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Nurturing Children’s Social and Emotional Development in Primary Schools: A Pilot Study

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Introduction

Nurture Groups provide an early intervention resource for children displaying social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, whose needs cannot be met in mainstream class. The groups are informed by Attachment Theory, have positive effects on behaviour, social and emotional wellbeing [1] and academic attainment [2], and allow children who may be at risk of exclusion to remain within mainstream education.

Nurture Group Efficacy

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to establish the evidence base for Nurture Groups as an effective intervention for children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The findings from principal Nurture Group research studies show:

- Nurture Groups assist positive relationships between pupils, parents and staff. [3]
- Improved social, emotional and behavioural functioning in NG pupils. [2]
- Improved academic attainment in NG pupils. [2]
- Nurture Groups address key attachment issues. [1,2]

However there remains a lack of understanding of the processes underpinning the efficacy of the Groups. It is hypothesised that the groups address a missing aspect of ‘select attention’ [4] in these children by establishing relationships built on ‘companionship’ [5] which provide a social, intersubjective forum for socio-emotional learning and development.

Social Learning and Emotional Development in the Co-Created Embodied Narrative

Successful intersubjective interaction within positive relations has been shown in infant studies of vocal patterning to display shared rhythm, quality, and narrative form. These are the hallmarks of ‘communicative musciality’ [6] which, together with expression in body movement, allows for the co-creation of meaningful experience in everyday projects [7]. We hypothesise meaningful relationships made in collaborative activity and communicative exchange between individuals produces this characteristic narrative pattern [Fig. 1]. As relations develop through embedded engagements, shared meanings and understandings are formed; both enabling and resulting in coherent co-creation of narrative patterns, which are arguably the structure of shared meaning-making [8].

Research Questions

1. What narrative patterns of engagement are observed in children attending NG and what is their frequency?
2. How are narrative patterns of engagement in children attending NG and in their parents co-created?
3. Do patterns of engagement change, relative to amount of time spent in Nurture Group?

Pilot Study

3 pupils, mean age 5 years, attending a Nurture Group in an urban local authority primary school in Scotland, were video and audio recorded during their usual Nurture Group sessions. This video data, in conjunction with video data obtained from a professional recording for a Channel 4 documentary [9], was analysed to measure the rhythm, frequency and duration of narrative episodes experienced by individual children.

This pilot study is part of a larger project to examine the behavioural and relational patterns up sampled in primary school children through Nurture Group intervention. Combined analysis of audio and video data collected from 17 children, aged 3-8 years, over 12 months, will allow us to understand emotional and social processes existing the social, emotional and behavioral development of Nurture Group children to be examined.

Preliminary Results

A 31 second narrative episode between a child and teacher was identified. The two were engaged in an everyday task, walking down the central school staircase. The teacher structured the interaction, describing the task ahead and then leading, counting the stairs as they walked down the three flights. Analysis of the pitch of teacher and child’s voice together, detailed measurement of the timing of vocalisations, and analysis of their behaviours and tasks as they descended the staircase revealed (Fig.2.).

a. The overall project of descending the staircase presented one narrative structure which consisted of:

(i) an introduction as the child and the teacher walk towards the staircase and prepare for the task they are about to embark on. The teacher takes the lead as she encourages the child to count the stairs and they make their descent to the first landing.
(ii) a development of the interaction between the child and the teacher as their vocalisations and footsteps fall into a rhythm and the child is able to anticipate the counting of the next step. The child becomes excited and starts to count aloud of their footfall as they negotiate a second turning before falling back into a steady rhythm for the final few steps.
(iii) a climax which is reached as they reach the bottom of the staircase and share a moment of joy at completing the task, which is expressed as a smile from the teacher and an exclamation “woo-oo” by the child.
(iv) a conclusion to the journey as they walk away from the staircase, leaving this task behind as they move on to something new.

b. This overarching narrative was divided into 3 narrative sub-units, each describing a small, shared project embedded within the larger task, and 7 separate phases (Fig.3).

c. The rhythm of timings of expression in the narrative episode was consistent within phases of development during descent of the staircase, but more varied during phases of transition on the landings. This indicates the structure of the shared project whereby the child and teacher become attuned to each other’s actions and intentions, and the episodes of de-structure where the rhythm is thwarted (e.g. turning a corner of the stair) and new intentions require to be formed.

Within the complete narrative episode, 7 distinct phases were identified, from which statistical calculations were made to show the rhythmic quality of the interaction and attachment of the subjects (Table 1) and corresponding footfall of the child and teacher show a rhythmic pattern, with the lower standard deviation across the ‘Stairs’ phases indicating the attuned engagement of the child and teacher, while the higher deviations at transition points demonstrate a restructuring of engagement as they negotiate the formation of a new episode. The pitch direction of the vocalisations aligns with the contours of a typical narrative structure (Fig.) indicating common form with musical narrative structure in mother-infant exchanges in which this pattern has previously been identified.

Conclusion

Analysis of pilot data indicates that Nurture Groups allow children the opportunity to co-create positive intersubjective projects with affective relationships in a safe, supportive environment. Evidence of narrative patterns demonstrates a fundamental form of embodied meaning-making that can assists social and emotional development and learning is present. Further study will examine this insight with a larger population to show patterns, consistencies and differences across groups and over Nurture Group attendance.

Fig.1.

Fig.2.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Time (sec)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>7-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Climax</td>
<td>16-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>21-25</td>
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