

**Social and Emotional Development in Nurture Groups:  
The narrative structure of learning through companionship.**

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**Abstract**

*This paper provides insight into the intersubjective nature of the Nurture Group experience for children in the early stages of primary school. The study investigates the psychological processes involved in the socio-emotional development of children in Nurture Groups and considers how they participate and make meaning through the relationships they build in the groups. A theory of narrative meaning-making guides understanding of the ways in which children make sense of their nurture group experience and provides a methodological tool to explore this experience. Over one school year, the children's interconnectedness with others was measured through their levels of involvement and participatory engagement with people and experiences in the nurture group. Patterns of embodied narrative engagement are studied to provide a 'picture' of the child's lived experience, and its development over time.*

**Introduction**

The analysis discussed in this paper is drawn from a case study that forms part of a PhD project investigating the psychological processes underpinning nurture group efficacy in primary schools. The project aims to understand the social and developmental processes experienced by children in Nurture Groups that in turn assist their engagement with school learning. The selected Nurture Groups for this study operate part-time within mainstream primary schools serving deprived populations in Scotland. The focus of the case study is a male Primary 1 pupil, aged five years, who was referred to the Nurture Group on Boxall Profile (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998) evidence of emotional and behavioural difficulties that can be effectively addressed through such intervention. The child is considered by the researcher to display a developmental profile typical of that described by Bennathan & Boxall (2000) as suitable to benefit from this type of nurturing assistance. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant Local Authorities and all ethical considerations outlined by the University of Strathclyde have been adhered to.

*Nurture Groups*

Nurture Groups are a targeted, part-time early intervention support operating within some mainstream schools and often employed as part of a strategy to assist children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). They aim to 'nurture' a specific population of children whose difficulties are considered to result from disrupted intersubjective learning in the early years due to fractured or chaotic family relationships (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). The groups draw from a standardised practice model (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000) and display the following features:

- Small class size, typically six to ten children and two specially trained Nurture staff.
- Welcoming, friendly environment with a 'homely' feel.
- Multiple opportunities for 1:1 and small group interactions.
- Consistent routine.

- 'Chunking' of sessions into short, manageable time periods.
- Children's learning needs are met at their own stage of development.

The groups are based on care-giver interaction principles and are designed to re-create missed early socio-emotional experiences through careful attendance to social and emotional competence. They are shown to assist the building of positive relationships between pupils, staff and parents (Billington, 2012), with resulting improvements in pupils' socio-emotional functioning and academic attainment (MacKay, Reynolds & Kearney, 2010). Despite outcome measures supporting the intervention as effective for children in the early years of primary school, allowing them over time to reintegrate fully to their mainstream class, the complexities of this psycho-educational approach are not fully understood. Recent systematic reviews report a wealth of literature that describes positive changes, particularly social and emotional improvements, in children attending Nurture Groups, and acknowledge the intervention as effective to improve emotional wellbeing (Bennett, 2015; Hughes & Schlosser, 2014). However, the same reviews highlight the lack of attention that is paid to the key ingredients of Nurture Group effectiveness. This project aims to address the debate surrounding the processes that underpin the efficacy of Nurture Groups by considering the ways in which children acquire the skills required for learning in school.

#### *Acquiring skills for learning in intersubjective relations with others*

Essential skills for classroom learning, such as attention, concentration, participation and effective communication are learned in infancy and early childhood through attuned, intersubjective relationships with an affective other (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2013; Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2015). Such affective attunement of feelings, emotions and actions, developed during attachment-focused interactions between the child and their primary care-giver, allows children to feel safe and to regulate positive and negative affect (Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2001). Through active, embodied engagements, involving arousal, attention and organisation of movement to successfully complete tasks (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2013; Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2015), they learn to participate positively with people and objects (Piaget, 1953; Vygotsky, 1978). When such early learning experiences are disrupted, the effects may be displayed in SEBD in the classroom. Nurture Groups address these difficulties by providing the opportunity to re-create early learning opportunities and build positive relationships in school (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016). They set out to develop social and emotional learning as a basis for classroom learning by working in affectively attuned relations to structure the child's engagement.

#### *The narrative of collaborative projects*

Children are active learners; they gain knowledge through rich psycho-physical experiences and active participatory exchanges (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2015). These exchanges are structured by a sequence of actions, chained together with common purpose to work towards a pre-determined goal. The successful accomplishment of active-learning tasks builds collaborative projects, or social schemas, that are repeated over and over, enabling learning of the patterns and rituals of a culture, e.g classroom culture. This collaborative learning, made within special relationships, assists children to build trust and confidence and provides the foundation for future learning. These collaborative projects show a distinct narrative structure, comprising of four elements: 1) *Introduction*: an invitation to participate, 2) *Development*: a build in intensity as the project proceeds and develops towards a goal through the co-ordination of actions, interests and feelings of the participants, 3) *Climax*: a peak of excitement with achievement of a goal, 4) *Resolution*: a reducing intensity as the project concludes and the participants move on to another project together or separate (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2013; Delafield-Butt & Trevarthen, 2015; Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016.)

## **Methods**

The project followed seventeen pre-school and primary school children in four part-time Nurture Groups over one school year. Weekly Nurture Group sessions were video-recorded

and the recordings subsequently micro-analysed to identify patterns of movement and facial expression within social interactions and annotated using the ELAN<sup>1</sup> annotation package. Audio data was extracted and vocal pitch analysed with PRAAT<sup>2</sup> software. Non-verbal narrative structures, consisting of body movement, facial expression and eye gaze patterns, were identified and mapped over time to understand the intersubjective and embodied nature of active, participatory meaning-making in Nurture Group learning.

### *The Case of Peter*<sup>3</sup>

This Case Study excerpt displays findings from video data analysis of one child's interactions in the Nurture Group. Peter was referred to the Nurture Group on evidence of diagnostic need and developmental delay measured by the Boxall Profile. The Boxall Profile is a standardised teacher-rated assessment tool, designed to identify emotional barriers to learning, plan focused intervention and measure change and progress in individual children (Nurture Group Network, 2015). The Profile is completed by the child's class teacher and, despite its subjectivity and limitations, it is widely regarded as a reliable measure and is found to have a high level of concordance with the SDQ (Couture, Cooper & Royer, 2011).

### **Results**

Peter's Boxall Profile displays a range of exhibited behaviours that interfere with learning. His Profile describes him as a child who is emotionally insecure; does not engage with others; can not sustain attention; does not participate; is not involved; displays negativity towards self and avoids contact with others. A very similar picture is witnessed between Peter's Boxall assessment and his observable behaviour in the nurture room. Analysis of video recordings made in early Nurture Group sessions show Peter as a child who does not often sit still, regularly moving around and fidgeting; rarely makes eye contact; has difficulty communicating; hangs back and sits on the edge of the group; appears anxious and does not smile often. Peter is perceived by the researcher as a 'lost child' who is overwhelmed by the primary school classroom, finding himself unable to make sense of the rules, instructions and interactions that take place around him. With his mind pre-occupied by this confusion, he appeared unable to self-regulate the arousal, interest and engagement required to attend to prescribed tasks and interact positively with others.

#### *Projects within projects: making sense of a nurture group session*

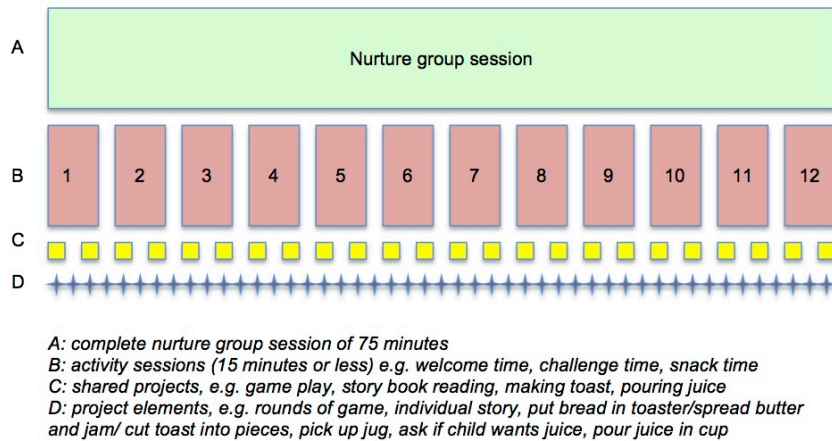
Peter attends the Nurture Group for one 75 minute session per week. The group is regular, reliable and predictable: always on the same day and time, with the same two staff members, small group of children and consistent structure. Each 75 minute session is segmented into shorter 'chunks' of time (Fig.1).

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<sup>1</sup> Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; <http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.praat.org/>

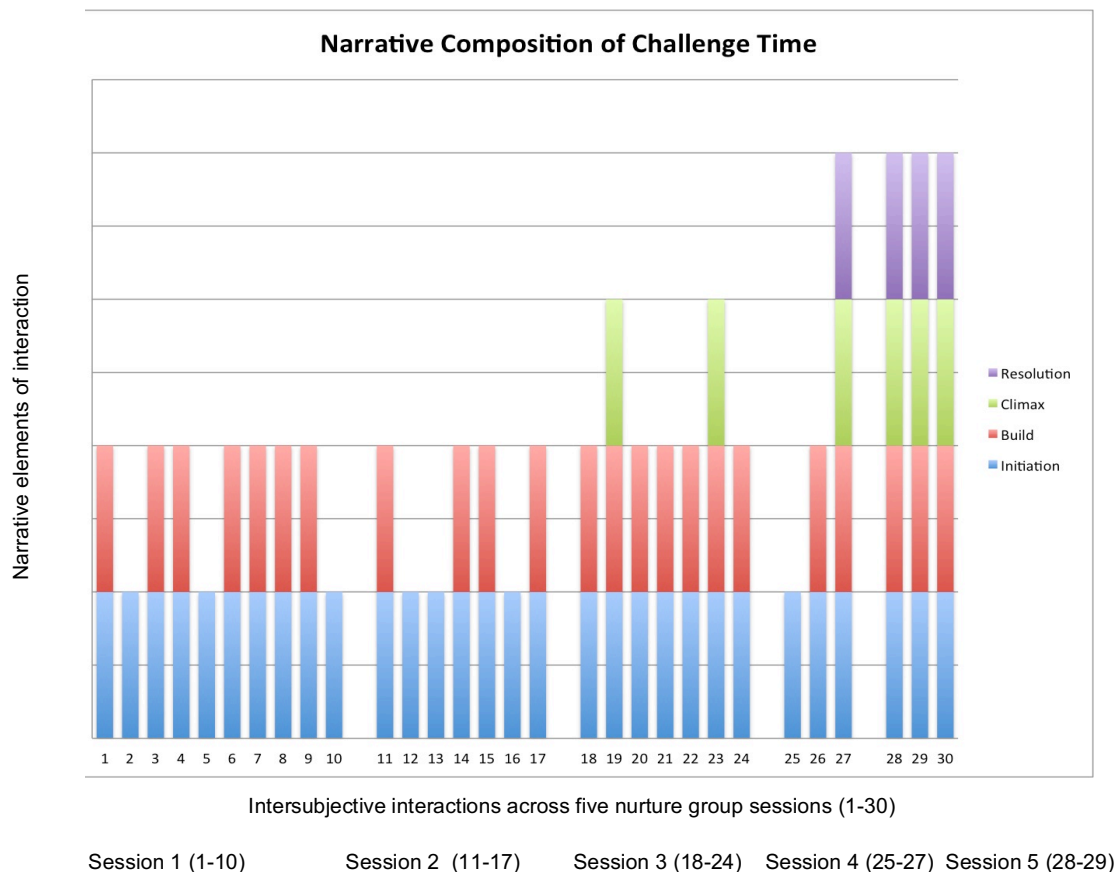
<sup>3</sup> The child's name has been changed to protect his identity



**Figure 1. The Nurture Group Session: Projects within Projects.** At the top (A) is the complete nurture group session of 75 minutes. This session is broken down (B) into 12 activity sessions of 15 minutes or less, with small periods of transition between when the child moves from one activity to another. These activity sessions are further broken down (C) into shared projects of interaction, lasting a number of minutes, which may be solitary, 1:1, or small group interactions. Within these projects of interaction there are displayed (D) multiple project elements, each lasting a few seconds, that combine to produce the completed project.

After one school year in the Nurture Group Peter’s Boxall Profile assessment shows improvement in the areas of involvement, engagement, emotional security and attachment. Observations made in the nurture room provide a picture of a child who sits still, pays attention, actively participates, makes eye contact, shows enthusiasm, initiates shared interaction, communicates well, smiles, laughs and has positive friendships; the ingredients of socio-emotional security and effective learning. These observations and Boxall scores were mapped against the narrative structure of intersubjective interactions between Peter and his teachers and peers during nurture group sessions to understand where and how progress was made in his emotional literacy.

Analysis of the four-part narrative structure of Peter’s interactions in the Nurture Group over the course of the school year provides a picture of his levels of contribution and intersubjective engagement over time. Here we provide an example of the changing narrative structure of Peter’s interactions during a prescribed, regular, group activity. The results display incomplete narrative cycles in early Nurture Group sessions that build in complexity towards completed narrative cycles over the course of the year (Fig. 2) showing the development over time of structured, shared intersubjective learning.



**Figure 2.** The narrative structure of intersubjective interactions within shared projects during the Challenge Time activity (see fig. 1 for description) of five nurture group sessions, spread over the course of one school year for one child are displayed. The elements of Initiation, Build, Climax and Resolution create a four-part narrative structure as described above, increasing in structural form over time.

## Discussion

The building of positive relationships between staff and pupils in the Nurture Group is considered to be an important focus for change (Billington, 2012). The Nurture Group staff are friendly and welcoming and meet Peter at his own stage of development, attuning to his needs and scaffolding his learning. Emotional security is thought to develop in children attending Nurture Groups through positive relationships with adults who act as a safe base (Cooke, Yeomans & Parkes, 2008; Hughes & Schlosser, 2014). Nurture Group efficacy is traditionally linked to Bowlby's Theory of Attachment (Bowlby, 1988), which describes how emotional security allows children to explore and pursue their own projects, developing curiosity, involvement and eagerness to engage in social activity. In this case, this theory is extended to propose that through periods of positive embodied intersubjective interaction, in a safe environment, Peter learns how to concentrate his attention for short periods of time, to successfully complete small units of action that combine to achieve a larger goal. Each individual interaction is represented as Level D in Figure 1, contributing to the shared task at hand, Level C in Figure 1. These are set within prescribed and regular activities in the Nurture Group session, represented as Levels B and A in Figure 1, respectively. Importantly, his teachers' attunement to his level of engagement ensures he discovers joy in the successful completion of these shared tasks, providing a means to learn regulation of his actions and emotions, interests and arousal, which in turn help him to build friendships and engage in shared activity (Delafield-Butt & Adie, 2016). Over time he will take these skills back to his mainstream class where they assist him to learn.

This creation of regular, structured projects, or schemas, resembles a 'social song' with regular temporal patterns, rhythm and affordances for action first noted in mother-infant

engagements (Stern, 1977) but evident throughout social life (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). The 'song' is enabled through supportive, attuned relations with others, in a predictable setting, providing reliable experiences. As in a familiar song, the 'rhythms' and 'words' become known and understood and children of any ability can participate, contribute and know what to do, coming together to build a successful community of learners. In this example, Peter is learning how to contribute positively, building coherent narrative structure that assists him to make sense of his learning experience in the Nurture Group and to find joy within successfully completed projects.

Early findings, such as displayed here, suggest that the socio-emotional development shown in Peter's Boxall scores is learned through active, embodied engagement in social projects, evidenced in the increasingly complex narrative structure of Peter's interactions.

## Conclusion

This paper presents initial findings from a small longitudinal study of children's narrative patterns of engagement in Nurture Groups. The study explores the ways in which children displaying SEBD can learn to engage positively with others and with school learning through careful attunement of feelings and movement with a sensitive partner in a safe, structured, predictable environment. In this way children learn the attention, concentration, participation and social skills that are required for successful classroom learning. The example displayed here displays how they begin to make meaning of their Nurture Group experience through verbal and non-verbal narrative cycles. It is proposed that these narrative cycles become a template for interaction, allowing children so supported to learn new socio-emotional expectations and patterns of relation that assist their social relationships and ultimately their engagement with learning.

The PhD project from which this Case Study is selected measures patterns of embodied engagement and investigates the co-construction of shared projects within Nurture Groups to understand how each child is participating and making sense of their experience. Over the course of a year the children's progress will be compared within activities and across ages, gender and Nurture Group settings, to provide understanding of the social and developmental processes and individual differences within Nurture Group intervention. The outcomes of the study will provide insight into the factors assisting the development of positive relationships and the resulting improvements in the socio-emotional functioning of Nurture Group children that supports their effective engagement with learning. Such co-operative engagement, as displayed in this example of social interaction, is organised by regularly patterned units of meaning-making within a prospective or anticipatory framework. Understanding the ways that learning is structured in units of meaning-making is important for early intervention and nurturing support within our nurseries and primary schools to provide all children with the best possible opportunities to learn.

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