes, and considered the potential influence of my personal experiences and beliefs. This sometimes took the form of notes written alongside the analysis, voice memos on my phone and written reflections in the journal. Samples of this reflexive process are shown in Figure 4.3. These comments were written as I reflected on my interpretation and reflexive position in relation to comments the NPs made as part of the theme ‘Schools in Crisis’. In this way, I endeavoured to embrace the reflexive process during my research journey to better understand my personal attitudes and beliefs, and how these shape the way I

view and interact with the world and those around me. This process ensured that the analytic process and interpretation of the data was transparent, thoughtful, and meaningfully co-constructed, rather than simply reflecting pre-existing assumptions.

Figure 4.2 *Extracts from reflective commentary*

Something I completely identify with from my past role as teacher in a disadvantaged community. Seeing children suffering neglect, violence, abuse. Parents who were doing their best but lacked the skills or resources. Times when I felt this sentiment and identified exactly this – the children (and parents) are victims of disadvantage, lack of opportunity, victims themselves of abuse, neglect.

As a teacher I felt I had a position of power to provide something more for these families, that if I could provide more for the children, could they use it to climb out of the 'disadvantage'? like Katriona o Sullivan. And what would it take, and what could I give or provide? And what was possible within the constraints of my position as a teacher? Once you see the imbalance of power and the inequity, you can't unsee it. I understand and empathise with their feeling compelled to help, to do something for these children when they're sitting in front of you day after day. And is this kindness, compassion, a shared sense of common humanity or a saviour complex?

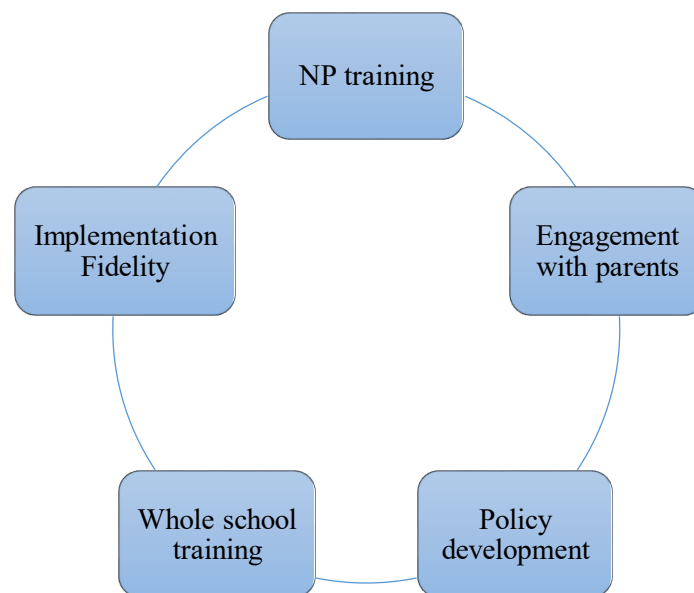
I have been thinking about the ways that bias can exist at multiple layers in the school and educational system. I have always been aware of my own privilege in terms of access to education and other supportive factors, and I have been reflecting on how the education system itself reflects and reinforces dominant cultural and social norms and how I may be unconsciously contributing to this. On my NEPS placement, I have seen clearly how these attitudes and biases can manifest in school culture to alienate and marginalise children who do not conform to these norms, particularly those from minority groups. I have also seen many wonderful examples of individual teachers and SNAs doing their best to create change in this system and I want to contribute to this in my own research and professional practice. I have had to question my personal beliefs, values, and prior experiences and consider how these might influence the way I interpret a child's behaviour or needs. My background as a teacher afforded me plenty of opportunity to reflect and consider how school norms may not align with the wider context of a child's home life, community, and cultural identity. I have been thinking the importance of considering each child as part of their broader ecological system, rather than in isolation. I hope that this will help me to keep a clear and unbiased perspective in my future work. I can see how important it is to have this awareness and to develop and promote inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive approaches in my work and research.

4.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

Emerging findings from this study demonstrate that the conditions and approaches in Irish NGs differ substantially in terms of organisation and structure from accepted models.

Nonetheless, these NGs are characterised by attachment-based approaches, operate in alignment with the NG Principles, and are perceived by NPs to have an overwhelmingly positive effect for individuals and groups across the school. Considered together with the existing evidence base, it can be inferred that many Irish NGs align with the functional intentions defined by Boxall (2002). Implications and areas requiring further support and development have been identified and outlined below in Figure 4.1:

Figure 4.3: *Suggestions for Future Practice*



4.4.1 NP Training

Quantitative findings identified a clear need for further training on nurture theory and practice, with just 75% of NGs staffed by two fully trained adults. While the small sample size (N=61) must be acknowledged, approximately 5% of NGs are run by staff who have not received any training on the model. It is therefore suggested that several members of school staff receive training focused on Nurture theory and practice, with an emphasis on NG Principles (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1978) before the NG is set up. As evidenced by NP narratives, this knowledge appears to positively inform and influence NG practices and approaches. The importance of initial training and continued professional development opportunities have been well documented (Shaver & McClatchey, 2013; Ruby, 2018; Fraser-Smith & Henry, 2016).

Furthermore, given the emphasis placed on the quality and substance of the interpersonal NG relationship, further training is required to elucidate the factors enabling

success, as well as further training on attachment theory, the principles of attunement, and related approaches suitable for use in the NG. NPs should also be made aware of specific approaches such as Emotion Coaching (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015), that further support co-regulation and emotional literacy. As previously suggested by Sloan et al. (2020), the UK-based Attachment Aware Schools programme could also be utilised effectively to develop NP skills and knowledge.

4.4.2 Whole-school Training

While many NG staff have completed specific training, there is room for growth in ensuring consistent training across all staff members. The current study highlighted concerns about the high level of emotional and mental health needs and challenging behaviours in their schools, and the small capacity of the NG to support all students who needed it. Therefore, it is suggested that all staff members should receive training on NG Principles and underlying psychological theory, in order to broaden the scope of the intervention across the whole school. The benefits of embedding NG Principles across the whole school have been highlighted in the current study and elsewhere (Coleman, 2020; Colley, 2009).

4.4.3 Implementation Fidelity

Findings from the current study demonstrated that many NGs in Irish primary schools differ from the accepted NG models in terms of organisational structures and staffing. Implementation fidelity could be enhanced by adhering to guidance about staffing and group size, which states that the NG should be staffed by two adults and run with a core group of pupils who attend for a minimum of 18 hours weekly (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006; Nurture Group Network UK, 2022). The crucial nature of partnership between the two members of staff in the NG was highlighted in the current study and elsewhere as essential for NG success, (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Griffiths, Strenner & Hicks; Hibbin, 2019). These differences in staffing likely arise from variation in resources and funding between the ROI and other contexts and would likely be ameliorated with further training.

4.4.4 Engagement with Parents

Involving parents in NGs has been widely recognised as a crucial element in fostering positive developmental outcomes for children, yet evidence of parental engagement was

lacking with the NGs in this study. Research highlights the significant role of parents and caregivers in reinforcing the social and emotional skills cultivated within the NG (Sloan et al., 2020; Taylor & Gulliford, 2011). Actively involving parents and caregivers in NG activities can create a consistent and supportive environment both at school and at home, enhancing the child's sense of security and trust (Cooper and Whitebread, 2007). Furthermore, NCSE guidance (2017) recommends regular parental engagement in relation to school supports and strategies. Boxall (2002) identified that parental involvement increases collaboration between school staff and families, ensuring that strategies and interventions are aligned. This connection between home and school helps nurture children's self-esteem and emotional resilience.

4.4.5 Policy Development

Quantitative findings demonstrate that a significant majority of schools do not have a specific NG policy. According to Boxall (2002), a formal policy can help in systematically identifying children who would benefit from NG intervention, ensuring they receive timely and appropriate support. Further research demonstrates that having a dedicated policy fosters collaboration between teachers, parents, and support staff, enhancing the holistic nature of school approaches (Daniels and Williams, 2005). Additionally, having a clear NG policy promotes consistency in practice and accountability, enabling ongoing evaluation and modification of the intervention as needed.

4.4.6 Implications for Educational Psychologists

The current study has implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs) working in the school system in Ireland. As highlighted in the literature, EPs are well-placed to provide training, consultation, and support with intervention evaluation and policy development, (Birch, 2016; Sloan et al., 2020). At present, EPs work in partnership with school staff, parents and children to implement, monitor and review school-based interventions.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides psychological support to all publicly- funded schools under the Department of Education. NEPS play a key role in policy development for the Department of Education and should lead the development of NG research and guidance documents. In particular, NEPS are well-placed to conduct research 'on the ground' given their existing links with schools. This research should focus on a systematic evaluation of NG practice and support in order to inform policy development.

NGs in the current study reported mixed experiences of NEPS support, despite previous research describing the key role of the EP in supporting NG practice (Birch, 2016; Gibb, 2017; Sloan et al., 2020). Similarly, NCSE (2017) guidance encourages a multi-agency approach to supporting students with significant and enduring needs and outlines the role of NEPS in supporting and developing individualised interventions. Sloane et al (2020) outline the need for a multi-agency approach to NG practice and highlights the key role for educational psychologists in providing training and guidance. Further research is needed to develop a robust evidence base, and NEPS could play a key role in supporting and evaluating NG pilot projects, researching and developing policy documents.

In relation to the current findings, NEPS are well-placed to offer advice and guidance to schools regarding NG practice and may use their skills and knowledge to promote whole-school approaches that are inclusive, flexible and responsive. NEPS have a role in providing training and development to school staff to enhance understanding of inclusive practice. In relation to NG practice, this should include providing information and training about the theoretical frameworks and principles underpinning NG practice, including strategies such as Emotion Coaching, relational behaviour support methods, attunement principles and attachment awareness. Furthermore, EPs are highly trained and skilled in facilitating attuned interactions and therefore are well-placed to guide and support NPs in developing these skills. NEPS also have a role in supporting school staff to identify students who may benefit from NG, and to provide guidance on monitoring progress and supporting re-integration into the mainstream class. These implications for policy and practice emphasise the key role of NEPS in supporting NGs.

4.4.7 Implications for the National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland is the central body supporting inclusive education. In relation to NG practice, several implications for the NCSE were identified from the current study.

At present, there is no clear national framework for NGs, unlike countries such as the UK. The NCSE could play a key role in developing national policy documents outlining the purpose, organisational features, staffing and processes for selection of pupils. These documents should align with the NG Principles and existing frameworks such as the Wellbeing Framework and Policy for Practice (Department of Education, 2019), and

Department of Education (2024) Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes. In this way, the NCSE would support schools in adopting a whole-school nurture ethos, which would align with the inclusive education goals under the EPSEN Act and Department of Education (2024) Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes. Similarly, the NCSE should compile and publish a list of existing NGs in order to facilitate further support and development.

In addition, for NGs to be effective, educators require specialised training in trauma-informed care, attachment theory, and relational approaches. The NCSE's recent guidance for schools, *Relate* (NCSE, 2025), represents a positive first step toward reframing challenging behaviours and expanding teacher understanding of trauma-informed practice. This could be further developed by collaborating with existing bodies such as the teacher education colleges and Oide to integrate nurture-based modules into existing programmes.

Further research is warranted to develop robust evaluations of existing NG practice to build an evidence base. In order to systematically evaluate NG practice, it would be beneficial for pilot NG projects to be established and supported by the NCSE. The NCSE could provide funding for research to be carried out at a national level, similar to that carried out in Northern Ireland (Sloane et al., 2020), which provided valuable insights about the effectiveness and cost implications of NGs.

4.4.8 Implications for Department of Education Inspectorate

The Department of Education Inspectorate evaluate the quality of education provision and ensure policy implementation in schools in ROI. In relation to NGs, the Inspectorate have a role in supporting and evaluating NG practice. At present, NGs may not be formally acknowledged or evaluated during Whole School Evaluations (WSEs) or other inspections. NG practice could be examined within existing frameworks such as the Quality Framework for Schools: Looking at Our School (Department of Education, 2022) and in relation to existing policies such as the Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes (Department of Education, 2024).

Furthermore, inspectors could assess the extent to which NG principles inform whole-school policy and practice, including approaches to behaviour and discipline, wellbeing policies and leadership commitment to inclusive and trauma-informed practices. Similarly,

the Inspectorate could support schools to use the School Self-Evaluation process to include whole-school nurturing approaches.

Guidance documents and training may need to be developed to increase understanding of the aims and structures of NGs, and to support recognition of effective practice in NGs, for example, use of the Boxall assessment, regular routines, and clear structures for selection of pupils. Within this framework, clear guidance should be developed to facilitate evaluation of how NG principles are embedded in educational provision. It would be beneficial for the NCSE and NEPS to work collaboratively with the Inspectorate in this regard.

4.4.9 Implications for Policy at National Level

As outlined in Chapter 2, there is currently no national guidance, policies or documents from the Department of Education regarding NGs. Findings of the current study indicate that NGs are quickly becoming a widely-used intervention for school-based emotional and social development. Moreover, NGs are listed as an effective intervention in the national Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019). However, without clear guidance, many NGs are operating without adequate training, staffing or structures, posing a potential risk to the children in these schools. It is the responsibility of the Department of Education and associated bodies such as school patrons, NCSE and NEPS, to provide evidence-based supports in schools. This may include access to training and development and allocation of specific funding for NG training, staffing and resources.

4.4.10 Implications for Future Research

The current study identified several factors associated with NG success. Future research could expand on the findings of the current study by investigating perspectives of other stakeholders, including NG children, parents, and EPs. The current study focused solely on NGs at the primary school level, and further investigation is warranted to explore NG impact and conditions for success at the post-primary level in ROI. Furthermore, this study highlighted divergence in organizational structures, staffing and approaches between NGs in Ireland and those elsewhere. Given the increasing popularity of NGs, future research should examine current understandings of the nurture approach, processes and strategies common to Irish NGs and the impact of this divergence on pupil outcomes. While the findings of the

current study illustrate positive outcomes for NG students with SEBD, it did not explore the impact on specific groups within this population. Therefore future research could examine NG outcomes for different groups, such as students with special educational needs, children in care and those from diverse or minority groups such as Traveller or Roma communities.

Similarly, future research should also take into consideration the inherent bias in identification of certain ethnic or social groups as ‘minority’ and the implications of such a label being applied. In addition, the means by which students are identified with SEBD requires further investigation, with a lens to acknowledging potential bias inherent in the use of these terms in schools, and the over-identification of students from certain backgrounds. Without the consistent use of structured tools such as the Boxall Profile, these judgements may be influenced by implicit class and cultural norms embedded within the education system (Reay, 2006). This has implications for a more reflective and equity-focused approach to exploring SEBD in educational contexts, to ensure a more culturally response approach to practice.

Findings in this study indicated that NGs supported academic progress for some students, though previous research reports mixed results (Reynolds, MacKay & Kearney 2009, Sloan et al., 2020). Therefore the suggested association between NG attendance and academic gains warrants further investigation. It would also be of benefit to examine the impact of school-level factors, such as DEIS status, on NG conditions and effectiveness. Additionally, the short-term nature of this study does not address the need for longitudinal research in this area to evaluate long-term outcomes for students. Finally, given the relevance of this topic to educational psychologists working directly within the school system, it would be beneficial to use small-scale action research methods such as Appreciative Inquiry to support existing NGs to develop evidence-based, strengths-focused practice. To date, the research base addressing implementation in NGs is limited and it remains difficult to determine whether the various NGs that have been shown to improve student social-emotional-behavioural functioning used a set of interventions of comparable form and fidelity. Future research evaluating student progress in social-emotional-behavioural functioning as result of placement in a NG would benefit from the systematic inclusion of fidelity measures.

4.5 Impact Statement

This research set out to examine the impact of NG for children's social-emotional development and to identify the specific skills and strategies that contribute to change by investigating the characteristics and practices of NGs in Irish primary schools. The current study aimed to contribute to the field of educational and child psychology by increasing knowledge and understanding of common processes and practices in place in Irish NGs, and to elucidate the effectiveness of this school-based intervention for SEBD.

The findings of this research represent an important and unique contribution to the existing literature by expanding on current understanding of the nurture approach and clarifying processes, approaches and factors associated with success. The current study sought to contribute to this area of research by supplementing the existing literature base on a national and international level. At present, there are no published studies regarding NG practice in the Republic of Ireland, despite notable contributions from Northern Ireland (e.g. Sloan et al., 2020). Therefore, a strength of this research is that it is the first of its kind to examine and identify common approaches currently in use in Irish NGs and their perceived efficacy in supporting children with SEBD. The findings deliver clarity on key processes, strategies, and factors common to NGs in ROI and specify the positive influence of NG for students' social and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, Bennett's (2015) systematic review highlighted the need for further investigation of the exact conditions and processes impacting NG effectiveness. This study has highlighted some of the key features of successful NG practice, including the importance of relationship formation, the physical environment and meeting children's basic needs for safety and connection in school, making a valuable contribution to the literature. Furthermore, this study makes a unique contribution, in that it is the first to systematically compile demographic data from Irish NGs, providing an overview of NG characteristics and practices and evaluating alignment with the widely accepted NG models and principles. Consequently, the key contribution of this study lies in its originality within the field of educational and child psychology, both in Ireland and internationally.

A further impact of this study relates to its role in enhancing evidence-based school interventions for SEBD, which is a fundamental aspect of Educational Psychology practice. In line with previous research, the findings indicate that NGs can have a positive influence on children's social-emotional development and improve behaviours in school. Schools play a

central role in fostering a sense of belonging, however, this requires intention, commitment to connectedness and awareness of any unconscious biases that may be inherent in teacher attitudes and the wider school system and how these may influence student experiences. Key criteria supporting this intervention are identified, including positive relationships, access to resources and training and flexibility in approach. Areas for development include increased staffing, policy development and further training on specific strategies and approaches such as attunement, attachment and co-regulation. By considering the implications for school-based practice, this study can shape educational outcomes and interventions at school level, informing ethical decision-making and inclusive practices.

To ensure that findings contribute meaningfully to ECP practice and policy, efforts were made to disseminate the research to interested parties and stakeholders. Therefore, the preliminary research findings were presented to attendees at the Psychological Society of Ireland Annual Conference in November 2024. Because this research has implications for schools, the study was also presented to attendees at the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) Education Conference in November 2024. Effective dissemination allows research to bridge the gap between theory and practice, informing the work of education staff, psychologists, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Bazeley, 2013). Future plans to share the study results include presentation to trainee educational and child psychologists at the Educational and Child Psychology Research Methods Summer School at Mary Immaculate College in May 2025. The research outcomes will be offered to relevant organisations including Nurturing Schools Ireland and the NEPS Special Interest group for NGOs. Finally, the researcher intends to submit the systematic literature review and empirical paper for publication in peer-reviewed journals. In this way, these research findings can be translated into meaningful improvements in policy and practice and make a further contribution to the field.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Systematic Review Screening

Articles screened for inclusion / exclusion criteria		
Title	Meets inclusion criteria?	Reasons for Exclusion
1. Hearing the unheard: Children's constructions of their nurture group experiences. (Griffiths et al., 2014)	Yes	
2. Do nurture groups improve the social, emotional and behavioural functioning of at risk children? (Seth-Smith et al., 2010)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
3. The effectiveness of Nurture Groups in improving outcomes for young children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in primary schools: An evaluation of Nurture Group provision in Northern Ireland. (Sloan et al., 2020)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision Does not elicit views and experiences of knowledgeable participants
4. The differentiated impact of Kangaroo Class programmes in Quebec primary schools: examining behavioural improvements in relation to student characteristics. (Lavoie, 2017)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
5. The attunement principles: a comparison of nurture group and mainstream settings. (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017)	No	Comparing nurture group and classroom practices Does not elicit views and experiences of knowledgeable participants
6. They were a little family': An exploratory study of parental involvement in nurture groups - from a practitioner and parent perspective. (Kirkbride, 2014)	No	Explores parental perceptions of Nurture Group
7. Understanding nurturing practices — a comparison of the use of strategies likely to enhance self-esteem in nurture groups and normal classrooms. (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003)	No	Does not elicit views and experiences of knowledgeable participants
8. Exploring the Impact of Nurture Groups on Children's Social Skills: A Mixed-Methods Approach. (Cunningham et al., 2019)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
9. Helping Children Thrive at School: The Effectiveness of Nurture Groups. (Sanders, 2007)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
10. The Embodied Narrative Nature of Learning: Nurture in School. (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016)	No	Does not elicit views and experiences of knowledgeable participants
11. Whole School Support for Vulnerable Children: The Evaluation of a Part-Time Nurture Group.	No	Evaluating NG outcomes

	(Binnie & Allen, 2008)		
12.	The bread, the jam and some coffee in the mornings: perceptions of a nurture group. (Bishop & Swain, 2000)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
13.	Listening to the voices of young children in a nurture class.(Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017)	Yes	
14.	The effectiveness of nurture groups on Student progress: evidence from a national research study (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
15.	The effectiveness of Nurture Groups: preliminary research findings. (Cooper et al., 2001).	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
16.	'It's small steps, but that leads to bigger changes': evaluation of a nurture group intervention. (Vincent, 2017).	Yes	
17.	The use and frequency of verbal and non-verbal praise in nurture groups. (Bani, 2011)	No	Does not elicit the views and perspectives of knowledgeable participants
18.	Parental perspectives on nurture groups: the potential for engagement. (Taylor & Gulliford, 2011)	No	Discusses parental engagement with Nurture Group
19.	Assessing effectiveness of nurture groups in Northern Scotland. (Shaver & McClatchey, 2013)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
20.	Progress and challenge in Nurture Groups: evidence from three case studies. (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005)	Yes	
21.	The effectiveness of Nurture Groups: preliminary research findings (Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
22.	Primary teachers' experiences of the effectiveness of nurture groups on children's social and emotional skills, attainment and behaviour. (Macpherson & Phillips, 2021)	No	Evaluating outcomes of NG provision
23.	A study of Nurture Groups as a window into school relationships: restorative justice and punishment in primary school settings. (Warin & Hibbin, 2016)	No	Narrative account, primary data not reported
24.	Nurture and nurture groups (Coleman & Cooper, 2017)	No	Discussion Article, no primary data reported

Appendix B: Nurture UK Quality Criteria

The Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Boxall Nurture Group Accreditation Guidance (Nurture Group Network, 2022)

Essential Criteria
The establishment applying for the MBQMA must be a member of nurtureuk.
There must be two of the same members of staff working with the pupils at all times.
At least one member of the nurture group staff, currently working with the children/young people must have completed nurtureuk's Theory & Practice of Nurture Groups training course and passed the related assignment. It would be desirable for more than one member of staff per establishment to have completed the course.
The Boxall Profile assessment tool must be used to refer children to the nurture group, inform practice and support the process of reintegration.
The nurture group must have been running for a minimum of two years prior to an application, with at least one certificated staff member working with the children/young people during this time.
There must be a minimum of six pupils in the nurture group for the majority of the time (with a maximum of 12 pupils)
In mainstream key stages one and two, the nurture group must run for a minimum of four half-day sessions per week with the same core group of children, with a fifth session for preparation,
In other settings the nurture group must run for a minimum of 20% of the timetable per week with the same group of children, with additional time for preparation and work with stakeholders. The input provided must be <i>regular and sustained</i> with evidence of successful outcomes as well as incorporating the Six Principles and practices of nurture groups.

Additional guidance for nurture groups run by support staff nurture practitioners

A teacher or senior leader in an establishment must be responsible for overseeing, supporting and co-ordinating the nurture group. In this situation the teacher should undertake the following duties:

- Spend regular time within the nurture group to support the nurture practitioners and gain knowledge of pupils to inform assessment and planning.
- Advise on strategies for individual children/young people within the nurture group where necessary.
- Carry out and contribute to school policies and procedures, including safeguarding procedures where appropriate.
- Oversee the activities and advise and collaborate with the nurture practitioners on delivering the curriculum, bearing in mind the individual needs of each child/young person.
- Meet regularly with the nurture practitioners to monitor daily individual records of the children/young people's progress and intended programmes of work.
- Liaise with outside agencies when necessary.
- Actively work with the nurture practitioners in partnership with parents to support and extend the work of the nurture group.
- Liaise with the nurture group staff, child/young person's class teacher, SENCo (*where applicable*) and attend regular reviews under the Code of Practice/Staged Intervention etc.
- Liaise with nurture practitioners to observe children/young people in alternative settings e.g. classes, playground and at lunchtimes and work together to develop strategies for managing these children in the nurture group and mainstream classroom.
- Participate in joint planning with the class teacher, nurture practitioners and school regarding IEPs etc.

Standards

1. Whole establishment management and staffing		Self-Assessment	
Area and standards	Consider	Essential	Desirable
1a. Is located clearly within the policies and structures of the school's continuum of special educational needs provision Is taken full account of in school policies and is fully considered in their development and review.	1a.1 Reference to the nurture group in behaviour, inclusion and special needs and staff support policies		
	1a.2 There is an additional policy relating to the nurture group		
	1a.3 The nurture group team work regularly with the SMT and mainstream colleagues to review school policies		
	1a.4 The nurture group policy has been reviewed within the last 12 months		
1b. Promotes the active involvement of mainstream staff in the life of the nurture group	1b.1 Protocols are evident for the involvement of other staff		
	1b.2 Evidence of whole establishment training relating to nurture group		
	1b.3 Staff are regularly invited to join with activities in the nurture group		

	1b.4 Appropriate staff show knowledge of nurture group routines and the reasons for them		
	1b.5 Staff are able to offer consistent expectations and routines across mainstream settings and the nurture group		
	1b.6 Nurture group successes are celebrated in the mainstream and vice versa		
1c. Is staffed by two adults of whom at least one has completed and passed the Certificate Course - The Theory and Practice of Nurture Groups	1c.1 At least one nurture group staff member has completed the accredited certificate course with at least a pass grade		
	1c.2 Nurture group staff are never required to cover for absent colleagues		
	1c.3 The group does not run with temporary staff		
	1c.4 Visits by other children and adults are carefully planned		

1. Whole establishment management and staffing		Self-Assessment	
Area and standards	Consider	Essential	
1d. Is staffed by adults who have and promote a positive attitude towards parents/carers of all children and encourage their involvement in activities supportive of the nurture group programme	1d.1 Parents and caregivers are regularly invited to join in for nurture group activities		
	1d.2 Staff support parents and caregivers to develop appropriate management and interaction strategies		
1e. Encourages multi-agency approaches to support children and parents	1e.1 Staff in the nurture group regularly discuss and support referrals to outside agencies		
	1e.2 Staff liaise with additional agencies where appropriate and support interventions wherever possible		

2. Attendance		Self-Assessment	
Area and standards	Consider	Essential	
2a. Has a pattern of attendance whereby children/young people attend the group for substantial and regular sessions	2a.1 The timetable is clear		
	2a.2 Routines for collection from mainstream classes (where applicable)		
	2a.3 Evidence of planning		
2b. Offers short- or medium-term placements, usually for between two and four terms, depending on the child's specific needs	2b.1 Individual child/young person records		
	2b.2 Boxall Profile© assessments		
	2b.3 Minutes of termly admission and review meetings		

3. Assessment, Resettlement and Evaluation		Self-Assessment	
Area and standards	Consider	Essential	Desirable
3a. Ensures that children/young people attending the nurture group remain members of a mainstream class where they register daily and attend selected activities	3a.1 Shared planning and target setting		
	3a.2 Termly regular admission and review meetings		
	3a.3 Clear communication between the nurture group staff and the mainstream staff		
3b. Ensures placements are determined on the basis of systematic assessment using the Boxall Profile and other appropriate diagnostic and evaluative instruments, with the aim always being to return the child/young person to full-time mainstream provision	3b.1 Clear selection and resettlement procedures		
	3b.2 Boxall Profiles are completed termly		
	3b.3 Use of observation schedules/records to identify progress with behaviour, use of language, social interaction skills		
	3b.4 Individual resettlement plans exist with clear targets, strategies and responsibilities identified Individual child/young person records		
3c. Is monitored and evaluated as to its effectiveness in promoting positive social, emotional and educational development of each child/young person	3c.1 Boxall Profile assessments		
	3c.2 IEP targets clearly linked to Boxall Profile areas to be developed		
	3c.3 Use of Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire		

	3c.4 Access to all other available information and reports, e.g. parental and child/young person views, Eand other agency reports etc.		
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4. Environment		Self-Assessment	
Area and standards	Consider	Essential	Desirable
4a. Supplies a setting and relationships for children in which missing or insufficiently internalised essential early learning experiences are provided	4a.1 Room provides opportunities for early learning experiences		
	4a.2 Planning reflects how children's/young person's learning is understood developmentally		
	4a.3 A variety of stimulating activities are planned around individual needs with evidence of adult flexibility to respond to children/young people's needs in the here and now		
	4a.4 Positive relationships between adults and children/young people in which adults show interest in and enthusiasm for developing their learning needs		
	4a.5 The curriculum is explicitly interwoven into all learning experiences		
4b. Provides a warm, welcoming and educational environment, that incorporates aspects of both home and school and where children/young people are accepted and valued	4b.1 Emphasis on sharing social experiences often based around food, and developing recognition of emotions		
	4b.2 Children/young people's attendance and timekeeping is seen to improve		
	4b.3 Predictable and stable daily routines are known and understood by the pupils		
	4b.4 Appropriate praise/reward is offered and children/young people are encouraged to value the efforts of others as well as their own		
	4b.5 Children/young people are able to describe the progression in their own learning		

5. Curriculum and Activities		Self-Assessment	
Area and standards	Consider	Essential	Desirable
5a. Ensures that the requirements of current curriculum guidance and legislative requirements are fulfilled	5a.1 Joint planning with appropriate staff		
	5a.2 Planning records indicate good knowledge of individual attainments and set appropriate challenges		
	5a.3 Classroom resources and routines allow for frequent incidental reinforcement of basic skills in numeracy and literacy		
	5a.4 A thematic approach is taken to the curriculum that starts with children/young people's direct experience and immediate environment		
	5a.5 Evidence of both adult and child/young person led activities		
5b. Provides opportunities for social learning through cooperation and play in a group with an appropriate mix of children/young people	5b.1 Selection of children/young people routinely considers the current dynamics of the nurture group		
	5b.2 School routines and rules and social and conversational behaviours are explicitly taught and reinforced in small incremental steps		
	5b.3 Individual and group planning accommodates the level of support required by each child/young person at that time and builds in opportunities for challenge that enable progression in the application of skills		
5c. Recognises the importance of quality play experiences in the development of children's learning	5c.1 Planning and support strategies show recognition of an individual's stage of play and aims to extend this		
	5c.2 Adults play regularly with the children, with similar age-appropriate activities for young people, modelling language, behaviours, emotional states and the use of equipment		
	5c.3 There is a broad range of play equipment available		

6. A nurturing approach		Self-Assessment
Area and standards	Consider	Essential
6a. Offers support for children's/young people's positive emotional, social and cognitive development at whatever level of need the children/young people show, by responding to them in a developmentally appropriate way	6a.1 Children/young people are praised explicitly for all achievements	
	6a.2 Children/young people are not criticised for inconsistencies in their performance	
	6a.3 Staff are able to help children/young people regulate their more extreme emotional responses	
	6a.4 Staff provide experiences which challenge the child/young person's specific difficulties	
	6a.5 Staff model good relationships	
6b. Places an emphasis on communication and language development through intensive interaction with adults and children/young people	6b.1 Language is a central element of all nurture group activities	
	6b.2 Children/young people are explicitly taught the words for emotions and feelings	
	6b.3 The emotional literacy of all is supported and developed	
	6b.4 Adults are skilled at actively listening to children/young people	
	6b.5 Children/young people engage adults through conversation rather than behaviour	
	6b.6 Opportunities to model and practice interactional language are built into the nurture group routines	

Appendix C: Participant Questionnaire

Whole School Management and Staffing	
Is your nurture group referenced in some school policies? e.g. Wellbeing, behaviour, anti-bullying, inclusion, SEN	Yes / no
Is a specific nurture group policy in place?	Yes / no
How many adults work in your nurture group?	1 2 3+
Have the nurture staff completed received specific Nurture Group training?	Both One None
Are there opportunities for mainstream staff to be involved in nurture? (for example, attending training, joining in nurture activities, celebrating children's successes in nurture)	Yes/no
Are parents and caregivers are regularly invited to join in for nurture group activities?	Yes / no
Does your Nurture Group support parents and caregivers to develop appropriate management and interaction strategies?	Yes / no
Do the staff in your Nurture Group liaise with additional agencies where appropriate? e.g. NEPS, Tusla, NCSE	Yes / no
Attendance	
The Nurture Group is:	full time part time
Is the nurture group run for a minimum of four half-day sessions per week 18 hours weekly) with the same core group of children? (Yes / no
Do the children attending your nurture group remain members of a mainstream class where they register daily and attend selected activities?	Yes / no
Do most children attend the group for between two and four terms, depending on their individual needs?	Yes / no
How many children attend the nurture group?	0-6 6-12 12+
If part time, how many in each group?	0-6 6-12 12+
Assessment	
Is the Boxall Profile assessment used to identify children for nurture group?	Yes / no
Is the Boxall Profile used to inform individual learning plans or student support plans?	Yes / no
Are regular assessments completed to monitor children's progress?	Yes, Boxall Profile Yes, other assessment No

Environment	
Does the Nurture room provide a warm, welcoming and educational environment that incorporates aspects of both home and school?	Yes / no
Is a domestic setting provided with food and comfortable furniture?	Yes / no
Is a range of equipment for play and creative expression available?	Yes / no
Routines	
Are predictable and stable daily routines in place?	Yes / no
Do the children engage in everyday routines of tidying up, sorting, putting away?	Yes / no
Do the classroom resources and routines allow for frequent informal reinforcement of basic literacy and maths skills?	Yes / no
Are simple changes to routine planned for and introduced to accustom children to change?	Yes / no
Is there a plan to support children's reintegration to the mainstream class?	Yes / no
Curriculum and Activities	
Are individual targets set for each child and reviewed regularly?	Yes / no
Does nurture group planning include both adult and child led activities?	Yes / no
Do the mainstream and nurture staff engage in joint planning as needed?	Yes / no
A nurturing approach	
Do the adults working in the nurture group model positive relationships and interactions with one another?	Yes / no
Do adults offer praise in a diversity of ways, including non-verbally such as smiling and nodding?	Yes / no
Do the adults model appropriate non-verbal communication such as eye contact, facial expressions and tone of voice?	Yes / no
Are there opportunities for adults and children to share in reciprocal activities such as play, having meals, sharing books and reading aloud together?	Yes / no
Is time provided for children to talk about events and feelings?	Yes / no
Can staff support children to regulate their emotional responses?	Yes / no
Are the words for emotions and feelings explicitly taught to the children in nurture group?	Yes / no
Are the school routines, rules and social behaviours explicitly taught to the children in nurture group?	Yes / no
Are the play activities provided at the child's current developmental level?	Yes / no
Do the adults engage children in extended conversations, recalling, and planning for tomorrow?	Yes / no
Thank you for providing this information. Do you give consent to being contacted to participate in an interview about the nurture group?	Yes / no

Appendix D: MIREC Form

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A24-010

1. PROJECT TITLE

Perceived benefits and limitations of nurture groups for children's social - emotional skills & behaviour

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Katy Kelly
Department / Centre / Other:	RPECS
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher (DECPsy)


3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this proposal and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	1 st March 2024

Appendix E: MIREC Amendment form (April 2024)

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A24-010 1st Amendment Request

1. PROJECT TITLE

Perceived benefits and limitations of nurture groups for children's social - emotional skills & behaviour

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Katy Kelly
Department / Centre / Other:	EPISE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher (DECPsy)

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

Proposed amendments:

1. *Research Question - no change*

2. *Hypothesis/Research Design - no change*

3. *Data Collection Methods*

Approval was granted for participants to complete a questionnaire providing demographic information about the school and nurture group. This questionnaire has been expanded to gather more details about the nurture group (Appendix A). Schools will be contacted using the methods described in the previously approved research and a link to the questionnaire using Google Forms will be sent at this time along with the participant information sheet and advertisement.

Following this, participants will be asked to opt-in for interview to provide more detailed information about the effectiveness of the current practice in the nurture group.

4. *Participant Number & Selection Procedures*

The number of participants completing the questionnaire will be between 30-70.

The number of participants attending for interview remains unchanged.


4. *Changes to Supporting Documentation*

A new participant information sheet will be sent to schools outlining the purpose of the research and the questionnaire. (Appendix B)

5. *Other Changes - none*

I have reviewed this amendment proposal and I am satisfied it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	24 th April 2024

Appendix F: Piloted interview schedule and questionnaire

Pilot Interview Schedule

1. Can you begin by telling me about your role in the school and in the Nurture group?
2. Can you give some examples of how nurture has impacted positively on the students who attend? (social / emotional / behaviour?)
3. What are the strengths of your nurture group / What makes your ng successful?
4. How long do children typically attend the NG for?
5. What types of activities do you do in NG?
6. What factors support your NG?
7. Are there any external services or agencies, such as NEPS, that support the NG?
8. How do you develop the curriculum for nurture? (or target setting?)
9. What, if any, challenges are associated with establishing or running the NG?
10. Can you think of any negative implications for the children who attend nurture group? *
11. Are there any ways you think your nurture group could be improved?
12. Can you tell me about the routines of the NG?
13. How does your role as Nurture practitioner influence your work outside of nurture group? (yard, staff meetings, mainstream teaching)
14. Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for me to know about this NG?

Probes

*Can you give me an example?

Can you tell me more about that?

Why do you think that is?

How does that work?

What does that look like?

What led you to...?

It sounds like you are saying....have I got that right?

Pilot Questionnaire

Whole School Management and Staffing	
Is your nurture group referenced in some school policies? e.g. Wellbeing, behaviour, anti-bullying, inclusion, SEN	Yes / no
Is a specific nurture group policy in place?	Yes / no
How many adults work in your nurture group?	1 2 3+
Have the nurture staff completed received specific Nurture Group training?	Both One None
Are there opportunities for mainstream staff to be involved in nurture? (for example, attending training, joining in nurture activities, celebrating children's successes in nurture)	Yes/no
Are parents and caregivers are regularly invited to join in for nurture group activities?	Yes / no
Does your Nurture Group support parents and caregivers to develop appropriate management and interaction strategies?	Yes / no
Do the staff in your Nurture Group liaise with additional agencies where appropriate? e.g. NEPS, Tusla, NCSE	Yes / no
Attendance	
The Nurture Group is:	full time part time
Is the nurture group run for a minimum of four half-day sessions per week 18 hours weekly) with the same core group of children? (Yes / no
Do the children attending your nurture group remain members of a mainstream class where they register daily and attend selected activities?	Yes / no
Do most children attend the group for between two and four terms, depending on their individual needs?	Yes / no
How many children attend the nurture group?	0-6 6-12 12+
If part time, how many in each group?	0-6 6-12 12+
Assessment	
Is the Boxall Profile assessment used to identify children for nurture group?	Yes / no
Is the Boxall Profile used to inform individual learning plans or student support plans?	Yes / no
Are regular assessments completed to monitor children's progress?	Yes, Boxall Profile Yes, other assessment no

Appendix G: Reflexive Journal Extract

Friday 19th April 2024

After the pilot interview I realised that I needed to revise the questions to encourage better narratives and reflective insights from the participants. I noticed that the interviewees were very eager to talk about their NG, which was great, but their eagerness led them in tangents, so the interview data was a bit vague and all over the place. I realized that the questions need to be more targeted and specific to gather the information I'm looking for. I also recognised that I need to explore the importance of relationships in NG so I can better understand the process of change. The feedback about the questionnaire was very positive, and they reported that it was quick and easy to complete so I don't think I need to make any further changes.

I revised the interview schedule accordingly to ask more targeted prompts about the impact, success factors, and specific challenges of the NG. For example, I changed the first question from: 'Can you begin by telling me about your role in the school and in the Nurture group?' to 'Can you tell me about a typical day in your NG?'.

I feel that this is a better opening question as it is still open-ended but will enable me to gather information about the characteristics of the NG, relationships between NPs and children, and practical elements such as funding and staffing. This experience sharpened my focus and allowed me to better align my data collection with the theoretical underpinnings and research questions of my study.

Appendix H: Recruitment email

Dear Principal,

My name is Katy Kelly and I am currently completing a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. My thesis research concerns the impact of Nurture Groups for children in Irish primary schools. I am seeking primary teachers and SNA's who have experience of working in a nurture group to:

1. Complete a five minute online questionnaire accessible here:
<https://forms.gle/xGcrjzmxpP1ger7X8>
2. Participate in a 30 minute interview about the nurture group

I would be very grateful if you could share this email, and the attached information sheet and advertisement with any staff members who have experience of working in a Nurture Group. The information sheet contains further details about the study and what is involved in taking part. Please get in touch if you have any questions or if any members of staff would like to participate.

Kind regards,

Katy Kelly

Appendix I: Advertisement for Participants



Are you a teacher or SNA who has experience of working in a Nurture Group?

My name is Katy [Kelly](#) and I am currently completing a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. At present I am working on my thesis research, entitled *Perceived Benefits and Limitations of Nurture Groups for Children's Social - Emotional Skills and Behaviour*.

I would like to gather the views and experiences of teachers and SNA's who have experience of working in a Nurture Group to find out your thoughts and opinions on this topic.

Exactly what is involved?

1. Complete a brief online questionnaire to gather information about your nurture group, available here <https://forms.gle/xGcrjzmxpP1ger7X8> or by scanning the QR code below.
2. I am also seeking staff to participate in an interview lasting between 30 to 45 minutes in length. The interviews can be held in-person in your school or via Microsoft Teams at a time that is convenient for you. The interview questions will explore your thoughts about how Nurture Groups support children's social - emotional development and behaviour and your experiences of supporting children in a Nurture Group. You will not be asked to share any personal or identifying information about yourself, your school, or any of the children attending the nurture group.

How can I get involved?

Please scan the QR code below to complete the questionnaire, or get in touch by phone on 085 1967318, or email to 0651796@micstudent.mic.ul.ie



Appendix J: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

What is the project about?

In recent years, many Nurture Groups have been established in Irish primary schools. A nurture group is a trauma-informed intervention for children, based upon the principles of attachment theory and developed for schools (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). The purpose of the nurture group is to support children and young people in successfully regulating their emotions and managing their behaviour (Cooper & Tipton, 2005), which in turn increases their capacity to engage in learning.

However, very little empirical or quantitative data is currently available detailing how many nurture groups are currently established in Ireland, what approaches and practices are currently in place, or how effective these are in supporting children's behaviour and social-emotional development.

Therefore, this research aims to:

1. Examine the characteristics of nurture groups in Irish primary schools, to find more about the approaches and practices currently in place.
2. Explore the perceived strengths and limitations of nurture groups to support children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Who is undertaking it?

My name is Katy Kelly and I am currently completing a Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology programme in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. This study is part of my doctoral thesis research and is being completed under the supervision of Dr. Sarah O'Brien.

How to participate?

Please follow this link to complete a five-minute questionnaire via Google forms <https://forms.gle/xGcrjzmxpP1ger7X8>

If you would like to participate in an interview, please get in touch with me by phone or email on 085 1967318 or 0651796@micstudent.mic.ul.ie

Why is it being undertaken?

This study is being undertaken because pupils experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are increasingly participating in Nurture Groups, an intervention based upon the principles of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). However, at present there is very little evidence relating to nurture groups in Irish schools. A recent systematic review concluded that while a wealth of literature describes the positive impact of nurture groups in UK schools, further research is required to understand the 'key ingredients' that make this intervention effective (Bennett, 2015). Therefore this study aims to examine the characteristics of nurture groups in Irish primary

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number A24-010). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, ~~University of Limerick~~ 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

schools to find out what approaches and practices are in place, and the perceived strengths and limitations of nurture groups at primary level in Ireland. By eliciting and examining the views and experiences of nurture group staff such as teachers and SNAs, we may glean insight into current practices and the perceived impact of this intervention. It is envisaged that this will contribute to the existing international research on the efficacy of nurture groups to support children's wellbeing.

What are the benefits and potential risks of this research?

This study will contribute to the literature on the topics of nurture groups and trauma-informed school based interventions, which may inform future policy and practice in this area. A benefit of participating in the study is that you will be provided with an opportunity for to reflect on and share the elements of practice that you feel are most impactful, and to discuss the important aspects of the nurture group in detail.

There are no direct risks to participants who agree to be interviewed, though it is possible that in discussing the nurture group, thoughts or memories relating to traumatic events experienced by the individual themselves, or by the children in the nurture group may arise.

To minimise this risk, participants are informed that: 1) Participation in this study is voluntary; 2) Participants in this study are under no obligations or expectations to discuss sensitive personal information or experiences; 3) All participants can contact professional support services such as the Spectrum Life Employee Assistance and Primary Care counselling services should the need for external supports arise.

Exactly what is involved for the participant (time, location, etc.)

Part 1: You will be asked to complete an online questionnaire designed to gather information about the nurture group. The majority of questions require a yes/no answer. The questionnaire will take approximately five minutes to complete. You will not be asked to share any personal or identifying information about yourself, your school, or any of the children attending the nurture group.

Part 2: If you agree to participate in an interview with the lead researcher this can be held online or in your school at a time that is convenient to you. It is anticipated that interviews will take between 30-45 minutes. You will be asked to provide more detailed information about your school's nurture group, your experiences as a nurture group educator and the impact of the nurture group on the children who attend.

Right to withdraw

Your anonymity is assured, and you are free to withdraw from the study up to the point of submitting the questionnaire. Because the questionnaire data is collected anonymously, it will not be possible to withdraw from the study after you have submitted your responses to this questionnaire. Following interviews, participants have the right to withdraw from the study by contacting the lead researcher within one week of the interview date.

How will the information be used / disseminated?

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number A24-010). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Upperclock Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

The information gathered from all the participants in the study will be collated and analysed to identify common themes and issues. These will be shared as part of the results and discussion sections of my thesis. Some direct quotes from the interviews may be used in the thesis and in any subsequent publications or conference presentations. However, individual participants or schools will not be identifiable in any of the reported data.

How will confidentiality be kept?

All of the information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party. Participant names, email addresses, school names and locations will not be sought or collected as part of the questionnaire. For interview participants, pseudonyms will be used for names and schools will be allocated a random number (e.g. School 2). This number and pseudonym will be used with your data to maintain anonymity. Participant's real names and school names or locations will not be used anywhere in the transcribed or reported data.

What will happen to the data after research has been completed?

In accordance with the MIC Record Retention Schedule, anonymized data may be retained indefinitely.

Contact details:

If at any time you have any queries or issues with regard to this study, my contact details are as follows: Katy Kelly; Email: 0651796@micstudent.mic.ul.ie; Telephone: 085 1967318

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number A24-010). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (reference number A24-010). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix K: Participant consent form



Perceived Benefits and Limitations of Nurture Groups for Children's Social - Emotional Skills and Behaviour

Informed Consent Form

Thank you for your interest in this study, which aims to examine the benefits and limitations of nurture groups to support children's social - emotional skills and behaviour. As a teacher or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) who has experience of working in a nurture group, your thoughts and opinions on this topic will be sought. Participation in this study involves an interview lasting between 30 to 45 minutes in length, to discuss your experiences and opinions.

The participant information sheet contains further details of what is involved. This information should be read fully and carefully before consenting to take part in the study.

Your anonymity is assured and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party. In accordance with the MIC Record Retention Schedule, anonymized data may be retained indefinitely.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form.

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet.
- I understand what the study is about, and how the information I provide will be used for research purposes.
- I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving participants, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw participation from the project at any stage without giving any reason.
- I am aware that all information provided during interviews will be kept confidential, unless information is revealed which indicates that someone might be hurt or in danger, in which case the researcher will be obliged to break confidentiality and share their concerns with relevant others, such as the school's designated liaison person for child safeguarding.

Name
(PRINTED): _____

Name
(Signature): _____

Date: _____

Appendix L: Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to be involved in my research. I am interested to find out about your nurture group and the factors that make it successful. It would be great to hear about specific examples or situations where you feel nurture has been particularly impactful, but please be mindful not to use the real names of the children. Your responses will remain confidential and please let me know if you would like to stop at any point.

1. Can you tell me about a typical day in your NG?
2. What would you say are the most effective or successful elements of your NG?
3. Since attending nurture, what changes have you noticed in NG pupils with regard to behaviour, emotionally, socially? (What can s/he now do the s/he could not do before?)
4. How does attending nurture support this change?
5. Have you seen any other changes or impact in the wider school community since having a NG? (children, staff, parents, whole school, you?)
6. What would you say are the most important factors for a NG to be effective?
7. How could your NG be improved?
8. Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for me to know about this NG?

Probes

Can you give me an example?

Can you tell me more about that?

Why do you think that is?

How does that work?

What does that look like?

What led you to...?

It sounds like you are saying....have I got that right?

Participant demographic information gathered at interview

Participant		
Name:		
Role:		
Number of years' experience as a teacher / SNA:		
How long as Nurture Group staff member:		
Please list any training or workshops you have attended in relation to Nurture		
School Information		
School name:		
Deis status:		
Location:	Urban	Suburban
		Rural
No of pupils	No of staff	
Minority groups / nationalities/ ethnicities of note in the school population?		
How many children currently attend Nurture Group?	Total: Girls: Boys:	Age range of children attending the NG:
How long has the Nurture Group been running?		How many staff in the NG: Full time or part time?

Appendix M: Sample transcript with annotations

Interview 3 - Maeve 30th May 2024

310 And that's throughout our whole school as well. I have to say, like, it's not
 311 just in nurture, I mean, that's the goal of the whole school, but it's definitely,
 312 the expectation in here isn't to sit down, to be quiet and to learn and listen.
 313 It's more about respect. And it's more about values, and to be heard and to
 314 be listened to and to be understood and friendship, connection, relationships.
 315 I think that's the most important thing in here I would say. And everyone has
 316 the chance to talk and has the chance to listen. And yeah, I think that that's
 317 probably the most important. I would say, the tea and the toast is probably
 318 (laugh) we would be lost without that, you know as well because it's
 319 definitely, they just love their tea and toast in the morning. They come in,
 320 they just can't wait for that and all the conversation happens around us
 321 around the table and around the tea and the toast. Yeah, there's lots of you
 322 see different sides to to them. You know, you see a completely different side
 323 to them as well, don't you?
 324 And like we've gone on trips, we've gone to cafes and to the playgrounds,
 325 and you know, things like that as well, which kind of you do you get to see
 326 them in a different light, which is lovely.

327
 328 R
 329 What do you think it is about the tea and the toast that's so special for them?
 330 Like is it the? Is it the food or something else?

331
 332 **Maeve**
 333 I suppose it's funny.
 334 No. Well, like we, it's probably not. I wouldn't say like, it's the food. I think
 335 it's just I think it's the comfort, the comfort of it and the security of it and
 336 knowing that it's there knowing that no matter what happens in the morning,
 337 I'm coming in here, I'm having my tea and toast and I'm going to have a chat
 338 with everyone.
 339 And that it's going to be OK. It's definitely it's the routine, it's the comfort.
 340 It's yeah, the security, it's knowing what's going to happen next and the
 341 expectation, you know when. Yeah. Yeah, I would say that.
 342 Sometimes the idea of even putting on the kettle not first thing in the
 343 morning, but throughout the day if someone was having a bit of a blip, you'd
 344 say we'll put on the kettle. it could be resolved by the time the kettle has
 345 boiled and they're happy to go back.
 346 I always felt...that saying like; if the flower doesn't grow in a certain
 347 environment, you don't blame the flower, you blame the environment. So I
 348 think in nurture, like the environment of nurture, in nurture, you know it
 349 resembles the family home. Their photos are on the wall, It's a kitchen table,
 350 you know, it's a place where it's a safe place and I just feel like it's more
 351 probably about the environment, you know, and what's around them.

Annotations:
 - *Seen + heard* (next to 312-315)
 - *Focus on communication* (next to 316-318)
 - *Family activities* (next to 324-326)
 - *Routine of transition* (next to 336-338)
 - *Family env. Home.* (next to 348-351)
 - *Different expectations* (next to 312)
 - *Non-judgmental understanding connection w/ others* (next to 312-315)
 - *Food* (next to 319)
 - *Family style meals* (next to 320-322)
 - *A different perspective* (next to 324-326)
 - *Security Consistency* (next to 334-336)
 - *Seen* (next to 336-338)
 - *Reassurance* (next to 339-341)
 - *Personal philosophy* (next to 346-348)
 - *Ownership* (next to 348-351)
 - *Importance of phys. env.* (next to 351)

Academics

School reluctance

391 He **he has made progress in leaps and bounds in every aspect of his learning.**
392 **He's coming into school every day. He, his oral language, has improved**
393 **dramatically. His head used to be always down, and used not even make eye**
394 **contact. And that was only last year, and now he is nearly like the leader**
395 **here at the table.**

confidence
belonging
self-esteem

396 And yeah, yeah, absolutely. And **he, he's gas. He doesn't like toast, but he**
397 **loves tea** (laughs)

Relationships, fondness, unconditional pos
referred.

398
399 Maeve
400 But yeah, so that would be another example.

401
402 R
403 And it sounds like for him, he's really come on in terms of, like, socially.
404 Can you speak a little bit more about that?

405
406 Maeve
407 **Well, he would have had very low self-confidence, you know, in**
408 **participating in games. Now he is one of their best football players or**
409 **hurling (players) in the class. He is really improving in his reading group.**
410 **Which he never even... he had no sounds at the beginning of junior infants**
411 **that he had no sounds at the beginning of senior infants and now he's**
412 **reading, he's actually reading now, which is wonderful as well.**

x social,
a play
school life
at accelerates
literacy dev.

413
414 R
415 And how long has this child been in nurture?

416
417 Maeve
418 **He's been in nurture for is it two years, two years? Two years. Yeah. Yeah.**
419 **So since the beginning of senior infants. Yeah, yeah. But this child like**
420 **wouldn't have had a lot of... I suppose... his experience maybe like in the**
421 **early childhood years would have been.. you know, He wouldn't have had a**
422 **lot of experience in communicating and sitting around and talking to adults**
423 **and other children and yeah, so there's been huge improvement there.**

long time! Inconsistent w/ Bowlby model.

Home vs school env.

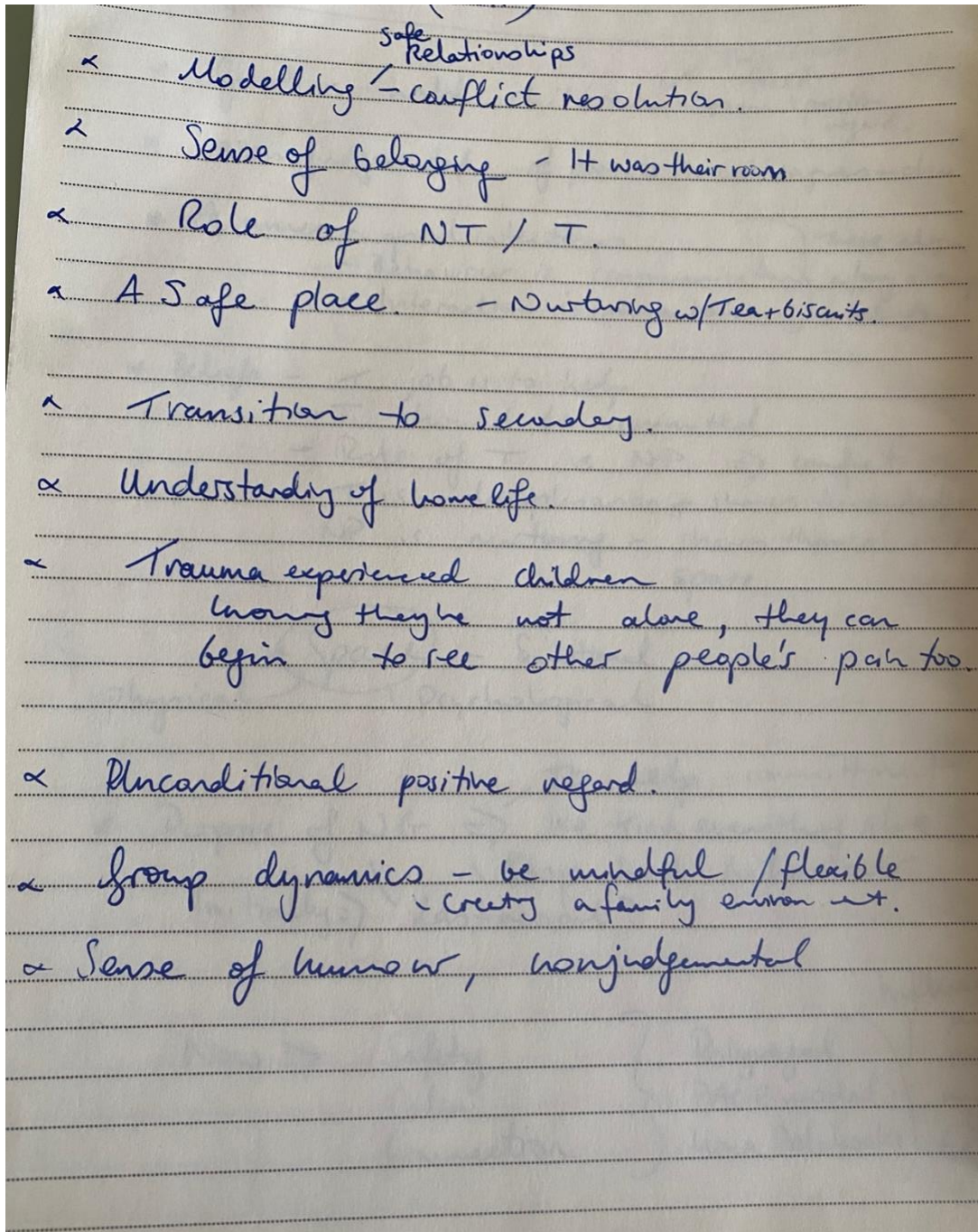
ACES?

424
425 Maeve
426 And we've one little boy, who is actually from the Ukraine in our in our
427 nurture group. And **he was very, very unstable emotionally. And there was a**
428 **lot of tears all day, and now he's... He's absolutely loves nurture. He's only**
429 **he started this year. He's much happier in himself. Yeah, he's definitely. I**
430 **definitely see an improvement there too.**

simple exposure to family style interacts loves NG

Emotional dev - security
- Happier in school

Appendix N: Sample of field notes from reflexive journal



✓ Passion + belief

Change to Nurture Practices

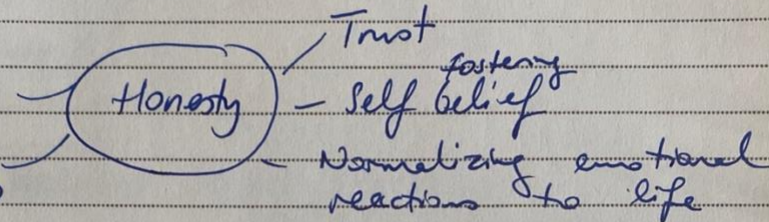
α Parenting skills - I was responding as a Mum

α Need for training + CPD

±

openess

Connections



α Support from Principal

α Team work - role of SWA as subordinate?

Is this why I got no response?

α Idealistic - If everyone could know this thing would be better

α Personal attributes of NIP.

Appendix O: Samples of Coding Process

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. On the left is a navigation pane with categories like 'Data', 'Organize', 'Cases', 'Notes', and 'Sets'. The main area displays a list of codes with columns for Name, Files, References, and Created on. The 'Conditions for success' code is selected. To the right, three reference samples are shown, each with a title, coverage percentage, and a text snippet.

Name	Files	References	Created on
Barriers	6	13	13 Jan 2021
Boundaries	5	8	13 Jan 2021
Boxall	7	8	13 Jan 2021
Challenges	1	1	15 Jan 2021
Cluster groups	2	3	15 Jan 2021
Concentration & Atten...	2	7	14 Jan 2021
Conditions for success	7	24	10 Jan 2021
Connection to the com...	4	7	14 Jan 2021
Emotional atmosphere	1	4	15 Jan 2021
Future plans for NG	7	14	13 Jan 2021
Going to Secondary	5	13	14 Jan 2021
Hopes for the future	2	2	15 Jan 2021
Important but uncoded	2	3	10 Jan 2021
Involving parents	8	33	10 Jan 2021
Its not enough	6	11	14 Jan 2021
Lack of clarity about n...	1	3	13 Jan 2021
Motivating the children	1	5	10 Jan 2021
Needing more training...	5	19	14 Jan 2021
Nurture Activities	8	29	13 Jan 2021
Creative activities	2	2	15 Jan 2021
Emotional Literacy	5	14	13 Jan 2021
extra curricular lear...	1	4	10 Jan 2021
Eye contact	1	1	14 Jan 2021
Mindfulness	6	11	14 Jan 2021
Play	4	10	14 Jan 2021
restorative practice	2	3	10 Jan 2021
Rewards	2	3	15 Jan 2021
Self esteem activities	2	2	14 Jan 2021

Reference 1: 0.35% coverage
 something that I've introduced in the last couple of months, but I found that's really made a difference. Having the visual there to just tell them what's going on.

Reference 1: 0.28% coverage
 So I hope we gave him the tools, the right tools to use, and the feeling, being safe and being supported

Reference 1: 0.17% coverage
 I said, this has to come from the bottom up

Reference 2: 0.27% coverage
 Well it's all about communication, it's all about understanding.

Reference 3: 0.27% coverage
 it's all about the socialization and it's all about the listening.

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. On the left is a navigation pane with categories like 'Data', 'Organize', 'Cases', 'Notes', and 'Sets'. The main area displays a list of codes with columns for Name, Files, References, and Created on. The 'Pupil ownership - agency' code is selected. To the right, two reference samples are shown, each with a title, coverage percentage, and a text snippet.

Name	Files	References	Created on
Barriers	6	13	13 Jan 2021
Boundaries	5	8	13 Jan 2021
Boxall	7	8	13 Jan 2021
Challenges	1	1	15 Jan 2021
Cluster groups	2	3	15 Jan 2021
Concentration & Atten...	2	7	14 Jan 2021
Conditions for success	7	24	10 Jan 2021
Connection to the com...	4	7	14 Jan 2021
Emotional atmosphere	1	4	15 Jan 2021
Future plans for NG	7	14	13 Jan 2021
Going to Secondary	5	13	14 Jan 2021
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Lack of clarity about n...	1	3	13 Jan 2021
Motivating the children	1	5	10 Jan 2021
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Nurture Activities	8	29	13 Jan 2021
Creative activities	2	2	15 Jan 2021
Emotional Literacy	5	14	13 Jan 2021
extra curricular lear...	1	4	10 Jan 2021
Eye contact	1	1	14 Jan 2021
Mindfulness	6	11	14 Jan 2021
Play	4	10	14 Jan 2021
restorative practice	2	3	10 Jan 2021
Rewards	2	3	15 Jan 2021
Self esteem activities	2	2	14 Jan 2021
Pupil ownership - agen...	1	3	10 Jan 2021
SNA	1	1	10 Jan 2021
Teacher stress	1	1	10 Jan 2021
The Dept of Ed	1	1	10 Jan 2021
The feel of it	1	1	10 Jan 2021
Whole school impact	1	1	10 Jan 2021
Word of mouth	1	1	10 Jan 2021

Reference 1: 0.18% coverage
 So they're becoming a bit more, taking more ownership of their, of the learning and everything

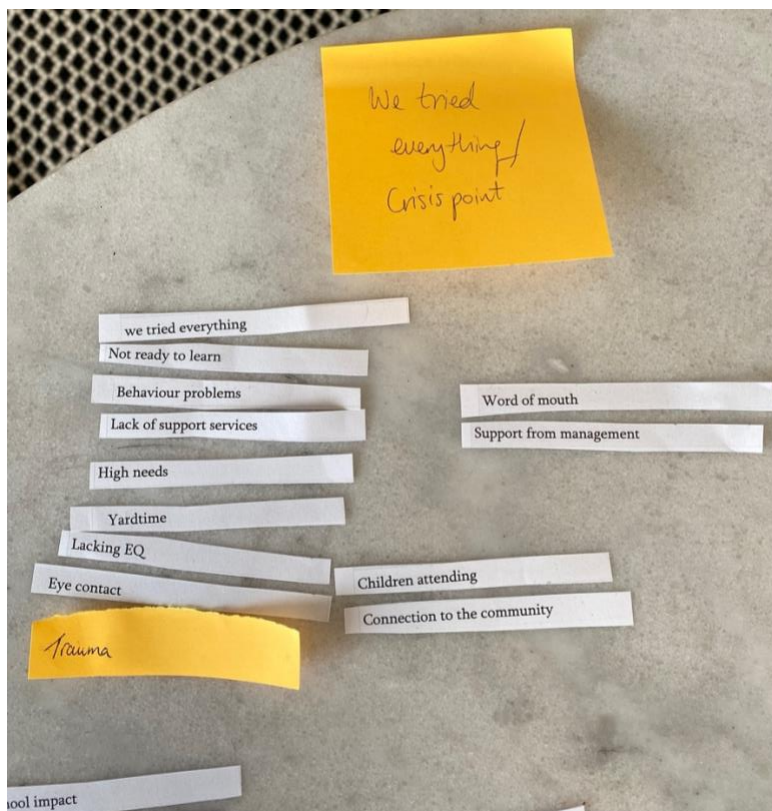
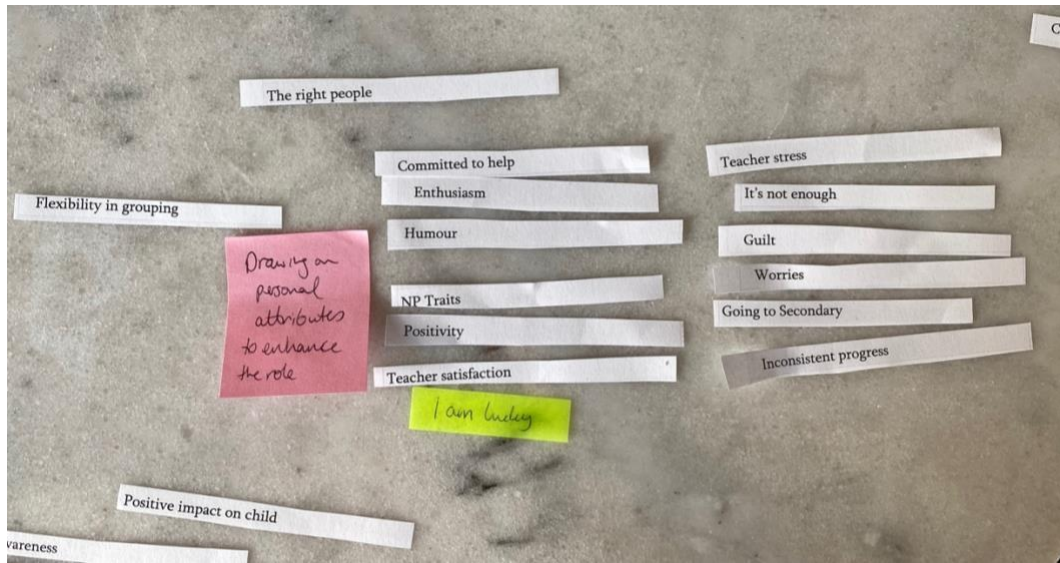
Reference 2: 0.12% coverage
 we try and involve them, in terms of decisions as much as we can.

Reference 3: 0.59% coverage
 So he's on daily medication and that wasn't being administered properly at home. So he comes in and that's, he has a structure and a place and a time where he's able to, kind of, to do that himself, and take responsibility for that as well. We've done a lot of work in kind of talking to him about the effects of it.

Reference 1: 0.43% coverage
 we also asked would they, like, be interested in introducing a mindful minute for the whole school everyday? And I think it was something like 84% came back and said yeah.

Reference 2: 0.60% coverage
 I think for them, just to be like, OK to recognise as well that they can say to me, oh, we're really enjoying this, can we actually do this for the rest of it, and can we do a 2 minute mindful minute tomorrow instead? Do you know things like that.

Appendix P: Sample of Theme Generation Process



② Belonging

Attendance

A safe space

A place for me

Feeling seen +
heard

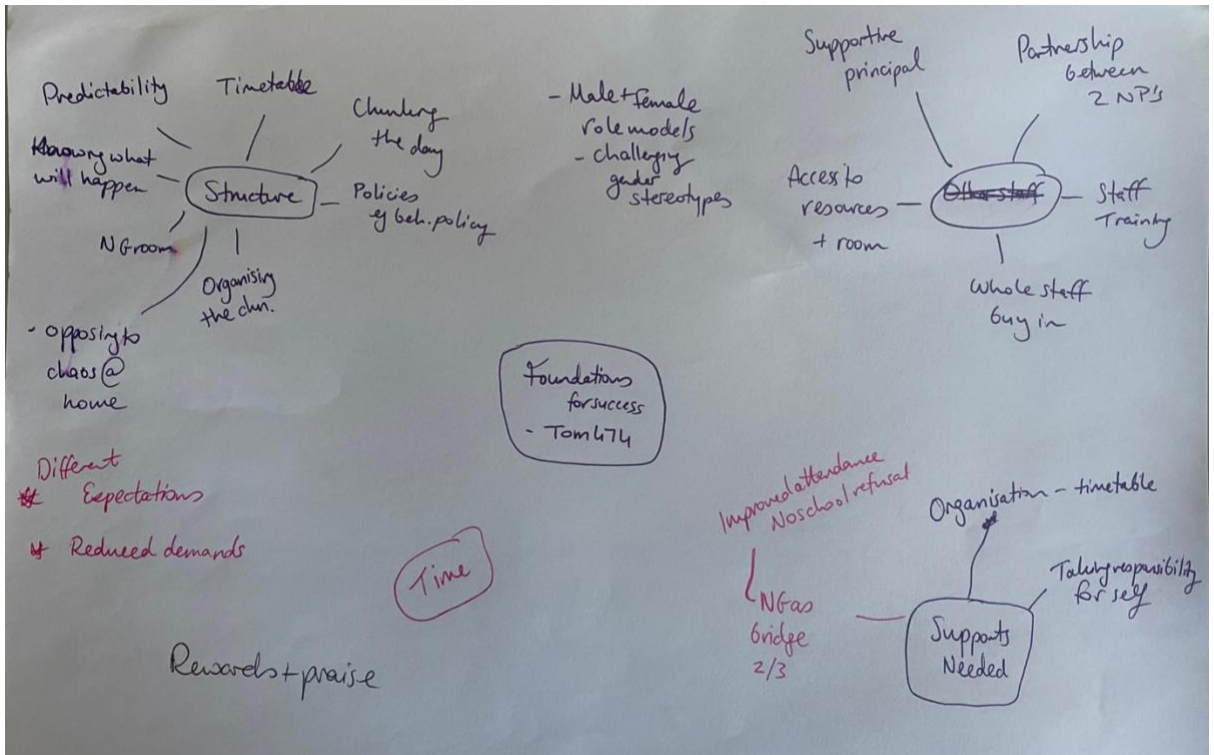
Responsibility

Ownership

On my side

Leadership

I have a role here



Appendix Q: Extracts from Reflexive Journal

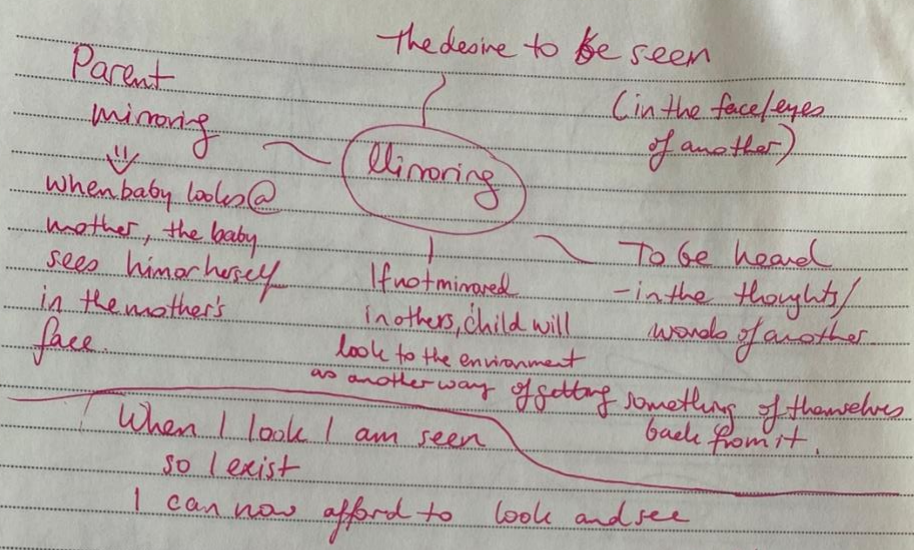
Stage 1 Familiarisation

- * Good vs bold children - ^{This is not fixed.} Eternal positive regard.
- * Non judgmental of parents + colleagues + class.
- * Assumes - good intentions
- Behaviour is communication
- Interaction is intervention } these align w/ my assumptions + beliefs
- * Beliefs - T job is to help
- T should be committed
- Role of T vs. NP \Rightarrow conflict
T is disciplinarian + shares knowledge
NP is nurturing + shares themselves / space

Space - Emotional
physical } Psychological

* Purpose of NG \Rightarrow To help - commitment
Initially \Rightarrow We tried everything else
Stop bad behaviour
Last resort?

Now \Rightarrow Safety } Polyvagal } Influence
Calm } PAEC model } on
Connection } Mona Delehouli } my
beliefs.



Intro like

- Disorganized ^{is attached to others}
- Disruptive
- seeking feedback

This communicates:

You are real. You exist. You are here + now.
I see you. I hear you. You exist

How?

<p>Presence ⇒ 'time + space'</p> <p>Attunement ⇒ Reflects back accurately</p> <p>Co-regulation</p> <p>Unconditional positive.</p>	<p>Empathy</p> <p>Understanding / seeking to understand</p>
---	---

× Level of clarity = what nurture is
↳ what sessions consist of
↳ Structure + timetable

× Justifying Nurture - Ready for school / absenteeism
↳ Readiness to learn

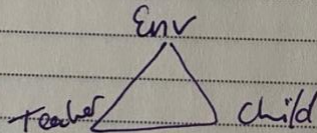
* DEIS \equiv Needs / problems w/ school.

* Home = chaos

vs

Ng = calm + safe, structured

* The child beneath the behaviour



* Env as third teacher!

* Do we all assume chn know how to be in school / what to do. NG makes it explicit, breaks down + organises for the chn who need it.
- Copy w/ demands of school.

Appendix R: JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Systematic Reviews

	Criteria	Yes/No /Unclear	Comments
1	Is the review question clearly and explicitly stated?	Yes	Clear review question provided
2	Were the inclusion criteria appropriate for the review question?	Yes	Could be further expanded
3	Was the search strategy appropriate?	Yes	Could be further expanded
4	Were the sources and resources used to search for studies adequate?	Yes	Yes
5	Were the criteria for appraising studies appropriate?	Yes	CASP tool used and explicit weighing applied
6	Was critical appraisal conducted by two or more reviewers independently?	No	Only one reviewer
7	Were there methods to minimize errors in data extraction?	Yes	CASP tool used and explicit weighting applied
8	Were the methods used to combine studies appropriate?	Yes	Thematic synthesis
9	Was the likelihood of publication bias assessed?	N/A	This question will not be applicable to systematic reviews of qualitative evidence (Aromataris et al., 2015)
10	Were recommendations for policy and/or practice supported by the reported data?	Yes	Clear recommendations for practice
11	Were the specific directives for new research appropriate?	Yes	Future research directions identified