

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The impact of introducing relational approaches into four primary schools

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Abstract

In this two-year project, four participating primary schools received training, support and investment to develop relational approaches and nurturing practices in their settings. The investment included funding for a nurture group, training for the nurture group staff and whole-school staff training in attachment theory, neuroscience and emotion coaching. The socio-emotional progress of 57 pupils attending a nurture group intervention was measured using the Boxall Profile® assessment instrument and staff focus group interviews reflected on any perceived changes to school ethos and practice over the course of the project. The impact of relational approaches on school suspension data was also investigated. The socio-emotional progress made by pupils attending the nurture group intervention was found to be statistically significant and this progress was confirmed by qualitative observations made by staff. The development of relational approaches in school changed the way that adults spoke to children and to each other; schools felt calmer and more nurturing; and staff well-being also improved. The impact on school suspension data was inconclusive. The findings recommend an investment in relational approaches in schools to promote positive emotional development, a calmer school atmosphere and improved staff well-being.

KEYWORDS

Boxall Profile®, nurture groups, relational approaches, suspensions

Key Points

- Pupils attending nurture groups made statistically significant improvements in their socio-emotional functioning.
- The development of relational approaches in schools changed the way that adults spoke to children.
- Schools were found to become calmer, more serene and more nurturing.
- A focus on relationships supported staff well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The Mulberry Bush Organisation (www.mulberrybush.org.uk) is a UK charity that funded and resourced the development of whole-school relational approaches in nine Oxfordshire primary schools between 2021 and 2025. The project was undertaken in two phases and the results from phase 1 (2021–2023) involving five primary schools have been published (Colley et al., 2024). This paper will focus on the results from phase 2 involving an additional four primary schools over two academic years (2023–2025).

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Each primary school participating in phase 2 of the project received the following investment and support to develop relational approaches and nurturing practice in their schools:

- Funding for a nurture group in each school.
- Nurture group training for two nurture practitioners.
- Training for two Senior Leaders via the National Nurturing Schools training course.
- Whole-school staff training sessions in the following areas of relational practice:
 - the six principles of nurture
 - attachment theory
 - child development
 - trauma-informed practice
 - neuroscience of emotions
 - an introduction to emotion coaching (including adult prompts and scripts)
- Advanced emotion coaching training was also offered to key staff from each school.
- School Improvement Partner visits and guidance via the Mulberry Bush Outreach team.
- Network meetings for school senior leaders.

Over the course of the two-year project, data were collected to evaluate the impact of this investment in relation to the following research questions:

1. How will the investment impact the socio-emotional functioning of pupils attending the nurture group?
2. How will the investment impact whole-school ethos and practice?
3. How will the investment impact whole-school suspension data?

What are nurture groups?

A nurture group is a specialist school-based learning environment where a small group of 10–12 pupils work intensively together with two trained staff on activities designed to address their unmet socio-emotional needs (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). Individual assessments through the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998) identify aspects of emotional development that require additional support and these are targeted by staff in a thoughtful and supportive way (Colley & Seymour, 2021). The intervention is part-time and the nurture group typically meets for three afternoon sessions per week (1–3 pm). For the remainder of the week, the pupils are in their mainstream classes where they apply the skills they are developing within the safe and slow-moving environment of the nurture group. Pupils do not attend the nurture group indefinitely. The intervention is designed to conclude for each pupil after a period of three terms when they then return to mainstream classes full-time (Boxall, 2002).

The six principles of nurture (Lucas et al., 2006) define the classic nurture group and are used as a framework around which whole-school nurturing practices are then embedded across the school. Affirmed by Education Scotland (2016), the six principles of nurture are set out in Table 1.

Nurture groups are now supported and recommended by key organisations in the UK including OFSTED in England (2011), Estyn in Wales (2019), NIEA in Northern Ireland (2025) and HMIE in Scotland (2025). Nurture group intervention has been shown to improve a range of developmental areas for pupils attending the provision, including socio-emotional functioning (Seth-Smith et al., 2010; Sloan et al., 2020), behavioural regulation (Ofsted, 2011), school attainment (Reynolds et al., 2009) and self-esteem (Lyon, 2017) as well as reducing school exclusions (Kearney & Nowek, 2019).

TABLE 1 The six principles of nurture.

Number	Nurture principle
1	Children's learning is understood developmentally
2	The classroom offers a safe base
3	The importance of nurture for the development of well-being
4	Language is a vital means of communication
5	All behaviour is communication
6	The importance of transition in children's lives

Source: Education Scotland (2016).

What are relational approaches?

The term ‘relational approaches’ describes a philosophy and pedagogy that seeks to establish a supportive, caring and nurturing environment in school (NICE, 2022). Specific practices that contribute to relational approaches include whole-school nurture, emotion coaching, attachment awareness and trauma-informed practice (Attachment Research Community, 2024).

- Whole-school nurture sees the application of the six principles of nurture across the whole-school, informing school policy and procedures (Colley et al., 2024). Staff are encouraged to reflect carefully on what pupil behaviour is telling them about unmet emotional needs and to use language that communicates empathy and understanding in every interaction.
- Emotion coaching is a practical approach that supports pupils in their efforts to better regulate their own behaviour, control impulses and delay gratification (Gus & Wood, 2017). Employing neuroscientific research into the understanding of emotions and emotional development (Siegel & Bryon, 2011), emotion coaching involves an individual pupil working intensively with a trusted adult through four key stages (Gus & Wood, 2017):
 1. Being aware of the emotion in the moment
 2. Labelling and validating the emotion
 3. Limit setting
 4. Problem solving
 A staff prompt or ‘script’ based on the emotion coaching stages is a key feature of the whole-school training received by all participating schools. The ‘script’ provides adults with the language to consistently label and validate the child's feelings before exploring positive solutions with the child.
- Attachment awareness encourages staff to understand that the root of all human personality lies in the earliest childhood relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Forming secure relationships is crucial for healthy, successful child development and this requires soothing, attentive care and co-regulation (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Nurture groups are informed by this theory and whole-school attachment-aware practice recognises the importance of trust and connection between pupils with a reliable, consistent adult.
- Trauma-informed practice acknowledges that when a pupil has been exposed to psychologically distressing events involving intense fear, terror or helplessness (Perry, 2006) then this will invariably impact on the pupil's emotions, relationships, learning and behaviour (De Thierry, 2015). Trauma will be retained in the child's body and/or subconscious and empathetic support will be needed to discharge this stress safely and appropriately (De Thierry, 2017).

A relational approach to education challenges the language of punishment, as championed by the Department for Education's Behaviour and Discipline guidance (DFE, 2016) and rejects both the use of isolation rooms (Bennett, 2017) and the application of zero-tolerance approaches (Birbalsingh, 2016). Instead of ‘managing behaviour’ (DFE, 2024), relational approaches see behaviour as a communication of need (Devon CC, 2025) that requires high warmth, high standards and high expectations to reduce interpersonal conflict and school suspensions (Scottish Government, 2024). Relational approaches emphasise connection, belonging and conflict resolution (NICE, 2022) and staff approach pupil behaviour with curiosity rather than judgement, taking a full account of the pupil's lived experience.

Leading the way in the implementation of relational approaches in schools is the Scottish Government (2024, 2025). The Joint Action Plan ‘Improving relationships and behaviour in schools: 2024–2027’ (Scottish Government, 2024) confirms Scotland's move away from punitive approaches while in England ‘the pressures on schools to perform outweighs commitments to inclusion’ (Daniels & Thompson, 2024). Scotland is being rewarded for adopting this approach through a notable reduction in school suspensions (Scottish Government, 2025).

School suspensions in Scotland and England

School suspensions in England (DFE, 2025) are rising exponentially in contrast with Scotland (Scottish Government, 2025). Between 2011 and 2023, suspensions—or ‘temporary exclusions’—in Scotland fell from 26,784 to 11,675, while in England suspensions almost trebled in the same period, rising from 324,110 to 954,952 (Figure 1).

Advocates for relational approaches argue that school cultures in England, focusing on performance, zero-tolerance and punishment (Bennett, 2017; DFE, 2016), have inadvertently contributed to this rise in school suspensions. Indeed, research suggests that where zero-tolerance approaches are employed, school suspensions increase and a sense of safety in school decreases (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

Informed by the literature (ARC, 2024; Education Scotland, 2016; Sloan et al., 2020; Scottish Government, 2024), this project sought to embed relational approaches in four primary schools and evaluate the impact that this would

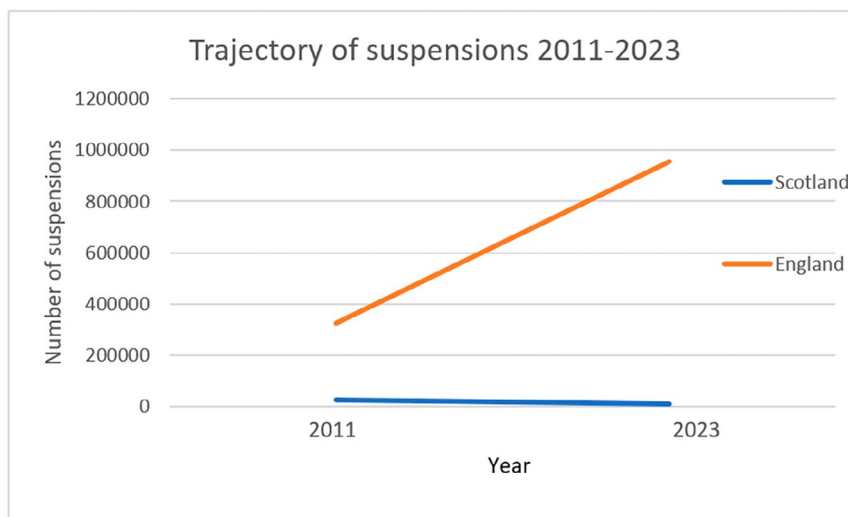


FIGURE 1 School suspensions in Scotland and England 2011–2023 (DFE, 2025; Scottish Government, 2025).

have on the socio-emotional functioning of pupils attending the nurture group, the whole-school ethos and whole-school suspension data.

METHODOLOGY

This small-scale longitudinal study was informed by an interpretivist theoretical perspective and employed a mixed-methods research design. Quantitative data were collected on school suspensions per academic year and quantitative pupil progress data were collected via the Boxall Profile® assessment (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998). Qualitative data were collected through focus groups interviews and individual interviews with school staff. An integration of quantitative and qualitative data strands took place during the analysis and interpretation of data relating to the socio-emotional progress made by pupils attending the nurture groups. This convergence of data provided a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the progress made by pupils during their placement.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the planning of the project, the rights, safety and well-being of participants were given primary consideration. Participants were free from coercion and consented independently to take part in the project. Gatekeeper consent was obtained from the Head teacher of every school, and consent was secured from the parents/carers of pupils participating in the school nurture groups. All participant information sheets were clear and open about the use of data, and research transparency was central to the relationships between the research team and participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in focus group transcripts and identifiers were employed for participating schools. The storage of data was securely held within the schools' own systems up until the point was shared with the research team. At this point, the data were held securely within the Mulberry Bush Organisation's database and password protected. Anonymised research findings were shared with all schools at the project's conclusion and prior to publication.

Positionality statement

Researchers are not neutral observers, and it is important to recognise and acknowledge how the values, world views and educational philosophies of a research team might shape how research is conducted and interpreted. The Mulberry Bush Organisation, which funded this project, holds core principles around psychodynamic understanding, reflective culture and collaborative working. The research team shared these values and a commitment to inclusion, equality and diversity. To ensure that transparency and intellectual honesty were maintained throughout the project, the research team actively questioned and adjusted their approach in order to remain neutral, balanced and curious throughout the data collection, analysis and interpretation process.

Participants

Schools in Oxfordshire UK with an interest in developing whole-school relational approaches were invited to apply for the four places available at phase 2 of the project. While phase 2 had sought to engage with secondary schools around the development of relational approaches, the secondary school that did agree to join the project (School I) withdrew within the first term and was replaced with another school at short notice (School K). Ultimately, the project involved four primary schools (Schools G, H, J and K) with no secondary school representation. Due to the delayed start, School K contributed data to one academic year only (2024–2025).

A total of 57 pupils participated in the nurture group intervention across four schools in two cohorts. Cohort 1 (2023–2024) involved 28 pupils while cohort 2 (2024–2025) involved 29 pupils. Each participating school independently identified pupils who might benefit from nurture group support using Boxall Profile® pre-assessments and teacher recommendations. A placement in the nurture group was then discussed with parents/carers and offered based on their agreement and support.

A total of 20 staff across the four participating schools engaged with the focus group interviews and individual interviews on three occasions over the 2-year period of the project.

Table 2 sets out the contextual information regarding the four participating schools including their OFSTED rating, the number of Education Health and Care Plans being managed and the timing of the nurture provision in the school week.

Data collection

Data were collected on the socio-emotional functioning of 57 pupils attending the nurture group through the Boxall Profile® assessment at two time points. A pre-intervention assessment (typically in September of the academic year) was followed by a post-intervention assessment (typically in June of the same academic year). All assessments were undertaken by the nurture team in conjunction with mainstream staff.

The Boxall Profile®

The Boxall Profile® is a detailed, normative diagnostic instrument that is frequently used to measure the socio-emotional functioning of children and young people in schools across the UK. A psychometric analysis of the instrument has indicated that the Boxall Profile® has good internal consistency, concurrent validity and convergent validity (Ruby, 2020).

The Boxall Profile® comprises two sections. The Developmental Strands (Section 1) focuses on positive classroom engagement and includes 34 descriptive statements such as ‘listens with interest when the teacher explains something to the class’. Each statement is scored between 0 and 4 depending on how frequently this behaviour has been observed in class. Positive socio-emotional progress on Section 1 is indicated by a total score that increases over time.

In Section 2—the Diagnostic Profile—34 statements have a focus on dysregulated and troubling behaviours in class such as ‘erupts into temper when thwarted’. The 34 descriptive statements are scored between 0 and 4, again, depending on how frequently this behaviour has been observed in class. Positive socio-emotional progress on Section 2 is indicated by a total score that decreases over time (Colley et al., 2024).

TABLE 2 School contexts.

School ID	Number of pupils on roll	Number of education, health and care plans (EHCPs)	Nurture group cohorts	Nurture group provision delivery	OFSTED rating
G	335	14	1 cohort 2023–24 only	4 × afternoons	Good
H	407	2	2 cohorts 2023–25	4 × afternoons	Good
J	445	11	2 cohorts 2023–25	3 × mornings	Good
K	285	7	1 cohort 2024–25 only	3 × mornings	Good

Focus group interviews

Focus group data were collected to provide qualitative reflections on the progress of pupils attending the nurture group, and to allow staff to critically reflect on the impact of the project on whole-school ethos and practice. Alongside the nine focus group interviews, two interviews with individual senior leaders also contributed to the analysed data. Schools self-selected the membership of their focus groups and Table 3 sets out the roles of focus group participants and the timing of the interviews.

School suspension data

The project sought to monitor the impact of relational approaches on school suspension data and each participating school was requested to submit their annual suspension data for the year preceding the project and for the years in which they took part in the project. This data included the number of half-day suspensions issued in the academic year, the number of children issued with suspensions and the number of days lost suspension.

Data analysis

Boxall Profile® data

A nonparametric statistical test was used to analyse the quantitative data generated by the Boxall Profile® assessments and examine how the nurture group intervention had impacted upon the socio-emotional functioning of 57 participating pupils. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test with continuity correction explored the differences in Boxall Profile® scores at Time 1 (pre-intervention) and Time 2 (post-intervention). Discrete data analysis took place on each individual total score on Section 1 (Developmental Strands) and Section 2 (Diagnostic Profile).

Focus group and interview data

Staff focus group interviews and individual interviews were undertaken at regular intervals across the time span of the project (Table 3). All interviews were video recorded and transcribed using Panopto. Panopto's automated transcriptions were then manually corrected with care to accurately reflect the contributions made by each participant and to ensure the descriptive and interpretative validity of the transcript record.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was then employed to analyse the transcript data. Reflexive thematic analysis is an accessible and flexible method to systematically and robustly explore, interpret and report on qualitative data through pattern-based analysis. In this case, a deductive approach was employed to prioritise data reflecting on the progress of pupils attending the nurture group and data that would inform a response to research question 2: How will the investment impact on whole-school ethos and practice?

TABLE 3 Time points for focus groups/interviews.

School ID	Focus group/interviews		
	Time 1 July 2023	Time 2 July 2024	Time 3 July 2025
G	NG Teacher, NG Assistant, Head teacher, Deputy, Exec Head	NG Teacher, NG Assistant, Head teacher, Deputy, Exec Head	Deputy (interview)
H	NG teacher, Mainstream Teacher 1, Mainstream Teacher 2, Deputy, cover teacher	NG teacher, Mainstream Teacher 2, Deputy, cover teacher	NG teacher, Mainstream Teacher 2, Deputy, Mainstream Teacher 3
J	Assistant Head, Head teacher, NG Teacher, NG Assistant	Assistant Head, Head teacher, NG Teacher	Assistant Head, Head teacher, NG Assistant
K	N/A (joined June 2024)	NG Teacher, Mainstream TA, Deputy, Mainstream teacher 1, Mainstream teacher 2	Deputy (interview)

The familiarisation phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006) began immediately after the first focus group interviews had been transcribed and corrected. Transcripts were read and annotated in relation to research question 2 and areas of potential interest highlighted. As the second and third sets of interviews were completed, each transcript was actively read and re-read with preliminary data labels being constructed through a recursive analysis of the whole dataset. Codes were then generated through an active process of phased critical examination. Here the researcher discarded, retained and collapsed initial codes so that only a coherent, meaningful and supported set of codes remained.

A search for potential themes was informed by the knowledge that a theme should capture something important in the data. Searching for themes was an active process and required the researcher to make choices around the broad concepts to be presented and the clustering together of codes that shared a unifying feature. An overall story needed to be communicated in relation to the research questions, based on clear and coherent evidence from the data.

Each potential theme was critically reviewed in terms of its supporting data and its distinctive contribution to answering the project's research questions. The themes were reviewed again in relation to the coded data and choices were then made regarding 'thin' themes that could be discarded or 'thick' themes that would be retained. Each retained theme offered a unique and specific focal point in relation to the research question. A coherent and meaningful set of sub-themes linked to each theme and helped to communicate the impact of the project on whole-school ethos and practice.

In producing the final report, the analytic narrative and data extracts were woven together into a compelling argument in answer to the research question. Choices were then made around which single data extracts or quotations best exemplified the analytic point being made, and this process continued right up until the final edit.

FINDINGS

RQ1: The impact on the socio-emotional functioning of pupils attending the nurture group

The socio-emotional progress of pupils attending the nurture group intervention was found to be statistically significant on both Section 1 of the Boxall Profile® (Developmental Strands) and Section 2 (Diagnostic Profile) (Table 4). Employing the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, the statistical analysis of Section 1 data recorded significant improvements in socio-emotional functioning from time 1 to time 2 ($p < 0.01$), with a strong effect size ($r = 0.68$). The analysis of Section 2 data recorded significant improvements ($p < 0.05$), with a moderate effect size ($r = 0.27$).

Figure 2 presents the distribution of Boxall Profile® scores for the Developmental Strands (DS) and the Diagnostic Profile (DP) at time 1 (T1) and time 2 (T2). In Figure 2, the higher median score at time 2 on the DS indicates that, overall, pupils improved their positive classroom functioning during the period of the intervention. In support of this, the lower median score at time 2 on the DP suggests that pupils also increased their emotional regulation in the classroom.

Qualitative reflections by staff on the progress of individual pupils attending the nurture group were integrated with the quantitative findings to offer a deeper understanding of the progress made. This included individual cases where learning and language had improved, plus the creation of friendship networks that extended beyond the environment of the nurture group.

Each quotation identifier indicates the School (G, H, J, K), the time point (time 1, 2 or 3) and the transcript time point (e.g. 16 min 6s).

Child C was so dysregulated in class they that he was on a reduced timetable. Now this child is joining in with the learning, he's doing what's expected and he's using language like 'I'm not going to give up'. The progress that he's made has just been amazing.

(H3 16:06)

Those children formed really strong friendships in the nurture group and friendships that they probably wouldn't have had ... So I think that the change in them is going to be sustained because I can see the happiness has been derived by these friendships.

(J3 13:00)

TABLE 4 Wilcoxon signed-rank and effect size for nurture group pupils.

Test	Boxall profile®	
	Developmental strands (DS)	Diagnostic profile (DP)
Wilcoxon signed-rank (p -value)	3.526e-07	0.04127
Effect size (r)	0.68	0.27

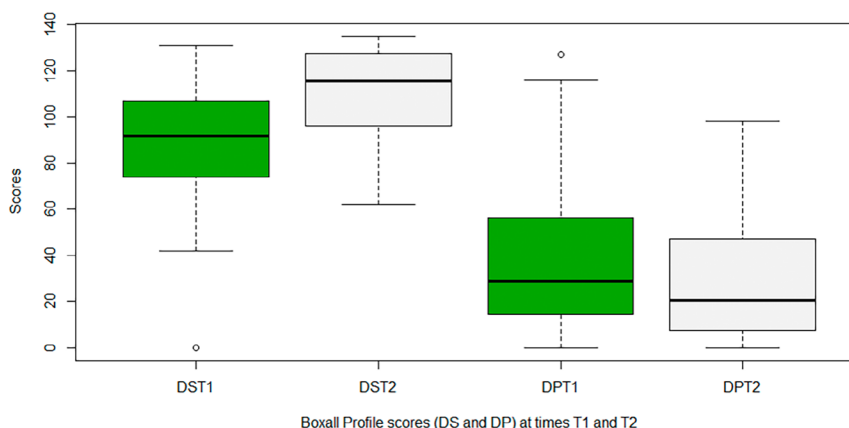


FIGURE 2 Distribution of Boxall Profile® scores at Time 1 and Time 2.

I can think of one child in particular who barely spoke. And I think the loveliest thing is that I have started to hear that child's voice and that has been huge for me because I had her all the way back in nursery and it was something that I kept an eye on all the way through, and now that child is talking.

(J3 14:05)

While staff reflections supported the general progress of children attending the nurture groups, there were qualifications included and an acknowledgement that progress for children with socio-emotional difficulties can be erratic and non-linear:

We might see some steady improvements and then there might be something that sets things back a little bit. It's not a single line trajectory; there's kind of more ups and downs. And being okay with the fact that it is a process, an ongoing process.

(J2 7:00)

RQ2: The impact on whole-school ethos and practice

The reflexive thematic analysis of transcripts from nine focus group interviews and two individual interviews concluded that the impact of the project on whole-school ethos and practice could be framed by four coherent themes: the development of relational practice, the impact on staff well-being, parental/carer views and the school's focus on including or excluding pupils. [Figure 3](#) provides a thematic map that illustrates the inter-connection between four themes and their sub-themes in relation to research question 2.

The impact of relational practice

The development of relational practices in school was found to impact on how adults talked to children, the qualitative 'feel' of the school and improved levels of consistency among staff when applying relational approaches.

How adults talk to children

Staff reported that the whole staff training around attachment theory, the six Principles of nurture and emotion coaching had a significant impact on the way that children were now spoken to around the school. In some schools, the language 'scripts' employed by staff at times of high emotion and/or dysregulated behaviour helped to maintain the focus on the needs of the child rather than the crisis behaviour itself:

The two-year project journey has got more people thinking about how they're speaking to children; how they're relating to them.

(G3 0.55)

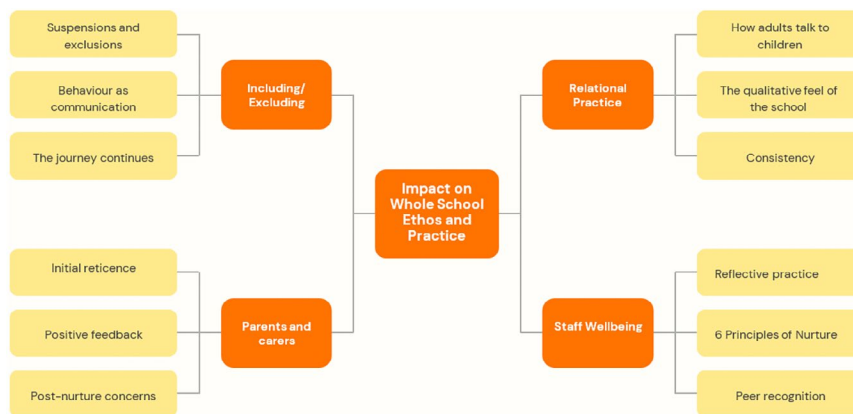


FIGURE 3 The impact of relational approaches on whole-school ethos and practice.

I think the fact that our school feels serene and nurturing and calm is down to the adult interactions every single minute of every single day. And I think the Nurture Project has helped us understand even further the importance of the language that we use with children.

(H3 7.03)

Interactions between adults had also begun to change and the use of relational language between adults appeared to be modifying interactions between children:

You can hear it when children are speaking to each other. It's like the modelling of the adults is then reflected in the way that the children then work and speak to each other.

(G3 0.55)

The qualitative feel of the school

For many, the project provided an opportunity to step back and reflect on values that are shared together. The whole premise of a relational approach was described as 'keeping the child in mind with a genuine kind of interest, and then kindness' (J2 1.47). As a result of the project, it was reported that the relational culture and ethos of the school had been 'refreshed' and a sense of calm now permeated school environments:

Just last week we had a lot of visitors in school, and they used words like calm, serene and nurturing to describe the school environment. And they were based in our school for an entire week.

(H3 6.38)

There's less big behaviour. Children move around the school most of the time calmly. The school feels calm and safer.

(G3 21.09)

From my perspective, I think that it's helped to refresh our culture around what is nurture, what provision do we want to be providing for our children.

(G2 1.24)

It was noted, however, that the creation of a calmer school ethos inadvertently served to highlight individual children who continued to struggle with their own emotional self-regulation in class:

I think the only downside to that is you are noticing the really high-level children more, because everyone else is much calmer—so they're becoming more prominent.

(K3 4:16)

Consistency across staff teams

The development of relational approaches via whole staff training was found to promote improved levels of consistency across staff teams when applying relational practices:

I think consistency is something that has definitely improved over the two years with all the training that we've had. I think that's really helped get a nice, consistent approach ... There is a real ethos that is now being used consistently in the language used by staff.

(J3 22:13)

However, 'pockets of old school thinking' (G3 0.41) continued to feature with certain staff members refusing to 'get on the bus' with the relational approaches (G3 0.26).

I'd say most teaching staff, most, not all, are on board and are fairly consistent in how they relate to children. We're not there with the consistency, but it's the majority rather than the minority.

(G3 12.38)

The impact on staff well-being

Staff indicated that the project had provided a framework around which they could reflect more clearly on their own practice and consider how the six principles of nurture applied to the whole-school community, rather than just the children attending the nurture group. The well-being of staff now had a higher profile in school and deliberate attempts were made to recognise the qualities and contributions made by individual staff members.

Reflective practice

Staff valued the opportunity to think carefully about practice and the values they shared as a team. They sought solutions to the challenges they faced with renewed determination, and a previous tendency to, perhaps, take challenging behaviour personally began to recede:

The project helped us focus and talk through things and come to our own solutions. It gave us space to think ... and reaffirm that this is what we believe in, and this is who we are. This might be tricky—but let's not react. Let's make a plan for how to support this.

(G3 7.14)

I think staff are not taking it as personally as they were ... because it's not about them, it's about the child and their needs in that moment. And I think there is a lot more realisation that actually it's not 'on them'.

(J2 20.20)

Six principles of nurture

The six principles of nurture offered a practical framework around which whole-school, relational approaches could be developed. The principles provided a common language for staff to employ consistently while maintaining an unerring focus upon growth, health and happiness:

Our Relational and Behaviour Policy is moving away from a behaviour policy and moving much more into developing trust in our understanding of the communication of behaviour. A lot of that encompasses all the six principles of nurture.

(J1 15.14)

I think having the training going through the six principles of nurture in different ways, thinking about how that applies to the classroom, how that applies to us as staff and how it applies to children. I think that's brought our thinking together.

(H3 2:32)

It's certainly enabling (staff) to have conversations on the same level, using similar language.

(G2 2.49)

Peer recognition

Raising the profile of staff well-being throughout the project encouraged schools to invest time and energy into creating opportunities for informal, social events that supported a sense of nurturing for all:

We had a teacher appreciation evening where we could all nominate people, TAs, teachers, anybody and some nominations ended up getting an award and it was just lovely. And it felt lovely and we all got an appreciation post from somebody random in the school, anonymously. All of these things that I think just build us up, just thinking about teachers as human beings and how they can be nurtured as well. So I feel like we've really made a lot of progress in that area.

(H3 21.55)

The impact on parents and carers

The perceptions of parents/carers, as reported by school staff, suggested that there could be some anxiety over the initial invitation for their child to join the nurture group. This defensiveness was allayed through clear communication and links with the nurture team. The feedback from parents/carers on the impact of nurture group intervention was positive, although concerns were expressed as to the support available to their children post-nurture.

Initial reticence

Schools noted that parents/carers could be anxious in the first instance about why their child had been referred to the nurture group for additional support. This initial reticence was allayed by the nurture team through their skilled communication of the aims and principles of the planned intervention:

When parents are first invited into the nurture group to introduce the setting and introduce what happens, you see parents come in looking quite guarded and probably a little bit worried about why their child has been chosen for that provision. Maybe a little bit defensive about it. (But after the presentation by nurture staff) you just see this incredible transformation with parents just relaxing and realising that actually, this is a really fantastic opportunity. By the end, they are all smiling and all saying thank you so much for offering this to my child.

(H3 19:49)

Positive feedback

Schools noted that parents/carers were full of praise for the impact of the nurture group intervention and how impressed they were by the work generated by their children in the specialist environment:

I think the parents whose children have been in the nurture group this year have absolutely praised it. They have been very grateful for the support because it's not just about the support for their child in the group, but the wider support that the family's being given.

(G2 25.21)

Parents come in to see the work that their child has done and they're impressed. They're impressed with what the kids have been able to achieve because they've never had a chance to see that (before) ... To actually come in and be genuinely impressed, that's a huge step forward.

(H3 14.20)

Post-nurture concerns

Concerns were expressed by parents/carers regarding the temporary nature of the intervention and the fact that their child might 'miss out' once their placement came to an end:

Parents have seen the worth of it, they have seen how much their children have benefited and are now starting to worry that their child's going to really miss out on not being in the nurture group, going forward.

(H3 16.59)

Including and excluding pupils

Suspensions and exclusions

The impact on school suspension statistics will be considered in response to RQ3, below, but additional reflections by staff on how suspensions were managed over the course of the project suggested that suspensions were reducing and that suspending a child was deemed a failure for all parties. Not only were suspensions 'not the answer'

(G3 4.41), but also, they begged the question—had the child been adequately supported by the school in advance of the suspension?

Our relational policy has had a year to embed and settle in and we are very clear with everyone that exclusions aren't the answer.

(G3 4.40)

My understanding is that the number of suspensions is reduced quite significantly compared to last year.

(K3 4:49)

I think that's really key when suspending- have you done absolutely everything within your power to put the support in place? Have staff been consistent in the offer of support that is there? And if we haven't, then the mistake is ours, not the child's.

(G3 5:37)

Behaviour as communication

As one of the key six principles of nurture (Lucas et al., 2006), the recognition that all behaviour is communication resonated with staff teams. For some, the principle challenged the more compliance-demanding position of certain colleagues, while encouraging staff to take the time required to support a child in crisis. The notion that all behaviour is communication was becoming 'entrenched in the school ethos' (H3 7.03):

Things like behaviour is communication is very much at the heart of our thoughts.

(K1 23:14)

Having this greater understanding of behaviour being communication and being so much more aware of that, requires giving a child more of your time ... I think if a child is in crisis, they need time to calm and regulate and that is going to take time out of staff's day. They are not just going to be fine. So, it's kind of being willing and accepting of that.

(J2 17:36)

If you speak to any member of staff when they are encountering a child who might be struggling, everybody's reflecting that that child is communicating something. Not a single person is seeing that as surface level behaviour. So I think it's that understanding that is coming through in the practice and that we're seeing from our staff.

(H3 7.50)

The journey continues

The inclusion of children with special education needs into mainstream schools was initiated by the Warnock Report (Warnock 1978) but almost 50 years later, inclusion continues to be a journey fraught with barriers including funding, resources, training and attitudes (Robertson & Jaswal, 2024). For participants in the project, progress towards whole-school nurturing and relational practice was described as an ongoing journey that would require trust in the process:

What I would love to see develop and grow stronger is the security of staff to feel really empowered and to believe in the policy ... to see it through, and hold their nerve in terms of thinking, 'Right, trust in the process'. It takes time. It's a bit of a journey.

(J2 3:49)

(The project) has helped us to reflect our policy and our practice, therefore enabling us to make sure that what we're trying to offer as a whole-school team is consistent. We're on a journey with it, but it's certainly a really good start.

(G2 1.54)

RQ3: The impact on whole-school suspension data

School suspension data were collected at three time points for Schools G, H and J. Time 1 data related to the number of suspensions pre-intervention (2022–2023) while time 2 data were collected at the end of the first year, and time 3

after the second year. School K joined the project a year late and provided pre- and post-intervention data following 1 year of the project.

Table 5 sets out details of the suspension data collected over the course of the project, including the number of suspensions, the number of pupils receiving suspensions and the number of teaching days lost to suspension each year.

Figure 4 provides a graphical summary of the number of suspensions issued per school across the time period of the project.

In summary, School G recorded a significant reduction in suspensions in the second year of the project, decreasing from 33 suspensions in 2023–2024 to 8 suspensions in 2024–2025. In addition and during the same period, the number of children suspended had halved and the number of teaching days lost to suspension decreased from 50.5 to 13.5 days. While this reduction in suspensions at School G was welcome, any causal link between the project and this reduction was treated with caution given the influence of school-specific contextual factors. For example, staff noted that a contributing factor to this decrease in suspensions was that a cohort of troubled year 6 children had transitioned into secondary school in September 2024:

A large number of the (suspensions in 2023–24) were due to children who were in a year six cohort whose needs we quite simply weren't meeting. But when those children moved on to secondary school it freed up time and resources to invest in the other children.

(G3 2.56)

After a rise in suspensions during year 1 of the project, School H saw suspensions decrease in year 2, including fewer days lost to suspension. But qualitative data from focus group 3 suggest that School H already had an inclusive ethos and while the project may have supported this, it did not initiate it:

I would say we've always had a low number of suspensions. We try everything other than excluding children. Basically, we would say we are a very inclusive school and off the top of my head, I would say, suspensions have remained consistently low.

(H3 19:11)

School J witnessed an increase in suspensions over the period of the project, plus an increase in the number of children suspended and an increase in days lost as the project progressed. These results appear to be at odds with the school's positive engagement with relational approaches and whole-school nurturing practice, but a small number of pupils had needs that were deemed beyond the capacity of the school:

So I'd say suspensions have increased. We've got about four children with very complex SEMH neuro diverse needs which we are trying to support in our alternative provision within school and it hasn't always been successful.

(J3 15:40)

TABLE 5 School suspensions per year with cohort size and the number of teaching days lost to suspension.

School	Pre-intervention (r1)	School year 2023–24 (r2)	School year 2024–25 (r3)
G	15 suspensions	33 suspensions	8 suspensions
	5 children	10 children	5 children
	21 days lost	50.5 days lost	13.5 days lost
H	10 suspensions	16 suspensions	9 suspensions
	6 children	10 children	6 children
	10.5 days lost	18 days lost	8 days lost
J	12 suspensions	21 suspensions	29 suspensions
	4 children	5 children	7 children
	11 days lost	22 days lost	40 days lost
K	N/A	18 suspensions	9 suspensions
		8 children	6 children
		35 days lost	9 days lost

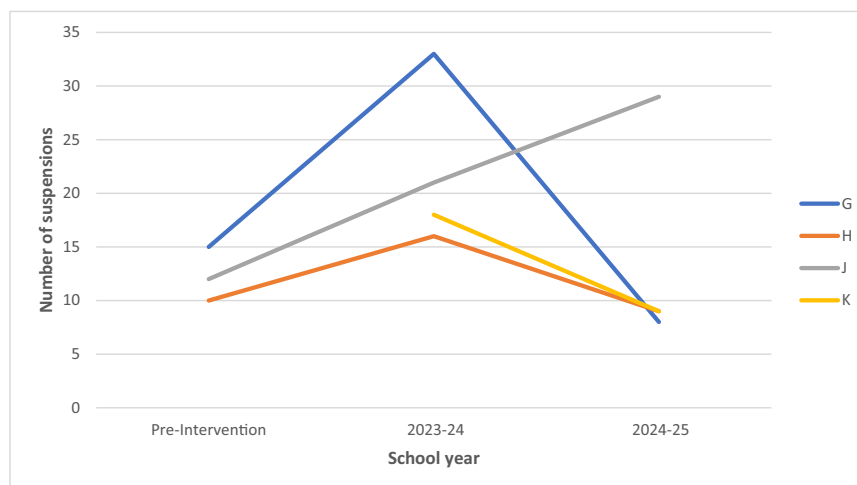


FIGURE 4 The number of suspensions issued per school over the course of the project.

School K, joining the project for 1 year only, recorded a decrease in suspensions over the course of the project year, a decrease in the number of children suspended and a reduction in school days lost to suspension. This positive trajectory was recognised and welcomed by staff in the school:

My understanding is that the number of suspensions has reduced quite significantly compared to last year.
 (K3 4:49)

DISCUSSION

The development of relational approaches in schools has been formally embraced and adopted by the education departments of all countries in the United Kingdom, bar one. In Scotland, the Government has set out its Joint Action Plan 2024–2027, ‘Improving relationships and behaviour in schools’ (Scottish Government, 2024) and has reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring safe and consistent environments for all. The Welsh school inspection team (Estyn) robustly promotes the use of nurturing approaches in schools and includes case studies on its website illustrating how schools are employing nurture to improve both pupil skills and whole-school inclusive practice (Estyn, 2018, 2019). In 2016, the Northern Ireland Education Authority (NIEA) commissioned two evaluation reports to evidence the outcomes for pupils who accessed support through nurture groups (NIEA, 2016a, 2016b) and both endorsed the nurture group approach as ‘an extremely effective intervention strategy for use by primary schools’ (NIEA, 2023, p. 1).

In England, however, the policy commitment to whole-school relational approaches in schools has been negligible. The Department for Education's policy and guidance to schools makes no reference to ideas around nurture groups beyond a single OFSTED report (2011) and any search for ‘relational approaches’ on the Department for Education's website will generate zero results. Tom Bennett occupied the position of Behaviour Adviser to the Conservative government from 2015 to 2024 and presided over a ‘no excuses’ system, encouraging strict behaviour policies enforced by a range of punitive sanctions including the use of ‘internal inclusion units’. These ‘muscular units’ (Bennett, 2017, p. 45) have been designed to remove pupils from class and invariably into isolation. A report by the Education Endowment Fund (2019) and followed up by the British Psychological Society (2021) highlighted the lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of these approaches, while organisations such as Speech and Language UK (2025) argued that these methods penalised children with special educational needs. An investigation by the BBC (2018) found that, within one academic year, more than 200 pupils had spent at least five consecutive days in isolation and that 5000 children with special educational needs had been referred to isolation rooms as punishment. Such statistics caused the British Psychological Society to call for a ban on the use of isolation booths (BPS, 2021), supporting claims that punitive isolation has a ‘huge impact on young people's self-esteem, well-being and feelings’ (Autism Eye, 2023). Despite these calls for change, the reappointment of Tom Bennett in 2025 as the Labour Government's current DFE Behaviour and Attendance ambassador confirms the policy trajectory for education in England.

The confirmed impact of nurture group intervention

The findings from the Boxall Profile® assessments undertaken on 57 pupils attending the nurture group provision offers further evidence that the socio-emotional functioning of pupils will improve when they are offered the opportunity to join this specialist intervention. Supporting the work of previous researchers (Chiappella, 2015; Colley et al., 2024; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014), the socio-emotional progress of pupils attending the nurture group was found to be statistically significant on both Section 1 of the Boxall Profile® (Developmental Strands) and Section 2 (Diagnostic Profile).

Staff observations of the pupils attending the nurture group identified broader improvements including increased confidence around school, enhanced language development and enriched networks of friends. However, staff also noted that observed socio-emotional progress could then be followed by a period of regression and a return to dysregulated behaviours. The non-linear patterns of development associated with pupils experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties were acknowledged by the staff working in the nurture groups and accepted as ‘part of the process’.

A nurture group sets out to offer a safe base that is calm, predictable and welcoming, allowing pupils to explore missed early learning experiences with the support of peers and a specialist staff team. The empirical results from this project support the findings from other UK nations. In Scotland, a large scale controlled study involving nurture groups in 32 schools found that nurture groups, ‘in applying Bowlby’s work on attachment to an educational context, provide a theoretical and practical foundation for addressing the emotional/behavioural and academic needs of the most vulnerable children’ (Reynolds et al., 2009, p. 209); in Northern Ireland, a project involving a sample of 384 children, aged 5–6 years, from 30 nurture groups was matched with 14 schools without a nurture group and found ‘notable and statistically significant positive improvements for the children in the nurture group across all of the social, emotional and behavioural outcomes; with reductions in negative behaviours and increases in prosocial behaviour (Sloan et al., 2020, p. 6); while in Wales, the school inspection team Estyn confirmed that pupils attending nurture groups recorded ‘sound progress’ on the Boxall Profile® assessments and this was reflected in their improved standards of behaviour, their ability to concentrate, their willingness to co-operate and also their resilience and perseverance during difficult periods (Estyn, 2019).

Nurture groups offer an evidence-based response to improving the socio-emotional functioning of pupils and this approach is being endorsed enthusiastically by most countries in the UK, with the exception of England’s DFE.

Positive impact on whole-school ethos and practice

The development of relational approaches and whole-school nurturing practices was found to have a positive influence on the way that adults interacted with both colleagues and pupils. Schools reported that the more traditional messages involving adult power and pupil subservience (DFE, 2016) had given way to more connected and compassionate responses (ARC, 2024). When met with a child in crisis, displaying dysregulated and/or challenging behaviour, the aim for staff became getting alongside the child to offer support rather than judgement in that moment. This became a more consistent approach for adults following training around emotion coaching, and the staff ‘scripts’ provided an important framework for more empathic interactions. Staff also noted that pupils were beginning to model the language of the adults around them, with more relational language being used in the playground and school corridors.

It was reported that the ‘feel’ of the participating schools had also changed. Schools had become calmer, more serene and more nurturing as a result of the investment in nurturing and relational approaches. Although many of the schools were already on a nurturing trajectory prior to the project commencing, the investment in relational approaches had ‘refreshed’ the school ethos and provided an opportunity to reaffirm a commitment to an environment of high warmth and high expectations (Scottish Government, 2024). A by-product of this calmer environment, however, was the raised profile of individual pupils whose behaviour disrupted this sense of calm and serenity.

Training and practice in relational approaches encouraged staff to take a step back and create space to think. In the fast-moving and intensive school environment, this simple and seemingly obvious process can be elusive unless it is actively created by individuals and teams. The benefits of reflecting carefully and critically on practice included improved planning, collaborative thinking and solution-focused responses.

Staff well-being was given a high profile in the relational training that schools received. In direct response to this, several schools developed means by which staff could feel more connected and more appreciated. Social events were enhanced with snacks and treats while an end of term celebration of colleagues and their work provided staff with the opportunity to focus on the achievements of professional dedication and skill.

Establishing a nurture group in each school was integral to the project investment, but this caused some defensiveness from parents/carers who were initially unclear as to why their child had been referred for this specialist support.

However, the response by parents/carers to the impact of the nurture group on whole-school ethos and practice was positive, and they witnessed the transfer of school-based skills and confidence into the home environment. For some, the only concern was how their child would be supported following the end of the nurture group placement.

Inconclusive impact on suspensions

The research project had a key focus on the potential impact of relational approaches on the annual suspension data collated by each participating school. While three of the four schools reported a decrease in suspensions and days lost to suspension from the pre-project measure to the post-project measure, one school reported an increase in suspensions and days lost to suspension over the course of the project. Contextual information around cohorts of pupils moving through the school explained both the dramatic decrease in suspensions at School G and the rise in suspensions at School J. We have seen how relational approaches in Scotland have contributed to a significant reduction in school suspensions since 2011 (Scottish Government, 2025) when compared with the escalating suspension crisis in England (DFE, 2025), but the results of this aspect of the project remain inconclusive.

Conclusion

The Mulberry Bush Nurturing Schools project (phase 2) saw the investment of significant resources into four primary schools to embed relational approaches and whole-school nurturing practice over a two-year period. The progress of 57 pupils attending the nurture group intervention was tracked through Boxall Profile® assessments and staff observations. Here the project recorded statistically significant improvements in the socio-emotional functioning of the pupils attending the nurture group. This progress was supported by staff observations regarding increased pupil confidence, increased language use and more developed friendship networks. Staff did express concerns that for some pupils attending the nurture group progress was erratic and non-linear, but overall, the impact of the nurture group investment was positive for all four schools.

The impact of the project on school ethos and practice was multifaceted. Noticeable changes were recorded in the way that staff spoke to pupils, and to each other, while a perceptible sense of calm increased around the schools that was remarked upon by school visitors. The consistent application of relational language, supported by the use of staff scripts, helped move each school towards a coherent and shared ethos. The impact of the project on school suspension data was found to be inconclusive although three of the four participating schools registered reductions in the number of recorded suspensions as the project progressed. This mirrors the extraordinary reduction in school suspensions recorded in Scotland since 2011 (Scottish Government, 2025) following their policy commitment to relational and nurturing practices in schools (Education Scotland, 2016; Scottish Government, 2024).

Limitations and future research

The project at phase 2 was limited by the number of participating schools. A larger cohort of schools would have generated a larger and richer dataset from which conclusions could be drawn. The inclusion of a secondary school perspective from one or more of the participating schools was sought but was ultimately unsuccessful. Future research might evaluate the impact of relational and nurturing practices on a cohort of secondary schools, with a focus on staff well-being, the socio-emotional progress of pupils and school suspension data.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nicoleta Gaciu: Methodology; formal analysis; writing – review and editing. **Emma Knipe:** Writing – original draft; funding acquisition; investigation; conceptualization. **Laura Dennis:** Writing – original draft; conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition. **David Colley:** Methodology; writing – review and editing; validation; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; visualization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are held by the Mulberry Bush Organisation UK. Requests for access should be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research, including all participant information and consent, was reviewed and approved by the Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee (UREC Registration No: 201487). Data collection and storage comply with University and GDPR requirements.

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