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Abstract

This explorative study analysed a selection of school OFSTED reports in order to answer the research question, 'how are nurture and nurture group practice represented in OFSTED reports?' This study sampled secondary school OFSTED reports over a period of one year and analysed the reports for reference to nurturing and nurture group practice.

Findings showed 176 reports, within the sample of 935, identifying practice related to nurture and 34 schools with nurture groups. An analysis was made of the use of these terms and the context within which nurture groups are discussed. There was a significant lack of clarity relating to the meaning of nurturing practice and the discussion of nurture groups in the reports lacked precision around language, tended to omit evaluation of the practice, and did not include the views of the parents of nurture group attendees. Findings also suggest that if the methodology used in this study were replicated with a wider range of schools and time-frames, significant learning about nurturing and nurture group practice would emerge. Implications for the development of OFSTED reports and the work of NurtureUK are suggested.

Key Words: nurture groups, nurturing, OFSTED, secondary

Introduction

The vocabulary of nurture groups and 'nurture' in education has developed significantly since the first established nurture groups in Hackney, England, in 1972 (Lucas, 2020). A nurture group is a targeted psychosocial intervention (Hughes and Schlösser, 2014), first developed by Bennathan and Boxall (2000), with a strong foundation upon the attachment needs (Bowlby, 1969) of children and young people. Nurture groups provide a safe base (Lucas, 2010) from which to support the social, emotional and mental health needs of learners who struggle to learn effectively in a mainstream classroom. Following a growth in prevalence of nurture groups in the late 1990s, an organic evolution has taken place (Middleton, 2020, p.34), with their nature and organisational structure becoming more diverse, and the defining features now being determined through adherence to the six principles of nurture (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006), rather than the structural features of the classic nurture groups (Boxall, 2002). The current model for enacting nurturing

approaches in schools, with many similarities to the whole-school approach introduced in this journal (MacKay, 2015), identifies nurture groups as part of a 5-stage 'Graduated nurture approach' (NurtureUK, 2018a, p.17). This approach, exemplified in recent research by Warin (2017) and Coleman (2020), emphasises a broader whole-school application (NurtureUK, 2019) of the six principles of nurture (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006). A growing body of research evidencing the effectiveness of nurture group practice (eg; Sloan *et al*., 2016) and whole school nurturing approaches (eg; McNicol and Reilly, 2018), is currently available and continues to grow.

In 1993 a new national approach to school accountability through school inspection was introduced, with the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). This removed the responsibility of monitoring inspections from Local Education Authorities and moved to a system of inspectors being contracted by tender (Davis, 2018). Following UK devolution in the late 1990s, OFSTED's remit was limited to English schools, with the responsibility for school inspection resting with ESTYN in Wales, Education Scotland in Scotland, and ETI in Northern Ireland. English schools are inspected under the OFSTED Education Inspection Framework (OFSTED, 2019).

The research outlined within this article sought to understand how nurture and nurture group practice are represented within OFSTED inspection reports. This is an exploratory study seeking to identify the scope and potential usefulness for practitioners, academics and supporters of nurture group practice of closely analysing OFSTED reports, as a way of understanding nurturing and nurture group practice. Whilst the vocabulary of nurture has uses beyond that of practice linked to NurtureUK and nurture groups, the prevalence of this use within OFSTED reports could have significant impact upon the dissemination and promotion of the importance of this practice. At present an understanding of the perspective of OFSTED reports, which recognises and discusses this practice, is a gap in research. As such, whilst the analysis of reports may not help to further the understanding of the practice of nurture, it offers the potential to understand how this practice is perceived by stakeholders who are not allied with NurtureUK and nurture groups, many of whom use OFSTED as a primary source of information. As a consequence it offers the potential to understand how the practice can be disseminated more widely. As a preliminary study, the scope of the research was deliberately limited. The decision was made to focus on OFSTED reports relating to secondary schools over a period of one year, which were published prior to the first Covid-19 lockdown period, which began at the end of March 2020. Secondary schools, as a more recent area where nurture practice has developed, were chosen as the focus as a way of limiting the size of the data.

Literature Review
OFSTED Reports

The consequences of OFSTED reports are a contested area. Undeniably, schools are judged by a broad range of stakeholders according to the OFSTED grading they achieve in their most recent report. Research shows a positive perception of OFSTED inspections on the part of parents, who felt that their views were valued and that it served as an opportunity for

positives about the school to be communicated (Ouston and Klenowski, 2018). For schools fortunate enough to achieve a 'good' or 'outstanding' grading, it is common to see the rating prominently positioned as a marketing tool. The overall cost of one year of the OFSTED inspection process has been estimated to be at £44m (National Audit Office, 2018, p.4) and the process of OFSTED inspection is seen to present significant financial and emotional costs to schools (Russell, 2018), being widely perceived by school practitioners as stressful, exhausting and demoralising (Hopkins *et al.*, 2016). There is evidence of the influence of inspection agendas pushing school leaders towards 'suboptimalisation' and teaching to inspection (deWolf and Janssens, 2007, p.22), enacted through actively working towards ensuring favourable outcomes for forthcoming inspections (Perryman *et al.*, 2018).

OFSTED has been portrayed as reflecting contemporary concerns about education in schools which are broadly held by practitioners, academics and policy makers (Brighouse and Moon, 1994), but also as part of the system by which a centralised, international, standardisation of education is enforced (Kamens, 2013), or policed (Bates, Lewis and Pickard, 2019), at the expense of localised contextual approaches (Cullingford, 1999). A further critique is that the process reflects "enframed managerialism" (Flint and Peim, 2012, p.194), with the demands of performativity enshrined by the discourse of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1991) which distracts the focus of leaders away from what effective practice is, towards a checklist mentality. As a consequence of this marketised discourse, teachers are placed within a wicked context (Middleton, 2019) where the energy and drive for innovation is lost (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). With the publication of a new inspection framework (OFSTED, 2019), it is hoped that a more wholistic assessment of schools may lead to a positive change in the field (Boddison, 2019).

The robust nature of OFSTED judgements has been challenged, with criticism directed towards the fact that whilst there is clear guidance for inspectors relating to evidence they should collect, the subsequent use of this evidence to make judgements is frequently less than robust (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2020). This lack of clarity may have been further compounded due to the nature of the outsourced inspection regime (Baxter and Clarke, 2013). In 2015 OFSTED took action to mitigate inconsistency in the quality of inspection reports, bringing school inspection in-house, however, as part of the assessment of inspectors, less than half of the existing inspectors were offered new contracts (National Audit Office, 2018).

Further criticism of OFSTED judgements has identified a correlation between lower OFSTED inspection ratings and both pupil intakes from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and intakes of pupils with low prior attainment (Hutchinson, 2016). In addition, the academic, social and emotional outcomes of learners at age 16, are poorly represented by OFSTED ratings once selection criteria have been considered (Von Stumm *et al.*, 2020). The process of accountability in which OFSTED plays a key part was charged as no longer working in the interests of stakeholders (NAHT, 2018) and appeared to culminate a year later with the commitment to reform OFSTED within the manifestos of the Labour Party (2019), the Liberal Democrats (2019), and the Green Party (2019).

OFSTED reports can be perceived as a key part of the enactment of government policy leading to the reproduction of this policy at school level (Cushing, 2020) and the language contained within as a legitimising tool, introducing a particular discourse through which to conceptualize effective education (Trowler, 2003). The high stakes nature of OFSTED inspections points towards the significance of the content and language used within reports, and it is suggested that the inclusion, or lack thereof, of references to nurture groups and nurturing practice not only reflects the significance assigned to this area of practice, but may also hold significance as a driver for future practice.

The first OFSTED-published recognition of the positive impact of a nurture approach is reported by Lucas (2019) as being in the 1997 OFSTED Annual Report, however on close inspection this report does not specify nurture practice, but rather discusses pastoral support (p.22), describes general secure and caring environments (p.25), and offering learners opportunities to take responsibilities (p.25). The first explicit recognition of primary school nurture groups by OFSTED was in 2005 (p.14). Six years later OFSTED (2011a) published a research paper which gave a favourable summary of the potential impact of well-run nurture groups in primary schools. In the same year, OFSTED (2011b, p.16) identified a secondary nurture group as an example of good practice in re-engaging disaffected learners. Most recently, OFSTED (2020, p.22) recognised that the use of a nurture group was a successful way of consolidating support for pupils with SEND and reducing costs. It is also significant to note that this publication referred specifically to a secondary-age nurture group. There are some examples of the positive recognition of nurture groups within individual OFSTED school reports, which have arisen following the first recognition in 2005. Examples include, Hawkley High School in 2006 and Shevington High School in 2008. There is, however, no current published research which analyses OFSTED's responses to nurture groups in school inspection reports.

A very small number of contemporary research articles which analyse OFSTED reports have been identified as part of this project. Mogra (2016) carried out textual analysis, identifying key-words used relating to radicalisation in schools, concluding an absence of systematic radicalisation in the schools which were studied. Chatzifou (2019) examined the relationship between Eco-school practice and OFSTED, identifying that OFSTED reports failed to recognise the importance of the work and ethos of this approach within their reports.

Methodology
OFSTED school inspection reports are publicly available on the OFSTED website (https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/), with a search and filter function. The website was initially searched using the option, "Education and Training" combined with "Secondary".

This search included the following types of secondary schools, as identified by OFSTED: Secondary, Comprehensive, Special, Girls, Hospital, Modern, Through, Grammar, Technical, Alternative Provision, Muslim, Jewish and Other Schools, and the following categories of

school: Maintained, Independent, Foundation, Academy, Free, Community, Voluntary Aided, UTC and Studio schools. Residential or boarding secondary schools were excluded from the sample, as these establishments are inspected under the Social Care Common Inspection Framework.

The search was filtered to include reports published from 21st March 2019 to 20th March 2020.

The status of the reports was filtered to include three inspection types, School, Standard, and Short, whilst rejecting Monitoring Visit, Additional Inspection, Pre-registration Inspection, and Emergency Inspection reports. Where more than one report was available as an output of the searches and filters, only the most recent report was included. A total of 985 reports were downloaded as a result of this filtered search process.

These 985 reports were then individually searched for the inclusion of the terms, 'nurture' and 'nurturing'. This produced 176 reports which used these terms with reference to the practice in the school, with four additional reports using the terms within recommendations for improvement and two using the terms to describe horticultural activities.

Through reading and re-reading the elements containing the terms, 'nurture' and 'nurturing' within the 176 reports, and inductively refining the emergent themes, the following emerged:

a) Specific reference to nurture group provision.
b) A whole school nurturing or nurture ethos.
c) A nurturing approach linked to specific ethical or spiritual identities.
d) A nurturing approach on the part of the staff.

The paragraph/s containing the terms were copied and analysed to provide qualitative evidence of the representation of nurture adopted within the reports.

No significant ethical challenges are identified related to this project, as all the data used within the research is available in the public domain and no schools from the primary research activity have been directly identified within this report.

Where quotes are used from the reports, they are coded to individual schools from the initial sample of 985 using the format, 'S###'. The data table is available to readers upon direct application to the author.

Findings and discussion

Of the 985 reports for secondary schools published by OFSTED within the year from 21st March 2019 to 20th March 2020, 182 reports contained the terms "nurture" or "nurturing". 6 reports were removed, 4 of which used the terms as part of the recommendations for improvement, and 2 which used the terms to refer to horticultural activities taking place as part of the curriculum, leaving a total of 176 reports to be analysed.

Figure 1 [insert fig 1 near here] identifies the context within which the terms 'nurture' and 'nurturing' were used in these 176 reports. It should be noted that some reports used the terms within more than one context. NurtureUK (2018a) identifies that over 2000 UK schools have nurture groups, which represents 16.4% of the total number of UK schools (BESA, 2019). With 34 schools identified as having a nurture group within the sample of 985, this represents only 3.45%. These two percentages are not expected to triangulate as the NurtureUK figures do not separate primary and secondary schools. The long history of nurture groups is related to primary schools and the relatively recent publication of the adapted Boxall Profile for use with secondary aged pupils (Bennathan, Boxall and Colley, 2010) implies a proportionately smaller distribution of nurture groups in secondary schools, which is reflected in the percentages within this research.

Of the 34 schools identified as having a nurture group, 20 reports did not use the term 'nurture group'. As such, it may be reasonable to question whether nurture group provision is not routinely identified within OFSTED reports. 7 of the schools with nurture groups were classified as 'Special', whilst 6 other schools classified as 'other' may also provide specialist provision. 2 schools with nurture groups also had a dog as therapeutic support. Just 1 school was identified as having a nurture group as well as a general ethos of nurture combined with a nurturing approach by staff.

Figure 2 [insert fig 2 near here] identifies the inspection rating received by those settings without a nurture group and Figure 3 [insert fig 3 near here] shows the inspection rating of those settings identified as having a nurture group. The ratings scale has four classifications, outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the majority of schools recognised by OFSTED for nurturing practice were identified as having a general, whole-school, nurturing approach or having a nurturing ethos. An example of this recognition for a school with a rating of 'outstanding' states:

> *Pupils flourish in this nurturing school.* (S124)

Just over a fifth of schools were seen to have staff who employed a nurturing approach to their relationships with the learners in the setting:

> *Staff nurture and teach pupils to develop their self-confidence and resilience* (S279)

> *Within the school there are many highly skilled staff who know how to nurture young people to become independent and successful*. (S702)

> *…relationships between adults and children are warm and nurturing…* (S710)

Some reports identify the staff's nurturing approach as a positive within the context of a negative report, as the following quote from a school rated as 'inadequate' illustrates:

> *Adults are successful at providing a nurturing environment where children behave well.* (S418)

In other settings where the rating is below 'good' and the staff are recognised as nurturing, particular reference has been made to inclusion groups such as children in care or those on the SEND register, for example:

> *Nurturing relationships are built with pupils who are looked after or in care* (S978)

whilst reference to SEND and SENCOs is made in connection with nurturing practice in 14 reports.

Where schools' intake crossed beyond traditional secondary aged learners, of which there were 74 within the 176 reports, and where provision for younger age groups was specifically discussed, this tended to be an area linked to nurturing practice, for example:

> *In the early years, children settle quickly into the nurturing environment…* (S592)

> *Parents say that their children are nurtured well through their early years.* (S812)

These examples reflect the legacy of the historic development of nurture groups and nurturing practice, which began as practice within primary-aged schooling (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000*)* and the much more recent move to develop nurture groups within secondary settings (Colley, 2012)*.*

In none of the 176 reports was nurture or nurturing associated with negative practice, indeed, nurture was part of required improvement of the additional 4 reports, exemplified by the following:

> *Leaders should ensure that the school nurtures, develops and stretches pupils…* (S208)

Closer analysis of the way in which the terms 'nurture' and 'nurturing' were used in reports which did not identify nurture groups, indicate that the use of the terms was not related to whole-school nurturing practice as exemplified by NurtureUk's (2018a) 5-stage 'Graduated nurture approach'. Instead, the majority of these reports use the terms generically, with 'nurture' and 'nurturing' equating to notions of care, development of talents and support, for example:

> *They provide a warm and nurturing environment where pupils feel safe and cared for well.* (S862)

> *These enhance and nurture their skills and interests.* (S310)

The voice of parents within the reports reflects the generic use of 'nurture' and 'nurturing', relating to ethos and approach, exemplified by the following quote from a parent:

> *"This is a nurturing environment, that enables my child to flourish."* (S421)

However, there are no examples of parents' views within the reports for schools with nurture groups.

The comparison of Figures 2 and 3 highlights a significant difference in the OFSTED ratings for schools with and without nurture groups. 74% of schools without a nurture group

achieved a positive rating (Outstanding or Good) in comparison to 45% for those with nurture groups, where the proportion of Requires Improvement ratings was significantly higher. Consideration of the reasons for this disparity may link to issues of the attainment focus of inspections, rather than a focus on achievement and progress of learners (Von Stumm *et al.*, 2020). Consideration of the socio-economic demographic of the school intake (Hutchinson, 2016) may also be an important element through which to understand these ratings.

Within the reports for 34 schools identified as having a nurture group, 15 reports are descriptive of practice relating to the nurture group, for example:

> *…nurture groups work to give pupils a safe space alongside mentoring support.* (S688)

18 reports offer a positive judgement of the nurture group provision, for example:

> *Pupils in the nurture unit make good academic and social progress. Pupils in the nurture class are supported well to gain confidence and develop their social skills.* (S345)

Whilst 3 reports offer a partial or qualified positive judgement, for example:

> *The school provides a 'nurture' facility, … this aspect of the school's provision is an emerging strength.* (S918)

For schools with nurture group provision, evaluative OFSTED comments can be extremely important in terms of accountability and justifying the funding for such a provision, for parents who seek to understand the effectiveness of the provision, as well as for other schools and those who support them, by acting as examples of positive practice. A welcome development to reports would be that a larger proportion moved beyond simple description to clearer comment about the contribution that nurture group make to the learning of those children and young people within the provision as well as to the whole school. A model of this approach is seen here:

> *…targeted therapeutic support in specialist classes, such as in the nurture group. All of this weaves together very well. The school is a happy, calm and welcoming environment.* (S196)

There are a number of comments within the reports which point to their authors' understanding of nurturing practice and nurture groups being limited or misunderstood. In 19 of the 34 reports, the term 'nurture group' is not used to describe this practice. Examples of mis-naming this provision include "nurture provision" (S823), "nurture unit and nurture class" (S345), "carefully considered support for a small group of pupils" (S569) and providing the familiar name-label used within the school, without clearly naming it as a nurture group (S134 and S209). It would be useful to understand whether the authoring inspector made a choice not to name the provision as a nurture group because they were committed to the Boxall (2002) classic model of nurture group provision, whether they were unfamiliar with

nurture group practice or for some other reason. Further examples include the apparent misrepresentation of the essence of nurturing practice:

> *They are nurtured well because the number of pupils in classes is low*. (S479)

This appears to focus on adult to pupil ratios rather than the pedagogical understanding of the 6 principles of nurture (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006), and a further example identifies nurture group practice only in terms of reading improvement opportunities:

> *Younger pupils in the nurture group regularly practise phonics.* (S428)

One report also appears to imply a child-care approach to nurture group practice:

> *Pupils who find school more challenging are looked after well in the nurture classes*. (S519)

A significantly concerning comment in one report appears to combine the use of nurturing practice with behavioural sanctions:

> *The inclusion unit provides both a sanction for poor behaviour and a nurturing base for pupils who struggle to meet the expectations staff have of them*. (S763)

Which exemplifies an approach that contradicts the principles of the classroom as a safe base and that all behaviour should be seen as a form of communication (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006, p.10). It is, however, unclear whether the wording in the report reflects the school's perspective of the provision or the inspector's conclusion.

As stated earlier, the voice of the parents in relation to nurture group practice was a significant omission from reports. The single reference within the 34 reports was where nurture group provision was evaluated for a school with the rating of Requires Improvement, and a distinction was made between the effectiveness for different age groups and as evidence, the following was stated:

> *This is having some impact on improving the progress of pupils, but is less compelling at key stage 4. Many parents and carers express their dissatisfaction with the level of support provided for their children*. (S802)

The importance of parents as key stakeholders in nurture group provision and their perceptions of its impact on their children and their families is an important area of consideration (March and Healy, 2007). The overall omission of the parent voice for learners in nurture groups reflects the work of Pyle and Rae (2015), who identified a lack of research in this area.
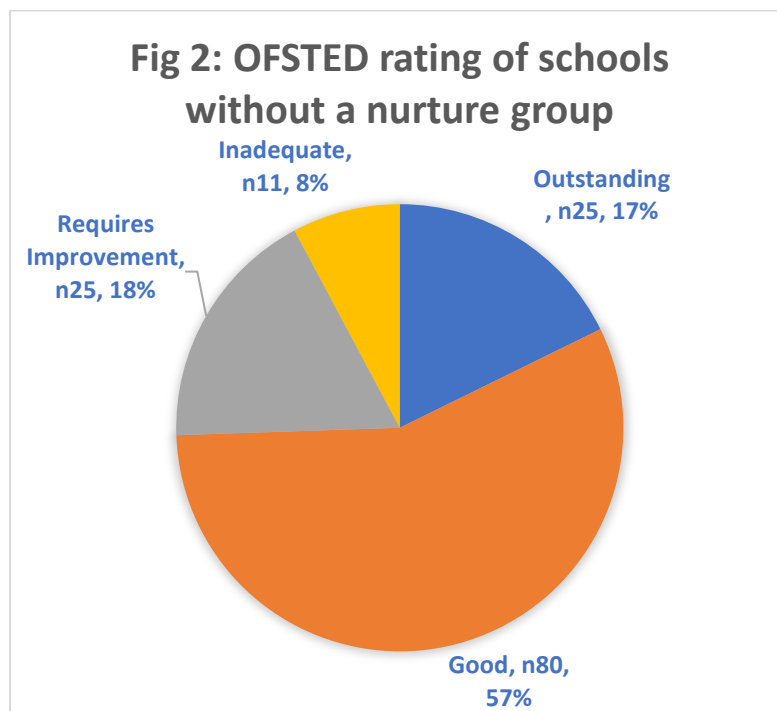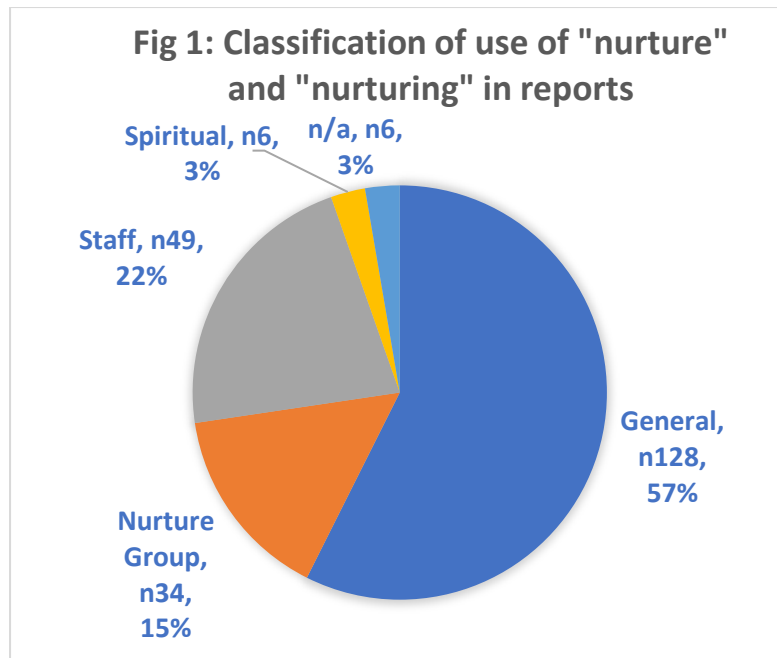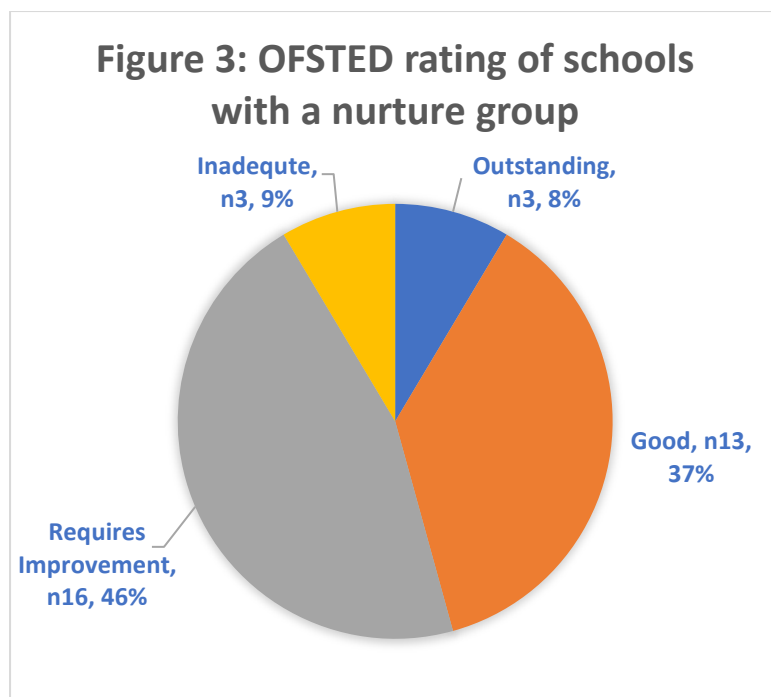

Conclusion

There is a strong body of academic literature evidencing the positives of nurture and nurture group practice, however evidence from OFSTED reports has significant impact upon

practice and reaches a significantly different audience. This exploratory research offers an approach which can complement research literature as a way of understanding the use and value of nurturing and nurture group provision in schools, and the perspectives of stakeholders. The use of this methodology with a wider sample may also be useful as a way of confirming the prevalence and spread of nurture groups in England. The sample would need to include primary and secondary schools, whilst Early Years settings may also be relevant to include, and if a wider time frame were encompassed, it would be possible to bring in data from reports covering the majority of English schools. A similar approach could also be used with ESTYN, Education Scotland and ETI reports to triangulate national figures and provide UK-wide information. This use may, to some extent, be compromised in the light of the findings related to the misnaming of nurture groups and the potential that not all nurturing and nurture group practice is recognised within OFSTED reports. The author would welcome feedback from researchers and practitioners about the usefulness of this methodology and whether widening the sample and scope may be useful as a future project.

This exploratory research has identified that OFSTED reports offer a broadly positive perspective relating to nurturing provision, and a tendency against the practice of providing evaluative comments about nurture groups. It has been found that the terms 'nurture' and 'nurturing' are widely employed in a generic way in OFSTED reports, with the link to educational conceptions of nurture in Lucas, Insley and Buckland's (2006) 6 principles of nurture being frequently omitted. The views of the parents of children and young people attending nurture groups have been identified as missing from OFSTED reports. There is a significant disparity between the identification of nurture groups in OFSTED reports and other statistical sources such as NurtureUK.

The findings point to a need for schools to be more overt about the use of nurture in their provision, both through a whole school nurture approach and nurture groups, to promote the clear identification of this practice in OFSTED reports. Furthermore, positive development opportunities for nurturing provision may be facilitated if organisations such as NurtureUK were able to successfully use their voice to encourage OFSTED reports to provide explicit recognition of nurture group practice, to include it in their evaluation of school outcomes and to seek the views of parents of nurture group attendees. This is likely to have implications for the unpublished OFSTED inspector training materials. As such, NurtureUK should consider the development of their role in educating and informing key organisations about nurturing practice. The explicit recognition of nurture group practice would help to develop a clear record of the number of English nurture groups and if greater clarity were achieved through this approach, it may also help understanding of the reasons nurture groups have been identified in a significant proportion of schools rated as Requires Improvement, rather than being evenly spread across schools rated both positively and negatively. Further research, analysing the demographics of schools with nurture groups and how this relates to the rating is an area for the development of this research.

Fig 1: Classification of use of "nurture" and "nurturing" in reports

- Spiritual, n6, 3%
- n/a, n6, 3%
- Staff, n49, 22%
- General, n128, 57%
- Nurture Group, n34, 15%

Fig 2: OFSTED rating of schools without a nurture group

- Inadequate, n11, 8%
- Requires Improvement, n25, 18%
- Outstanding, n25, 17%
- Good, n80, 57%

Figure 3: OFSTED rating of schools with a nurture group

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