

Volume one

“...they were a little family”

An exploratory study of parental involvement in nurture groups – from a practitioner and  
parent perspective

By

Rebecca Kirkbride

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## ABSTRACT

Nurture groups are a specific intervention originally developed by Boxall to support the emotional development of identified children whose “...emotional, social, behavioural and formal learning needs cannot be met in the mainstream class.” (Boxall, 2002, p.1). For such children the literature states that their difficulties are as a result of an interaction between the child and their environment, with the home often highlighted. The approach taken by nurture groups emphasises that difficult and often negative early experiences can be modified through creating opportunities in developing security and attachment from alternative sources other than parents. Despite previous research indicating the positive impact parental involvement can have on both parents and children, research into parental involvement in nurture groups has been identified as being sparse and requiring further investigation.

The purpose of this research project was to contribute to the literature on parental involvement in nurture groups. This exploratory study provides an insight into the perceptions of parents and nurture group staff regarding parental involvement. A constructivist paradigm was adopted, to explore the subjective realities of participants. In-depth qualitative data was collected from semi structured interviews with parents (n = 4) and staff (n = 4) involved in nurture groups. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to draw out themes from the data. Findings highlight different experiences of parents and staff, but also common themes of relationships, communication and sharing practice. Findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and the relevant literature regarding parental involvement. Implications for nurture groups, schools and educational psychologists are discussed.

## **DEDICATION**

To Pete

For his support and encouragement, and for putting up with a long distance marriage for two  
years!

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

EP	Educational Psychologist
ICA	Intercoder Agreement
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
NG	Nurture Group
RQ	Research Question
SSI	Semi Structured Interview
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is the first volume of a two part thesis, which together comprises the written requirements for the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham. Completed during years two and three of training, this volume reports a small-scale research project, undertaken whilst employed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) in Silvashire<sup>1</sup>, a Local Authority (LA) in the South-East of England.

#### **1.1 Rationale for the study**

The area of exploring parental involvement in nurture groups is sparse. Therefore it was felt that this would be a worthy area to investigate further. Of particular interest were the perceptions of those directly involved in supporting children who attend nurture groups. By gathering such data it was felt the findings could highlight positive experiences as well as areas requiring further research and development in this area.

#### **1.2 Aims of the study**

The research aimed to gain the perceptions of nurture group staff and parents of children who have attended a nurture group in Silvashire. Semi-structured interviews focussed on participants' views and experiences of nurture groups, with a particular focus on the parental involvement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

### **1.3 Researcher identity and position**

My identity as a female TEP is likely to have influenced my approach to the study, and my interpretations of the data. Some of the core values instilled in the University of Birmingham Doctoral programme, including a commitment to anti-oppressive practice, working collaboratively with others with sensitivity, and respect for their beliefs, values and experiences are reflected in my chosen area of research and the methodology chosen. My roles prior to the Doctoral training have also influenced my position. Working in a Young Offenders Institute for four years I saw the long term impact of difficulties in the home and between young people and their parents, and felt that for some the support came too late. Later, as a secondary school teacher working in disadvantaged areas in the East Midlands I also saw parents who were often overwhelmed by the unfamiliar processes that took place in educational settings.

### **1.4 Research context**

Silvashire Council is a Unitary Authority set within the south-east of England. Silvashire ranks as the 115th most deprived district of 354 in England (Noble et al., 2008). It has an increasingly varied population with one of the smallest proportions of white heritage people in the country (367th out of 376 authorities).

Nurture groups have been used in Silvashire since 2009. Nurture groups were introduced to the borough with the aim of transforming the way that mental health support was delivered to children aged under 10, to improve their mental wellbeing. At the time of the current study there were nurture groups in seven Silvashire primary schools, five of which were

deemed to be ‘classic’ nurture groups (see Appendix 1 for more details). The present study aims to inform the directions of the nurture groups in Silveshire.

### **1.5 Structure and content of volume one**

The content and structure of the remaining chapters of Volume One are now outlined.

The literature review in **Chapter Two** offers a brief history of nurture groups, describing the target children for nurture groups, and the theoretical basis and research into the effectiveness of nurture groups. The literature review offers a critical evaluation of parental involvement in educational contexts, including a consideration of the conceptualisation of parental involvement, research into parent-school relationships and an exploration of the supporting factors and barriers to effective parental involvement. Towards the end of the chapter the previous two sections are brought together to consider parental involvement in nurture groups, discussing the importance of parental involvement and evaluating current practice and research. Finally the aim of current research and the research questions are provided.

**Chapter Three** describes the methodology, research design and research questions of the study. A constructivist research paradigm, with a relativist ontology and subjectivist, transactional epistemology was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were used, and thematic analysis was applied to the data.

**Chapter Four** presents the findings in relation to the research questions. Findings are arranged in themes for the separate participant groups of parents and nurture group staff. Results are presented visually using thematic maps.

**Chapter Five** discusses the findings in relation to the three research questions, and explores limitations of the methodology and makes suggestions for future research.

Finally **Chapter Six** provides conclusions from the study and considers implications of the research for professional practice for educational psychologists and professionals working in nurture groups.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the processes and outcomes of involving parents in the practices of nurture groups. The literature review adopts a ‘swiss cheese’ approach (Obenzinger, 2005) in which a picture of current knowledge in several areas is explored, leading to an identification of gaps. This will contain a thematic review of previous research into the effectiveness of nurture groups, the field of parental involvement, and research into the models and impact of parental involvement in nurture groups. In this paper, ‘parents’ should be taken as meaning parents, carers or significant adults fulfilling a care giving role to a child living with them.

This literature review begins with an overview of the structure of the paper:

- Section 2.2 outlines the literature search method and key terminology used in the enquiry.
- Section 2.3 offers a brief history of nurture groups, the target children for nurture groups, the theoretical basis and research into the effectiveness of nurture groups.
- Section 2.4 offers a critical evaluation of parental involvement in educational contexts, including a consideration of the conceptual frameworks, research into the parent-school relationship and an exploration of the supporting factors and barriers to effective working relationships.

- Section 2.5 brings together the previous two sections and considers parental involvement in nurture groups, discussing the importance of parental involvement and evaluating current practice and research.
- Section 2.6 provides a conclusion and summary to the paper and outlines the aim of current research and the research questions.

## **2.2 Literature search method**

Initially, the University of Birmingham eLibrary service and the bibliographic database “ERIC” (1966 to date) were used to identify research articles for the current review. Electronic searches for articles containing the following terms was conducted on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2011: parent\* engagement (1142); “parent\* involvement” (4412); “parent\* involvement” education (4209); “nurture group\*” (15); parents “nurture group” (3); parent partnership education school (1027); “parent perspective” (117); “parent\* experience” (290). The total of published works for these terms can be seen in the brackets next to the search terms.

As these initial searches produced too many results to read through, the same words were selected to be searched for in the title, and only searching journal articles, books, and research reports from 2001 to 2011, using the same databases. This search yielded 357 published works. Many were relevant, but studies which focused on parent training programmes, child rearing practices, higher education, adolescence, autism, dyslexia, eating or toileting difficulties, as well as parental perspectives on day care, depression, manners, divorce, grieving, substance abuse and homosexuality were omitted. Following this, the search yielded

151 published works. Government legislation and guidance were searched for using the Department for Education website using the same terms.

Following the electronic searches, what was clear to the researcher was that although parental involvement generally is a very popular topic the area of parental involvement in relation to nurture groups was sparse. When the search term “parents nurture group” was used, initially only three titles were found, and only one of these explicitly focussed on the interaction between home and school (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007), which highlights the value of conducting the current research in this area.

## **Literature Review**

### **2.3 Nurture groups**

For most children there is the assumption that they will begin school with the basic learning capability that has developed in their early years (Boxall, 2002). However, for some children this is not the case, and for these children nurture groups “...create the world of earliest childhood in school...” (Boxall, 2002, p.1) to support their social and emotional development. Nurture groups are a specific intervention originally developed by Boxall to support the emotional development of identified children. Nurture groups are an “...in-school resource for primary school children whose emotional, social, behavioural and formal learning needs cannot be met in the mainstream class.” (Boxall, 2002, p.1).

There are many variations of what a nurture group comprises. However, the ‘classic’ model of nurture groups (Boxall, 2002) is made up of specific components. Nurture groups include up

to 12 children normally aged 4-5 years old, typically located in their school (Cooper & Lovey, 1999). The classroom environment includes elements that are often found at home such as a kitchen, work and play area, with rooms being colourfully decorated with soft furnishings (Cooper & Lovey, 1999). Typically children attend nurture groups for a significant part of each day with the work being intensive and relatively short term, with children returning to their mainstream class after a year (Cooper & Lovey, 1999).

The approach taken by nurture groups is one that emphasises that “...‘bad starts’ could be modified.” (Kearney, 2005, p.3), through developing opportunities for children to gain security and attachment from alternative sources other than their parents (Kearney, 2005). This deficit view of parents and the reasons why children may enter nurture groups is explored later. The nurture group curriculum, as proposed by Boxall, focuses on three key areas: developing self-esteem (including confidence, self-awareness, and resilience); using play to teach social skills; and developing language for communication to increase a child’s ability to engage in social situations (Boxall, 2002). Generally the development of these areas is targeted solely during the time in which the child is in the nurture group, and the opportunity to develop these skills further in the home is not explicitly promoted.

### *2.3.1 Background to nurture groups*

There are currently 900 nurture groups registered with the Nurture Group Network (Nurture Group Network, 2011), although it is thought that in total there are approximately 1500 nurture groups in the UK (Nurture Group Network, 2011). Nurture groups were originally developed by Boxall in 1969 in inner London boroughs to support the development of



children who display emotional or behavioural difficulties (Boxall, 2002), and who often display behaviours that are inappropriate for their developmental stage (Cooper & Lovey, 1999; Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001).

The success of nurture groups has been acknowledged for some time (DES, 1978; Fish, 1985; DfES, 1997; DCSF, 2009b; Ofsted, 2011b) and since the 1970s nurture groups were maintained in the UK with varying degrees of popularity (Boxall, 1976; Boxall, 2002; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). Over thirty years ago the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) cited the impact nurture groups had in supporting the social and emotional development of young children. Later in the mid 1980s the report 'Educational opportunities for all?' further emphasised the value of nurture groups (Fish, 1985). Following a reduction in nurture group popularity in the late 1980s, interest in nurture groups gradually re-emerged in the 1990s. The DfES (1997) Green Paper 'Excellence for all children' recognised the potential of nurture groups as a source of long term support for children. The renewed interest in nurture groups has since continued across the UK (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007). More recently, Steer's report on behaviour (DCSF, 2009b) outlined positive feedback received from head teachers regarding nurture groups and the role they can play in early intervention, in line with the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007). Although neither report carried out any empirical research into nurture groups' they have helped in raising nurture groups profile and popularity.

The principal aim of nurture groups is to enable children with emotional or behavioural difficulties to participate fully in mainstream classes (Boxall, 2002). The original literature on nurture groups' takes the view that children's difficulties are as a result of an interaction between the child and their environment (Boxall, 2002; O'Connor & Colwell, 2002), which

may either be home or school. However, other literature places greater focus on the home as being the original source of the child's difficulties (Renwick & Spalding, 2002; Archer, 2003; Kearney, 2005; Bishop, 2008) stating that the internal working model the child has developed from their early experiences influences their subsequent interactions and behaviour (Boxall, 2002). This deficit view of the child and their family is a challenging view that can implicitly imply the family's inferiority to the school (Jackson & Remillard, 2005) as well as aiding in the development of unequal and judgemental views being fostered, further distancing parents who often had negative schooling experiences themselves.

### 2.3.2 Target group for nurture groups

Nurture groups target children whose emotional development has been adversely affected by their early experiences (Boxall, 2002). Suitable children are likely to be showing behaviour such as emotional immaturity, impulsivity and delayed development of relevant learning skills (Boxall, 2002), which can lead to further challenging behaviour in school (Bennathan, 2005).

The origins of these children's difficulties are often felt to link back to their early developmental experiences (Boxall, 2002). The nurturing care children should experience is often lacking for those attending nurture groups. "Some children had been brought up in disorganised and chaotic homes, without structure, order and consistency of experiences or management, and with little or no opportunity to make trusting attachments, to immerse themselves in experiences and to learn." (Boxall, 2002, p.3).

### 2.3.3 Theoretical basis of nurture groups

Nurture groups take the view that children's behaviour is understood developmentally, and that all behaviour is seen as communication. The dominant principle of nurture groups is the idea that emotional and behavioural difficulties children may display are in fact, developmentally appropriate behaviours for a younger child (Cooper et al., 2001). In order to help children in nurture groups, staff have to help them progress through the developmental stages successfully in order to establish the "...social and psychological foundations for learning" (Cooper & Lovey, 1999, p.123). The theoretical underpinnings of nurture groups are based on Bowlby's attachment theory (1969; 1973; 1980) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970; Cooper & Lovey, 1999; Cooper et al., 2001; Boxall, 2002; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005).

#### *2.3.3.1 Attachment Theory*

Boxall's early work with nurture groups highlighted the importance of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980). The rationale behind this is that for some children "...the developmental processes associated with early attachment needs are incomplete..." (Cooper, 2004, p.60), and therefore this is a crucial area to support.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980) provides an explanation of how the parent-child relationship emerges and influences subsequent child development. Attachment theory states that in order to thrive emotionally, children need a close and continuous care giving relationship. Additionally children need a secure base with a reliable and consistent significant attachment figure in order to confidently explore the world around them (Geddes, 2006). This secure base needs to have the capacity to be sensitive to the child's needs,

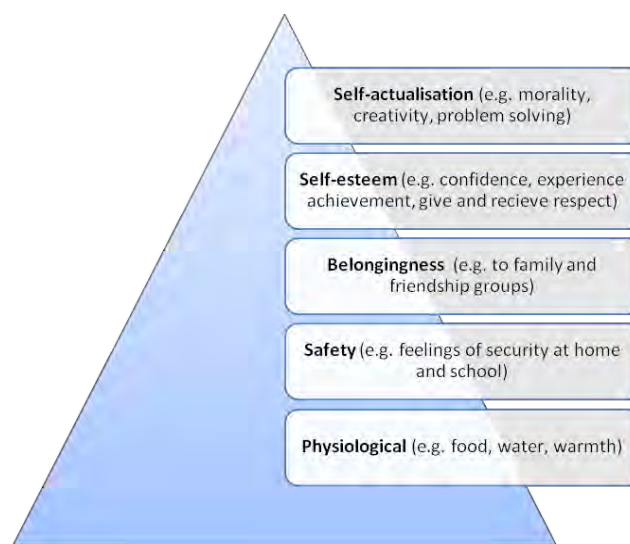
providing reassurance and containing the child's emotions and experiences of their environment. Attachment behaviour indicates that the attachment figure can recognise and respond to the child's needs, through empathic attunement (Geddes, 2006). Children can develop different styles of attachment based on their experiences and interactions with their care givers. As a consequence of the attachment made children develop an internal working model, which provides a template of how to form lasting relationships with others as well as shape their sense of self (Geddes, 2006).

Early attachment difficulties are important in terms of identifying later difficulties in school (Williams, Williams & Ullman, 2002), and the links with attachment theory can be seen in behaviours nurture groups aim to promote, such as a sense of well-being and confidence in exploratory behaviours (Cooper & Lovey, 1999). Nurture groups help to support the development of earlier concepts such as feeling secure and safe so that concepts such as self-esteem can also develop (Cooper et al., 2001). Nurture groups aim to provide children with a secure base for them to explore their environment and develop social skills needed for successful learning and development (Boxall, 2002). Within the nurture group interactions between the adults in the group, as well as how they interact with the children model positive social interactions (Cooper, 2004). This enables "...children to learn to value themselves through the experience of being valued and cared for by others." (Cooper & Lovey, 1999, p.124).

#### *2.3.3.2 Hierarchy of needs*

The premise of Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation is that all humans have a hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1), and that unless a human's basic needs are met, higher levels of

behaviour and motivation cannot be experienced (Maslow, 1970; Benson & Dundis, 2003; Konarska, 2010). The satisfaction of these areas has an important consequence on a child's experiences of school and their readiness to learn (Osterman, 2000).



*Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943)*

Nurture groups have been influenced by an understanding that lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy need to be acquired in order for the development of children's higher level needs (Cooper & Lovey, 1999; Cooper et al., 2001; Boxall, 2002; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). For some nurture group children their early experiences may not have included opportunities for their basic needs to be met. Therefore in order to adequately support their needs nurture groups aim to address the areas Maslow proposed through the environment of the nurture group setting, as well as in the routines and activities that take place (Cooper et al., 2001; Boxall, 2002; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005).

#### 2.3.4 Nurture group effectiveness

Research indicates that nurture groups positively impact on children's social and emotional well-being as well as their academic attainment (Iszatt & Wasilewska, 1997; Cooper, Arnold

and Boyd, 2001; O'Connor & Colwell, 2002; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Sanders; 2007; Ofsted, 2011b). Based on measures from the Boxall profile research indicates children attending nurture groups can experience positive effects two years after leaving (O'Connor & Colwell, 2002). The key outcomes of effective nurture groups include enabling children to develop a greater sense of achievement, increasing their motivation to learn as well as their abilities in literacy and numeracy being developed and reinforced by additional activities (Cooper et al., 2001).

Nurture groups do help support children's emotional and behavioural well-being. However, as a child's home and school life are so enmeshed, it would be beneficial for the outcomes of attending a nurture group for these two elements of a child's life to work more closely. This is an area that to date has not been explored.

### 2.3.5 Nurture groups - conclusions

Research shows that nurture groups support the development of children's social and emotional well being. The home environment and parenting received can be factors that can result in a child attending a nurture group. Alternative programmes exist that involve working with parents to examine their child's social and emotional development, and parent-child interactions (discussed further in section 2.5.3). However, little research has considered the impact of working with parents in a 'classic' nurture group context, particularly in the specific context of Silveshire.

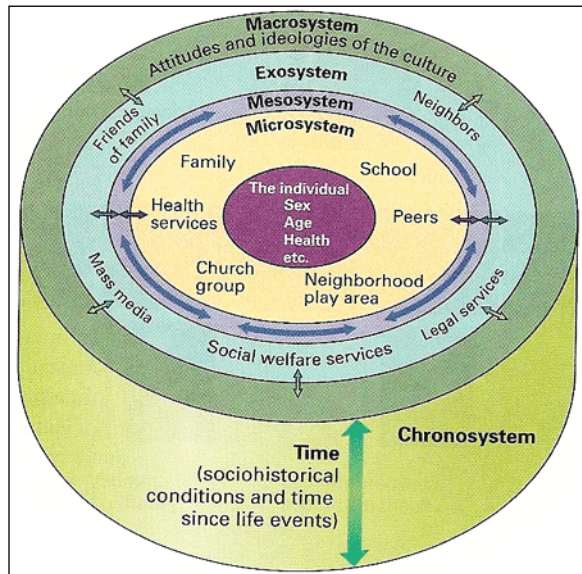
## **2.4 Parental involvement**

In 2006 the then Home Secretary was quoted saying “A child with recognised behavioural problems will, by the age of 28, have cost taxpayers...10 times the norm. By tackling bad parenting we are tackling child disadvantage and social exclusion.” (Downward, 2006). Although this quote simplifies the separate issues faced by children and families in complex and challenging situations, it does highlight the issue that in order to effectively support children parents need to understand and be involved in partnerships with professionals in order to support their child (DCSF, 2007). However, parenting is recognised as a complex task, faced with many challenges (Hutchings & Lane, 2005).

Parental involvement can have a positive impact on a child’s learning (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Spera, 2005; Wood & Caulier-Grice, 2006; DCSF, 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2008) and development (Colwell & O’Connor, 2003; Wood & Caulier-Grice, 2006; DCSF, 2007; Ofsted, 2011b). Warnock highlighted over thirty years ago that the “...successful education of children with SEN is dependent on the full involvement of their parents” (DES, 1978, p.150). When examining parental involvement in their child’s school life the majority of the literature focuses on the impact made on the child’s academic ability (DCSF, 2007; Fan & Chen, 2001; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Ofsted, 2011b). However, as already highlighted in previous research a child’s well-being and social development is just as important (Colwell & O’Connor, 2003; Ofsted, 2011b) and parents may require further support to be involved in this aspect of their child’s life (Sylva et al., 2004; DfES, 2007b; Allen & Duncan Smith, 2008).

In order to pinpoint areas in which parents may require this support, considering theoretical constructs of the context in which interactions between parents and school staff occur is necessary, acknowledging the reciprocal nature of these relationships as well as the influence of environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) highlighted the importance of the environment, in the widest sense, to human development (1977). Bronfenbrenner felt that human behaviour and development is "...interdependent and must be analysed in systems terms." (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p.518). Human development occurs through reciprocal interactions between the individual and other people and objects in their environment, therefore highlighting the importance of parental involvement in their child's school experiences. Additionally, the context of child development is not just the family, but the geographical, historical, social and political setting in which the family is living (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Children and young people influence, and are influenced by, the multiple systems of which they are a part, including family, school and community. Bronfenbrenner's theory involves complex layers within an individual's environment, each having an effect on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Bronfenbrenner called these layers of the environment surrounding the child the micro-system, the meso-system, the exo-system and the macro-system (see Figure 2).





*Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1992)*

The *micro-system* relates to the child's direct interactions and relationships, for example the relationships in the home or at school. The nurture group can also be viewed as a micro-system. The *meso-system* is the relationship and connections a child's micro-systems have. For example, the relationship parents have with school. This is seen as an important element, as forging home-school links has been shown to be hindered by low parental self-esteem, mutual mistrust, lack of confidence, anxiety and school scepticism (McCormick, 1999). This is explored in more detail later. The *exo-system* is "...the settings or events that do not directly involve the micro system but still influence it." (Singal, 2006, p.242). These tend to be systems that interact with others in the child's micro-system, such as the work life of the child's parents. The *macro-system* refers to the layer comprising of "...political, social, economic and cultural patterns, which have a cascading influence throughout the interactions of all other layers." (Singal, 2006, p.242).

The consideration of the complex and interactional systems as raised in Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1992) theory highlights that there are many factors that need to be considered when working to support a child's development, some of which are explored in more detail later on in Chapter Two.

#### *2.4.1 Historical and political perspective*

The role of parents in supporting children's educational, social and emotional development has been high profile over many years. The Plowden report 'Children and Their Primary Schools' (DES, 1967) is viewed as a cornerstone for the encouragement of partnerships between parents and education (Vincent, 1996), emphasising the key role parents play in their child's education. The Warnock report highlighted the importance of parents being equal partners in their child's educational development, devoting a whole chapter of her report on the subject (DES, 1978). This is still one of the key messages many years on (DfEE, 1997; DfES, 2001; DfES, 2004; DFES, 2005; Hutchings & Lane, 2005; DCSF, 2007; DfES, 2007b; DCSF, 2009a; DfE, 2010; Ofsted, 2011a). "Parents are a crucial influence on what their children experience and achieve." (DfES, 2007b, p.18). The continuing publication of government documents in the area of encouraging parents and education partnerships has been developing, with a number of acts and papers outlining strategies for parental involvement, including the Labour government's 'Excellence in Schools' White Paper (DfEE, 1997), the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001), Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004), Every Parent Matters (DfES, 2007a), the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007) and the Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2009). More recently the 2010 UK Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition government's White Paper focuses on reforming the education system and highlights a greater need for schools to be more accountable to parents as well as emphasising that "Good schools

work with parents...” (DfE, 2010, p.29). This continual publication of policies and strategies suggests that professionals are far from achieving successful parental involvement in education.

Desforges and Abouchar (2003) highlight that Government strategy for parental involvement should include three focus areas - providing parents with information, developing parental voice and encouraging parental/school partnerships, each of which comes with its own challenges. It is unclear to what extent these areas have been achieved in the context of nurture groups (Bennathan, 2001; Bishop & Swain, 2000). Additionally all three of these areas allow for potentially different interpretations of the term ‘parental involvement’ (Barton et al., 2004). Therefore this initially needs to be explored.

#### 2.4.2 Conceptualisations of parental involvement

The form of parental involvement is important to consider when determining its effectiveness in school. Many terms are used when discussing this area including participation, partnership, empowerment and collaboration (Jackson & Remillard, 2005). Although these could be thought to have positive connotations (Vincent, 1996; Barton et al., 2004), to what degree are these terms useful (Dale, 1996) or actually practised (Bastani, 1993) needs to be considered. Additionally, identifying salient features of parental involvement can be influenced by who is providing the definition (Izzo et al., 1999).

It is felt by Barton et al. (2004) that focussing on *parental* actions to become involved in their child’s experiences in schools enforces a deficit model of parent-school interactions (Jackson & Remillard, 2005). If there is a lack of parental involvement, the blame often lies more with

them than the schools. To encourage successful parent-school involvement, an understanding of the reasons parents' become involved, or not, as well as the role schools' play, may be more fruitful. The application of such terms in a real-life context may reveal a more complex situation than initially thought, and it is important to differentiate between schools' and parents' views of such terms in order to aid in the development of a common understanding (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

The difference between parents being reactive to school-instigated involvement and parents being seen as proactive in their child's learning and development is vast and has implications for the implicit power dynamics that may be present between parents and staff. Therefore it is important to consider successful parental involvement from both the perspective of the parents and the education system. Izzo et al. (1999) report that school staff perceive parental involvement positively when there are higher rates of educational activities in the home. However, these perceptions may be based on bias or stereotyping, as the rate of educational activity is hard to quantify. Peters et al. (2008) found a clear increase in parental perceptions of their involvement (29% in 2001, 38% in 2004 and 51% in 2007 for parents rating themselves as 'very involved'). The introduction in schools of roles such as parent governors may contribute to this (Vincent, 1996). However, more could be done to raise the level of involvement amongst the less engaged or hard-to-reach parents who often are sidelined in such involvement (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Coe et al., 2008).

Involvement could be conceptualised in terms of a process (Bastani, 1993) rather than a fixed trait, influenced by the differing attitudes of key individuals, something that is spontaneous or perhaps in some cases has to be encouraged. The term 'parental involvement' can cover many

activities that take place at home and in school (Wood & Caulier-Grice, 2006) including “...‘parenting, helping with homework, talking to teachers, attending school functions, through to taking part in school governance.” (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, p.12). Rather than being conceptualised as an isolated process. Epstein et al. (1997) conceptualised the relationship as interactional ‘spheres of influence’ between home, school and communities which affect a child’s learning and development. It was suggested that these spheres can create ‘family-like schools’ and ‘school-like families’ (Epstein et al., 1997). Perhaps parental involvement needs to be conceptualised in a framework in line with ‘family-like schools’ in which schools take into account the realities of family life and foster an accepting, caring atmosphere to welcome families, providing more information and guidance (Pena, 2000; Ofsted, 2011a).

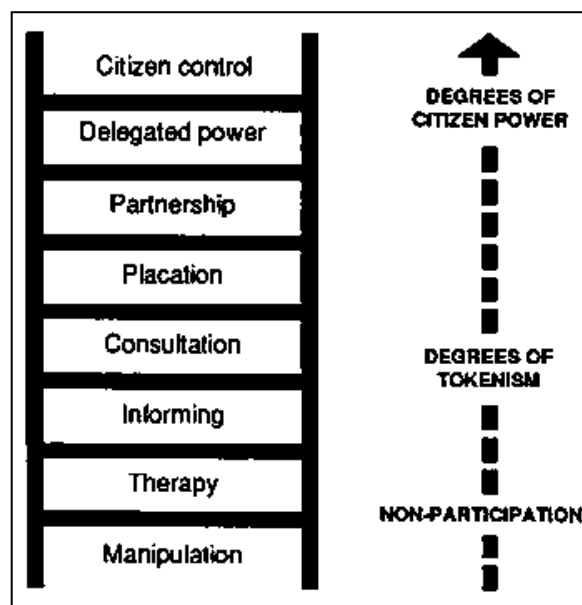
The definition of parental involvement applied in the current research was a synthesis of the literature discussed. Parental involvement was conceptualised as a process of interactions between parents and nurture groups, including elements of partnership and participation. Parental involvement includes engagement in activities within the nurture group setting, support in transferring activities into the home, sharing information, and the development of parental knowledge. Although providing a definition is useful, the research will aim to consider what the data reveals later on in terms of what participants share about their experiences and possible conceptualisations of parental involvement.

#### 2.4.3 Conceptual frameworks

An examination of conceptual frameworks of parental involvement and participation in general may allow for the exploration of role behaviours and relationships of parents and

schools (Dale, 1996) as well as help to gain an understanding of how to improve these interactions. A variety of frameworks have been developed to conceptualise school-parent working which can aid in understanding the different perceptions and possible processes that may take place in these interactions. These will now be explored, with a view that similar characteristics across the frameworks can be highlighted and synthesised to consider the data later.

Despite being formulated over forty years ago Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' model (1969) still forms the basis of many participatory approaches (Collins & Ison, 2006). In a citation search of Arnstein, over 4000 research articles and books have cited his model since 2001. Although there is a distinction between the terms participation and involvement, it was felt that by considering Arnstein's ladder may enable a greater understanding of the variations in the forms of relationship between schools and parents, and may have provided an interesting comparison to other available models of parental involvement which will also be considered.



*Figure 3: Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' model (1969)*

Key to Arnstein's model is the consideration of power influences, which could potentially be seen in a school context (Collins & Ison, 2006). The extent to which partnership takes place in this environment and an exploration of tokenistic involvement in this context may reveal some interesting views from both parents and staff. Blamires, Robertson and Blamires (1997) outline various types of collaborative working including parents being passive partners, parents being viewed as a source of information, parents as consumers, and parents as a resource to be managed by professionals. From these categories it can be noted that some of these are not actually collaborative in nature, which is key to successful outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker & Sandler, 2005). Perhaps what is needed in order to support parents is a more specific and personalised approach, as suggested by Harris et al. (2009). Rather than families fitting into the services provided, the services perhaps should adapt themselves to the needs of the families.

Elements of Arnstein's model (1969) can be seen in other frameworks. For example, Cunningham and Davis (1985) discuss three different models in which teachers and parents interact and work together to various extents. These are the expert model, the transplant model and the consumer model. In the expert model professionals control interventions and parents are the passive recipients. In the transplant model professional skills or knowledge are passed to parents. The consumer model is the ideal model in which there is a more equal partnership, with parental knowledge and rights being acknowledged. The transplant model of teacher-parent partnership is perhaps the most frequently adopted (Cunningham & Davis, 1985). But parents in this model could be viewed as passive partners and the school still retain a level of control, therefore rendering the relationship as lacking true parental involvement (Cunningham & Davis, 1985). Additionally the model takes a generic approach to parenting

styles, family relationships, resources, values and culture (Dale, 1996). Therefore a more collaborative approach needs to be developed.

Epstein et al. (1997) developed an alternative framework which can be seen to have elements of Arnstein’s framework in it. Epstein et al.’s (1997) framework focuses on family-school-community involvement, and outlines the numerous ways in which parent-school-community partnership can occur.

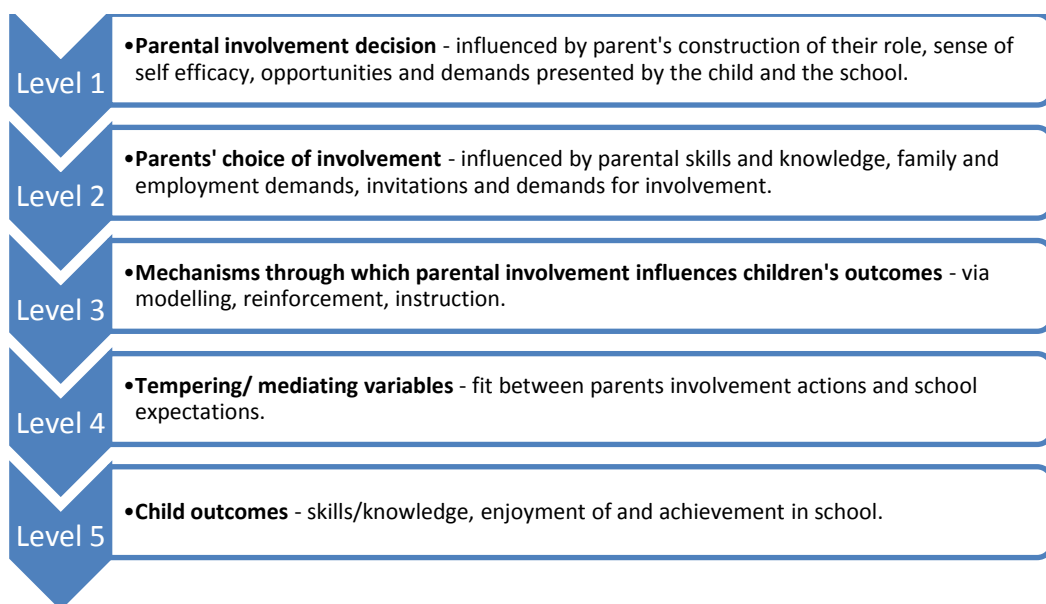
Form of involvement	Type of involvement
Parenting	Help families establish suitable home environments to support children’s learning needs.
Communicating	Establishing effective communication strategies between home and school.
Volunteering	Recruiting parents to help/support in school with class or whole-school events.
Learning at home	Supporting parents with how to help their children with homework, support in educational decisions.
Decision making	Representation of parents in school decisions, e.g. governors.
Collaborating with the community	Identifying and integrating ideas from the community into school.

*Table 1: Framework for family-school-community involvement (Epstein et al., 1997)*



However this does not account for parents' individual previous experiences of working with schools, which can play a significant factor in their involvement (Orrell-Valente et al., 1999). Therefore some of the suggestions could be viewed as perhaps naive or idealistic. A recent Ofsted report (2011a) highlighted that the most successful home-school relationships are those that work with families' needs in mind and tailor their approach to the individual family. Support needs to be "...finely differentiated." in order to meet the specific needs of families' (Harris et al., 2009, p.xii). This is especially pertinent to those children attending nurture groups.

An alternative framework to parental involvement was proposed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), which outlines levels that need to be considered in order to understand parental motivations for involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler emphasised that successful parental involvement requires an understanding of the psychological variables that form the basis of parental decisions to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; 2005).



*Figure 4: Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of parental involvement (1997)*

This model outlines the complex interaction between influencing variables, and highlights that if elements in the earlier levels are not present then successful involvement will not be achieved. The model was later revised in 2005 (see Figure 5), which places a greater focus on parental involvement in relation to their child’s learning behaviours.

Welcoming and honouring parents	Level 1: Helping motivate parents to be involved, helping parents feel invited to participate, and honouring factors that affect parent participation.
Connecting parent involvement to increased student learning	Level 2: Where parents can influence their children’s learning behaviours and beliefs.
	Level 3: What parents can do to influence their children’s learning behaviours and beliefs.
	Level 4: Checking to see what children are learning from their parents.
	Level 5: The learning attributes students need to possess that have a direct connection to increased learning and achievement.
	Level 6: Increased student learning and achievement.

*Figure 5: Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s revised model of parental involvement (2005)*

The first level of the 2005 model is an interesting one to consider, in terms of to what extent staff create a welcoming environment for parents. Elements of both models that may also be relevant include acknowledging the aspects of parents’ lives that may affect their involvement, and emphasising the key elements of parental role construction and sense of efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

A more recent framework proposed by Barton et al. (2004) attempts to go beyond an action orientated explanation of involvement and takes a more ecological perspective exploring the ‘whys’ of parental involvement. The Ecologies of Parental Engagement framework (Barton et al., 2004) states that parental engagement cannot be understood through the development of a list of tasks, and instead relies on the activity of networks (Barton et al., 2004). Barton et al. (2004) describe parental engagement as an object rather than an outcome of processes, which is influenced by factors outside of school as well as within school. This ecological perspective is one that is felt to be useful in engendering change in real-life contexts.

The literature highlights several themes key to parental involvement, with a variety of material and psychological elements – ‘connectivity’ or links between home and school communication, support, collaboration, understanding and interaction, as well as the frequency and quality of these aspects (Orrell-Valente et al., 1999; Izzo et al., 1999; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Barton et al., 2004 Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). Izzo et al. (1999) conceptualised several dimensions affecting parental involvement, including the frequency and quality of parent-teacher interactions; educational activities at home; and parental participation in school. Orrell-Valente et al. (1999) state that the frequency of parental involvement can be influenced by the parent-school relationship, the family dynamics and the parent’s perceptions of the use or relevance of the support offered.

#### 2.4.4 Research into the impact of parental involvement

Working collaboratively with parents has been recognised as being of upmost importance (Gascoigne, 1995; Hornby, 1995; Beveridge, 1998; Izzo et al., 1999; Pena, 2000; Boxall,

2002; Desforges & Abouchar 2003; Sylva et al., 2004; Harris & Goodall, 2008; DEECD, 2008), with an impact on parents and children.

#### *2.4.4.1 Impact had on the child*

Parental involvement in school has been identified as being a key factor for child well-being and school attainment (Bastani, 1993; Izzo et al., 1999; Pena, 2000; Boxall, 2002; Desforges & Abouchar 2003; Smart, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004; Harris & Goodall, 2008; DEECD, 2008).

Parental support and involvement has been suggested to have a greater impact on many measures than other factors such as education (Hartas, 2008) particularly for those children raised in challenging or deprived environments (Izzo et al., 1999). Whilst this may be a bold statement, caution needs to be applied when interpreting such research, due to the complex interaction and influence of variables. To be able to say that parental involvement has such an influence on their child's attainment and be able to isolate and examine this variable is a confident claim. However the empirical evidence suggests that there is a strong association between parental involvement and student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001) and outcomes on specific interventions (Wood & Caulier-Grice, 2006).

#### *2.4.4.2 Impact had on the parent*

Increasing parental involvement has positive outcomes for parents themselves (Boxall, 2002; Harris, Andrew-Power & Goodall, 2009), including an increase in confidence in seeking help at the school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005), better attitudes towards their child's education (DfES, 2006a) and school staff (Harris et al., 2009), and an increase in parent-child communication (Pena, 2000; DfES, 2006a). However, research suggests that parent involvement tends to involve those parents who have had positive experiences with their own

or their child's education (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003), in addition to those parents who are educated and feel comfortable in the school environment (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003).

#### *2.4.5 Parent-school relationships*

Parents should not be treated as a homogenous group by schools and individually "...parents must be advised, encouraged and supported so that they can in turn effectively help their children." (DES, 1978, p.150). Whilst this quote is from a report over thirty years ago, this view is still held (Number 10, 2012). Additionally, despite some parents being difficult to reach schools should want to develop their relationship with parents as in the long term they will be caring for their child longer than any other professional (Madden, 1995).

Despite numerous strategies and local interventions to improve parent-school relationships the results are often disappointing and involve difficulties for both parents and schools (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; DCSF, 2009a). A number of supporting and constraining factors can influence parental involvement, which could be categorised under two broad areas of material and psychological factors (Harris & Goodall, 2008), or as Reay (2000) defined them emotional and social capital.

##### *2.4.5.1 Supporting factors*

A large factor that appears to mediate parental involvement is parental socioeconomic status (Epstein et al., 1997; Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Izzo et al., 1999; Sacker, Schoon & Bartley, 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Harris et al., 2009), often determined by occupation or parental level of education (Harris & Goodall, 2008). So in essence some believe that parents from a higher socioeconomic class were more involved in their child's education (Izzo et al.,

1999; Barton et al., 2004). Research suggests that these parents find it easier to engage in their child's school life and are more confident in communicating with school staff and developing relationships within the school community (Izzo et al., 1999). This is possibly due to experiencing positive experiences in their own education, being able to speak the language of teachers, having feelings of entitlement as well as having access to more practical arrangements to enable them to access school, such as child care and transport (Reay, 2000). Although this is positive for parents who fall within this group, it perhaps also emphasises a barrier faced by those from lower socioeconomic groups, such as the families involved in the current research.

Self-efficacy refers to one's beliefs in one's abilities in a specific domain or overall, and is an important area to consider when working with parents, as an individual's self-efficacy can determine what actions they may take in any situation. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) suggest that a parent's decisions regarding involvement in aspects of their child's school are based on feelings of capability. Increased parental self-efficacy has been found to relate to parent-child interactions (Tucker et al., 1998), parental responsiveness (Sanders & Woolley, 2005) and behaviour management styles (Sanders & Woolley, 2005). Bandura's (1977) theoretical writing suggested that self-efficacy is determined by four areas – personal mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological arousal. Therefore in terms of parental involvement in school life parents need to have experienced previous successful involvement, observe other parents successfully involved with school, receive encouragement from significant others and experience positive emotions from these interactions. Whether such opportunities exist in nurture groups will be considered.

#### *2.4.5.2 Barriers*

One aspect of increasing parental involvement is to address the potential barriers parents may face. Material factors can be easily identified and relate to aspects such as transportation issues, childcare issues, cultural and language issues (Pena, 2000; Harris et al., 2009) or being ‘time poor’ - juggling aspects of home and school life (Harris et al., 2009).

However, the more subtle barriers are harder to identify and address, such as suspicion and hostility – from either the parents or the school (Carvalho, 2001). Feinstein and Sabates (2006) reported a correlation between the length of a mother’s full-time education and her attitudes and level of interaction with her child’s school. This takes a rather judgemental and perhaps simplistic explanation of poor parental involvement, and can be disregarded by later research (Hartman, Stage & Webster-Stratton, 2003). If the gap is to be closed between the most disadvantaged children and families who experience barriers and low school involvement (Barton et al., 2004) and families that do not, then other factors must be examined (Izzo et al., 1999), including the approach taken by education professionals. These potential power inequalities need to be addressed if the parents and children requiring the most support feel empowered to develop positive relationships with schools (Carvalho, 2001).

Menahem and Halasz (2000) provide some useful insights into the possible reasons for parental low involvement in school. “Parental non-compliance can serve to protect the parents from overwhelming fears and anxieties, which if addressed may transform parental defensiveness into cooperation.” (Menahem & Halasz, 2000, p.61). Therefore for some, low involvement is a defence mechanism aiming to prevent emotional stressors. Parental experiences of fear and possible intimidation highlight the need for professionals to focus on

the development of trusting and sensitive relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000) and address any perceived power imbalances. Additionally, negative past experiences of parents working with professionals and schools can lead to revealing differences in personal constructs (Power & Clark, 2001) and the sources of blame in addition to feelings of disillusion and lack of parental confidence (Duncan, 2003).

Parental power or voice has been seen as requiring development (Pena, 2000; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Hartas, 2008; DCSF, 2009a), and although it is seen as an area to address by professionals there is also the view that parental willingness to engage is also necessary before this can be achieved (Vincent, 1996). What then results is a confusing message regarding where this problem should start to be addressed, for example, inequalities in parental voice can create an implicit power imbalance between school staff and parents, which can challenge school-parent collaboration (Harris et al., 2009). The development of power imbalances can lead to a reduction of communication, with parents feeling wary of their place in school (Power & Clark, 2001; DCSF, 2009a) as well as possibly frustrated or confused (Williams et al., 2002), leading to less engagement.

Interestingly, Harris and Goodall suggest that difficulties with parent-school relationships and parental involvement may be due to the *schools* being hard to reach, rather than the parents (2008). The pressures that can occur in schools regarding work load and stress can result in school staff finding it hard to find time to work with parents on a deeper level (Harris et al., 2009) and may lead to parents being viewed as part of the problem (Carvalho, 2001; Jackson & Remillard, 2005). Schools can easily fall into the trap of pigeonholing parents and families as uninvolved or uninterested, leading to a cycle of poor communication and poor working



relationships (Power & Clark, 2001). Nechyba, McEwan and Older-Aguilar (1999) propose that poor working relationships involve institutional barriers that originate from the school not the parent. If parents do not conform to the schools established values and ways of working, it is the parent who is challenged not the school. Therefore a two-way communication channel needs to be encouraged (Harris et al., 2009). It could be argued that staff may require additional training to increase the skills required when working with parents such as empathy, a non-judgemental attitude, transparent communication, clarity about the nurture group work, consistency and confidentiality (Snell-Johns, Mendez & Smith, 2004; Bishop, 2008). Raffaele and Knoff (1999) state that home-school collaboration should be built around the core principles of being pro-active rather than being reactive, work should be sensitive to the circumstances of the families, the contributions made by parents should be valued, and it must empower parents.

Psychological factors can involve aspects such as being intimidated by educational jargon or parents own negative school experiences (Pena, 2000). Based on their own schooling experiences, the attribution of responsibility and a sense of efficacy regarding their role as a parent also need to be considered (Power & Clark, 2001). If a parent does not perceive being involved in school as part of their role as a parent, involvement in aspects of a child's school life may be minimal. Nechyba et al. (1999) summarised possible processes in which socioeconomic factors may play a role. One perspective is that a 'culture of poverty' exists in which families in lower socioeconomic groups place less value on education, therefore leading to lower engagement. However, more recent research presents the findings that support for parents to acquire skills results in "...levels of economic disadvantage (becoming)... less important..." (Hatman et al., 2003, p.396). Perhaps then factors such as

stereotypes and value judgements made by professionals need to be considered. A second possible reason is that lower socioeconomic families may lack empowerment (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999), leading to possibly feeling less well equipped to work with professionals in the school environment.

#### 2.4.6 Ethical considerations

Harris et al. (2009) state that schools that successfully involve parents have three similar practices – building trusting collaborative relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000), recognising and respecting families needs, and adopting an ethos in which the relationships have shared power and responsibility (Harris et al., 2009). Sharron and Coulter (1996) suggest that to be in a position to adopt a new way of working, people need to feel good about themselves and have a productive relationship with others. However, the relationship element of the home-school interactions can be hindered in the context of nurture groups.

When entering into a working relationship one key aspect is ensuring that parents are fully informed of the reasons behind their child being involved in the nurture group. However, an ethical issue that arises in the literature regarding school-parent relationships is the extent to which parental consent is fully informed (BPS, 2009)? Good practice involving parents in terms of working relationships are outlined in documents such as NASEN (2000) as well as being outlined in documents such as BERA (2004) and the BPS (2009). “Parents should be fully informed ‘consumers’ of services...” (DfES, 2007a, p.20). However, the gap between good and actual practice may exist in terms of parental understanding as to why their child is attending a nurture group (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001). Although parental permission is essential “...other parents are driven by desperation to accept the nurture group, too disturbed

and fraught to understand or even care” (Boxall, 2002, p.205). Additionally some parents may be put under persistent pressure to allow the school to place their child in a nurture group due to the difficulties they may be causing in the school environment (Boxall, 2002, p.205). This is an aspect the author would like to consider further in the current research.

#### 2.4.7 Parental involvement - conclusions

In terms of parental involvement, a complex interplay between psychological and practical variables exists. There are aspects of power in the school-parent relationships that need to be considered (Arnstein, 1969; Blamires et al., 1997), as well as the role of communication (Cunningham & Davis, 1985; Epstein, 1997), parental voice (Epstein, 1997), links with the wider community (Epstein, 1997) and supporting individual needs (Blamires et al., 1997; Harris et al., 2009) that need to be considered.

Although a culture of non-involvement has developed over time (Ofsted, 2011a), the aim of the current paper is to provide the opportunity for an exploration of these themes in a real life context with both parents and school staff, in order to understand the constraining and supporting factors to the two parties working together. Whilst both parents and schools feel that parental involvement is a good thing, previous research suggests that both parties have different ideas about what the involvement would look like and what the primary purpose of this involvement would be (Harris & Goodall, 2008). It is hoped that increasing understanding of these will enable practitioners to develop practice.

## **2.5 Parental involvement in nurture groups**

“Reluctance to accept a place in the nurture group arises less often when the school has a productive relationship with the parents from the beginning...” (Boxall, 2002, p.206). Parental involvement and support of parents in a nurture group context has been highlighted by some as requiring further research (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Sanders, 2007). “Research into effective support for the parents of children in a nurture group would be extremely beneficial.” (Sanders, 2007, p.59). Of particular note, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) highlight that parental involvement has significant influences on a child’s progress.

### *2.5.1 Importance of parental involvement*

In taking on the nurturing role of the child’s carers, placing children in nurture groups has been argued to raise questions regarding the quality of home-school links (Bishop & Swain, 2000), specifically around communication and co-operation between parents and school. Therefore it has been suggested that relationships with parents need to be developed and encouraged through the approach used by nurture group staff (Bishop, 2008). A consistent approach using empathy and understanding, transparent communication and clarity regarding the nurture group (Bishop, 2008, Ofsted, 2011b).

The aim of nurture groups is to welcome parents into the school, avoiding making value based judgements. Bennathan and Boxall (1996) emphasise the importance in encouraging parental involvement with children in nurture groups, in order to enable consistent approaches between home and school. The importance of working in partnership with parents is that often one of the primary reasons for children entering nurture groups is linked to issues at home (Orrell-Valente et al., 1999; Renwick & Spalding, 2002; Archer, 2003; Kearney, 2005; Bishop,

2008). Because of this very issue Bennathan and Boxall recognise that parents may be experiencing feelings of being “...criticised and inadequate...” (1996, p.49). As with conduct difficulties (Orrell-Valente et al., 1999), Bennathan and Kettleborough have noted that parents often require some element of nurturing themselves, coping with difficult circumstances (2007). However, in terms of previous research of parental involvement in nurture groups, the literature is sparse.

### 2.5.2 Current levels of practice

Early intervention and support for emotional and behavioural difficulties are vital for child development (Colwell & O’Connor, 2003), especially as there is a strong link between home and school experiences (O’Connor & Colwell, 2002). To address such difficulties research indicates that when strong working relationships between home and school are forged there are positive outcomes for all (Sanders, 2007). Although Colwell & O’Connor (2003) suggest that parental involvement in nurture groups is generally encouraged, research indicates that current levels of practice vary widely (Boxall, 2004). HMIE reports that “Only a few nurture groups involve parents in a sustained and planned way” (2009, p.6). The literature states parental involvement is encouraged but varies widely “...most schools only pay lip service to meaningful school-family partnerships.” (Pena, 2000, p.43).

Sanders (2007) reports that the positive effects experienced by children in nurture groups in Hampshire were partly due to parents and staff working together, thus emphasising the vital role this interaction plays. This development “...must take place within the context of relationships in a family, a group, a community, and sees this to be integral to the educational process.” (Lucas, 1999, p.14). Therefore in order for successful and “authentic” (Wolfendale,

1985) parent-school relationships to develop, there needs to be a deeper exploration of the barriers school and parents face (Barton et al., 2004) as well as adopting a positive strengths-based approach to parental involvement (Allison et al., 2003; Benard, 2006).

In their study Cooper et al. (2001) report parental perceptions of nurture groups. The impact nurture groups had on their child varied although the majority of the parents reported observing positive effects in their children, including a more positive view of school, a greater engagement in learning and better behaviour at home and school. Similar findings are reported by Ofsted (2011b). There was also less reported anxiety in parent-child relationships, although the paper did not outline what evidence was used to come to this conclusion (Cooper et al., 2001). However, overall this illustrates the benefits of improving parent-nurture group relationships in order to improve outcomes for the children.

A review by the Nurture Group Network suggests that the nurture groups "...have enabled staff and parents to develop closer links and become more effective partners in the children's learning." (Bennathan & Kettleborough, 2007, p.2) and parents "...appreciate the extra attention their children are receiving." (Bennathan & Kettleborough, 2007, p.2). However, this conclusion does not appear to be reflected in other research, which reveals that other factors in parent-nurture group links may also be involved. For example, a member of staff in Boxall's (2002) research was quoted as saying "Most of the parents don't understand what has gone wrong and what we are doing. Those who do understand mind deeply, and are grateful." (p.162). Therefore it can be concluded that, as Bennathan and Kettleborough (2007) highlight, when working with parents is done well the results are positive. However, work with parents does not always take place (Pena, 2000; Boxall, 2004; HMIE, 2009; Ofsted, 2011b).

### 2.5.3 Research into parental involvement in nurture groups

There have been attempts to address the area of supporting parents and to aid in the communication between nurture groups and school. These have varied from parent support groups (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996) and parents' evenings (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996; Boxall, 2002) to promote parental confidence in their own knowledge and experiences, adopting a solution focused approach and taking distinct steps together, to enable both the parents and staff to focus on "...one or two areas of concern and to identify solutions which are within the grasp of individuals" (Bishop, 2008, p.73). Such collaboration between nurture groups and parents has been found to have positive outcomes for the children and the parents (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005). For example, 'a quiet place', developed in Liverpool for parents and their children (Spalding, 2000), takes a similar approach to that taken in nurture groups (Renwick & Spalding, 2002). As well as supporting the child's development the aim was also to support parents in areas such as anger management and stress relief (Renwick & Spalding, 2002). An evaluation of this intervention found that it had a significant impact on the short term emotional and behavioural difficulties exhibited by the children (Renwick & Spalding, 2002).

Parallel programmes to nurture groups that work with parents to develop their understanding of children's social and emotional development and parent-child interactions have been found to have a positive impact on both parents and children. For example Family SEAL (DfES, 2006b), Incredible Years (developed by Webster-Stratton) and the Family Links Nurturing Programme (developed by Bavolek), which all work with parents to examine elements of parent-child relationships and appropriate approaches parents can take to support their child's development. Evaluations of these programmes have shown a positive impact for the parents

attending, as well as for their child (Jones et al., 2007; Downey & Williams, 2010; Grant, 2012). These programmes cover topics such as interacting with your child through play, positive behaviour management, developing self-esteem, and developing understanding of child development. Elements covered in these programmes may be also suitable for work that could potentially be developed in nurture groups.

Joint engagement in activities supporting child development can be noted in other fields of work, including engagement in reading programmes (Dale et al., 2011), and speech and language therapy joint sessions (Britten & McMinn, 2004). These have found positive outcomes for children and parents (Britten & McMinn, 2004; Dale et al., 2011). Additionally, ensuring that parents are represented on relevant panels (DfES 2007a) has been suggested as a further way forward to promote relationships with parents, increase home-school links and potentially minimise the perceived power imbalance between school staff and parents.

#### *2.5.4 Parental involvement in nurture groups - conclusions*

As raised earlier on in the literature review Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) highlight that parental involvement needs to include three focus areas - providing information, developing parental voice and encouraging partnerships. The current literature suggests that these areas would benefit from further development in nurture groups. In the context of nurture groups these areas could perhaps aid in the development of their effectiveness and the impact had on the child.



## **2.6 Literature review conclusion**

As mentioned at the beginning of the review, Chapter Two explores several areas of the literature and identifies gaps, which helped to consider and shape the aims of the research and the research questions. The current study aims to contribute to the understanding of parental involvement in nurture groups (from parents and nurture group staff perspectives). It is felt that this can contribute to developing methods for these two parties to work together for the mutual goal of supporting nurture group children.

As identified in the literature review, little research exists on the topic of nurture groups and parents. Therefore the current research will be exploratory in nature, guided by the data collected. However, there will also be an application of elements of conceptual frameworks developed from parent partnership literature to the context of nurture groups. Other interesting aspects arisen from the literature will also be referred back to, including promoting factors and barriers for involvement. By applying previous research into a new context it is hoped that areas requiring further development and focus for support are identified, as well as highlighting elements of good practice that could be applied further.

### *2.6.1 Research aims and research questions*

The current research has three aims:

1. To explore the existing practice in nurture groups in terms of parental involvement in one LA.
2. To explore parental views and experiences of their involvement with nurture groups.
3. To explore nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement with nurture groups.

The three research questions that will be applied in the current research are:

1. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with parents about parental involvement in nurture groups?
2. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with nurture group staff about parental involvement in nurture groups?
3. How can these themes be used in supporting the development of parental involvement in nurture groups?

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter Two provided a synthesis of the current research and theories into parental involvement. From this it was clear that research exploring parental involvement in nurture groups was sparse and would be a worthy area to investigate further. Of particular interest were the views and understanding of those directly involved in supporting children who attend nurture groups as well as their parents, including an exploration of examples of their experiences that may provide useful illustrations. By gathering their views it is felt perhaps the findings could highlight positive experiences as well as themes of areas requiring further research and development.

Chapter Three outlines how the research questions were operationalised, and the rationale for the methodology and research design applied to the current research. It first presents the research paradigm and design used in sections 3.2 and 3.3. It then considers the epistemological and ontological aspects of the research in section 3.4. Sections 3.5 to 3.6 describe the participants, and methods for data collection and data analysis. Finally sections 3.7 and 3.8 consider issues around ethics, and ensuring the quality of the qualitative data.

### **3.2 Research paradigm and assumptions**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define a research paradigm as a "...basic set of beliefs that guide action", dealing with first principles, 'ultimates' or the researcher's worldviews." (p.157). The first task in establishing a research methodology is to select a research paradigm (Doyle, Brady & Byrne, 2009). This is an important element of the research process, as the research methodology and the subsequent process of data collection and analysis will be "...influenced by the researcher's theoretical framework" (Mertens, 2005, p.2).

In the current research a constructivist paradigm was adopted, which acknowledges the multiple realities that exist and emphasises an individual's experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Constructivism has its roots in phenomenology, which is concerned with the social and psychological experiences of people and the understanding individuals form from these experiences (Welman & Kruger, 1999; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), acknowledging that no account is more or less true (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As constructivist researchers aim to understand "...the world of human experience..." (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36) this paradigm was appropriate for the current research which aimed to explore the multiple perspectives regarding nurture groups and parental involvement. Exploring these interpretations allowed for a greater understanding of the approaches adopted by nurture groups in working with parents and therefore ensuring that practitioners can effectively support parents and those working in nurture groups.

### **3.3 Research design and assumptions**

Adopting a constructivist paradigm involves examining real-life instances of nurture groups, involving challenges and experiences. The data attempted to capture individuals' experiences of nurture groups, adopting an insiders' perspective to explore the views and experiences of nurture group staff and parents. This research paradigm lent itself to qualitative research methods (Pouliot, 2007), which enable the researcher to adopt a more inductive approach to understanding subjective human experiences (i.e. not forming hypotheses about what might be found). This form of research is less concerned with the need to generalise data and allows the researcher to take an 'emic' view, gaining an insider view (O'Dowd, 2003).

Due to the chosen topic of research being a relatively new area an inductive stance was more suitable, in which the specific rather than the general is the focus of the research. Adopting an inductive approach complements a purely qualitative research design, in which the research is open-ended and the subjective is emphasised. Although further research may later examine additional factors that could affect parents and nurture groups working together it is important to firstly explore wider themes in the area.

### **3.4 Ontological and epistemological issues**

Acknowledging the ontological and epistemological stance of research is essential, as research methodologies are comprised of a set of epistemological and ontological requirements (Pouliot, 2007) which should be aligned with the researcher's own epistemology

and ontology (Pouliot, 2007). In relation to this Willig (2001) states that in any research, specific questions must be posed, relating to the assumptions the methodology makes about the world, the kind of knowledge the methodology aim to reproduce and how the methodology conceptualises the researcher in the research process. Therefore these questions will be answered in order to justify the approach used in the current research.

#### *3.4.1 What assumptions does the methodology make about the world?*

Ontological assumptions concern questions regarding the nature of being and the form of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Usher, 1996; Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Moore, 2005). The constructivist methodology views reality as socially constructed (Pouliot, 2007). Therefore the ontological assumption adopted in this study was relativist. The basis of this assumption is that the researcher acknowledges the complex and multi-layered nature of reality specific to the phenomenon being discussed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Although some aspects of these realities will be shared between individuals, experiences and interpretations will be constructed differently by different people.

In addition to the socially constructed reality of participants, the researcher needs to also consider an alternative form of reality that has been produced by prior research (Pouliot, 2007), and the social organisation of knowledge produced in different contexts related to the research.

The constructivist methodology emphasises the social construction of knowledge. Therefore the researcher needs to ensure that their own position is made clear (as they will be constructing the knowledge from the results and from their own viewpoints and experiences)

and reflexivity is maintained so the researcher remains aware of how their views of social reality can impact on their construction of others. Adopting an inductive approach to the analysis of data – moving from the local level of knowledge to a general level – allows one to “...develop both subjective knowledge and objectified knowledge (which derives from ‘standing back’ from a given situation by contextualising and historicizing it).” (Pouliot, 2007, p.367). Considering alternative constructions of a reality from the perspectives of prior research and that of the current participants allows the researcher to explore aspects of participants’ views that are recognised in research literature as a reality for those living in that context, and those which are not.

#### *3.4.2 What knowledge does the methodology aim to reproduce?*

Epistemology is the philosophical enquiry into “...the nature of knowledge, what justifies a belief, and what we mean when we say that a claim is true” (Alcoff, 1998, p.viii). The epistemological assumption of the constructivist paradigm is that knowledge is transactional, subjectivist, and socially constructed (Pouliot, 2007) rather than being an objective reality – the researcher and the participant interact and create the findings from the experiences of the participant. Knowledge can be viewed as a subjective construction, the “...filters through which we see and experience the world” (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000, p.92).

Therefore understanding needs to explore these multi-layered subjective constructions (Tindall, 1994). In the context of the current research, although theories of parental involvement have been discussed in other contexts little theory exists with regard to nurture groups. Therefore in order to seek to understand the multiple personal views and

understanding of nurture group staff and parents involved in nurture groups a constructivist approach was appropriate. To do this a key aspect of the research process is interpretation, which relies on both the participants abilities to reflect upon and verbalise their views and perceptions of the situation being studied (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

#### 3.4.3 How does the methodology conceptualise the researcher's role in the research process?

A tenet of the constructivist methodology is that knowledge and reality are linked through the social constructions of interpreting the data and the organisation of knowledge (Pouliot, 2007). The constructivist methodology recognises the active role the researcher has in the formation of knowledge, as their own interpretations of the data are a social construction. It is "...impossible to separate the inquirer from the inquired into..." (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.88), for example during the selection of questions and the interpretation of data (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000). Therefore it is important for the constructivist researcher to acknowledge their experience and beliefs, which can contribute to the formation of knowledge (Audi, 2003; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) in order to "...avoid falling into the trap of treating their accounts as concrete realities or material truths" (Jacobs & Manzi, 2000, p.36).

To conclude this section of Chapter Three, my position regarding the paradigm and associated methodology selected for this study can be outlined in three statements:

- 1) There is little existing theory relating to parental involvement in nurture groups, therefore the research is exploratory in nature. Although prior theory and research are considered, much of this is not based in the realm of nurture groups. Therefore a constructivist paradigm was adopted in order to develop an understanding of the subjective realities as well as the objectified knowledge that exists from prior research.



2) Data was captured from the perspectives of individuals involved in nurture groups, whose views and understanding are subjective and influenced by previous interactions, none of which are more or less valuable to explore. Subjective meanings, constructions and multiple complex realities were gained (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). Therefore the research has its basis in relativist ontology.

3) The participants and researcher both influence the transformation of the experiences, from verbal information through to the transcription and analysis process. Therefore the epistemological stance of the researcher is one that is subjectivist and transactional.

### **3.5 Participants**

The research aimed to gain the perceptions of nurture group staff and parents of children who have attended a nurture group, who were therefore identified as the sample for this research.

#### *3.5.1 Recruitment*

##### *Stage one*

There were seven schools in the borough running nurture groups. From these seven schools, two of these were omitted from the study as their model of nurture group delivery was not in line with the theoretical assumptions of the original ‘classic’ nurture group model (see Appendix 1). The remaining five school head teachers were initially contacted to request for their consent (see Appendix 2), one of which did not give their consent. The remaining four head teachers did give their consent.

### *Stage two*

Following the consent of head teachers, nurture group staff from the four nurture groups were contacted to gain their consent. This was done through a different consent form (see Appendix 3). A summary of details regarding these nurture groups can be noted in Appendix 4. All four nurture groups were made up of one teaching assistant and one qualified teacher. All eight members of staff were approached to participate in the research, however one member of staff from each nurture group gave their consent, who all were teaching assistants. The limitations of this are discussed in section 5.3.1. More detail about the staff participants can be found in Appendix 4.

### *Stage three*

Once consent was given from the nurture group staff, opportunity sampling was employed and staff helped the researcher in approaching all parents who had children attend the current and previous nurture groups. Initially all of the parents were given an information sheet outlining the main aims of the research and whether they would be happy for their contact details to be passed on to the researcher to contact them, to discuss the research further (see Appendix 5). It was decided that this should be given to parents by nurture group staff as they are familiar with each other and have regular contact, whereas the researcher was an unfamiliar person to them. Parents who gave their contact details were then contacted by the researcher to discuss the research further, and to request their fully informed consent (see Appendix 3). It was felt that this would be a more successful approach as the lengthy consent form may appear unappealing to read and return. Additionally as some of the parents were

deemed 'hard to reach' by the schools it was also felt that this approach may seem more personal to parents and therefore result in the researcher being able to recruit these parents. Parental levels of literacy were initially checked with nurture group staff and class teachers, and then again with the parents who gave their permission to be contacted. Four parents in total consented to participate in the study. It was important for the researcher to respect the parents' right to decide not to participate in the research, whether this was said explicitly or passively (i.e. not returning the initial contact form) and therefore after three months it was decided that it would not be ethical to persist in pursuing more potential participants. More detail about the parent participants can be found in Appendix 4.

### *3.5.2 Sample size*

In qualitative research Sandelowski (1995) states that determining sample size is ultimately a matter of judgement and evaluating the quality of the information. The epistemological position taken also needs to be considered (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In the current research a subjectivist approach is taken, in which individual experience is emphasised, large sample sizes are not sought after (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Mason (2010) states that research samples should be "...large enough to assure that most or all of the perceptions that might be important are uncovered, but at the same time if the sample is too large data becomes repetitive and, eventually, superfluous.". Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) discuss the concept of reaching a saturation point, which is defined by Mason as the point in which collecting new data "...does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation." (Mason, 2010).

In the case of the current research, there were practical restrictions on the number of respondents that it was possible to recruit. All five 'classic' nurture groups in Silveshire were contacted. However, one head teacher did not want the school staff to participate. All four remaining nurture groups in Silveshire took part in the research. In terms of the parents, nurture group staff contacted all parents from the current and the previous nurture group (where applicable). Perhaps due to being a 'hard to reach' population, only four parents (one from each nurture group) consented to participating. Despite this relatively low number of parents, common themes emerged from the analysis phase which suggested a saturation point was being approached.

In summary, a relatively homogenous sample of four nurture group staff (all female, with an age range between 30 and 55) and four parents/carers of children attending nurture groups were interviewed (all female, with an age range between 30 and 60). Information about participants and the nurture groups is provided in Appendix 4.

## **3.6 Methods**

### *3.6.1 Data collection: semi-structured interviews*

The semi-structured interview (SSI) schedule was used to answer research questions one and two. The data collection phase of the research aimed to focus on the individual views of parents and nurture group staff. SSIs were selected as the preferred research method to describe the quality of participants' experiences relating to involvement in nurture groups. The literature review was used to provide broad areas for the interview schedule, although the

interview itself was non-directive and would allow for exploration of the participants own experience. Participants were asked questions to elicit their views and experiences relating to parental involvement (see Appendix 6 for copies of the schedules).

The data produced from SSIs allowed the researcher to gain a “...valid knowledge and understanding by representing and illuminating the nature and quality of people’s experiences.” (Tindall, 1994, p.142). SSIs were used in order to gain an understanding of the views of parents and staff working in nurture groups. SSIs are defined by Robson (2002) as an interview which has “...predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate.” (p.270).

SSIs allowed an element of freedom to the content of the interviews as they take an exploratory approach. They have the advantage of not being rigid in the sequencing of questions, with the opportunity to be able to re-word questions and allow interviewees the opportunity to spend more or less time on questions (Robson, 2002). SSIs elicit the interviewee’s views rather than leading them towards preconceived choices. As participants’ interpretations of events are important (Robson, 2002) SSIs allow for the exploration and development of an understanding of the meaning of participants’ own experiences within their specific context (Robson, 2002). Due to the nature of a SSI specific questions were not given to all participants and the interview structure was flexible enough to allow for responding to and following up issues raised by the interviewee that may not have been anticipated. The interview allowed the researcher to explore the attitudes and values of individuals, rather than just the facts that questionnaires might gather. In the case of the current research, the aim of

the interviews was to enable the researcher to explore the views and experiences regarding parental involvement and from this, highlight potential areas for development within this area for nurture group practice.

Although interviews can be perceived as a two-way conversation, interviews should be approached as a one-way communication process (Oppenheim, 1992) in order for the researcher to remain impartial. This process should be based around a core set of questions which the researcher can expand on (Mitchell & Jolley, 2007). The researcher aimed to have as little involvement in the interview as possible, and simply provide a set of prompts and encouragements rather than the interview developing into a dialogue. However although a semi-structured format enables the interviewer to follow the interviewee's lead, and to explore their views regarding a topic some structure is still required in order to ensure that relevant information to the research question is gathered.

In designing a SSI it is worth bearing in mind that information gathered in interviews is cumulative "...each interview building on and connecting to the other." Bogden & Knopp Biklen, 1998, p.96). Therefore an interview framework or topic guide needs to be developed that can encompass all possible issues that may be raised. In terms of the interview schedule Robson (2002) suggests that open questions should come before closed questions, as starting with closed questions may channel respondents, perhaps missing the broader issues that matter to them. However a range of different types of questions may be useful, including follow-up questions, specifying questions, direct questions as well as considering the use of

silence. Additionally the framework should include some non-leading probes, which can aid clarification and encourage the participant to elaborate.

It is important to consider that the actual interview is only one element of the interview research method. Other stages include planning, recording, transcribing, analysing and reporting (Powney & Watts, 1987). The development of the interview started with writing down all the possible topics and questions the researcher may want to explore, which were initially derived from the areas specified in the research questions. Following this, initial questions were formulated, which fell into a set of headings which are discussed later on in Chapter Three. These headings would help in directing the interview in an unobtrusive way (Oppenheim, 1992). However because of this, it is important to be aware that all participants will not have received questions in the same order or in the same way.

Prior to the interview participants were sent an information sheet to help them think about their experiences with nurture groups (see Appendix 7). This allowed them to feel prepared and to ease any feelings of uncertainty regarding the content of the interview. The interview process started with an introduction into the purpose of the research (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 1998) and an assurance to the interviewees of aspects of confidentiality and anonymity (which are discussed in 3.7). The researcher was a stranger to the interviewees; therefore rapport building was an important part of the interview process (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 1998). When carrying out an interview it is important to allow enough time for participants to cover all the issues they raise. The interviewer needed to be confident in appropriate interview strategies for initiating and sustaining the dialogue. This included the use of pauses, the effect of prompts or probes, and encouraging “don’t know” responses. It

was also important that distractions were kept to a minimum, therefore consideration of the environment was made prior to data collection.

#### *3.6.1.1 Piloting*

The interview schedules were devised and piloted during August and September 2011, prior to data collection. Piloting was conducted with two colleagues in the Psychology and Inclusion Department in which the researcher worked. Both of these individuals had experience of working with parents and nurture groups. It was decided that, as the population of parents the research was to be focussed on was already hard to access, piloting on professionals who worked with this population would still be meaningful without reducing the participant group. Findings from piloting indicated that although the wording of the questions was suitable it would be advisable to use additional materials with parents to provide a prompt for them. Although there is relatively little research on the use of photographs during interview processes (Hurworth, Clark, Martin & Thomsen, 2005), adopting a photo-elicitation technique is thought to be a useful way of aiding recall and talking about events and experiences, as well as to providing an alternative focus for the participants other than the interviewer (Hurworth et al., 2005). Although questions used in the semi-structured interview did not refer to the photos, they were visible for the participant if they chose to look at them. Images based on areas of the literature were selected by a nurture group member of staff from a wide selection chosen by the researcher. These photos aimed to illustrate different elements of nurture groups, scenarios with staff and parents interacting as well as scenarios at home and school the parent or their child may have experienced. See Appendix 8 for a copy of the images used.



### 3.6.2 Data analysis: rationale for selection

“Approaches to qualitative data collection and analysis are numerous, representing a diverse range of epistemological, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives.” (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012, p.3), and a key part of the research process is the selection of an appropriate data analysis method. The goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover patterns, insights, and understandings (Patton, 2002). Metaphors of kaleidoscopes (Dye et al., 2000) and jigsaw puzzles (LeCompte, 2000) have been used to conceptualise the processes involved in qualitative data analysis, examining the smaller components experienced by participants and bringing them together to arrive at a clearer insight into a phenomenon.

There is overlap between different qualitative methods that could be appropriate for the current research (Holloway & Todres, 2003) depending on the focus taken by the researcher. These include grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), discourse analysis (Gee, 2005), and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However as qualitative approaches are highly diverse and subtly nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003) “...the choice of approach should be based upon the goals of the research...” (Johnson, Burrows & Williamson, 2004, p. 364).

Thematic analysis was considered to be a better fit to the primary research purpose of this study: to identify commonalities in experience and perceptions across participants in relation to a shared phenomenon (nurture group provision). Additionally consideration was given to the appropriateness of the approach for the sample size and the data set (Wilkinson, Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Thematic analysis is suitable for small samples (Joffe & Yardley, 2004), and provided a qualitative framework for exploratory, content-driven analysis (Guest et al., 2012).

Thematic analysis shares many features with IPA (Guest et al., 2010), and therefore both of these were explored in detail. Both IPA and thematic analysis are concerned with making sense of people's lived experiences (Huxley et al., 2011; Guest et al., 2012). Additionally the analytical processes for IPA and thematic analysis are very similar (Collins & Nicolson, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Huxley et al., 2011), both centring on the process of immersion in the data and the drawing out of themes. The similarities are such that how IPA is actually different from a rigorous form of thematic analysis has been questioned by some (Collins & Nicolson, 2002).

However there are some differences between the two, which led me to select thematic analysis for the purposes of the present study. One aspect that sets it apart is thematic analysis breadth of scope. IPA solely "...focuses on subjective human experience..." (Guest et al., 2012, p.16), whereas thematic analysis can help to consider broader phenomena across cases (Huxley et al., 2011). In the analysis stage of IPA "...it is concerned with individuals' subjective reports..." (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.88). Although themes are developed across cases, the distinctive variations between cases are also highlighted, to preserve individuality (Kay & Kingston, 2002). The researcher examines each individual script and then draws themes and looks for differences as well as similarities. Due to IPA's focus on the idiographic, individual experience where the researcher is required to "...enter the life world of each participant..." (Willig, 2001, p.54) and produce a narrative account (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) I considered IPA unsuited to the current research, the aim of which was to abstract recurrent themes across the participants' accounts of their experiences of nurture groups.

Unlike IPA, thematic analysis draws themes across the whole data corpus, drawing similarities and themes (Huxley et al., 2011). Braun and Clarke explain in their 2006 paper that “...thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning.” (p.86). Huxley et al. (2011) also highlight this, stating “...the primary emphasis is on themes/commonalities across the data set, rather than detail of individual experience...” (p.419). This search for shared perspectives is congruent with the aims of the current research.

The theoretical orientation of IPA lies in phenomenology, interpretation (hermeneutics) and idiography (Smith, et al., 2009). Some of these features are not unique to IPA, with phenomenology and hermeneutics also forming the basis of thematic analysis (Huxley, Clarke & Halliwell, 2011; Guest et al., 2012). However the way in which these aspects have been combined uniquely within IPA results in IPA attempting to find meaning beyond the immediate claims of the individual, and to reveal more about a person than that person may themselves be aware (Smith, et al., 2009). IPA aims to reveal latent or hidden meanings, metaphorical references, and linguistic signals. However in the current research one of the aims was to draw out themes based on what participants have said (on a semantic, explicit level). Therefore I judged IPA unsuitable in the current research.

In conclusion for this section, thematic analysis was selected as the appropriate method of analysis as it afforded a better fit to the primary research purpose: to identify commonalities in experience and perceptions across participants in relation to a shared phenomenon (nurture group provision). Its breadth of scope allowed the researcher to draw themes across the whole

data corpus for nurture group staff and parents, on a semantic and explicit level (which is congruent with the aims of the current research).

### 3.6.3 *Data analysis: thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis has been criticised as being too vague in its method (Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, early exponents such as Attride-Stirling (2001) argue that data should be analysed in a methodical manner in order to gain meaningful and useful findings. In order to overcome criticisms that within thematic analysis, ‘anything goes’, the six clear and detailed key stages of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) carefully structured approach was followed within the present study, as outlined in Table 2.

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the process</b>
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

6. Producing the report	Selection of vivid, compelling extracts examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature.
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*Table 2: The phases of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006)*

### 3.6.3.1 Thematic analysis process

All of the interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and then transcribed (see Appendix 9 for an example) by the researcher. This is a key stage of analysis (Bird, 2005), which begins the data familiarisation process. Once transcription had taken place one transcript was checked for accuracy by a colleague. Field notes were taken in order to provide more detailed information on the context of the answers and any additional information

Following the transcription stage the researcher read through the interviews several times and mind maps were produced to help the researcher further familiarise herself with the data. Comments were noted regarding any salient thoughts or emerging points. When reading the transcriptions the researcher was aiming to identify extracts at the semantic, or explicit, level (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as opposed to a latent level. Later these extracts, and themes, would progress from description to interpretation, where broader meanings and implications would be drawn.

Using the qualitative data analysis package NVivo 9, transcripts were read line by line and extracts or 'chunks' of meaningful text were highlighted and emerging codes were noted

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). See Appendix 10 for details of NVivo 9. 'Codes' were created and data was explored for these codes or for other interesting occurrences in the data. Having completed the initial coding of all of the transcripts, the component elements of each code were considered for consistency or overlap with other codes. This provided the opportunity to begin defining the codes, and to link these together into groups. Some initial codes were abandoned or merged at this stage due to overlap with others. The emergent codes were then compared against the research questions in order to ensure that only the codes that significantly contributed towards the research brief were pursued. These codes were considered and overarching themes and sub-themes were developed from the coding groups, linking the data together, and also meaningfully linking back to the research questions. The themes were arranged according to the semantic content of the codes, and then a deeper exploration of their meaning was explored.

Initial thematic maps were then produced. Again at this stage codes were discarded or categorised as 'miscellaneous' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis states that a theme "...is a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organises possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (1998, p.67). Braun and Clarke suggest that deciding on themes "...is a question of prevalence, in terms both of space within each data item and of prevalence across the entire data set." (2006, p.82). There needs to be a number of extracts for a theme across the data set, but a higher prevalence does not necessarily make the theme more important to the research. Braun and Clarke state there is no set rule for the proportion of data or number of themes. It shouldn't be considered as a percentage of a data set, or in the length of a quote. Prevalence should not be the deciding

factor of whether to include a theme or pattern of data and researcher judgement determines themes. The data and themes should capture “...something important in relation to the overall research question.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). However prevalence was considered in terms of how many participants conveyed similar experiences, and themes and subthemes were not created from quotes of just one or two participants.

Following this stage the themes were reviewed and refined. This again involved discarding themes due to insufficient data or merging two themes into one. Braun and Clarke advise that “Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes.” (2006, p.91). Coded extracts were then re-read in the context of the theme to consider whether a pattern formed between the extracts. The themes were then defined and named.

The analysis took place over a total of 15 days, in which the researcher re-visited previous analysis-sessions on each occasion, therefore maintaining an iterative approach. Throughout the process the researcher maintained an element of reflexivity to ensure an awareness of the impact of her own biases. Key to maintaining reflexivity is the need for “...researchers to constantly locate and relocate themselves within their work, and to remain in dialogue with research practice, participants and methodologies.” (Bott, 2010, p.160). In the current research this was achieved through keeping self-reflective notes throughout the duration of the research and field notes during the data collection stage, the researcher reflecting on her position as well as the possible influence of previous roles (see section 1.3). Additionally reflexivity was maintained throughout the research by engaging in supervision both at work and at university, discussing and reflecting on the research process and exploring initial findings. Finally, going back to the data several times over many weeks, with periods of

reflection in between allowed the researcher to gain some space between herself and the data, to ensure that she could repeatedly find the same themes.

See Appendix 11 for an illustrated example of the thematic analysis process, Appendix 12 for table of themes and subthemes, and Appendix 13 for an example of all the extracts which formed the theme ‘Staff barriers’.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethical protocols were carefully considered and adhered to during all stages of the research. This included gaining ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Birmingham, as well as adhering to the British Psychological Society (2009) Code of Ethics and Conduct and the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (2004).

#### *3.7.1 Informed consent*

Informed consent centres on the full knowledge and consent of those involved. A transparent approach was adopted throughout the research process to promote mutual respect and confidence between participants and the researcher. Informed consent was gained from all participants, who gave their permission to be interviewed, as well as have the interview audio recorded (see Appendix 3). The consent forms outlines issues such as confidentiality, data storage and protection, how the results will be presented and their right to withdraw. Time



was also spent with participants at the beginning of the interview explaining what the research involved. This was done verbally as well as in written form (see Appendix 3 and 6).

### *3.7.2 Privacy and confidentiality*

Confidentiality was assured to all participants. Pseudonyms were used for the local authority in which the research has been conducted, as well as for any names of children or nurture groups mentioned. Audio recordings of interviews were stored on an encrypted computer, and deleted from the Dictaphone following transcription. Only the researcher heard the audio recordings.

### *3.7.3 Right to withdraw*

It was emphasised to all participants that they had the right to withdraw either before or during the interview. If this request was made, their data would be destroyed and removed from the research. Following the completion of the research the data was not stored against individual names so participants were not able to withdraw their data after participation.

### *3.7.4 Debriefing and feedback*

Upon completion of the interview participants were given an opportunity to ask any further questions and were given the researcher's email address if they wished to contact her. Additionally participants were asked if they would like to receive feedback regarding the outcomes of the research. For those that requested this information participants received feedback, including a summary of the aims of the research, the main findings, and the implications. Feedback was compiled into different formats for parents and nurture group staff. Parents received written feedback (see Appendix 14) in the post, and staff were given a

presentation of the findings (see Appendix 15) in their individual schools. The results were also fed back to the nurture group steering committee, also using the presentation found in Appendix 15. The steering committee oversees the strategic planning in relation to policy, staffing and finance of nurture groups in the borough, in addition to ensuring the implementation, evaluation and review of their effectiveness. Members of the steering group include head teachers, senior educational psychologists, nurture group coordinators and members of the services supporting behaviour team. A copy of the full report could have been sent to participants if requested, as recommended by BERA (2004).

### **3.8 Ensuring quality of the research**

In terms of the quality of data produced there is an ongoing debate as to whether qualitative and quantitative research methods can be accurately assessed against the same criteria (Seale, 1999; Mays & Pope, 2000; Smith et al., 2009). However it is still important to ensure that research conducted produces quality results that are trustworthy and rigorous. Yardley's (2000) four criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research were applied, which were sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

In terms of sensitivity to context the researcher maintained an awareness of factors such as empathy and power. Great effort was made to ensure that participants were clear about the aim and the role of their involvement in the research, and during the interviews time was made for rapport building. Additionally the use of photo-elicitation helped provide a useful

prompt for interviewees. During the analysis stage verbatim extracts were provided in order for the reader to make links between the participant comments and the interpretations made. Finally links between the findings and the existing literature were made in order to orientate the study (Smith et al., 2009).

Commitment to the research is demonstrated by the researcher's appropriate use of thematic analysis in both the interviewing and analysis stages, as well as the appropriate selection of a sample. Transparency has been achieved through the clear and logical write-up of the research which forms a coherent piece of work, guiding the reader through the different stages from selecting the sample and constructing the SSI through to the different stages of the analysis. In terms of impact and importance of the research it is thought that a good test of validity "...lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful" (Smith et al., 2009, p.183). This is explored in more detail later in Chapter Five and Six. Braun and Clarke (2006) also provide a checklist for good thematic analysis which was adhered to (see Appendix 16).

### **3.9 Conclusion**

Chapter Three has considered the research paradigm and the associated methods to explore the research questions. Chosen tools and analysis methods have been considered and justified, and the issues regarding the quality of the data produced in qualitative research explored. Through the application of SSIs and thematic analysis, the researcher will be able to explore individual parents and staff views and understanding of nurture groups, compare these themes

to those presented in existing research and highlight areas that require further research as well as potential areas that could benefit from future development.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter Four will look at the findings from the inductive thematic analysis. The emergent themes are discussed in relation to the original research questions in Chapter Five. The individual themes and corresponding subthemes will be presented and summarised, with excerpts from the interviews provided to illustrate. To ensure anonymity participants have been assigned a number. Furthermore a prefix has been added to participant numbers to identify them as either a member of nurture group staff (S) or a parent (P).

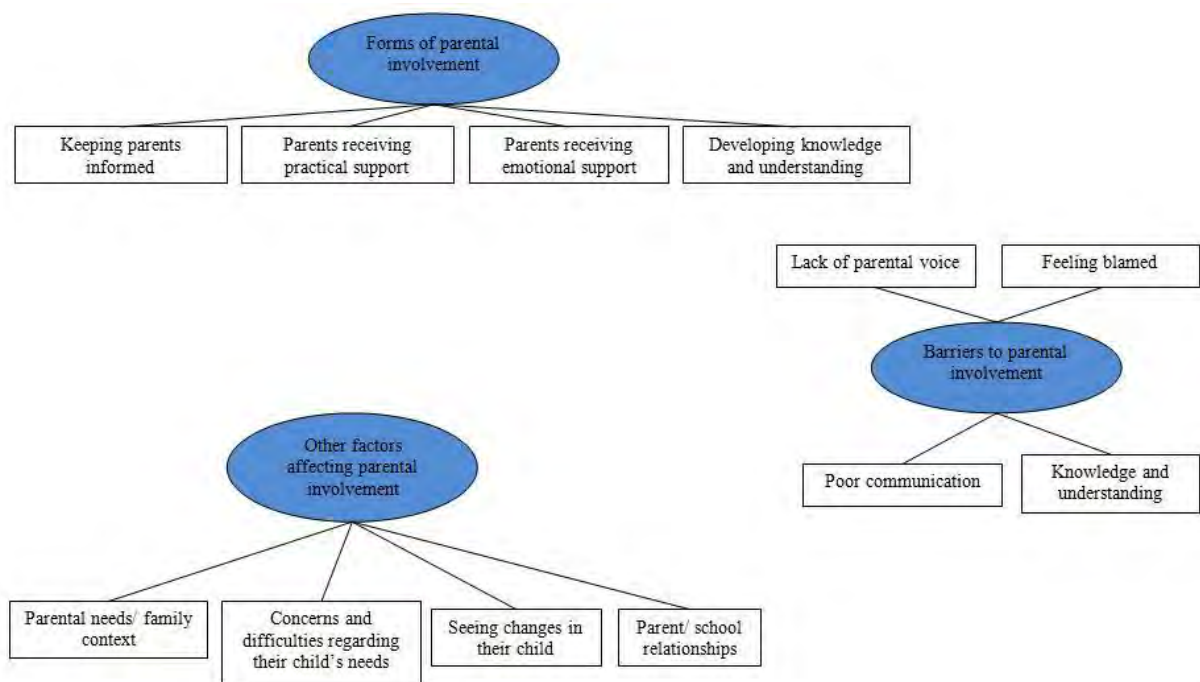
At the end point of the analysis stage 30 codes in total were created across the eight transcripts. More codes were produced during the data analysis process but were discarded due to irrelevance to the research questions or collapsed into other codes. The analysis was conducted separately with respect to generating themes from parents or nurture group staff, although comparisons were drawn once the themes had been produced.

The results display different levels of theme – main overarching themes and subthemes within them. Themes are defined as capturing “...something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). Whereas subthemes are “...themes-within-a-theme.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92) which give structure to larger themes.

There are two thematic maps – one for parents and one for staff (see Figure 6 and 10). Within these maps each of the themes is illustrated in blue circles, along with the appropriate subthemes (in the transparent boxes). Each subtheme has been illustrated with one or two examples of coded text-segment to prevent overloading the reader with information regarding themes, codes and quotes. A complete list of theme and subtheme definitions and coded text-segments can be found in Appendix 12.

## 4.2 Main Themes Identified

### 4.2.1 *Parents*



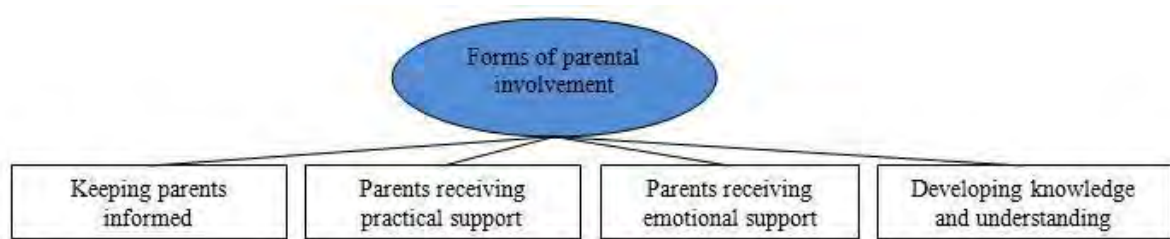
*Figure 6: Thematic map of parent's experience of nurture groups*

Figure 6 displays the three themes identified relating to parents' experiences of nurture groups. These were:

1. Forms of parental involvement
2. Barriers to parental involvement
3. Other factors affecting parental involvement

Each of these three themes is subsequently displayed separately (in Figures 7, 8 and 9). Within each of these themes, further subthemes were identified. These will now be discussed in more detail.

#### 4.2.1.1 Theme 1: Forms of parental involvement



*Figure 7: Theme 1 – Forms of parental involvement*

The ‘Forms of parental involvement’ theme was labelled as such as it was characterised by participants’ experiences of interacting with staff, including incidents of receiving information and how they were supported throughout their child’s time in the nurture group. The theme also included what parents viewed as the function of these connections and their experiences of staff working with them. This highlights the types of interaction that took place as well as indicating the development of relationships between the two groups. The data for this theme is organised into four subthemes, which are now explored in more detail.

### Subtheme 1: Keeping parents informed

Many of the parents gave examples of nurture group staff keeping them involved through passing on information and inviting them into the nurture group to ensure that they understood what was occurring within the group. It seems that most of this was done informally and therefore varied depending on the practices of the nurture group. However there were some more planned methods of ensuring parents knew what was taking place, such as using a home-school diary and letters. Parents described examples of staff informing them of specific incidents that may have happened during the day, as well as providing updates of their child's progress.

*“We had a book, a home-school book um but I used to get phone calls every day. Usually as he left school, because he came home on transport, so as he would leave they would phone me and we would have the conversation as he was on his way home. A few times they called me when I was at work...when he was quite distressed and wouldn't get on the bus and they didn't think it was safe so they'd call me to see if I could collect him” P2*

It seemed that channels of communication were trying to be developed so that parents could find out information if they wanted to, rather than being totally dependent on staff to provide information. Being informed emerged as an important aspect of nurture groups - parents either appreciated it if it was taking place, or they desired it if it was not.



### Subtheme 2: Parents receiving practical support

Parents reported experiences of receiving practical support in managing their child's specific needs, such as how to implement behaviour management strategies. References were made to specific strategies that had been suggested to parents.

*"Sometimes he just wouldn't get ready and I would say Tim you can take as long as you like but when you're waiting for me or I have to wait for you for ten minutes then you're going to have to wait for me for ten minutes, because this is eating into my time now. Making it quite clear that there are times when it's my time." P2*

Parents also talked about nurture group staff supporting them practically by overcoming barriers in engaging with the nurture group (such as work or transport).

*"I used to get the bus over. They did come and get me once, for their rewards. They come and got me." P3*

### Subtheme 3: Parents receiving emotional support

Many of the parents were experiencing challenges, both in terms of meeting their child's needs but also with regard to their own personal circumstances. The parents talked about the nurture group being a source of emotional support in which they could feel listened to and raise worries or concerns, referencing the welcoming and friendly style staff had.

*"...when I got in there everybody was really friendly, they, and so welcoming, they were all on first name terms with each other and with myself, so that relaxed you. They showed me round*

*and explained everything and it was just an open house, it felt like if I had anything I could bring it to them, which I needed with my mum being ill (starts to cry).” P2*

As all of the children have since left the nurture groups, the extent to which the parents felt emotionally supported was also noted following the end of the nurture group.

*“...I missed that when it ended. His new school’s not as, they’ll contact me for his good behaviour but I don’t feel as close to them as I did at the nurture group. I felt a lot happier when Luke was at the nurture group than I do here.” P3*

#### Subtheme 4: Developing knowledge and understanding

There was some positive talk about parents desire to develop their understanding and knowledge of their child’s needs and nurture group practice.

*“I’d like to think that um you know that they’d be able to show us the ways we can best work with our children. Even if it’s down to, not necessarily the actual education. How to play with them and share time with them, the things that you don’t always give enough time to at home.” P4*

Some parents spoke of their experiences with nurture group staff working alongside them to build their knowledge of nurture group practice. However this seemed to be more of an incidental experience rather than a targeted aim. Parents’ knowledge developed over time from their child attending the nurture group, rather than there being an explicit information sharing period with staff. Additionally the information shared with parents seemed to be more

on a practical level (i.e. what the room looked like and how often their child would be in the group) rather than discuss why their child was there.

*“It was very friendly and looked nice, and warm.” P3*

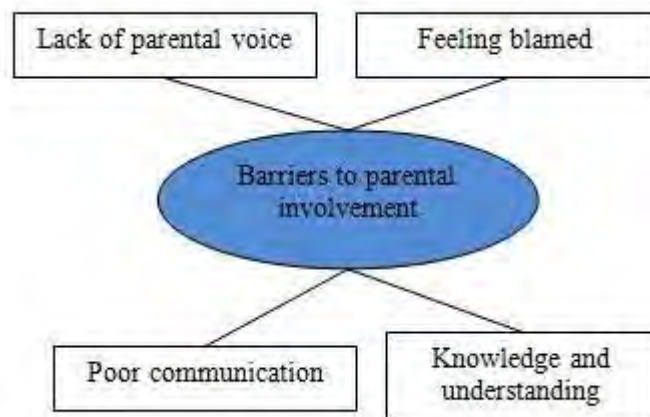
There were examples of parents’ developing their own understanding, rather than being told explicitly. In these cases it seems that parents who want more information go from a state of not knowing, to slowly accumulating more information independently. This can result in a better understanding by the end of the time their child is in the nurture group.

*“...at first I thought gosh I’m not sure about this, so I was a bit negative towards that. But it balanced out and I could see where they were coming from and er it was lovely.” P2*

However there were also incidents of a poor understanding of nurture groups, through misunderstanding or a lack of interest.

#### *4.2.1.2 Theme 2: Barriers to parental involvement*

The ‘Barriers to parental involvement’ theme was identified to describe the difficulties and negative experiences parents had gone through whilst their child was attending a nurture group. This includes circumstances, experiences or emotions that are seen to hinder effective staff-parent interactions. They were deemed barriers to the parents in their understanding as well as in their involvement with the nurture group.



*Figure 8: Theme 2 – Barriers to parental involvement*

The data for this theme is organised into four subthemes, which are now explored in more detail.

Subtheme 1: Lack of parental voice

The parents described feelings of not being able to express their views or ask questions about things taking place in the nurture group. This varied from aspects such as when a child was leaving the nurture group through to smaller questions and queries.

*“I don’t mind him having these things because you can’t you can’t stop it but that was one of my thoughts that I had but never voiced it.” P2*

It seemed that parents did not want to bother staff or appear to be causing a fuss, or felt it was not their role. This led to disengagement by some parents.

*“I found it very patronising, very you know, it I just felt that it didn’t matter what I said I weren’t gonna , weren’t gonna get through.” P1*

### Subtheme 2: Feeling blamed

Parents experienced negative emotions, particularly feelings of blame, for the difficulties with their child that had led them to come to the nurture group, as well as feelings of blame relating to any difficulties in parental involvement in nurture groups. From the parents perspective it appears that nurture group staff took a 'parent-centric' perspective.

*"At first I thought nurture, you think oh gosh I haven't done a very good job at home I haven't done the nurturing at home and I felt like I failed."* P2

The accumulation of negative emotions and difficulties in parent-staff relationships seemed to have a cumulative effect for some, leading to parents feeling stuck and not engaging.

*"no matter what I said, they had their opinion of me"* P1

### Subtheme 3: Poor communication

Some of the parents talked about the barrier of communication, with the nurture groups not fully informing parents of why their child was selected for a nurture group. Parents also felt that they were not kept up-to-date with developments within the nurture group. This subtheme also included the environment in which nurture group staff spoke to parents and the appropriateness of the time or location for those discussions.

*"I kept thinking had there been problems between the children? Had Alice, sort of, because Alice all of a sudden did get quite loud (laughing), had she been telling him to go away? Or is*

*there some kind of problem between those two. But nothing was ever said to me, and like I said I didn't feel like the entrance door was one, a convenient time for the teacher."* P1

#### Subtheme 4: Knowledge and understanding

Consciously or unconsciously, the knowledge and understanding parents lacked was a barrier to them understanding the work that was carried out in the nurture group. There were gaps in parents' knowledge regarding what a nurture group was and how this could help their child's development.

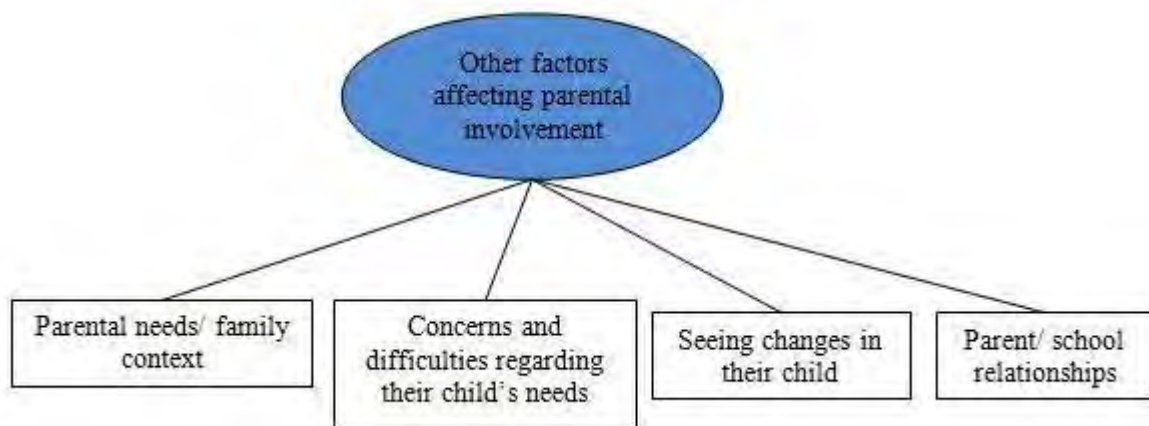
*(Interviewer: could you explain what they do there?)*

*"Umm...well they just, umm...control children like that really, you know."* P3

In the instances where there was a conscious awareness of a lack of knowledge there was no mention of how nurture group staff were supporting parents to address these gaps.

#### *4.2.1.3 Theme 3: Other factors affecting parental involvement*

Some of the results highlight the individuality and specificity of parents' experiences and situations. Perhaps these subjective factors play an important role in influencing parental involvement in nurture groups.



*Figure 9: Theme 3 – Other factors affecting parental involvement*

The data for this theme is organised into four subthemes, which are now explored in more detail.

Subtheme 1: Parental needs/ family context

It was clear that all of the parents were experiencing situational factors (including social, emotional and medical needs) relating to themselves and/or the whole family whilst their child was in a nurture group. These included depression, serious health difficulties, bereavement, parental learning difficulties, having other children with special educational needs and being a kinship carer.

*“I’ve got cancer as well but then I didn’t know that and I’m on watch and wait so everything’s good for me at this stage but um it was all spiralling, I was ill, feeling ill but couldn’t think why. Mum was really ill, Tim was having all of this.” P2*

The various stresses placed on the family could be seen as having implications on how parents may engage with nurture groups, as well as how they cope with their child’s needs at

home. However parents felt that the nurture group was a source of support for them and their child during difficult times. Parents expressed feelings of relief getting support from the nurture group.

*“Oh definitely made it a lot easier for me, yeah, because I’ve got my own problems as well.”*

P3

### Subtheme 2: Concerns and difficulties regarding their child’s needs

Parents expressed their views regarding their child’s emotional, behavioural or learning needs, as well as sharing experiences of having difficulties managing these needs.

*“I used to wake up in the mornings and think what am I going to get today”* P2

Parents found that in addition to other stressors occurring in the family home, effectively caring for their child was emotionally and physically tiring. Parents talked about not knowing what to do, and feeling drained by the continuous contact from school regarding their child. The specific challenges varied, depending on the needs of the parent and the child.

### Subtheme 3: Seeing changes in their child

In terms of their experiences of nurture groups parents talked about feelings of relief and happiness, when seeing the impact the nurture group had on their child.

*“I was just really happy at that time as Alice was really happy.”* P1



The extent of their expressed relief is perhaps indicative of the degree of concern they had prior to the nurture group. Parents implied that as the experience was positive for their child, this also had a positive impact for the parent. The changes for their child ranged from increased confidence in school through to observing a decrease in behaviour difficulties.

#### Subtheme 4: Parent/ school relationships

It seemed from the interviews that parent-nurture group staff relationships were influenced to some extent by the parent-school relationships. Parents who had experienced previous difficulties with the school also appeared not to have overly positive interactions with the nurture group.

*“Well something happened and it made me come to that point, bring...who I was bringing was the local councillor (laughs). But anybody really, and I used to say I shouldn’t have to bring you, this is a school. Schools should be working to make parents and children feel comfortable.” P1*

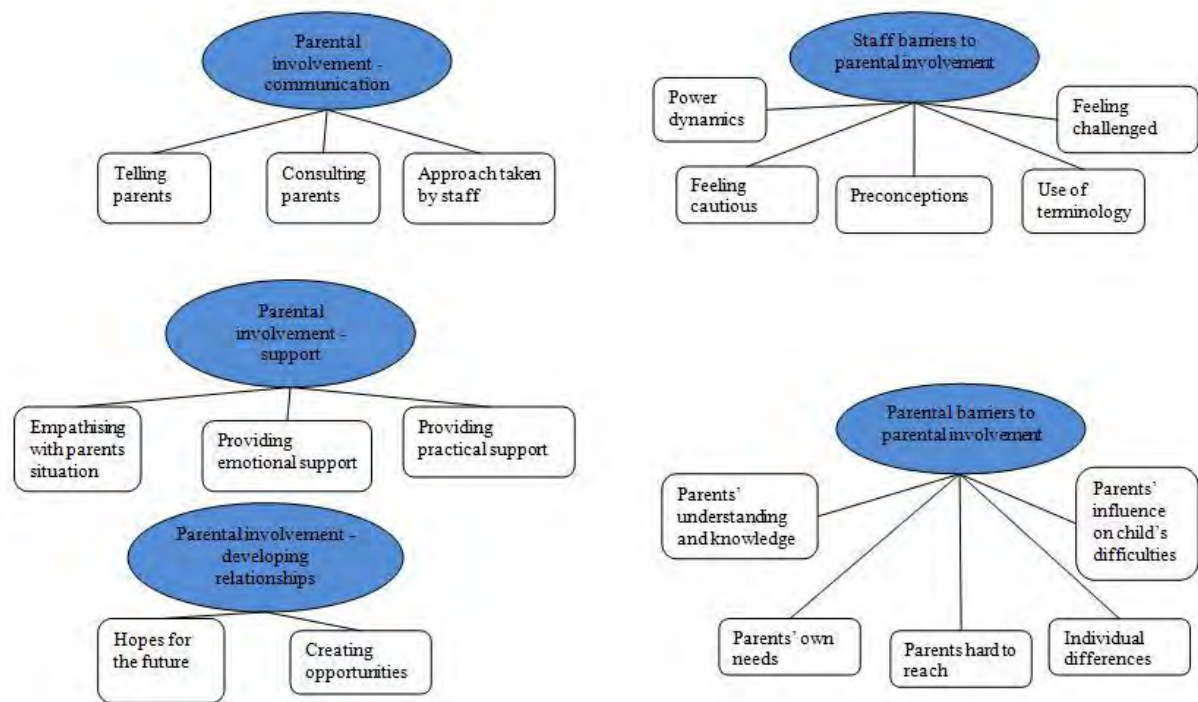
#### *4.2.1.4 Summary of parental experiences of their involvement in nurture groups*

*“...such simple things to put right that people just don’t know about, um how they can make things better, if only we could share that more...it’s not something that everybody knows about.” P4*

Overall parents experiences of nurture groups and working with nurture group staff has been positive. There are examples of receiving support from staff, with some incidences of

individuals working together to overcome challenges. Barriers do exist, some of which have been effectively overcome through working together. However there are areas of difficulty that parents experience, particularly around parental understanding of the function of nurture groups as well as with communication and feeling welcomed into the group.

#### 4.2.2 *Nurture group staff*



*Figure 10: Thematic map of nurture group staff experiences of working with parents*

Figure 10 displays five themes were identified relating to nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement in nurture groups. These were:

1. Parental involvement - communication
2. Parental involvement - support
3. Parental involvement - developing relationships

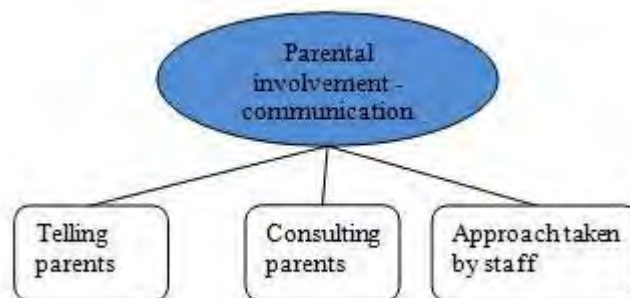
4. Staff barriers to parental involvement.

5. Parental barriers to parental involvement.

These themes are explored separately (in Figures 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15). Within each of these themes, further subthemes were identified. These will now be discussed in more detail.

#### *4.2.2.1 Theme 1: Parental involvement - communication*

The 'Parental involvement - communication' theme was labelled as such as it was characterised by different approaches staff used to interacting with parents and communicate information.



*Figure 11: Theme 1 – Parental involvement - communication*

Three subthemes were identified which are now explored in more detail.

#### Subtheme 1: Telling parents

Based on the accounts given by staff, their communication was more often one directional, telling or giving information to parents.

*“...we literally had to bring her in, sit her down and say look, we’ve recorded how many times he’s sworn and attacked and things like that.” S1*

This form of communication tended to be instigated by the staff rather than the parents. The most frequent times ‘telling parents’ took place was at the beginning of the nurture group and if there were issues with a child.

### Subtheme 2: Consulting parents

A less frequent form of communication (but still present) was the subtheme of staff consulting with parents, working together and seeking parental views.

*“...at the beginning we got them all to put comments on post-it notes, during the coffee afternoon, um and they were really positive.” S3*

Although this did not take place as frequently as one directional communication, it seemed to have a more positive impact on staff-parent relationships.

### Subtheme 3: Approach taken by staff

Staff talked about their style of communication with parents, including considering their use of language and non-verbal cues.

*“...it’s just that you’ve got to be positive when you’re talking to parents haven’t you, you can’t, you’ve always got to find something positive, you can’t just go in on the negative side.”*

S3

#### 4.2.2.2 Theme 2: Parental involvement - support

The 'Parental involvement – support' theme outlines the functions staff felt their relationships provided to parents. Three subthemes were identified within this theme.



*Figure 12: Theme 2 – Parental involvement - support*

##### Subtheme 1: Empathising with parents situation

All of the staff empathised with the parents regarding challenges they face with personal circumstances as well as supporting their child's needs. Whilst some demonstrate empathy with current situational factors, some other members of staff also demonstrated that they empathised with how perhaps parents have developed their own parenting from early childhood experiences. Staff also recognised that the challenges parents face may have an impact on their level of engagement in school and with the nurture group.

*"I can imagine for some parents coming to the school gate it's just another complaint." S3*

##### Subtheme 2: Providing emotional support

Staff felt that they provided emotional support to parents. Being available for parents and giving them methods of contacting staff if needed appears to be a strategy that has been successful. There was also a focus on taking a positive stance with parents, who may not be used to hearing encouraging feedback.

*“...we do extend that nurturing out to the parents because I think that’s important you know. because if they’re feeling nurtured and they’re getting a bit of nurture, coz actually you don’t know if they were nurtured as kids you know. So if you nurture the parents a bit and show them, it’s good practice.” S1*

### Subtheme 3: Providing practical support

Staff stated that the nurture group parents lacked some of the practical skills required to manage their children.

*“...the parents have got very limited skills, parenting skills.” S4*

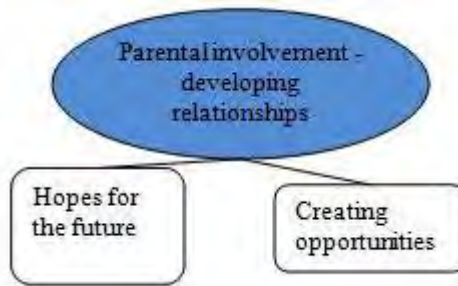
Practical support tended to come in the form of behaviour management strategies and praise.

*“Other than that it’s trying to communicate with them, give them little strategies to try. They can then take those strategies and try them out at home, to continue that consistency.” S1*

It also included signposting on to other services, for example with parenting classes.

#### *4.2.2.3 Theme 3: Parental involvement - developing relationships*

The theme ‘Parental involvement - developing relationships’ includes factors that have influenced how staff may have attempted to form relationships. Within the theme two subthemes have been named.



*Figure 13: Theme 3 – Parental involvement - developing relationships*

Subtheme 1: Creating opportunities

Staff raised the need to have to create opportunities to get parents involved in the work that takes place in the nurture group. This predominately involved coffee mornings and inviting parents to come in to join in part of the nurture group sessions (such as story time or breakfast). In line with this staff recognised that they needed to use opportunistic invitations, which required the least effort from parents – for example when parents would already be on the school site.

*“...we thought if we did it right at the very end of the day when they come to collect the children anyway it wouldn’t be so...um, bad, so they might be fine with that.” S3*

Staff felt that they had to create such opportunities, as without these the level of engagement from parents was low. Staff highlighted the need to have an ‘open invitation’ in which the offer was made to parents. However only one nurture group staff member talked about additional strategies to ensure that parents did attend.

*“Parents like that are very good at giving excuses, but we come back to her with solutions, saying we can do this or how that this.” S1*

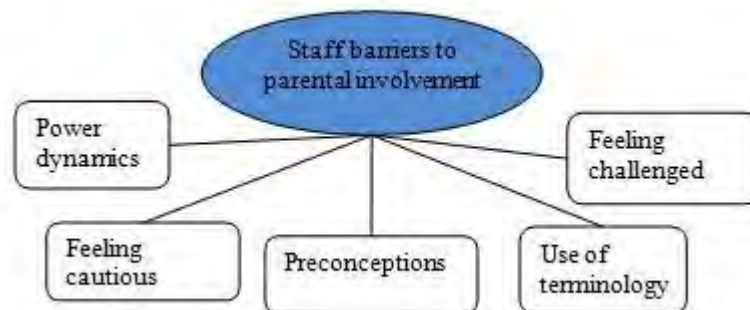
## Subtheme 2: Hopes for the future

Despite the challenges felt by staff they were still hopeful for the future of parent-nurture group relationships. All of the nurture groups had plans for increasing parental involvement for future groups, based on past experiences of successes and failed strategies. However there was a recognition that developing work with parents can be time consuming, which can be challenging.

*“I do think we need to have the parents more aware and more on board perhaps. More involved but I don’t want them coming in every day, you know just...I think um...yeah, I think there definitely needs to be that to be improved. There’s definitely areas that you know you need improving and I think last year was our first year and our setting up year, and that was hard enough as it was.” S4*

### *4.2.2.4 Theme 4: Staff barriers to parental involvement*

This theme was identified and labelled due to staff descriptions of difficulties and negative experiences. This includes circumstances, approaches or emotions that are seen to hinder effective staff-parent interactions.



*Figure 14: Theme 4 – Staff barriers to parental involvement*



The data for this theme is organised into five subthemes, which are now explored in more detail.

#### Subtheme 1: Feeling cautious

Staff appeared to take a cautious approach to working with parents. This seemed to be either due to previous experiences or due to worries about upsetting or offending parents.

*“I’m not sure whether...not that I wouldn’t want the parents in here with us but parents are a pain (laughing). I know that sounds bad but they are.” S4*

*“I think in principle I’m not sure about parents coming into the nurture group because it’s almost like come and look at our ideal setting here with our lovely dining room, and you know, not everyone’s going to have that.” S3*

#### Subtheme 2: Feeling challenged

Some staff have attempted to work with parents but have been unsuccessful. Continually trying to work with parents and experiencing set-backs has resulted in staff feeling challenged and sometimes low in motivation.

*“that’s hard to get across to parents, because actually...some parents don’t want to hear because actually some parents are the cause. So when it’s like that it’s tricky.” S1*

### Subtheme 3: Preconceptions

Other staff barriers are more value based and could perhaps be more difficult to address. Staff held preconceptions about the ‘type’ of parent whose child attends a nurture group, which seems to convey a parent-centric view of further challenges.

*“But to be fair, if they really did care and were interested in what their child was doing during the day they might not be here” S2*

### Subtheme 4: Power dynamics

The use of power dynamics can create a barrier to parents wanting to, or having the opportunity to work collaboratively with staff. Staff either seemed to use power dynamics between staff and parents intentionally, such as in this extract, or they seem unaware of possible unequal partnerships.

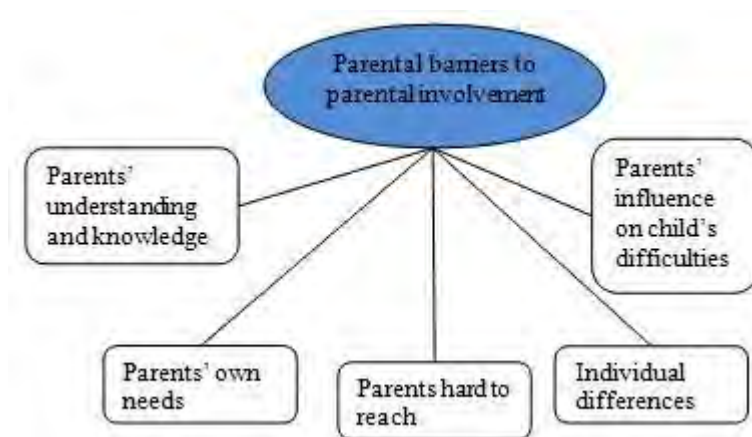
*“...because it’s coming from the top. I think if someone else had done it I think there would have been more issues with parents letting their children come in. But of course, because it’s her and she’s the head and she is saying we think that this would be the right place for your child right now that they probably think I can’t really say no.” S4*

### Subtheme 5: Use of terminology

In the case of the use of terminology nurture groups appear to intentionally avoid the term ‘nurture group’, as they felt parents would perceive nurture groups negatively.

*“We avoid using the words nurture group in our paperwork, or parents refuse for their child to have anything to do with it.” S3*

#### 4.2.2.5 Theme 5: Parental barriers to parental involvement



*Figure 15: Theme 5 – Parental barriers to parental involvement*

Compared to the staff barriers theme, nurture group staff seemed more conscious of the possible barriers to parental involvement that involve parents. There were five subthemes identified.

##### Subtheme 1: Parents' understanding and knowledge

Staff felt that parents did not understand the aims of the nurture group, and tended to focus on educational aspects of the group instead of considering their child's emotional needs.

*“...if I do bring them in here and we do let them in will they like what they see or will they kick off because they'll think oh my god all they're doing is playing, I actually thought they were in here as part of the curriculum...” S4*

However the staff interviewed were unable to provide examples of trying to overcome this observation. Furthermore staff found it challenging trying to explain to parents how nurture groups could support their child.

*“I don’t think they understand really what this is all about. I try to explain it in all different ways. But it’s difficult to explain to parents” S2*

This perhaps links to the barrier of the use of terminology, previously discussed under the subtheme of staff barriers.

#### Subtheme 2: Parents’ own needs

Staff described how working with parents in nurture groups can be challenging due to their own needs – which can relate to their own learning difficulties, medical needs, social or emotional needs.

*“You kind of have, you have your parents that..... (sighs) a kind of, it depends what they’re going through. We had a parent, another one actually that you did get hold of who suffers from depression herself, um...is kind of...got her own things going on” S1*

#### Subtheme 3: Parents hard to reach

Perhaps as a consequence of these first two subthemes staff felt that parents whose children attend nurture groups are hard to reach and are distant from the work that takes place in nurture groups.

*“You never get the parents you really want to see. You know they just, they’re just not interested and that’s just the sad thing about working in, um, this environment.” S4*

#### Subtheme 4: Parents' influence on child's difficulties

Highlighting the need for work to be carried out with parents in their own skill development, one subtheme that arose was the belief that the parents have some influence over their child's difficulties.

*"the children you get in here have got needs and it may be due to the parents. And anyone doesn't want to admit that, you know, their role in that"* S1

#### Subtheme 5: Individual differences

One further barrier to staff working with parents is the differing needs of parents and families, their level of engagement and their personal circumstances – all of these mean that it can be difficult to develop an overall 'one size fits all' approach.

*"it is really tricky and I don't think there's a right way and I don't think there's a wrong way."* S4

#### *4.2.2.6 Summary of nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement with nurture groups*

*"I think it's important to nurture the parents as much as you do with the children."*

*S1*

Staff views and experiences of parental involvement are mixed and sometimes contradictory. Whilst staff were able to give examples of positive and successful interactions with parents, they also seemed to find parental involvement challenging and time consuming – often

resulting in limited tangible success. It seems that a lot of the perceived barriers from staff are attributed to parents. However there are also many barriers arising from staff, which they perhaps have not considered. Whilst staff understood that parents may have had their own challenges, both as a parent and in their own childhood, there did not seem to be much acknowledgment of how this may impact on parental levels of involvement. However parents need similar support to that being received by their children.

### 4.3 Summary of results

Although the results are presented in two separate sections for staff and parents, similar findings can be noted, as illustrated in Table 3.

Staff subthemes	Parent subthemes	Commonalities
Providing emotional support	Parents receiving emotional support	Nurture groups being a source of emotional support
Providing practical support	Parents receiving practical support	Nurture groups being a source of practical support
Parents' understanding and knowledge	Developing knowledge and understanding	Knowledge and understanding
Parents' own needs	Parental needs/ family context	Parental needs
Individual differences	Parents' individual story	Considering individual experiences
Use of terminology	Poor communication	A need for clear communication
Power dynamics	Lack of parental voice	Being aware of power issues
Preconceptions	Feeling blamed	Non-judgemental stance

*Table 3: Commonalities across staff and parent subthemes*

Overall these can be viewed into three overarching categories of relationships, communication and sharing practice. Common subthemes around staff-parent relationships

were noted – nurture groups are a source of emotional and practical support, where parental knowledge and understanding can be developed. In terms of the experiences of parents and staff, commonalities have emerged relating to an appreciation of parental needs, individual experiences and challenges they may face. When working with parents, there appears to be a need for clear, two-directional communication, whilst adopting an approach that is non-judgemental and empowering.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This exploratory study provides an insight into the perceptions of parents and nurture group staff regarding parental involvement in nurture groups. Chapter Five interprets and explores the findings of this study (outlined in Chapter Four). The first part of Chapter Five is organised under the relevant research questions to aid coherence for the reader. Although the research is exploratory, findings for each theme are also discussed in relation to the existing literature. As in addition to the socially constructed reality of participants, the researcher needs to consider an alternative form of reality that has been produced by prior research (Pouliot, 2007). The limitations of the study are then considered and areas for further research identified.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature on parental involvement in nurture groups. Specifically it aimed to explore the existing practice of nurture groups in terms of supporting parental involvement. Additionally nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement with nurture groups were considered. Three research questions were asked:

1. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with parents about parental involvement in nurture groups?
2. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with nurture group staff about parental involvement in nurture groups?



3. How can these themes be used in supporting the development of parental involvement in nurture groups?

A separate discussion of staff and parental findings felt appropriate, to enable a consideration of the two groups' experiences, followed by the development of common aspects of staff and parents' results.

## **5.2 A discussion of the findings**

### *5.2.1 What are the themes that emerge from interviews with parents about parental involvement in nurture groups? (RQ1)*

The first research question explored parental views about their involvement in nurture groups. Examining what parents said about their experiences of their child being in nurture groups and interacting with nurture group staff provided an insight into aspects that may be acting as barriers or facilitators to successful interactions. Understanding the barriers parents felt they faced, as well as the positive elements, can help staff make changes to the approach that they take, and increase parental involvement in nurture groups. The themes in the findings were identified using the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with three themes identified for parents. Overall parents viewed nurture groups as a positive form of support for both their child and for themselves. Examples were provided of supportive interactions between parents and staff, which parents valued. However there were also areas in which further development may be required, particularly around parental understanding of the function of nurture groups. The findings are now discussed in terms of the themes.

#### *5.2.1.1 Forms of parental involvement*

Parents' interactions with staff varied, and although lacking in a uniform approach, parents had predominantly positive experiences. The theme highlights that parents valued these connections and wanted to work with staff. Parents' contact with staff was often unplanned and informal. Parents valued being informed of developments within the group or specific progress their child may be making. Parents either valued this as they had experience of it, or they expressed a desire to be informed more as it was not currently taking place. As highlighted in the literature, this finding emphasises the importance for parents to be involved. It suggests that methods of communication need to be developed further, and relates to previous research highlighting the importance of the initial contact made by staff (Snell-Johns et al., 2004).

Positive experiences of having practical and emotional support from the nurture group staff were expressed by parents, suggesting that relationships have been formed in order for parents to be accepting of the support. This relates to the research by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) which indicates that parental feelings of capability can be a strong predictor of involvement. If staff are helping to develop capability, parental involvement could increase. As Adams and Christenson (2000) state, professionals need to continue to focus on the development of trusting and sensitive relationships. Additionally, understanding the types of support offered and the areas requiring support can help to identify potential barriers and develop an understanding of why parents may not engage with nurture groups initially, and how such support can be improved.

Parents felt that their understanding of nurture groups could be developed, as they were aware that they did not fully know what was taking place in the group. Although there were examples of parents and staff working together to develop parental knowledge, this appears to be an area which needs further development, not only in terms of the group but also in terms of their own child's needs.

#### *5.2.1.2 Barriers to parental involvement*

Despite the positive experiences highlighted in the previous theme, this theme was named to represent the difficulties and negative experiences parents had whilst their child had attended a nurture group. The barriers identified included difficulties relating to personal circumstances, experiences with school and negative emotions. These were identified as barriers to the parents understanding as well as being a barrier in their relationships and involvement with the nurture group. Understanding these barriers can help to support parents and nurture groups in developing their relationship, as well as support parental understanding.

In line with previous research, practical and psychological barriers existed for the parents, which they felt made it harder for them to engage with activities in the nurture group, as well as to approach staff about queries they had. Although some nurture groups made attempts to overcome some of the practical difficulties (for example, in relation to transportation), the more subtle barriers such as feeling blamed need to be addressed, through the development of sensitive and trusting relationships between staff and parents. However this may be harder to achieve.

The consequences of parents lacking a voice is reflected in the literature (Power & Clark, 2001), and is identified as an area that needs to be developed in order to increase parental involvement in nurture groups. Parents need to be given the opportunity to express their views and ask questions, as well as feel that their views have been acknowledged (Pena, 2000). If successful parent-staff involvement is to take place, research indicates that it needs to be an equal collaboration (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Addressing this area seems to be key, as discussed in Chapter Two, research indicates that parents lacking a voice in school can decrease communication and engagement in school activities (Power & Clark, 2001) and increase feelings of frustration, as seen in the current sample of parents. The potential power inequalities need to be addressed if parents are to feel empowered and develop positive relationships with schools (Carvalho, 2001). Parental self-efficacy can be increased through experiencing successful involvement in school, observing other parents successfully interact with nurture groups, receive encouragement and experience positive emotions from these interactions (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Other factors also play a role in creating barriers for staff-parent relationships to develop in nurture groups, which focus more on the approach taken by staff members. These will be discussed later, but does highlight an important point that often schools can take a view that focuses too much on reasons associated with parents as to why staff-parent relationships are difficult to maintain. Aspects within school need to be considered too. For example, the use of jargon and not explaining specific terms such as ‘nurture group’ can lead parents to feel isolated from what is taking place in school to support their child. If professionals neglect to provide such information then it is of little surprise that some parents are hard to reach.

### *5.2.1.3 Other factors affecting parental involvement*

Parents spoke a lot about the specific challenges they as a parent or as a family faced, relating to their own needs or the needs of their child. This is an interesting aspect to consider in terms of how this may impact on their relationship with nurture group staff. The various stresses placed on the family could be seen as having implications on how parents may engage with nurture groups, as well as how they cope with their child's needs at home (thus highlighting areas requiring support). As a child's inclusion in a nurture group is often linked to issues at home, parents themselves often require some element of nurturing, coping with difficult circumstances (Bennathan & Kettleborough, 2007). It seems that the impact of these experiences needs to be considered further in terms of the role staff may take with parents, as well as a possible influencing factor on the parent's readiness to engage in support. Helping families see the relevance of support offered that meets their specific needs may increase involvement (Snell-Johns et al., 2004).

Results around parents' personal experiences and relationship with their child's school highlighted some interesting links with their perceptions of their relationship with the nurture group. For some parents there had previously been difficult conversations and situations with the wider school, where they experienced being criticised and feeling inadequate (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996). It seems that in some instances the school environment can implicitly imply a parent or family's inferiority (Jackson & Remillard, 2005), leading to parental distancing. Although the current research does not consider how to adjust the school-wide aspect of parental experiences, nurture group staff could be more aware of this aspect, in order to influence how they interact with the parents.

Although nurture groups are targeted at supporting the needs of children, questions from the research were raised regarding how nurture groups should work with parents. Although direct support for parents is not the role of nurture groups, the relationships between parents and staff should be considered. For parents who are finding caring for their child emotionally and physically challenging, difficult interactions with school can exacerbate these feelings. As a child's home and school life are so enmeshed, it would be beneficial to the child for these two elements to work more closely together.

#### *5.2.1.4 Conclusion of parental views about their involvement in nurture groups*

Encouraging parental involvement with children in nurture groups is important in order to enable consistent approaches between home and school (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996). The findings from the parental interviews are that although the parents have positive experiences of working with nurture groups, barriers are present. If these can be addressed research suggests that parents may increase in confidence in seeking support from school (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005) and feel more positive towards school staff (Harris et al., 2009).

However research suggests that parent involvement can be limited to those parents who have had positive experiences with their own or their child's education (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), which may not always be the case with children who attend nurture groups. Therefore changes need to be made to increase parents feeling comfortable or welcome in the school environment (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Bishop (2008) states that a consistent approach is required that uses empathy and understanding, transparent communication and clarity regarding the nurture group. However the findings from the current study suggest that some of these areas require further development.

The findings of this study reflect previous research which suggests that although parental involvement should be taking place, it is not planned with varying practice across nurture groups. The literature conceptualises parental involvement in various ways, including as participation, partnership, empowerment or collaboration (Jackson & Remillard, 2005). However from the parents' perspective in this study parental involvement currently seems to be placed in a 'deficit' model in which parents are felt blamed for their child's difficulties. It seems that the positive terms such as participation, partnership, empowerment and collaboration are not present in the parents' experiences of working with nurture group staff. Although parents are pleased with the support received and progress they had observed in their child it seems that this comes from a passive approach in which parents can receive this if the staff chose to provide it. This is also apparent in the lack of knowledge parents had regarding why their child is in a nurture group or what takes place in the group. As Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) highlighted, the areas of providing parents with information, developing parental voice and encouraging parental/school partnerships all need to be addressed in order to develop the role of parents.

#### 5.2.2 What are the themes that emerge from interviews with nurture group staff about parental involvement in nurture groups? (RQ2)

The second research question was to explore nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement in nurture groups. The themes in the findings were identified using the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with five themes identified for staff, which are now discussed in more detail.

### *5.2.2.1 Parental involvement - communication*

The element of communication was felt to encapsulate the overall experiences of parental involvement in nurture groups. Predominately, examples of communication expressed by staff with parents were one-way, which would reflect the passivity element of parental involvement (which was found in the parent results). As the research literature has highlighted, parents do not seem to be the equal partners (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Coe et al., 2008; Peters et al., 2008). This form of communication depended on the nurture group staff initiating the contact with parents and appeared to promote an unequal relationship with power imbalances between staff and parents. As reflected in the parent results this may also appear to have related to parents' feelings of being able to share concerns and ask questions.

The less frequent incidents of consulting parents are positive to see, and the further development of this form of communication may enable all nurture group staff to foster an accepting, caring atmosphere to welcome parents, providing more opportunities to share information and give guidance. Previous literature states that home-school collaboration should be built around the core principles of being pro-active rather than being reactive (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999) and that in these collaborative interactions the parents' contributions should be valued in order to empower parents. When working with parents some staff adjusted their language and considered their non-verbal style of communication. Adopting a non-judgemental attitude and using transparent communication to ensure clarity about the nurture group work (Bishop, 2008) is also something that perhaps could be developed further.



#### *5.2.2.2 Parental involvement - support*

Staff felt that they provided both emotional and practical support to parents. This support seemed to take place when staff were able to empathise with the experiences parents were having at home as well as with their own needs. Empathy is highlighted as a skill required by nurture group staff (Bishop, 2008). This included staff adopting a nurturing approach to their relationship with parents, which some staff recognised that parents may have lacked (Bennathan & Kettleborough, 2007).

Staff felt that one of their roles with parents was providing support. Although this support was not planned, and seem to arise more when a specific incident had happened in the nurture group or at home. In order for such work to have the greatest impact it would be beneficial to have some planned elements to the support provided, as well as the reactive elements. When this takes place research suggests that there are positive effectives for the children in the nurture groups (Sanders, 2007) as well as for the parents (Cooper et al., 2001; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005).

#### *5.2.2.3 Parental involvement - developing relationships*

It is felt that this theme very much summarises the stage at which the nurture groups in this study currently are. Staff were aware of the challenges experienced in developing staff-parent relationships in nurture groups, and were keen to learn from previous groups for future practice. Although this is positive it is felt that staff may need to reflect on their own influence

on previous difficulties rather than just focussing on the role parents may have played. Moving away from a parent-centric perspective of these challenges is essential if the nurture groups are to develop their practice of working with parents.

Staff are aware that they need to be creating opportunities for parents to visit the nurture groups and find out more about what is done there. This has previously included giving invitations to coffee mornings. Such opportunities can allow the promotion of parental confidence in their own knowledge and experiences, and allows staff-parent relationships to develop (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). As the nurture groups are held in an environment which requires a form of invitation to parents, the staff must initiate this.

#### *5.2.2.4 Staff barriers to parental involvement*

There were several barriers experienced by staff which can highlight potential areas that require addressing in order to promote staff-parent relationships. These related to feeling cautious, feeling challenged, having preconceptions, power dynamics and the use of terminology. Such barriers may confirm Harris and Goodall's (2008) suggestion that it is the schools that are hard to reach rather than the parents. Due to the pressures nurture group staff may be under, particularly in new nurture groups, questions are raised regarding if support needs to be specifically put in place to support the staff as well as the parents (Sanders, 2007). This may particularly be the case for nurture group staff who are teaching assistants.

Staff barriers may also need to be considered on a wider whole-school level, as Nechyba et al. (1999) propose that poor working relationships between staff and parents can involve institutional barriers that originate from the school, not the parent. Perhaps if nurture group staff feel supported by school senior leadership teams they may be able to devote more time to developing resources and strategies to work with parents on a deeper level (Harris et al., 2009). The staff sample in the current research comprised of teaching assistants, who may have felt less supported than members of teaching staff involved in nurture groups. Teaching staff may feel more able to initiate developments and share knowledge in terms of nurture group practice. Therefore further research is required to determine this (which is considered in more detail in section 5.4).

The preconceptions of staff can be seen to continue a cycle of pigeonholing parents as uninvolved, potentially leading to poor communication and working relationships (Power & Clark, 2001). This could exacerbate implicit power imbalances between staff and parents, which may challenge staff-parent collaboration. More needs to be done to reduce this imbalance, such as avoiding the use of jargon and ensure that parents are fully informed and have a secure knowledge and understanding of nurture group practice. Furthermore this raises interesting questions regarding how informed parental consent is, as there seems to be a gap between good and actual practice in terms of parental understanding as to why their child is attending a nurture group (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001). It seems that although consent is gained, parents still lack full understanding, as a consequence of unclear language and jargon. As power imbalances exist, there tends not to be a climate or an opportunity for parents to ask further questions.

#### *5.2.2.5 Parental barriers to parental involvement*

There were several barriers staff had experienced when working with parents. Again, considering these barriers can highlight potential areas that require addressing in order to promote staff-parent relationships. These related to parents' understanding and knowledge, parents' own needs, parents being hard to reach, parents' influence on child's difficulties and individuals differences. In the parental results some of the subthemes (such as 'individual story') highlight the influence social context can play. However the staff results do not reflect this area to the same extent. What is needed in order to support parents is a more specific and personalised approach as suggested by Harris et al. (2009), where the services perhaps should adapt themselves to the needs of the families, rather than families fitting into the services.

Staff felt that parents lacked an understanding of what a nurture group was, and why it would support their child's development. As highlighted earlier in Chapter Five, parents also felt that this was an area which they had experienced. However little is currently being done to ensure that parental knowledge is being developed. This indicates an area in which further work could be conducted.

Acknowledging the individual differences between families and the specific challenges they face was a barrier experienced by staff which seemed to overwhelm them. The varying responses of parents led staff to believe that it was not worth persisting with parental engagement, and if parents chose to become involved that was a positive. However perhaps taking smaller steps, in a solution focused manner could enable both the parents and staff to focus on a small number of areas of concern (Bishop, 2008).

It seems that staff focus more on parents' actions, rather than considering the staff or school role. As Barton et al. (2004) state this approach enforces a deficit model of parent-school interactions. The factors causing parental barriers seem complex and inter-related, including their own experiences at school and their childhood, experiences with their child's school, difficulties they experience with the school as a whole, as well as having their own needs and difficulties with their child. The cumulative effect can be seen in the low rate of parental involvement in the nurture groups studied. In order to increase involvement staff felt it was difficult to know how best to target the barriers, leading to perhaps an ineffective approach that does not address any of the areas. This needs to be developed in order to promote collaborations between nurture groups and parents, which is vital as it has positive outcomes for both the children and the parents (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005).

#### *5.2.2.6 Conclusion of nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement in nurture groups*

Nurture group staff recognised the potential impact working with parents could have for the children in the groups. They expressed a desire to work more with parents, although feeling frustrated by the difficulties they have experienced when previously attempting to involve parents. However there seems to be a contradiction in staff views – despite the positive experiences and desire to address increasing parental involvement, staff were also cautious and wanted to keep parents at an appropriate distance from the group.

Communication needs to be developed, particularly in terms of parental understanding of nurture group aims and practices. Although being aware of parental barriers is useful in terms of considering areas that require addressing in order to overcome these barriers, there also needs to be an increase in reflection of the role staff may be playing in these difficulties.

### 5.2.3 How can these themes be used in supporting the development of parental involvement in nurture groups? (RQ3)

Research question three aimed to take the findings from the semi structured interviews with staff and parents to consider what approaches could be taken to increase parental involvement in nurture groups. There were several areas arising from the findings and research literature relating to research questions one and two that can help answer research question three. As Bastani (1993) highlighted, parental involvement in the nurture groups in the current study seems to be taking place through a process that is still developing, both in terms of the nurture groups determining the best approach but also in terms of the differing attitudes of the key individuals.

Parental involvement appears to be envisaged by the two groups differently. For example, when referring to frameworks of involvement, the results reveal that very few of these conceptualisations of involvement can be seen in the experiences of the parents or nurture group staff. This highlights the extent to which this area needs to be developed. Therefore the development of an overarching aim and definition of parental involvement would be a useful starting point for nurture groups, which should consider the process of involvement, the possible influencing factors in the community context, as well as the ‘whys’ of involvement in addition to the ‘hows’. The frameworks put forward by Epstein et al. (1997), Hoover-

Dempsey et al. (1997; 2005) and Barton et al. (2004) could provide a useful starting point in terms of developing parental involvement.

There are commonalities between the accounts of staff and parents. The findings of the research highlight several key areas that could be developed in order to support parental involvement in nurture groups – the development of relationships, communication and sharing practice. These are now considered in more detail.

#### *5.2.3.1 Relationships*

The results of the study highlight issues around the influence of power that occur in schools. When considering the different levels of Arnstein's ladder of participation' model (1969), it seems from the results that the parents are experiencing a relationship with the nurture group at the 'informing' level. Staff findings also reflect this, although some staff also feel that they are consulting with parents (the next level up). However both of these stages are fairly low on Arnstein's ladder and reflect a degree of tokenistic involvement. This can also be seen in Cunningham and Davis (1985) models of teacher-parent interactions, in which the results fit into their 'expert model' where professionals exercise control over interventions and parents are the passive recipients of services. Considering Blamires et al. (1997) types of collaborative working the results would suggest that parents are more a type of passive partner, who are viewed (and experience being) as a source of information.

Future practice needs to develop the level of involvement to a more collaborative partnership, which is what parents' desire and is key to successful outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The difficulty seems to lie with staff, who express a mixed message of wanting to

involve parents more but also expressing a parent-centric, 'stuck' view. A 'consumer model' which allows for a more equal partnership in which the knowledge and rights of parents are recognised needs is the ideal model that should be adopted (Cunningham & Davis, 1985). However at present it may be beneficial to aim to develop a 'transplant model (Cunningham & Davis, 1985) in which skills are passed on to parents through discussion and modelling. Although this model proposes that the staff are in control, it may be a more appropriate aim at this stage of the development of the nurture groups included in this study.

Staff felt that their relationships with parents were generally positive, and they recognised the role they can play in supporting parents both practically and emotionally. This needs to continue, where parental knowledge and understanding can be developed and be extended through partnership opportunities between school, parents and other agencies. Staff ensuring that they are available (either in person or via telephone or email) will increase parental feelings of being supported.

Parents have needs that relate to individual experiences, personal challenges as well as difficulties with their children. If staff acknowledge parental needs, and view the nurture group as a source of support for the parents (as a means of supporting the child) relationships between the two parties can develop. Epstein et al. (1997) conceptualised the relationship as interactional 'spheres of influence' between home, school and communities. Therefore consideration needs to be had about the role of all of these spheres if parental involvement is to increase. There needs to be a movement away from trying to make families 'school-like' and take into consideration the subjective experiences and needs of children, parents and the families as a whole in order for the work in nurture groups to have a long term impact. A



successful and authentic parent-school relationship needs to develop, addressing the barriers highlighted as well as adopting a positive strengths-based approach to parental involvement (Allison et al., 2003). Home-school collaboration should be built around the core principles of being pro-active rather than being reactive, and should be sensitive to family circumstances. Trust is required in order to maintain relationships between home and school (Dunsmuir, Frederickson & Lang, 2004; Roffey, 2004). The contributions made by parents should be valued and must empower parents.

#### *5.2.3.2 Communication*

Research indicates that communication can play a large role in maintaining relationships between home and school (Dunsmuir et al., 2004; Roffey, 2004). Communication needs to be clear and two-directional, whilst adopting an approach that is non-judgemental and empowering. Epstein et al.'s (1997) model highlights that if the more basic forms of involvement are not present (such as communication), successful involvement will not be achieved. Parental role construction and parental sense of efficacy needs to be addressed in order for parents to be involved in their child's school experiences (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parents need to feel listened to, and have opportunities to provide their views and express their concerns in both informal and formal meetings with nurture group staff. This could include the use of resources such as a home-school book to facilitate two-way communication.

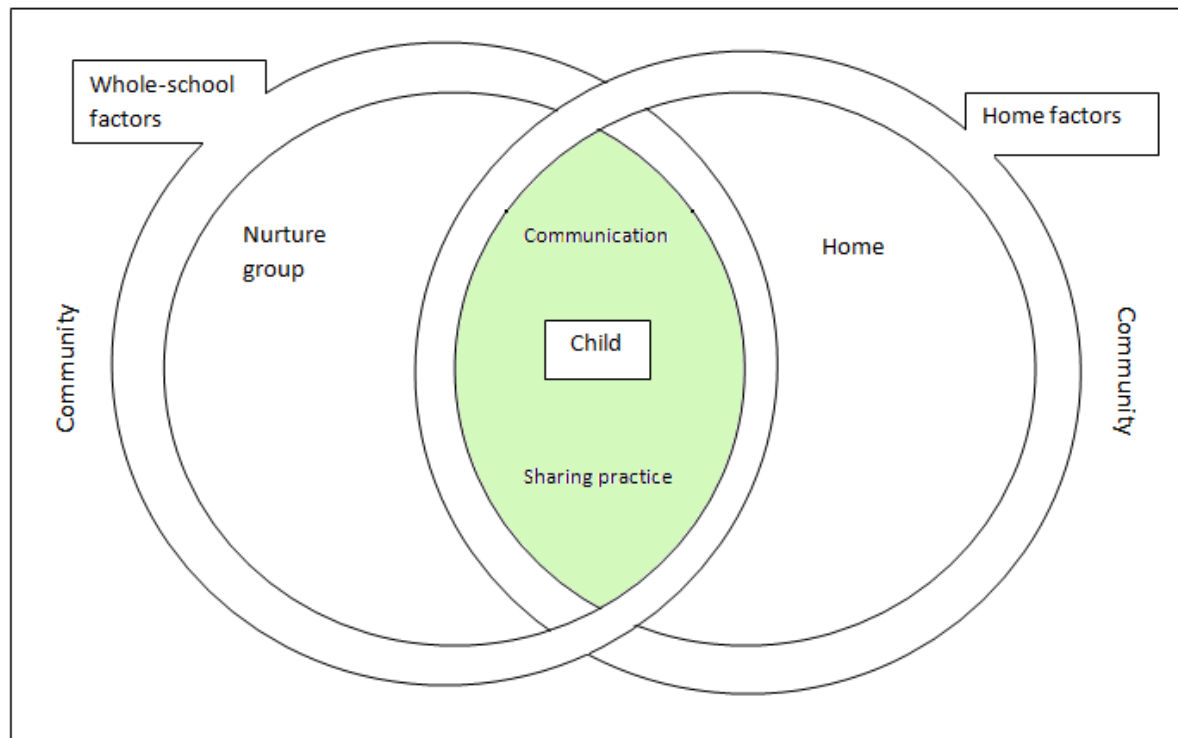
#### *5.2.3.3 Sharing practice*

The frameworks proposed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Barton et al. (2004) are perhaps more successful in representing the complex interaction of factors that may

influence parental involvement, taking into account the social context and individual experiences. These frameworks take an ecological perspective which is more appropriate in reflecting the findings of this study, which indicates that parental involvement is influenced by factors outside of school as well as within school. For example, the parents' construction of their role in school activities, their sense of efficacy and the competing demands they face with their child, school and home life (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Therefore developing staff-parent relationships and parental involvement needs to focus on the psychological and emotional factors as well as the practical.

Promoting parental confidence through the development of knowledge and sharing experiences can enable staff to work collaboratively with parents, addressing small but specific areas of difficulty relevant to them. This can be adopted through informal routes (such as holding flexible meetings, and staff being contactable) as well as more formal or planned approaches. There needs to be an increase of opportunities to work with parents, including regular coffee mornings/afternoons, and chances for parents to participate in shared activities. Meetings need to be regular to enable staff and parents to share practice throughout the duration of the nurture group as their child's needs may change. This will also enable the application of suitable strategies and approaches at home and school. There could also be the development of outreach work, perhaps in collaboration of other agencies, supporting parents with behaviour management strategies or specific support depending on the child's needs (for example, autism outreach support). Opportunities to meet with other parents who have attended nurture groups may also provide a useful opportunity for parents to develop a support network and share experiences and strategies.

#### 5.2.4 *Synthesis of the main findings*



*Figure 16: Diagrammatical representation of the main findings*

Figure 16 above provides a synthesis of the main findings, which have been discussed in detail earlier in Chapter Five. The overlapping section of the Venn diagram represented in Figure 16 suggests involvement should be collaborative (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) and that an agreed definition of parental involvement needs to be determined, formulated and shared fully by both staff and parents.

Similar to the account of ‘spheres of influence’ put forward by Epstein et al. (1997), Figure 16 highlights the interactional relationship between home, school and the community. Central to supporting children in nurture groups, parents and nurture group staff need to come together. Although the child spends much time in the two environments of home and school (including the nurture group), the interactive nature of these environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1992)

needs to be acknowledged. In terms of the separate micro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1992) both the home and nurture groups are influenced by wider factors (Barton et al., 2004) which need to be acknowledged and considered when supporting parental involvement.

The common theme revealed in the findings of developing a relationship between staff and parents (represented by the green) appears to encompass the other two common themes of sharing practice and communication. In line with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980), these relationships should be attuned (responsive to the child's or parental needs), consistent and predictable (Geddes, 2006). When such relationships have been developed between staff and parents, skills may be shared more easily with parents through joint discussion and modelling (Cunningham & Davis, 1985).

### **5.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Research**

Consideration has already been given with regarding measures to ensure the quality of the current research in Chapter Three (section 3.8). In this section the strengths and limitations of the research will be made, specifically relating to the sample, data collection and analysis methods.

#### ***5.3.1 Critique of the sample***

The sample used was small. However the aim of the research was to elicit the *individual* experiences of the participants, and claims regarding the representativeness of the sample or the generalisability of results are not being made. It allowed the voices of parents and staff working in specific nurture groups to be reported, which can allow practitioners to begin to develop ways forward in increasing parental involvement in nurture groups. However there

are some implications if the findings are to be generalised. The study was conducted in one area of the country, which has high rates of poverty and deprivation. Therefore the experiences of samples of participants may not be the same as in other parts of the country.

In terms of the staff participants, as all of the members of staff interviewed were teaching assistants this may have led to different results than if the teaching staff involved in the nurture groups were also interviewed. Due to their own experiences and role in school, as well as their potentially different relationship with parents, teachers may have different perceptions as well as different opportunities to disseminate and develop knowledge and skills with parents. However the teachers who worked in the nurture groups included in this study did not consent for their involvement.

Additionally, in the case of the parents, it would have been ideal to gather the views of the least engaged 'hard to reach' parents to explore the difficulties and barriers they feel are present. However, by the nature of being hard to reach I was unable to achieve this in the research timeframe. Further steps could have been taken to try and reach the hard to reach parents, including using services that provide support to these parents (such as Parent Partnership), as well as through my contact with these families in my educational psychology work in schools.

### *5.3.2. Critique of the data collection tools*

The use of the SSIs allowed participants to openly share their views and experiences. Although questions were prepared these were not prescriptive, which enabled participants to discuss specific aspects that they felt were pertinent to their individual experience. However

when using the SSI as a data collection method the researcher needs to be aware of the influence of the interviewer, the influence of the interviewee, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the content of the questions (Cohen et al., 2000). These aspects had previously been considered by the researcher in Chapter Three. Additionally the participants' ability to express themselves and recall experiences may have had an effect on how well they could portray their experiences.

### *5.3.3 Critique of approach to analysis*

Using thematic analysis allowed for the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns within the data set. Due to its independence from theory it can be flexibly applied to various research paradigms. However thematic analysis has been criticised for being vague or poorly defined (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Some believe that the data collection and analysis stages are blurred (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and that the method allows researchers to select extracts to support themes the researcher would like to see, therefore lowering the validity of the research. However as the analysis was inductive and aimed to understand subjective human experiences rather than forming hypotheses about what might be found, findings were data-led. This allowed the researcher to understand the participants' versions of the truth (Moret et al., 2007).

The research is neither value nor bias-free due to the researcher's interpretations of participants accounts, and therefore validity will always be limited to an extent. However outlining my epistemological and ontological stance, and clearly explaining how each step of thematic analysis was conducted should make the analysis of the data more explicit.

I ensured throughout the process that I maintained an element of reflexivity, critically reflecting on the influence I may have on the research process. This is an important element to conducting the research as the constructivist researcher needs to acknowledge their experience and beliefs, which contributes to the formation of knowledge (Audi, 2003; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). As without reflexivity the researcher risks viewing their interpretation of the data as reality, rather than a version of reality. Cohen et al. (2000) argue that asserting the validity of research is key, maintaining the credibility of the research. For example, measures are taken to ensure the data reported represents accurately the views of the participants (Guest et al., 2012). In this study another TEP familiar with Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis read through a sample of a transcript to determine intercoder agreement, which allowed the researcher to assess the consistency in the application of codes (Guest et al., 2012), therefore increasing the reliability of the coding and analysis. See Appendix 11 for more detail.

To ensure the rigour of thematic analysis a clear and systematic framework was adopted to counter balance the criticism of thematic analysis that "...anything goes..." (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.78). During the research process I referred to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis six-staged framework to help me address some of the issues of reliability and validity of the analytical process using thematic analysis. I also used Braun and Clarke's (2006) checklist of criteria to ensure I have generated a good thematic analysis of the data (see Appendix 16).

#### **5.4 Implications for Further Research**

Exploratory analyses are commonly used to generate hypotheses for further research (Guest et al., 2012). The results create a picture of parental involvement as being in the early stages. However there is the potential for further work to be conducted. Future research involving larger samples would allow for a further exploration of the issues raised in the current research in other nurture groups. Additionally research using other measures would be beneficial, to enable the triangulation of data. Future research could establish the impact staff working with parents may have on parent-child relationships, which could consequently support a child's development (as an interactive process between a child's environments).

Findings from the current and previous research suggest a lack of clarity around the impact of school-wide aspects of parental experiences, as well as the support systems available to nurture groups, particularly if they are in the early stages of development. Therefore future research could focus on the whole-school level in relation to nurture groups, including staff understanding of nurture group practice, the processes that take place in setting up nurture groups and the ongoing support and development opportunities staff may require. Further research including the views of teaching staff involved in nurture groups (in addition to teaching assistants) may reveal opportunities for the dissemination of knowledge developed in nurture groups on both a whole-school level as well as with parents.



## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 Introduction

This small exploratory study contributes to the existing research on nurture groups, as one of the first research studies to consider parental involvement in nurture groups, from the perspectives of individual parents and staff. It can be concluded that contextual insights gathered from the current study could inform future practice in nurture groups. The study identified themes based on participants' experiences, and from these, has highlighted several areas which could be developed to promote positive parental involvement and staff-parent interactions in a nurture group setting.

Both staff and parents were able to provide examples of parental involvement in nurture groups. Both groups also expressed a desire for parental involvement to increase. However, the barriers experienced by both parents and staff resulted in both groups being 'hard to reach' and distant from each other. For example, the parental barriers (such as lacking a voice and feeling blamed) led to parents distancing themselves from staff. Staff barriers (including feeling challenged) appeared to reduce their desire to want to engage with parents, resulting in parents finding it hard to seek support when needed. This apparent cycle of barriers and disengagement had led to poor interactions, low parental involvement and feelings of cautiousness by both parties (staff and parents) exacerbating the problem. Therefore it is noted that both parents and nurture group staff require additional support if their work together is to be successful. The importance of communication, sharing practice, developing relationships and working together collaboratively are all areas identified in the research.

## **6.2 Implications for Practice**

Previous research suggests that relationships with parents need to be developed and encouraged by nurture group staff, and that parental involvement can enable the application of consistent approaches between home and school. However as previous research of parental involvement in nurture groups is sparse, the findings of the current study contributes to an enriched professional understanding of how to develop the practice of nurture groups and the role all key adults can play in supporting the development of children. There are implications for nurture groups, schools, and EP practice.

### *6.2.1 Implications for nurture groups*

Children attend nurture groups in order to experience nurturing that they may have been deprived of in their early years, which may be in the home environment. As most children will remain in that home environment, it is vital that nurture groups develop some form of work with parents. Nurture group staff in Silveshire need to invest more time in the development of strategies to specifically work with parents, such as sharing and rehearsing skills. Future practice needs to feature a higher level of communication with parents, creating more opportunities to share information and raise concerns. Staff can become more available through assigning specific times for meeting with parents throughout the time of the nurture group, as well as providing contact details. When working together with parents, staff need to adopt a needs and strength-based form of support, supporting parents with areas that are specifically pertinent to them. The potential for parental feelings of agency needs to be developed, rather than focus on negative aspects or deficits. Working with parents will also create opportunities to refer parents on for further support from other professionals. This will help promote opportunities to share practice, as well as enable the two groups to develop their

relationship and work together collaboratively, therefore creating a more authentic partnership.

### *6.2.2 Implications for schools*

Nurture groups need to be supported on a whole-school level, both by senior management and other members of school staff. Ensuring that there is an awareness of the practice that takes place within nurture groups is essential, as is information sharing regarding the children (and families) teaching staff and nurture groups will be supporting. It is possible that qualified teachers involved in nurture groups may be more able to ensure the dissemination of knowledge regarding nurture group practice (compared to the teaching assistants interviewed in the current research). Additionally, development of parental involvement in nurture groups needs to be part of a whole-school approach to engaging parents of children with special educational needs, and included in the development and strategic planning that takes place in schools.

### *6.2.3 Implications for educational psychology practice*

Implementing interventions, particularly those spanning a whole academic year, take significant amounts of planning and preparation. This can be challenging, particularly if the nurture group is new to the school. EPs could work with staff in nurture groups, providing opportunities to help in the development of strategies within the nurture group. This would help nurture group staff feel more supported and reassured regarding their approach to the work delivered in the nurture group and with parents.

As objective practitioners working with a number of stakeholders, with knowledge of relevant psychological theory and research, EPs are well placed to understand the perspectives of both parents and school staff. Therefore, EPs can play an important role in the development of collaborative work and consultation between parents and nurture groups. This may include raising awareness of how parents experience nurture groups. For example, when working directly with parents it seems that factors such as social and economic difficulties (which in themselves can make parenting difficult) can be ignored. The support of the EP can ensure that these issues are brought to the forefront, therefore helping to overcome some of the barriers experienced. This will be essential if nurture group practice is to develop, as the experiences revealed in this research highlight the complex interplay of variables for parents and staff (including factors that hinder and support involvement).

With possible developments in addressing parental involvement, nurture group staff may be expecting immediate gains. However, change and development often take place through a set of small steps over a long period of time. Therefore receiving support from EPs in strategic planning can help develop this process, as well as manage staff expectations. EPs are also in a strong position to co-ordinate support between the nurture group and other LA professionals, therefore promoting systemic inter-agency work to support the whole family.

In summary, previous research identified the need for parental involvement in nurture groups to be developed. The current study aimed to explore the multiple subjective perspectives regarding nurture groups and parental involvement. It makes a distinctive contribution to the area, providing a rich description of parents and staff experiences of working together in the context of nurture groups. It offers a new perspective of how parental involvement can be

developed in nurture groups, considering the experiences of those directly involved in the groups. It was hoped that as a result of the research, nurture group practitioners may consider adopting alternative approaches in their work with parents, to promote the vital interactions between home and school. By doing so, the quality of home-school links and the relationships within these links can develop, resulting in a meaningful partnership to support child development.

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## APPENDICES

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## **Appendix 1: Information regarding classic nurture groups**

Cooper and Tiknaz (2007) suggest that in the UK there are currently four forms of nurture groups:

1. The classic Boxall nurture group
2. New nurture groups
3. Groups informed by nurture group principles
4. Aberrant nurture groups

The differences between these groups vary according to how closely they refer to Boxall's original, or 'classic', conceptualisation of a nurture group (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007). For example, in terms of their day-to-day running, how children are selected and how much of the school day children spend there. The nurture groups in the current study are all classic nurture groups.

A classic nurture group, as established by Boxall (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000; Boxall, 2002), is a temporary and part-time placement, which aims to return students back to their mainstream classes on a full-time basis. They are centrally situated in mainstream schools, and children are selected from the school in which it is based (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007).

Classic nurture groups have approximately 10-12 children, from Key Stage 1 or 2, who have social, emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007). Two members of staff (one teacher and one teaching assistant) work together in the nurture group. Students attend the group every day, for half of the school day. Children can spend between

two and four terms in a nurture group, with one academic year (three terms) being most common place (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007).

Time in the classic nurture group is highly structured with predictable routines. Nurture group staff ensure that a supportive and structured learning environment is provided, in order to reassure the children. The room is deliberately cosy and welcoming, mirroring the environment of a home, including soft furnishings, a kitchen and an area to eat (Boxall, 2002). The children share meals (in particular breakfast and snacks) with each other there. As part of the nurture group routine they also have the opportunity to play. This has the specific purpose to support children to engage in different forms of social interaction as well as to explore their emotions and develop their problem solving skills.

The selection and monitoring of children who attend classic nurture groups is done so through the Boxall Profile (Boxall, 2002) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), both of which are completed by their mainstream class teacher. The Boxall Profile is a two part checklist that profiles a child's emotional and behavioural needs (Boxall, 2002). It is completed in selecting children as well as enabling nurture group staff to highlight areas to address in the nurture group, and monitoring the children's progress during their time in a nurture group. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) which is completed as a selection tool. It creates a profile of a child on five dimensions (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviour).

## **Appendix 2: Head teacher consent letter**

Dear

I am writing to ask for your permission to conduct research within your school.

This research forms part of a requirement of my training to become an Educational Psychologist. In partnership with the School of Education at the University of Birmingham I am researching parental understanding of and involvement in nurture groups. The results of this study will form part of my thesis (as part of my Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology).

I would like to interview school staff involved in the nurture group and the parents of children attending the nurture group to obtain their views on the extent of parental involvement in the nurture group and parental understanding of the aims and ethos of nurture groups. I will also explore their views of how collaborative practices could be promoted. All relevant schools in the borough have been approached for participation.

### **Why is the study being done?**

Evidence suggests that the impact of parental support and involvement in a child's education can have a great influence on child progress and development. However parental involvement in nurture groups varies widely, with many challenges presenting barriers to successful collaboration. One aspect of this is related to one reason why many children become involved in nurture groups – that they are not able to develop the appropriate skills in the home environment. We hope our findings will help us understand the circumstances under which parents may feel more confident in becoming involved in their child's nurture group as well as to increase their understanding of the role a nurture group intervention plays. Additionally it is hoped that exploring what staff and parents feel would help promote positive collaborative practices would also be beneficial in informing our practice in the Psychology Service and schools running nurture groups in the borough.

### **What does the project involve?**

The research will involve interviewing parents of children attending nurture groups and nurture group staff (after gaining their consent). We will also ask for the parents and staff to complete a questionnaire. Additionally the researcher would like to have access to the nurture group policy documents.

**Are there any risks of discomforts?**

We do not anticipate any risks to the individuals taking part in this study.

**What are the potential benefits?**

It is hoped that the outcomes of the research may enable the nurture groups in the borough to develop their working practices with parents/carers attending nurture groups. This is likely to mean that there is no immediate benefit for pupils in your school, but we hope that the involvement of the school and the identified participants will be beneficial to other children attending nurture groups in the future.

**Project procedure**

Once we have obtained your permission to partake research in your school, we will send information sheets and consent forms to staff working in the nurture group and the parents/carers of children attending the nurture group informing them of this study and asking for their consent. Please find copies of the information sheets and consent forms for parents and nurture group staff included with this letter.

Ideally, data collection would take place in the autumn term of the academic year 2011-2012.

Following the analysis of data and the write up of the research I would like to hold a presentation to feed back findings to participants. Additionally you will be provided with a hard copy of the findings. This will be during the spring term of the academic year 2012-2013.

*Data protection:*

Please be assured that the data from each school will be treated in strict confidence and all information from the research will be aggregated across schools in a way that protects the identity of individual schools and participants.

**How to contact the researcher**

Rebecca Kirkbride: [REDACTED]. If you prefer to telephone, Tel: [REDACTED]

This study has been approved by the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Committee.

Project ID Number: [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,



Rebecca Kirkbride  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
University of Birmingham

---

Head teacher consent slip

If you are happy for nurture group staff in your school to take part in this study or have further queries, please complete this reply slip and return it to the researcher at the following address:

**Rebecca Kirkbride**  
**Trainee Educational Psychologist**  
**xxxx Psychology Service**

I would like the nurture group staff at xxxxxxxx School to take part in this study

I have further queries about the study and would appreciate a meeting with the researcher

Head teacher name:.....

School: .....

Signed:.....

### Appendix 3: Staff and parent consent letter

#### **An exploratory study of parental understanding of and involvement in nurture groups – from a practitioner and parent perspective**

Dear

**You are being invited to take part in a research study.** You have been asked as you are currently involved in the running of the nurture group at xxxxxx.

**Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.** If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact Rebecca Kirkbride (see at the end of this letter).

#### The aim of the study

The aim of the study is to explore parental understanding of nurture groups, their experiences of their child being in a nurture group and how parents think their involvement and understanding could be improved. The study will also explore your views about the same areas. The aim from this is to form a better understanding of how schools and their nurture groups can work better with parents/carers to support their children.

#### Why is the study being done?

Research suggests that parental involvement in nurture groups is encouraged as there are many positive outcomes to be had. However parental involvement in nurture groups varies widely across the country. The study is being done to see if nurture groups can improve this situation so that parents/carers feel supported and understand the role of the nurture group for their child.

#### What will happen if I take part?

If you agree to take part the researcher will contact you to arrange a suitable time to meet at the school. When we meet you will be asked about your experiences of working with parents of children attending the school nurture group. This will take place in a private room, with just yourself and the researcher. There aren't any right or wrong answers – we just want to hear about your opinions. The discussion should take between 45 minutes to an hour. The

discussion will be audio taped. If you would prefer not to have the interview audio taped the researcher can write down your responses instead.

Do I have to take part in this study?

**Taking part is voluntary - it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part.** If you don't want to take part, you do not have to give a reason and no pressure will be placed on you to try and change your mind.

**If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign the consent form (attached). If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.**

You can pull out of the discussion at any time, and if you change your mind about being part of the study after having the interview you are free to ask the researcher to remove your data.

If I agree to take part what happens to what I say?

All the information you give **will be confidential** and used for the purposes of this study only. Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Information will be used in a way that will not allow you to be identified individually. The school will not have direct access to the information you give and will not be able to link any information provided by you.

Data generated by the study will be kept securely in paper and/or electronic form for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project. After this time it will be destroyed.

Are there any risks or discomforts?

We do not anticipate any risks to the individuals taking part in this study. Should you wish to discuss any relevant concerns after participating in the study or if you feel you would like further support you can contact any of the following people:

- The researcher: Rebecca Kirkbride on xxxx or [REDACTED]
- Nurture Group support: xxxxx
- Nurture Group Network: xxxx
- Psychology Service: xxxxx

What are the potential benefits?

It is hoped that learning about parental and nurture group staff experiences and understanding will lead to better working relationships between schools and parents of children attending

nurture groups. This may mean that there is no immediate benefit, but we hope that your involvement will be beneficial to other children attending nurture groups in the future.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will be used to form part of the researcher's thesis, which is a requirement of completing the qualification Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology.

A presentation will be held at the school to feedback the findings once the study is complete. All findings will be anonymous so any comments you make cannot be identified. If you're interested the researcher can also send you a summary of the findings.

What do I do now?

Think about the information on this sheet, and feel free to contact the researcher if you are not sure about anything. If you agree to take part, sign the attached consent form and place in the attached envelope for the researcher to collect.

Contact details

If you would like more information on the study, please do not hesitate to contact Rebecca Kirkbride by email [REDACTED] Rebecca is a doctorate student studying Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham.

Thank you for your time

Rebecca Kirkbride

Statements of consent

- I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information leaflet for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and understand I can contact the researcher if I have further questions.
  
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. If I withdraw my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.
  
- I understand that the information I provide in the interview will be anonymous and confidential. No identifiable personal data will be published.
  
- I understand that the information I provide in this study will be stored in a secure location, which only the researcher and her supervisor will be able to access (in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998). This will be kept for 10 years, after which it will be destroyed.
  
- Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of participant:(print).....

Signed.....

Date.....

I agree to the interview being audio recorded (alternative arrangements can be made if you don't wish to be recorded).

**Please tick box**

**Yes**

**No**

Name of participant:(print).....

Signed.....

Date.....

**Researcher's contact details:** Rebecca Kirkbride (e-mail: [REDACTED] Tel: xxxxx).

*A copy of the signed and dated consent form and the participant information leaflet should be given to the participant and retained by the researcher to be kept securely on file.*

#### Appendix 4: Participant profile

Participant	Personal characteristics	Characteristics of their child
1p	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 30-35</p> <p>Single parent</p> <p>Additional needs: None</p> <p>Other professionals: counselling services</p>	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Needs: Statement for SEN, anxiety, withdrawn, bereavement</p>
2p	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 35-40</p> <p>Single parent</p> <p>Additional needs: depression</p> <p>Other professionals: family link worker</p>	<p>Gender: Male</p> <p>Needs: Statement for SEN, ADHD and autism Expelled from school due to challenging behaviour</p>
3p	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 30-35</p> <p>Single parent</p> <p>Additional: terminal illness</p> <p>Other professionals: family link worker, respite care</p>	<p>Gender: Male</p> <p>Needs: Statement for SEN, Autism, bereavement</p> <p>Suspended from school due to challenging behaviour</p>
4p	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 55-60</p> <p>Grandmother, Kinship carer</p> <p>Additional: None</p> <p>Other professionals: social services</p>	<p>Gender: Male</p> <p>Needs: Early difficult experiences, parental difficulties, rejection from mother</p>

*Table 4: Parent participant profile*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Personal characteristics</b>	<b>Details of nurture group</b>	<b>Information on school setting</b>
1s	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 30-35</p> <p>Position: Teaching assistant</p>	<p>Running for: 3 years.</p> <p>10 children in the nurture group.</p> <p>Current group: 7 boys, 3 girls.</p> <p>Set up of the NG is based on the classic model (in terms of set up of room, selection of students, staffing and structure of the day).</p>	<p>Specialist provision for children with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties.</p> <p>60 children on roll</p> <p>82% students receive free school meals (FSM)</p>
2s	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 50-55</p> <p>Position: Teaching assistant</p>	<p>Running for: 2 years.</p> <p>10 children in the nurture group.</p> <p>Current group: 6 boys, 4 girls.</p> <p>Set up of the NG is based on the classic model (in terms of set up of room, selection of students, staffing and structure of the day).</p>	<p>Mainstream primary.</p> <p>558 children on roll.</p> <p>Has a nursery.</p> <p>21% students receive FSM.</p>
3s	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 35-40</p> <p>Position: Teaching assistant</p>	<p>Running for: 2 years.</p> <p>10 children in the nurture group.</p> <p>Current group: 5 boys, 4 girls.</p> <p>Set up of the NG is based on the classic model (in terms of set up of room, selection of students, staffing and structure of the day).</p>	<p>Mainstream primary.</p> <p>209 children on roll.</p> <p>Has a nursery.</p> <p>26% students receive FSM.</p>

4s	<p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Age: 50-55</p> <p>Position: Teaching assistant</p>	<p>Running for: in first year.</p> <p>10 children in the nurture group.</p> <p>Current group: 7 boys, 3 girls.</p> <p>Set up of the NG is based on the classic model (in terms of set up of room, selection of students, staffing and structure of the day).</p>	<p>Mainstream primary.</p> <p>704 children on roll.</p> <p>Has a nursery.</p> <p>15% students receive FSM.</p>

*Table 5: Staff participant profile*



## Appendix 5: Parent initial information sheet

Dear parent/carer,

I am a doctorate student studying Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham and I am inviting you to **take part in a research study**. You have been asked as you currently have or previously have had a child involved in the nurture group at xxxxx School.

**Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. To explain what the research is about and what this could involve for you I would like to contact you to talk about the research.**

If you are happy for me to contact you I will explain:

- Why the study is being done
- What will happen if you decide to take part (as taking part is optional)
- What the good things are about taking part
- What will be done with the research

If you are happy for me to contact you please could you put your name and telephone number below, along with times that would be ok to contact you.

**Name:**.....

**Phone number:**.....

**Times best for me to call (please tick):**


9am-12pm

12pm-3pm

3pm-6pm

6pm-9pm

Specific time:.....

If you would like more information on the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email . Thank you for taking the time to read this letter

Rebecca Kirkbride

## Appendix 6a: Staff interview schedule

### **Introduction**

- Explain rationale and procedure
- Explain confidentiality and limits of confidentiality
- Obtain verbal consent and check participant has signed consent form
- Ask if the participant has any questions

### **Rapport building**

- Could we start by you telling me a bit about yourself? (*Prompt: What kind of things do you like to do?*)
- How did you become involved in the nurture group (NG)?
- Length of time NG been running in the school?
- Length of time involved in NG?
- How many staff involved?
- Can you describe what happens day-to-day in the NG

[RQ2: What are the themes that emerge from interviews with nurture group staff about parental involvement in nurture groups?]

### **Purpose/aims of the nurture group**

- What is the aim of the NG? What is a NG?
- How do you feel the NG supports children? Can you give me an example?

- What information was given to parents before the beginning of the NG? At what point is this information given?

### **NG children's needs**

- Can you tell me about the types of needs of the children attending the NG?
- To what extent do you feel these needs arise from issues outside of school?
- Can you tell me how concerns/needs of the children are shared with the parents?

### **Processes during a NG**

- What processes for involving parents prior to NG starting? What information is given to parents? E.g. Are they told what a NG is and why their child is there?
- What processes for involving parents during NG?
- What processes for involving parents when NG ends?

### **Parental involvement**

- What are your views of the nurture group/parent involvement to date? What should parental involvement look like?
- Why do you think parents have/have not wanted to get involved?
- If parents have been previously involved has this been a routine part of the NG or for other reasons (i.e. specifically been contacted)?
- What do you feel have been positive elements of NG/parental relationships? What have been the supporting factors?
- What elements of NG/parental relationships that could be developed/ having been challenging? What have been the constraints in trying to increase involvement?

- What information do you provide to enable parents to support their child's learning/experiences in the NG? Is there any information you don't provide but think you should/think it's right that you don't give it out?
- What opportunities do you provide for parents to enable them to join in with the daily life of the nurture group?
- What opportunities do you provide for parents to put across their views regarding the nurture group (either during or after)? Do you feel there is a place for this?
- What are the needs of some of your NG families? How do you support these?

### **General prompts**

Can you tell me a bit more about that?

What do you mean when you say . . . ?

### **Debrief**

*"Those were all my questions"*

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Do you have any questions about what we've been talking about?

Thank you for your time

## **Appendix 6b: Parent interview schedule**

### **Introduction**

- Explain rationale and procedure
- Explain confidentiality and limits of confidentiality
- Obtain verbal consent and check participant has signed consent form
- Ask if the participant has any questions

### **Rapport building**

- What kind of things do you like to do?
- How long has your child been coming to the school?

[RQ1: What are the themes that emerge from interviews with parents about parental involvement in nurture groups?]

### **Starting the nurture group**

- Can you tell me about how your child came to attend the NG? What information was given to you before the beginning of the NG?
- Can you explain what the NG is? How is it/was it helping your child?
- Did you feel it was important that your child attended the NG? Why?
- What do you think about the NG?
- What are your views of the nurture group support your child?
- How were/are any concerns/needs/progress relating to your child shared with you?

### **Processes during a NG**

- What were you told/given from the school/NG before the NG started?
- What were you told/given from the school/NG during NG?
- What were you told/given from the school/NG at the end of the NG?
- How have you been involved in your child's experiences at the NG? Did you have any opportunities to join in with the daily life of the nurture group?
- Can you tell me about your relationship with the nurture group staff so far/when your child was in the NG?
- Did you feel you required any support or advice from school/NG staff? Is there any information you didn't get but think you would find useful?
- What do you feel have been particularly positive elements or barriers while your child was in the NG?

### **General prompts**

Can you tell me a bit more about that?

What do you mean when you say . . . ?

### **Debrief**

*"Those were all my questions"*

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Do you have any questions about what we've been talking about?

Thank you for your time

**Appendix 7a:** Participant interview information sheet – staff version

Dear xxx

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to talk about your work in the nurture group at xxx Primary School.

When we meet I may ask you questions around the following topics:

- The purposes and aims of nurture groups.
- The needs of the children attending your nurture group.
- Your experiences of working with/coming into contact with parents of children attending the nurture group.
- The processes the nurture group adopts for involving parents and sharing information with parents during their child's time in the nurture group.
- Your views around the role and extent of parental involvement in a child's nurture group experience.
- Your views of how parental involvement could be developed.

The order and wording of the questions will vary from interview to interview. I might also ask further questions to explore some of your answers further. There is no right or wrong answer – I am interested in hearing about your individual views and experiences.

Please do not hesitate in contacting me if you have any questions before we meet –

████████████████████

Kind regards

Rebecca

## Appendix 7b: Participant interview information sheet – parent version

Dear xxx

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to talk about your experiences of your child attending the nurture group at xxx Primary School.

When we meet I may ask you questions around the following topics:

- What a nurture group is and how it was supporting your child.
- What information was given to you before the beginning of the nurture group?
- What is your view of the work done in the nurture group?
- Your experiences of working with/coming into contact with nurture group staff or visiting the nurture group.
- How the nurture group staff worked with/passed on information to you, e.g. passing on concerns, positives or observations.

The order and wording of the questions will vary from interview to interview. I might also ask further questions to explore some of your answers further. There is no right or wrong answer – I am interested in hearing about your individual views and experiences.

Please do not hesitate in contacting me if you have any questions before we meet – [REDACTED] I look forward to meeting with you on **Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> September at 9am.**

Kind regards

Rebecca



**Appendix 8: Images used in semi structured interview**



## **Appendix 9: Example transcript (nurture group staff one)**

### **So, um, I emailed you the list of areas –**

Yes, I kind of got the the the, that is, in-instantly I hate that (looking at prompt sheet), instantly I'm like I hate that, when people say the purposes and aims of a nurture group. They're so big, and I'm like how do I put it and I literally I have a little card, I put it there, that's why I laminate it! I take it with me when I do my training.

### **How long has the nurture group been running here?**

Here, I've only been here for a year just January just gone. Um, so and I think it wa-a-a-s about two-o-o years before that. It hasn't been a... massively long here. I know that they did have a nurture group... quite a while ago, a good few years back and I think then the funding stopped um and I think it became something else, I know LACES was here.

### **Oh really**

I think that was here, upstairs at one point. This was way before my time, um. So and then I think when Jo came it was something Jo became passionate about and you know started getting into, like right, she'll have a nurture group. So I had, there were two... two teachers before me um...so...

### **And how did you, how did you get involved in this?**

For me, do you know what, I, I have only actually only been working in education for about five years. Um...I was...a mum...and working, child minding at home, and then as soon as he went, the youngest went to full time I was like right, I'm going to get a job in a school. It was actually something I did, it started off, I actually started off because it was something convenient for my home life with my children being at home in the holidays. Because by trade I'm actually a hairdresser!

### **Really! Well that's always handy!**

Yeah it is! And then when I started working in a school, I started working at XXX as a TA. And I kind of was steered towards the behavioural children, and...I kind of, I thrived on that I loved it, absolutely loved it, and it kind of escalated from there, and I think, with thriving

from the behaviour children and then, also having a pretty crap childhood myself, made me think I want to help the children that need it. So I wanted to be a learning mentor, so I was at XXX for two years, then I went to ZZZ as a learning mentor. Unfortunately the, the support, at the, with hierarchy wasn't fantastic so I kind of left. And I, I met Penny, Penny used to do outreach, Penny Mayhew, from here, she did outreach at St Ethelbert's. And I said to her if there are any jobs coming up let me know. I emailed Jo, and said look I'm really interested in working in a special school blah blah blah. So I came in for an interview. I was interviewed for the XXX, you know the XXX?

### **Yep right...**

So I was interviewed to be in the XXX and to be a TA in nurture. So I thought ok...I'm not a learning mentor anymore but I couldn't give...the children...my hundred per cent anyway because of the lack of support and because of things there so I thought I well I move on here. Um, so yeah, they gave me the job in the interview for, for the nurture and she said (head teacher) "there'll be a little bit of training" she said, she re-e-e-a-l-l-y down played it quite a lot actually (laughing). Um, and, and, so I came to work as a TA and Gloria was the teacher here. Um, so, um, yeah so I came in in the January and then took over in the September as the teacher... Her family circumstances had changed and we kind of swapped roles. Cos she had taken over from the teacher that went on maternity leave and so she had kind of stepped up. She never wanted to be a teacher, she didn't, never wanted to do it, it kind of happened. And then so we swapped...roles and I kind of loved it. Coz I'm quite...I think I'm learning I like to be a little bit controlling (laughing)...I like things my way (laughing)! Um, so and then yeah it's kind of escalated from there and it's become something that...I've rambled on now

### **No, no it's good**

It's become something that I really, I love. You see such a difference. I always love working with the diddies anyway, because the way I see it is... you have a big impact there. They're so vulnerable, and they're so...you mould the children and if they're not having the best influences at home all we can do is try here. And I think if we've got that consistency, um, and...if we've got the consistency here it can help them. And yeah it's snowballed from there really, it's now something I feel really passionate about and I find it very rewarding. And that's kind of where I'm at. And because obviously I'm not a qualified teacher I kind of figured right well I'm doing it, I love it and then I thought I'd start my degree as well and add to it you know (laughing) and then a whole load of GCSEs with that! So yeah, yeah, it's something that I, I mean....yeah...I like...without...if you told me six years ago, being home with my babies that I'd was going to work in a school and teach kids and things like that...it's funny that you don't...you find something that you love...and I love it, I absolutely love it. I love the feeling that these kids, you know, they may have had ten tonnes of crap before

they've walked through that door, and just by seeing Hazel, Renee and I acting like idiots, smiling, you know, dancing around, you know, being all nurtury and fun, and, you know, just seeing the difference and the change in the child is just massive, I love that.

**So what kind of um, when they start the nurture group, what kind of things do you see in them when they're in the first week or so? How are they in the group?**

Normally the first day, cos I go and observe them, um and you see them in their school...you see them with the other children...twenty odd other children. You see that they're not coping, you can see that they're struggling, um, but I still kind of...I have this thing. We all get observed, we observe, on half an hour. That's only half an hour...you can't judge on half an hour properly, you have to make an instinctive...it's like when we have observations as teachers. So I think, you know, you see them like that but you don't truly [know?] until they come in, and obviously for the first couple of days they're quite...they're quite quiet...you have a little honeymoon period, you know, and then they start coming out of their shells. And we've had so many different children. Um, I think because we are attached to a behavioural school we can sometime be at danger of having behavioural children. So, I mean we've had a spell before the holidays where we had three children that all had...they had nurturing needs but they also had behavioural difficulties. And them mixed together it was very very tough, you know. So, we've got very strong needs all mixed up together, and that's where we differ. Where as if, in the six schools that are set up across, that you know that I've supported, they've got the luxury of, you know they can channel the groups so that it's just nurture or they can think right that...that child's more behavioural, you know they can pick it a little bit better. Where as we kind of, if there's in the borough there's a child that's at risk of exclusion and they're key stage one well they'll naturally come here, um to stop them from being excluded and having that on their record. So, um...so we can kind of flit in and out, do you know what I mean? But we still maintain we work on the whole nurturing principle, the whole nurturing, you know, it's home like, it's you know, it's about giving that consistency, it's that home like feel, we have a kitchen, we have a dining room, we have a sitting room, you know. Yes, they double up as a work table and as a role play area, you know, but it's all that kind of home like where we can put in the structure and boundaries, and things like that.

**Do you think having those home-like elements, do you think some children, even those elements, are unusual for them?**

Yes, it...when I first started, it actually, I got very emotional one day because we had a year two boy and he could not butter his toast. And it knocked me because I got cross with myself, because I presumed that a child of that age would be able to butter their toast. Just because I showed my children how to butter their toast at four doesn't mean that every parent is going to sit down at a table with their child, have that conversation, show them how to butter their

toast, make a game, you know. And that...it took a while for me to think “crap” you know these...oh sorry (laughing)! These poor, not these poor kids, but these kids, you know... you don’t realise that actually... things that we... some people take for granted that just don’t happen, you know...the good morning, that’s the first thing. The good morning when you open the door and say “good morning! How are you?”...they might not get that at home, they might just go “right get up” and it’s just...so it starts from the very beginning, the nurture, as soon as you open that door. And in fact, even the lady on the um, nurture course, said that they had a nurture boy and he was integrated back into class, and um...one day he came to school and he couldn’t see her car in the car park, even though he wasn’t in nurture anymore he couldn’t see her car in the car park and he kicked off as soon as he walked through the school gates, as soon as he walked into class, he just couldn’t handle it, just because he couldn’t see her car. And that shows you make that positive attachment with that person and it just carries on.

**And the children that you have in the nurture group do then they stay within the school here for a little bit in the school?**

Some of them, we’ve just had a little boy that has...um, he really is not able to cope with big...with big...you know and I think that’s another aspect of it, is here we have a maximum of five at a time in the class you so, so we can really work on their needs you know, really get them ready to be integrated. And he just, he, bless him, he can’t, he can’t go up to, you know be with his class so he’s gone over. Um, but the rule is that, you know, they stay here for two to four terms and then they reintegrate back into their mainstream schools.

**And is that depending on the individual?**

It’s depending the individual, to that person. You do have whole expectations but you also have individual expectations of them, and you do treat them as fairly as possible, but they also are individuals. So for instance, you know, what they say to do, is between two and four terms you would reintegrate a child back in, and you would do it steadily, one full day back at school, two full days back at school. But we had a little boy that just couldn’t cope with keep going backwards and forwards so it was literally...prepared him that this day you’re going there. And it worked for him. Because we’d already tried before and he ended back up here, you know. Doing the gradual but it just wouldn’t work for him. So again it does depend on the individual child. But when, you kind of know when they’re ready, their Boxalls would show they’re ready....um, they verbalise to you that they’re ready. There was one little boy, he was here for about three terms and he was like “I want to be back at my school”, “I miss my friends”. They know when they’re ready...they may not...say, but the things they say you begin to think...he’s beginning you know, and you see it, you know, when their points are off the wall because they’re getting so many points because they’re able to sit down now, they’re

able to, you know...give purposeful attention like on the Boxall, you know. You kind of know when they're ready.

**So those, for you, feeling like you've done a good job with the child, that we've helped that child, would be to do with those kinds of things, the elements on the Boxall?**

Yeah, the Boxall is the main evidence...any photographs are your evidence and things. Yeah every day, it builds the whole picture.

**Umm, right. So what would you say, for you is the aim of the nurture group, what is the main purpose?**

The main aim is...to nurture them, to, to give them consistency. My big word is consistency, sometimes being that safe...that safe place. Um, and to do that in a home like environment. So you're giving them the curriculum but you're giving them a nurturing curriculum, and you're getting them ready for...mainstream school, ideally...for me, is for them to be able to access the curriculum in mainstream school, and sometimes they're not, they're not quite ready for that. So coming here allows them to access that in a smaller environment, in a home-like environment, in a nurturing environment, and being able to get them ready to actually access it, you know, and not every child can do that. So here we, we put the boundaries in, we're structured, we're consistent, you know and like I say I have a big thing with the consistency, we're as consistent as we possibly can.

**And do you feel that for all or most of the children that they are lacking that at home?**

I think...we just had a little boy we were talking about who's just gone up...I think it's very easy for people to stereotype that don't know, and they think oh it's all the parents fault. But actually...yes unfortunately...sometimes it can be that they, you know, they're not having consistency at home, they, you know, the things that some of these children are going through, it's horrific actually. Horrific. You just...I think...it's amazing when you go through life when you don't work in the situation and you just, it passes you by, you just don't know. And when you're working in it, it's like...oh my god. You realise that, you know, that any children you walk past on the street can be...you just don't know, you don't know what's going on with them. So...I've gone off on one haven't I!

**No!**

Yeah, but this particular parent, she's amazing. She works alongside you, she tells you what she's doing, she communicates in the home-school diary every single day, you know, it's...I mean, she does work in a private school herself but I don't, I don't even think, I think even if she didn't she would still be like it, because she's just one of those parents and...so he has consistency, he has everything, he's nurtured, he has consistency, you know, but there's just a, a, he has just been diagnosed with Aspergers so I think that will help. Because the children we get in, it might not just that they've got ADHD or are on the spectrum, it may be, we had one little boy who um, absolutely fine reception, year one. Got into year two and his mum and dad split up, boom, that was it, world's blown apart. Dad lent on him. It was an Asian culture, so he, the son was the only son and the others were daughters so dad lent on the son, you know, and that was it. He couldn't cope, he couldn't handle it so he came into nurture and you know, he had that nurturing environment, that kind of consistency. Academically he was one of the children we have in here that was academically, I would say he was borderline gifted and talented but emotionally, socially, developmentally that's where he needed his work. He needed that kind of, that little help, that bit of a boost.

**And with that mum you were just talking about would you say that, was she a typical parent for the school? What would be the types of parents whose children would be coming to the nurture group?**

No, in my experience...I don't want to generalise or be stereotypical or anything like that, I can only go on my experiences of a year and a half of being here but she is...an exception to the rule. You kind of have, you have your parents that..... (sighs) a kind of, it depends what they're going through. We had a parent, another one actually that you did get hold of who suffers from depression herself, um...is kind of...got her own things going on, um, and she's not consistent, and she's not, you know, because she can't really look after herself. I think there's a lot going on, um, so, one minute fine. Always very friendly, always very nice, never stropy or anything like that, um...but just not consistent and I think when we've discussed things before we've said right this is not the time, we need to tell you that this is not the time to tell Liam<sup>1</sup> (son), but then Liam will come in and tell you about what I've told her not to say to him. So she's, I think a lot, she's struggled to keep things...treating him like a child, to protect him. I think he knew way too much. So, you know, you've got that sort of parent, and then we've got the, the, the little boy who I was talking about whose parent was fantastic, and then we've got other parents who...may have very high expectations of their children, uumm, I do find that within the Asian community. The little boy I was talking about previously, when he came around for the look and everything it was all about well what about this? What about maths? What about literacy? Coz the expectations, and actually this is where you need to get the message across that if your son or daughter is not feeling emotionally stable or they can't stable, they can't, they can't get the thing um what's happened out of their head, I can't

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

remember all this, you'll probably know all the technical names, but they'll stop the levels or whatever it is, it stops, it blocks it and they can't learn anything else. So there's no point trying to teach a child if a child is stuck there. You need to deal with that first, and that's hard to get across to parents, because actually...some parents don't want to hear because actually some parents are the cause. So when it's like that it's tricky.

### **How do you manage that? Because obviously that's a really delicate area**

I know, and as I'm saying it I'm thinking how do I deal with that? (laughs) coz I don't know actually, I think it's just... it's about your words and how you use them, you know, um. Some of the parents don't kind of care, you know. We had a parent of a little girl...she went through horrendous horrendous things in her life, and he was he was very much, very blasé, oh she's just naughty, she's a naughty girl, that's it. There was no breaking through that, um, I don't think it helped that they had special needs. I think that some parents themselves have their own special needs, um, so that's a barrier, it makes it very hard because they haven't got the understanding, you know, so yeah.

### **So what do you do?**

I don't do the discussion, the head does the discussion with that parents, what she says to the parents to sell it. And from what I gather she sells it on the fact that this is a place for your child, your child is not accessing the curriculum and school in a group of 25 children. If they come here they will have a smaller group, it will be more consistent, everything I've said to you. We sell it like that, it will be that nurturing environment, and once those children are nurtured and they've got the consistency and boundaries in place you will find that they will go up and start to be able to access the curriculum. So I think it's put to them like that, you know, and I think even though I said the parents haven't got an understanding and things like that sometimes, the parents bottom line, they do know because they do exactly that, they've already labelled their child to think they're naughty, they know there's a problem. They're already slightly...aware that you know, yes but then that's what they do. That's very black and white, my child's naughty he's going there. They don't link about other reasons why, in my experience.

(interrupted by someone coming in)

### **So you were saying about parents and how you work with them.**

So yeah we do it other ways, umm, I'm not going to be able to explain myself. I don't know how, I don't know really if I'm honest. It's very subtle. It's got to the point where it's...I've never got to the point where I've actually had to sit down and say right, look. I think there's



been a borderline. There was one lady that just couldn't get it through her head, that sounds horrible. But if you allow your four year old son to play call of duty he is going to continue running around the school shouting die you f\*\*king b\*\*\*\*\*ds, you know. He's never going to get out of that. So we literally had to bring her in, sit her down and say look, we've recorded how many times he's sworn and attacked and things like that. The use of war language and terminology was astounding, oh my gosh. We literally had to say to her this is what he's saying constantly, he is not going to be able to form the typical friendships in a mainstream playground and have those good social relationships if all he's thinking about is killing them and being an army and having an MK jigger, MK 40 something. I do think it's up to the parent to judge what their children see, yes we have guidance and certificates but I think it's still up to the parents. But I think at four years old, and then when you see your child playing it out then you need to sit down. So I think if we ever get into that situation where we have to say what you're doing is affecting this child then it needs to be said. In fact we did have another one with a little girl. We all had nits because we were catching them off of her. She was not looked after, she was smelly you know. We had a meeting and sat down with him and said look this will go further if you do not start taking better care of her. And he needed that, because then she started coming in cleaner, she had new shirts on. And that, my gosh, the day she came in she had new shoes. I think we all got emotionally actually. She had new shoes, she had her new white shirts, she had her ponytail. She said look at me Mrs Hughes. She was...the change in her. It only lasted a couple of days but that change in her, her stance, just by her dad, her parents doing that. It's, sometimes you do have to be direct but...

**Do you think in any of those examples or with any other parents that they needed additional support, perhaps with their parenting or something else? What happens in those situations?**

If I feel a parent needs some parenting classes I will speak to the family links worker and say right, can you give me the information or you know, could you get in contact with them and suggest these so if I feel then I will say this will be a really good course for you. And I kind of, you have to put it, you judge a parent individual because every parent's different and it might be that you have to say look you know sometimes you've said yourself you struggle, it's hard and this class will help you to look at it in a different way. So you have to put it in their words, but I'm all for, you know...trying to get them to do something, a parenting class or something which can help them and might open their eyes a bit so it kind of you know.

**And throughout the nurture group do the parents pop in or do you invite them in?**

I invite them in. I invite every parent and every teacher, not together. But they'll have their parent come in for breakfast, and we all sit down and have breakfast together.

### **And how does that go, for the children and the parents?**

It's been an experience on occasions...um, yeah. I mean we've had one mother who babied her son very much...and practically fed him. Yet when he was here we encouraged him to do things more himself. It's an eye opener, an eye opener when they come in sometimes. Cos you kind of think ahhhhh, that's why that kid can't do that you know (laughing). Um but it's lovely, and the kids themselves love it. Love having their mum or dad in, or their Nan in, um and the other kids also love it because it's attention. And I've never...every parent I've had, good or bad, they've always paid lovely attention to the other children as well. It's always been a lovely experience. I think once I had a bad experience where a child, again on the spectrum, could not cope with the fact that someone else is in the class. Someone different, so that was quite stressful for him. He really kicked off and went doolaly, he really did. But that's the only experience, and no I make a point of having parents in, and they know I ring them every...I'd say two to three times a week. Cos if there's an incident I have to ring them anyway. I will definitely ring at the end of the week to feed back how their week's gone.

### **And what kind of things do you tell them?**

Um, I tell them everything. You know I say right, he's had, and I also give good phone calls home, so if they've had a particularly fantastic day I reeeally think you should praise blah de blah. He's had a brilliant day, he's got his points. And I always say to the parents I am here, this is my phone number, you ring if you need to talk, we're here. So we do extend that nurturing out to the parents because I think that's important you know. Because if they're feeling nurtured and they're getting a bit of nurture, coz actually you don't know if they were nurtured as kids you know. So if you nurture the parents a bit and show them, it's good practice. You're modelling good behaviour, you're modelling how it should be.

### **How do they respond to that, that kind of friendly and open approach?**

I think me, I'm a bit like that anyway, I'll push myself onto people (laughing). I'm like yeah you will like me (laughing). I don't give up, I am over nice, I like to try and, I'm not being big headed saying I'm nice (laughing). For example one parent was guarded at first, but with me keep on ringing her saying how are you, how's things, always positive. And when I feed back information I always do a positive, a negative and end on a positive so they're not left with a negative, they're left with the positive. So they're not feeling...I think it's important. And I draw on my parenting, cos I, if I'm told something, I've had some teachers ring me up and are so rude and so blunt you're left crying and left distraught, that's not nurturing. So I think it's important to nurture the parents as much as you do with the children. And they're all receptive. We integrated two children at the end of last year and I rang the parents up the other day to find out how they were doing, and I was saying to another member of staff here, you know when they haven't quite hung up the phone and you can still hear, I heard her go

ohhh that was really lovely. And that's what you want, because you're showing an interest. Yes it's tough and there are some times that your personal head and your personal feelings are like I want to bloody sort yourself out. But you know you need to be professional so. I ramble on don't I (laughing). And more parental involvement, they're not, we don't have assemblies or sports days, things like that. Here is different like that, we don't do that. But that's why I think it's important that we do the breakfast, and they do know it's an open invitation.

**And how often do those breakfasts happen? Once a week? Every day?**

We have, we kind of say that if we have children in September I would give two to three weeks to settle in, get to know each other. And then I would start a rota, so it will be breakfast invites for a Wednesday morning. So the first Wednesday would be child a, second Wednesday child b, third Wednesday child c. And then if I've only got three children the fourth Wednesday would be teacher for child a, teacher for child b, teacher for child c, like that. And that would be it. We'd leave that for a little while and then we'd kind of start again after a little while. So it depends, it does depend.

**What happens in those situations where parents don't turn up? Have you ever had that?**

No, we try and work with it. So one parent, she said she couldn't get here so we went and picked her up. We say this is a really important thing for your son to experience, he will be over the moon to see that mum has come to breakfast. So we make sure there is no excuse, no excuse. Because we don't want that. So I can't say how we would deal with that because we've not been in that situation. Parents like that are very good at giving excuses, but we come back to her with solutions, saying we can do this or how that this.

**What do you think the role of parents, parental involvement and nurture groups?**

I think that the main role is the communication and building up the communication between nurture parents and the teachers. We try and encourage the parents to talk to their children, so I might ring them up. Say for instance on a Thursday we have a trip reward day. On the Wednesday we know whether they've made the trip. So we would encourage the parents, we would ring the parents on the Wednesday and encourage the parents to sit down with the children and discuss their week. So I think their involvement would be communication more than anything. Their only involvement in here is communication. Other than that it's trying to communicate with them, give them little strategies to try. They can then take those strategies and try them out at home, to continue that consistency. With one parent there was a total meltdown, a total breakdown in communication, and Alex's behaviour was at its worst then. They broke down communication with us, we were like the devils, and his behaviour was

awful, because our communication was terrible. Once I started to build the bridges again, and every morning greeting them with a smile every morning. It took a while, the relationships towards the end was really good.

### **So there's that consistency in the communication and in the behaviour management**

Yep. For me it's about communicating with the parents and passing that nurturing, nurturing the parents. I think that's their involvement in the nurture group to be honest with you. Because I don't think, like I said, it's...the children you get in here have got needs and it may be due to the parents. And anyone doesn't want to admit that, you know, their role in that. I think that the only thing that is missing is that nurture groups should be in all schools. Society is changing and in my view not for the better. You have more and more children that go through hell, whether that be children experiencing poverty, abuse, maybe violence, maybe drug and alcohol abuse, it could be anything. And unfortunately and in this borough the statistics are very high I think. So how can we then expect them, and have high expectations of them to be reading at the age of, when they come out of year one. If they've been slapped around the face three times before they come through the school door how I am going to teach that child to read? And it's needed in secondary school as well, in year 7.

## Appendix 10: Details of NVivo 9

NVivo 9 is a software programme that allows the researcher to enter in unstructured information, such as an interview, and allows the researcher to systematically analyse the data. It allows codes to be generated by highlighting sections of text, which then can be grouped together.

The screenshot shows the NVivo 9 interface with several key components and annotations:

- Nodes Table:** A table listing code systems with their respective sources and references.
 

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Assumptions	4	17	22/12/2011 15:17	R	23/12/2011 07:55	R
Barriers within school system	3	12	22/12/2011 09:56	R	23/12/2011 06:23	R
Being home-like	4	14	22/12/2011 11:54	R	23/12/2011 06:03	R
Chaloua	3	19	19/12/2011 15:27	R	23/12/2011 01:55	R
- Transcripts:** A list of sources on the left sidebar, including 'Childcare needs' and 'Staff interview 4', with an annotation explaining that all transcripts are included here for activation.
- Full Transcript:** The main window displays a full transcript of a staff interview, with a specific section highlighted in yellow to show the context of a coded segment.
- Code System:** A sidebar on the right shows a 'Code System' with clearly labeled code titles and their locations within the transcript, allowing for quick referencing.

**Appendix 11:** Example of thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with one selected transcript

*Stage 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data*

The familiarisation process begins with the transcription of the data from the audio recordings to a word document. I generated codes when transcribing pauses and punctuation as I felt it important that the data represented the participant's accounts as accurately as possible for both the meaning and content, for example, a pause of two seconds was transcribed as "...". Following this, a hard copy of the transcript was read through several times, with extracts of interest highlighted and initial thoughts written and revisited (see Figure 17).

<p><b>And how does that go, for the children and the parents?</b></p> <p>It's been an experience on occasions...um, yeah. I mean we've had one mother who babied her son very much...and practically fed him. Yet when he was here we encouraged him to do things more himself. It's an eye opener, an eye opener when they come in sometimes. Cos you kind of think ahhhhh, that's why that kid can't do that you know (laughing). Um but it's lovely, and the kids themselves love it. Love having their mum or dad in, or their nan in, um and the other kids also love it because it's attention. And I've never...every parent I've had, good or bad, they've always paid lovely attention to the other children as well. It's always been a lovely experience. I think once I had a bad experience where a child, again on the spectrum, could not cope with the fact that someone else is in the class. Someone different, so that was quite stressful for him. He really kicked off and went doolaly, he really did. But that's the only experience, and no I make a point of having parents in, and they know I ring them every...I'd say two to three times a week. Cos if there's an incident I have to ring them anyway. I will definitely ring at the end of the week to feed back how their week's gone.</p> <p><b>And what kind of things do you tell them?</b></p> <p>Um, I tell them everything. You know I say right, he's had, and I also give good phone calls home, so if they've had a particularly fantastic day I reeeally think you should praise blah de blah. He's had a brilliant day, he's got his points. And I always say to the parents I am here, this is my phone number, you ring if you need to talk, we're here. So we do extend that nurturing out to the parents because I think that's important you know. because if they're feeling nurtured and they're getting a bit of nurture, coz actually you don't know if they were nurtured as kids you know. so if you nurture the parents a bit and show them, it's good practice. You're modelling good behaviour, you're modelling how it should be.</p> <p><b>How do they respond to that, that kind of friendly and open approach?</b></p>	<p>- implying difficult/challenging - example → links between P-C interactions + child's difficult</p> <p>- Positive experience</p> <p>Impact on child</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Communication - feedback</p> <p>Being available, support Supporting P needs Links to P own childhood Modelling → but how? More explicit?</p>
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*Figure 17: Hard copy of SSI transcript, highlighted and annotated*

Once all eight interviews had been transcribed and read through, the transcripts were imported into NVivo 9 (see section 3.6.2 and Appendix 10 for further information). The transcripts were read through systematically, looking for features in the text that were of interest with regards to the research questions (see Figure 18). Each interview transcript was coded line-by-line, and also in ‘chunks’ of meaningful text, where the meaning or importance of a comment only became clear in reference to further responses. These extracts of text were given a label or ‘code’ (see Figure 19). This was a cyclical process, as when codes emerged in one transcript the researcher re-read transcript across the data set for relevant text relating to the new code. The number of codes created is limitless at this stage (see Figure 20). Some extracts of the transcript were given more than one code and I tried to ensure each extract of the transcript was given equal attention by re-checking the codes assigned. The emergent codes were then compared against the research questions in order to ensure that only the codes that significantly contributed towards the research brief were pursued.

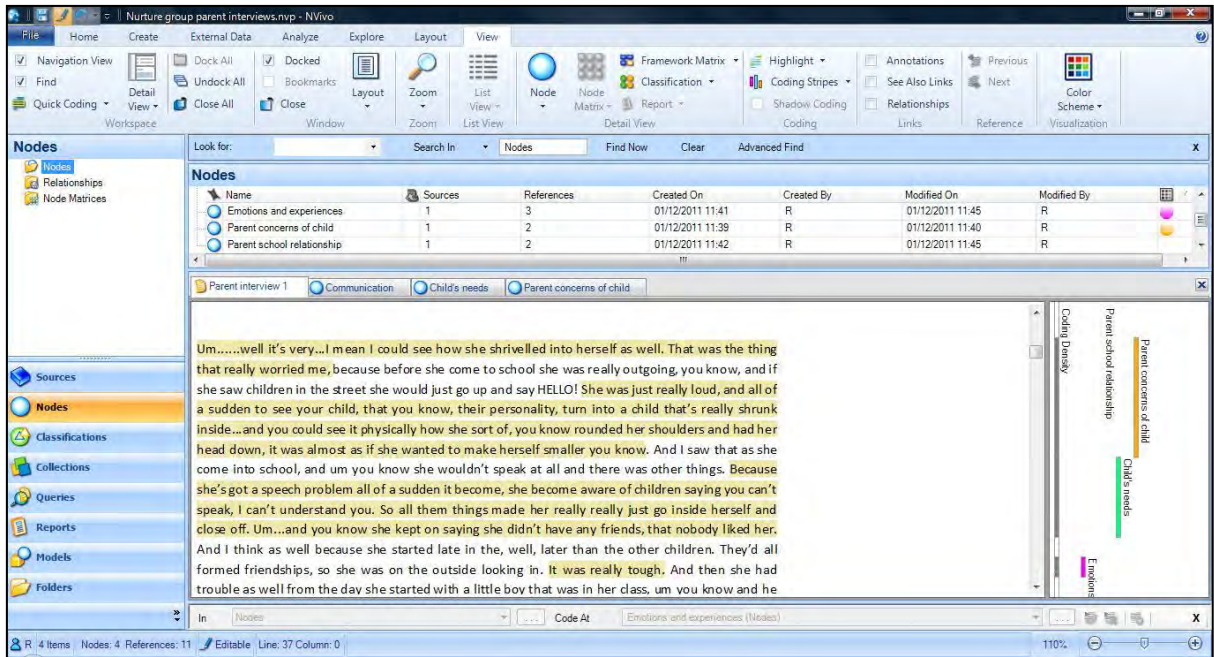


Figure 18: Initial highlighting of interesting features of the data using NVivo 9

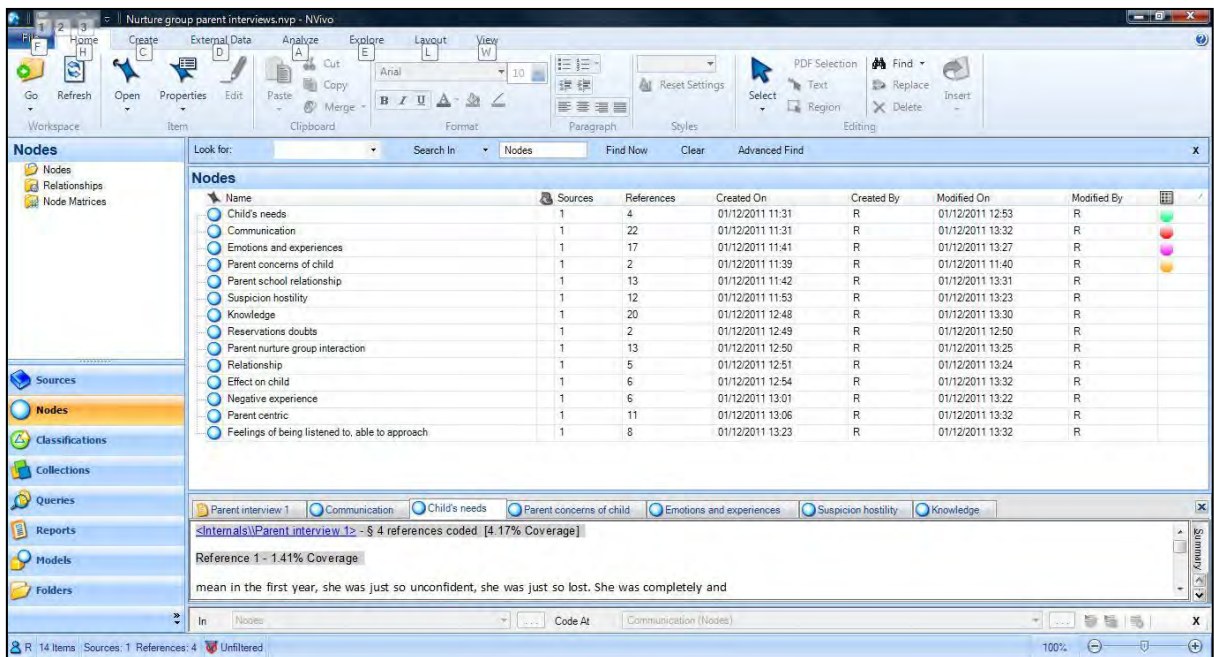
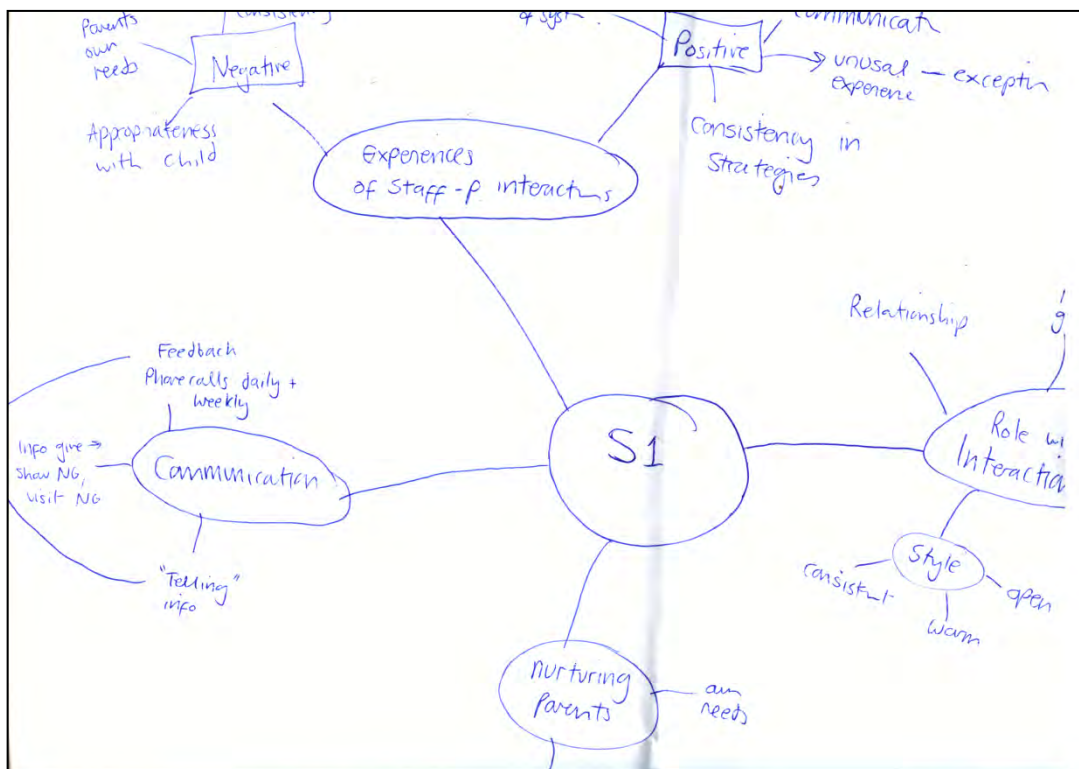


Figure 19: List of initial codes created on NVivo 9



Assumptions  
Barriers within school system  
Cautious  
Children's needs  
Communication  
Consistency  
Contact attempts  
Feeling stuck  
Fitting in with parents lives  
Home  
Hopes for the future  
Individual differences  
Judgements  
Not sure  
Nurture group aims  
Nurture group parent relationship negative  
Nurture group parent relationship neutral  
Nurture group parent relationship positive  
Parent centric  
Parental concerns or questions  
Parental influence on child difficulties  
Parental understanding  
Parents emotions and experiences  
Parents own needs  
Personal experiences and emotions  
Power dynamics  
Support  
Terminology

*Figure 20: Initial themes created after first cycle of examining staff codes*



*Figure 21: Working out themes from one member of staff's SSI*

I started to get a feel for the overarching themes and sub-themes and the ones that felt more significant. The developing mind maps allowed me to consider the relationships between codes, sub themes and overarching themes (see Figure 21).

<i>Stage 3: Searching for themes</i>	<p>Once the data set had been read, re-read, coded and re-coded all of the codes created were collated into possible themes. Consideration was given to how different codes could combine to create overarching themes, which was an iterative process. Themes emerged separately for parent and staff data. During this stage I tried to refocus the analytical process at a broader level of analysis, once I had coded the interview transcripts, trying to identify emerging hierarchical themes that could group codes together.</p>
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This phase is about reviewing and refining the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each created theme was read through with the coded text extracts to check that the themes were grounded in the codes. An inter-rater also read through the themes and codes, to determine intercoder agreement, that the themes were founded in the original data (see Figure 22 for notes from this process). Using subjective assessment (Guest et al, 2012), we separately read through one transcript with the list of codes. Separately we identified sections of text that were thought to relate to the individual codes, and then referred back to my original codes to determine the level of agreement. The definitions of themes and subthemes, and the possible thematic maps were also considered. Discrepancies were discussed and any amendments made. Following this, thematic maps were created.

Inter-rater reliability

- We examined the definitions of all the themes.
- We considered the location of the subthemes and looked at the content of the subthemes with a random selection of quotes.
- Examined the overall thematic maps
- Looked at a selection of subordinate themes and quotes within those.
- H looked through my 'relationships' theme (for staff) and checked quotes.
- We discussed the wording of some of the names for themes – for example, “emotional support” into “providing emotional support”, and “developing parenting skills” into “practical support”.
- H noticed that towards the end of the theme that the quotes used blurred with other themes.

Action points

- *Need to do definitions*
- *Suggested using a specific quote to really highlight the experience from the parents and staff perspective.*

*Figure 22: Notes from inter-rater session*

The themes were revisited and re-read several times, creating an opportunity to revise them, ensuring that the story told was clear and reliable. This also aided in developing the names for each theme. Following the reviewing themes stage and producing a thematic map of the data I was able to determine what each theme was about by writing a description of each theme to outline what the theme entailed to ensure a systematic approach (see Appendix 12). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest identifying the “...story that each theme tells...” (p.92) that contributes to the detailed analysis of each theme. At this stage, I also considered how each theme fits into the overall ‘story’ of the data. The thematic map enabled me to be able to see how the different themes related to each other (see Figure 23), and potential splitting or merging themes (see Figure 24). At this point it was noticed that a small number of modifications were required as the themes were not creating what Braun and Clarke (2006) term a ‘coherent and internally consistent account’ (p.92). These modifications included moving some sub-themes away from the theme and splitting some sub-themes.

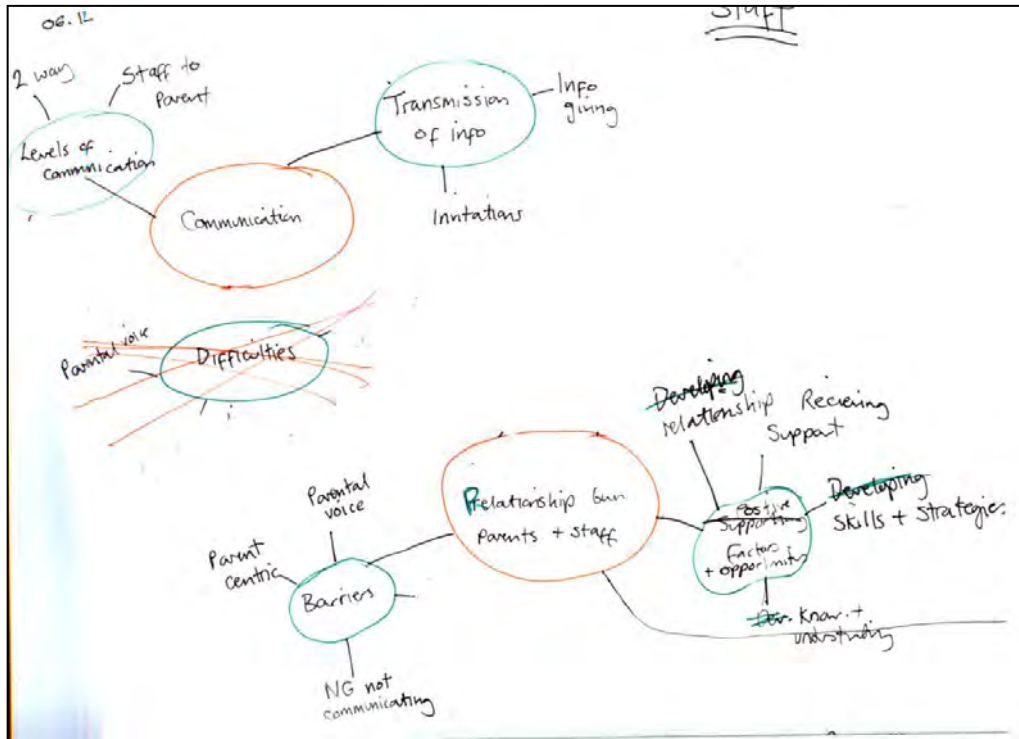


Figure 23: Working out thematic map across all staff SSIs

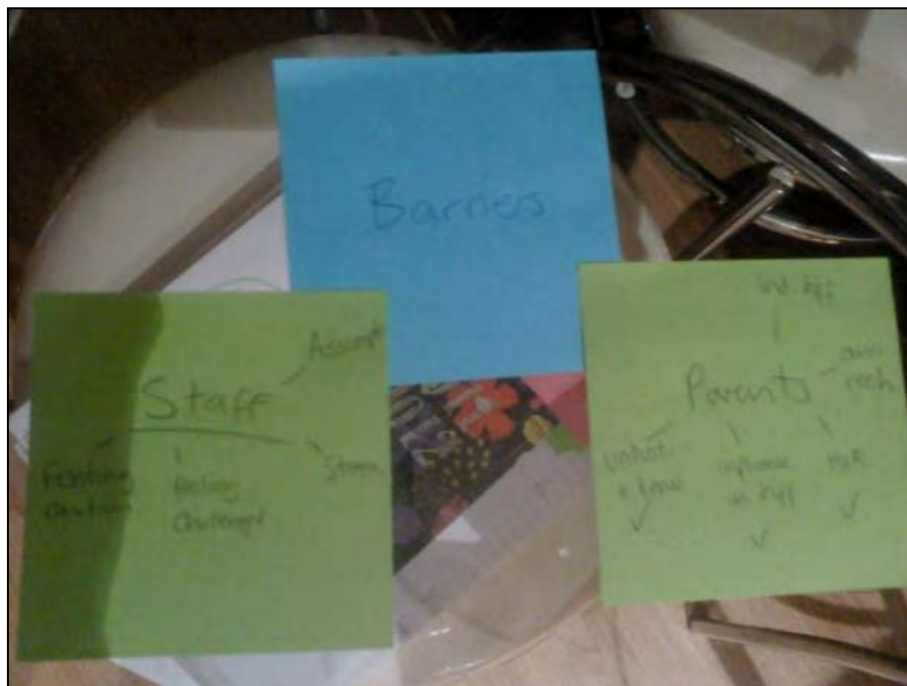


Figure 24: Checking the names of themes and positions (with inter-rater)

Figure 24 illustrates the decision to split the ‘barriers’ theme into two separate themes to encapsulate issues relevant to staff and parents.

<i>Stage 6: Producing the report</i>	<p>The final stage of thematic analysis involves the final analysis and write-up of the findings. Themes were presented in tables with sub-themes, subordinate themes and coded transcript segments (see Appendix 12). Thematic maps were created to help provide an overview or story of the data (see Chapter Four). Coded extracts are included as examples, with the data relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature. The reader will be told a story of the data, which supports the validity of the analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2006).</p>
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**Appendix 12:** Table of themes and subthemes from thematic analysis process

12a: Staff

Theme	Sub-themes	Supporting extract
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Parental involvement - support</b> (forms of interaction staff have with parents that have a supportive function)</p>	<p><b>Empathising with parents situation</b> (perspective taking, considering the challenges and experiences parents might be having)</p>	<p><i>“...actually you don’t know if they were nurtured as kids you know”</i></p>
	<p><b>Providing emotional support</b> (staff providing emotional support to parents, including providing comfort, listening to parents, taking a sensitive and understanding approach)</p>	<p><i>“...we do extend that nurturing out to the parents because I think that’s important you know. because if they’re feeling nurtured and they’re getting a bit of nurture”</i></p>
	<p><b>Providing practical support</b> (staff providing practical support to parents, including the suggestion of strategies to use with their child, or getting parents access to more targeted forms of support such as parenting classes)</p>	<p><i>“If I feel a parent needs some parenting classes I will speak to the family links worker and say right, can you give me the information or you know, could you get in contact with them and suggest these so if I feel then I will say this will be</i></p>

		<i>a really good course for you.”</i>
<b>Parental involvement - communication</b> (different forms of communication staff have taken when interacting with parents)	<b>Consulting parents</b> (conferring with parents, entering into discussions, seeking feedback, two-way communication)	<i>“...this particular parent, she’s amazing. She works alongside you, she tells you what she’s doing, she communicates in the home-school diary every single day...”</i>
	<b>Telling parents</b> (informing parents, giving information, one-way communication)	<i>“...we literally had to bring her in, sit her down and say look, we’ve recorded how many times he’s sworn and attacked and things like that.”</i>
	<b>Approach taken by staff</b> (methods of communication and approaching parents taken by staff, considering their verbal and non-verbal signals, adapting the content and style of language)	<i>“I draw on my parenting, cos I, if I’m told something, I’ve had some teachers ring me up and are so rude and so blunt you’re left crying and left distraught, that’s not nurturing.”</i>



<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Parental involvement - developing relationships</b></p> <p>(staff views of the changes that are taking place regarding their relationships with parents. This includes how staff have found ways to help promote relationships and plans for the future)</p>	<p><b>Creating opportunities</b></p> <p>(staff finding or creating opportunities to work with parents. This includes using incidental contact with parents such as when parents collect their children, and other events taking place in school such as parents evening. Also includes directly inviting parents in, and planning how best to achieve this, such as via meetings or leaflets)</p>	<p><i>“I invite them in. I invite every parent and every teacher, not together. But they’ll have their parent come in for breakfast, and we all sit down and have breakfast together.”</i></p>
	<p><b>Hopes for the future</b></p> <p>(acknowledgement of where the nurture group is in terms of parental involvement and ideas for how to approach this in future nurture groups. Includes learning from experience, ideas and strategies staff would like to try out in the future, wanting to improve things)</p>	<p><i>“I do think we need to have the parents more aware and more on board perhaps. More involved but I don’t want them coming in every day, you know just...I think um...yeah, I think there definitely needs to be that to be improved. There’s definitely areas that you know you need improving and I think last year was our first year and our setting up</i></p>

		<i>year, and that was hard enough as it was.”</i>
<b>Staff barriers to parental involvement</b>  (views and emotions that impede on staff views of working with parents)	<b>Feeling challenged</b>  (staff feeling that obstacles are in place when trying to work with parents)	<i>“...so it’s difficult and I don’t think I’ve come to the, I don’t think I’m sure how to work with parents.”</i>
	<b>Preconceptions</b>  (having an opinion formed prior to having experience or knowledge of parents, prejudice, bias, prejudgement)	<i>“But to be fair, if they really did care and were interested in what their child was doing during the day they might not be here”</i>
	<b>Feeling cautious</b>  (careful forethought to avoid negative consequences, close attention, vigilance)	<i>“I think...there’s a lot of potential but I think we’ve got to sort of tread carefully.”</i>
	<b>Use of terminology</b>	<i>“...you know it was considered maybe not best practice not to call it a nurture group. Nurture by the very name, you know is quite emotive and you think some parents might think to</i>

		<p><i>describe it as that, thinking of the needy parents. I'm sure they know it's a nurture group, but it's just never mentioned in great detail that that's what it is."</i></p>
	<p><b>Power dynamics</b>  (parent-staff interactions that are unequal due to the power dynamics present, often due to the position of the staff or the school-centred approach taken)</p>	<p><i>"...because it's coming from the top. I think if someone else had done it I think there would have been more issues with parents letting their children come in. But of course, because it's her and she's the head and she is saying we think that this would be the right place for your child right now that they probably think I can't really say no."</i></p>

<b>Parental barriers to parental involvement</b>  (views and experiences of factors involved with parents that hinder staff parent interactions)	<b>Parents’ understanding and knowledge</b>  (gaps in parents’ knowledge regarding their child’s needs and what a nurture group is. Information and skills not acquired)	<i>“There was no breaking through that, um, I don’t think it helped that they had special needs. I think that some parents themselves have their own special needs, um, so that’s a barrier, it makes it very hard because they haven’t got the understanding, you know, so yeah.”</i>
	<b>Parents’ influence on child’s difficulties</b>  (how parents’ behaviour and interactions with their children may impact on the child’s difficulties, as presented in the nurture group)	<i>“If they’ve been slapped around the face three times before they come through the school door how I am going to teach that child to read</i>
	<b>Parents hard to reach</b>  (parents being difficult to engage, difficult to access, inaccessible by traditional methods of engagement)	<i>“But they do put their barriers up, most of them. It’s not a positive place for some parents. Everything is always negative for them...there’s never any positive”</i>
	<b>Parents’ own needs</b>	<i>“You kind of have, you have</i>

	<p>(Parents having their own social, emotional and medical needs, for example depression, unemployment, relationship difficulties)</p>	<p><i>your parents that..... (sighs) a kind of, it depends what they're going through. We had a parent, another one actually that you did get hold of who suffers from depression herself, um...is kind of...got her own things going on"</i></p>
	<p><b>Individual differences</b>  (parents' experiences and situation being very subjective and individual, parental need is specific)</p>	<p><i>"there's only two of them that have got both parents in the household. There's another child who is looked after by dad, mum's not on the scene any more. Um, there's another one who is just mum"</i></p>

12b. Parents

Main themes	Sub-themes (theme descriptions)	Supporting extract
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Forms of parental involvement</b></p> <p>(interactions between parents and staff during nurture groups, what parents view as the function of these connections and their experiences of how staff work with them)</p>	<p><b>Developing knowledge and understanding</b></p> <p>(parents' knowledge regarding their child's needs and what a nurture group is being supported and developed through their interactions with nurture group staff. Understanding the aims and activities taking place in a nurture group)</p>	<p><i>"...it was explained that Mark possibly was having difficulty learning um because of some of the barriers that had been set up because of his experiences and that the um, they would take it back to basics if you like and have the set up of a, of a family environment where he could react and respond to um circumstances and have that adjusted and feel safe in that environment."</i></p>
	<p><b>Parents receiving emotional support</b></p> <p>(parents being emotionally supported from nurture group staff, including being</p>	<p><i>"I just don't feel as welcome as I did in the nurture group. I can call XXX at Luke's new school but most of the time she's not there. With the nurture group if I didn't have credit I used to just prank her and she'd phone right back."</i></p>

	<p>comfort, feeling listened, feeling that staff are available for them)</p>	<p><i>She was really good like that.”</i></p>
	<p><b>Parents receiving practical support</b>  (parents being supported through the suggestion of practical strategies and approaches, including the suggestion of strategies to use with their child, or getting access to more targeted forms of support such as parenting classes)</p>	<p><i>“Sometimes he just wouldn’t get ready and I would say Tim you can take as long as you like but when you’re waiting for me or I have to wait for you for ten minutes then you’re going to have to wait for me for ten minutes, because this is eating into my time now. Making it quite clear that there are times when it’s my time.”</i></p>
	<p><b>Keeping parents informed</b>  (experiences of nurture group staff giving parents information verbally and through other means.  Updating parents regarding their child’s progress, giving information and</p>	<p><i>“Always, always. We had a book, a home-school book um but I used to get phone calls every day. Usually as he left school, because he came home on transport, so as he would leave they would phone me and we would have the conversation as he was on his way home. A few times they called me when I was at work to say he’s not going to V this afternoon or other times when he was quite distressed and wouldn’t get</i></p>

	creating opportunities to inform parents about nurture groups)	<i>on the bus and they didn't think it was safe so they'd call me to see if I could collect him"</i>
<b>Barriers to parental involvement</b> (circumstances, experiences or emotions that are hindering effective staff parent interactions)	<b>Feeling blamed</b> (parents assigning fault or placing responsibility on the difficulties experienced between parents and nurture group staff)	<i>"That's my own fault really, um because of working here, I think people expected that I could take the time off and go and find out about it"</i>
	<b>Poor communication</b> (parents experiences of nurture group staff not keeping them updated with news and progress, unsure of the next steps the staff were going to take, staff not talking to parents)	<i>"...communication could have been better...for me just to feel, um, I could have, you know, I would have been welcome to make enquiries."</i>
	<b>Lack of parental voice</b> (Parents feeling that their concerns, questions or observations were not being listened to or	<i>"I found it very patronising, very you know, it I just felt that it didn't matter what I said I weren't gonna , weren't gonna get through."</i>



	<p>acknowledged, lacking the opportunities – practical and emotional – to find out more. Feeling in the way, not listened to, a hassle, not their place to ask)</p>	
	<p><b>Knowledge and understanding</b> (gaps in parents’ knowledge regarding their child’s needs and what a nurture group is. Information not given by nurture groups, unsure as to the aims and activities taking place in a nurture group)</p>	<p><i>“I know they went in there to do a lot of playing, with little cookers and tents, sort of thing. But I don’t know if they were actually work-based games. So I don’t know about that”</i></p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Other factors affecting parental involvement</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">(parents' experiences and situation being very subjective and individual, parental need is specific)</p>	<p><b>Parent/school relationships</b></p> <p>(interactions between the overall school and parent, positive experiences, difficulties with their child and conflict)</p>	<p><i>"I thought I just can't be bothered with the aggression or they don't want to talk to you. And I didn't want to complain, I just wanted to say what was the reason behind that."</i></p>
	<p><b>Concerns and difficulties regarding their child's needs</b></p> <p>(parental views of their child's emotional, behavioural or learning needs, difficulties parents' have experienced in managing these needs)</p>	<p><i>"...when I got there he attacked me, and it wasn't him, he was just like a little boy, well he was like an animal actually, and he was so frightened it was like he was pinned in the corner and he didn't know what to do, and he was going to lash out at whoever was near him. I mean I've still got scratches to tell the tale, I got a black eye and the rest of it."</i></p>
	<p><b>Parental needs/family context</b></p>	<p><i>"I've got cancer as well but then I didn't know that and I'm on watch and wait so everything's</i></p>

	<p>(situational factors for the parents and/or the whole family. Including parents having their own social, emotional and medical needs)</p>	<p><i>good for me at this stage but um it was all spiralling, I was ill, feeling ill but couldn't think why. Mum was really ill, Tim was having all of this."</i></p>
	<p><b>Seeing changes in their child</b>  (parents noting positive emotional and behavioural developments in their child since being in the nurture group, less distressed, improved behaviour, confidence in learning)</p>	<p><i>"...he was getting to laugh and talk, and by laughing and telling silly stories he would then share things of his own..."</i></p>

**Appendix 13:** All staff extracts for the theme ‘Staff barriers to parental involvement’

Subtheme	Coded transcript segments
Feeling challenged	<p>S1: that’s hard to get across to parents, because actually...some parents don’t want to hear because actually some parents are the cause. So when it’s like that it’s tricky.</p> <p>S1: Some of the parents don’t kind of care</p> <p>S1: he was he was very much, very blasé, oh she’s just naughty, she’s a naughty girl, that’s it. There was no breaking through that</p> <p>S1: It’s an eye opener, an eye opener when they come in sometimes</p> <p>S1: Parents like that are very good at giving excuses</p> <p>S2: Maybe one we sort of knew they wouldn’t come in</p> <p>S2: I gave those out...maybe two or three out. Nothing came back, nothing</p> <p>S2: they would drop the children so fast in the morning cos they were working, or they were never here, or...it was really difficult.</p> <p>S2: they weren’t as forthcoming to support their own children</p> <p>S2: they do put their barriers up, most of them. It’s not a positive place for some parents. Everything is always negative for them...there’s never any positive.</p> <p>S2: I mean how are we supposed to change these children if that’s what’s going on at home?</p> <p>S3: I’m still not sure how to get them more involved.</p> <p>S3: I don’t know how we’d be able to work that, that out. I know that some of them work, and it is hard to get them all together.</p> <p>S4: they were picking him up early and that was really disruptive. They would come at like ten to three some days when the arrangement had been at three o’clock and they’d be saying they had to get the bus or what have you. It was, it was a nightmare.</p> <p>S4: it’s a difficult one because for some children would love to have their parents in, other children...no way. So which...and then would they feel comfortable with other peoples’ parents in?</p> <p>S4: it’s really difficult and that’s probably why we didn’t get the parents in</p>

	<p>of the little girl last year. She JUST didn't want her in at all.</p> <p>S4: it is really tricky and I don't think there's a right way and I don't think there's a wrong way.</p> <p>S4: I'm not sure whether...not that I wouldn't want the parents in here with us but parents are a pain (laughing). I know that sounds bad but they are.</p> <p>S4: so it's difficult and I don't think I've come to the, I don't think I'm sure how to work with parents.</p> <p>S4: you just don't know what they're going to be like. So it can be easier not to have them in.</p> <p>S4: if it was a full-time nurture group that would be different and you'd have to do your own parent consultations and that would be horrible (laughing), and I don't think that I would want to do that thank you very much.</p> <p>S4: they are quite hard work.</p> <p>S4: I think the main problem with parents in nurture groups is the fact that they're not around, and you have to make a specific effort to get them in</p> <p>S4: it's just really hard.</p> <p>S4: But um this year we probably haven't even got round to it, we haven't really done anything with parents.</p> <p>S4: You never get the parents you really want to see. You know they just, they're just not interested and that's just the sad thing about working in, um, this environment.</p>
Preconceptions	<p>S1: you don't realise that actually... things that we... some people take for granted that just don't happen,</p> <p>S1: I think it's very easy for people to stereotype that don't know, and they think oh it's all the parents fault. But actually...yes unfortunately...sometimes it can be that</p> <p>S1: she does work in a private school herself but I don't, I don't even think, I think even if she didn't she would still be like it, because she's just one of those parents</p> <p>S1: in my experience...I don't want to generalise or be stereotypical or anything like that, I can only go on my experiences of a year and a half of being here but she is...an exception to the rule</p>

	<p>S1: So, you know, you've got that sort of parent, and then we've got the, the, the little boy who I was talking about whose parent was fantastic,</p> <p>S1: Some of the parents don't kind of care</p> <p>S1: one parent was guarded at first</p> <p>S2: They must, the parents must knew they were coming here, the parents heard from their children when they came home, they took things home that they made and were talking about the nurture group</p> <p>S2: the end of the day, unless there were problems or issues with the children then we wouldn't really hear</p> <p>S2: they would drop the children so fast in the morning cos they were working, or they were never here,</p> <p>S2: I don't think they understand really what this is all about. I try to explain it in all different ways. But it's difficult to explain to parents</p> <p>S2: Most parents accepted it. They didn't say my child's not going in there. They knew they needed it.</p> <p>S2: they weren't as forthcoming to support their own children</p> <p>S2: The EAL team do them but they've got different kinds of parents.</p> <p>S2: But to be fair, if they really did care and were interested in what their child was doing during the day they might not be here</p> <p>S2: Their child is here every afternoon, not producing work you'd want to know what they were doing</p> <p>S2: I mean how are we supposed to change these children if that's what's going on at home?</p> <p>S2: Some of the parents are a bit frightening. You see them outside in the morning, spitting all over the floor and you think oh god. There's one dad who comes in, pushes his way in...he's scary.</p> <p>S2: Maybe these parents will be different, and they'll be interested in where their child is going</p> <p>S3: I think really they need to understand what it's about</p> <p>S3: if they don't (understand) it kind of takes away their responsibilities...they might see us as solving their problems and expecting someone else to sort it all out.</p>
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	<p>S3: I think the way the room is laid out, with a dining table and that idea that just because there's a dining table you might be saying to parents this is the norm, and a lot of people won't be sitting at a table.</p> <p>S3: Sometimes I see it as parents don't see it as their role to come in and once you've said this is what's happening they just think ok and leave you to it.</p> <p>S3: I know you can still do that without a dining room table, you can still sit down and make sure. But I think there would still be some guilt</p> <p>S3: I don't want them to think that we've made their child perfect now</p> <p>S3: it might seen as bad parenting</p> <p>S3: they might think that it was a reflection on their parenting.</p> <p>S3: we've been reeaally lucky with our parents.</p> <p>S3: I think we've been so lucky with the parents we've got. We were worried about how it was going to go, especially as it's our first nurture group. But they've all been so supportive and easy to work with.</p> <p>S3: how receptive the parents have been. We've had no negative feedback.</p> <p>S3: it's worked so well, we've had no comments like I don't want you to work with my child. Everybody's been really good. I can't see why we need to change it. But the next time we might have to, we might have problems next time. I just think we've been really lucky this time.</p> <p>S3: I don't think that the moment we could approach parents about things like that.</p> <p>S4: I'm not sure whether...not that I wouldn't want the parents in here with us but parents are a pain (laughing). I know that sounds bad but they are.</p> <p>S4: they'll think oh my god all they're doing is playing, I actually thought they were in here as part of the curriculum,</p> <p>S4: these sorts of parents aren't interested in how they feel.</p> <p>S4: you just don't know what they're going to be like. So it can be easier not to have them in.</p> <p>S4: I think the main problem with parents in nurture groups is the fact that they're not around, and you have to make a specific effort to get them in and then,</p>
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	<p>S4: I'm sure they know it's a nurture group, but it's just never mentioned in great detail that that's what it is.</p> <p>S4: there were definitely chances for them to come in and a lot of them didn't take it.</p> <p>S4: You never get the parents you really want to see. You know they just, they're just not interested and that's just the sad thing about working in, um, this environment.</p>
Feeling cautious	<p>S1: one parent was guarded at first</p> <p>S2: Then we decided against the coffee morning because if not everybody's carer turns up it's upsetting for them</p> <p>S2: But they do put their barriers up, most of them. It's not a positive place for some parents. Everything is always negative for them...there's never any positive</p> <p>S3: I think...there's a lot of potential but I think we've got to sort of tread carefully.</p> <p>S3: I think if I was a parent and they started to come in too quickly I'd be thinking why is my child in there, I'd be quite suspicious I think</p> <p>S3: I think you need to suss them out and work them out,</p> <p>S3: I think in principle I'm not sure about parents coming into the nurture group because it's almost like come and look at our ideal setting here with our lovely dining room, and you know, not everyone's going to have that.</p> <p>S3: I know you can still do that without a dining room table, you can still sit down and make sure. But I think there would still be some guilt</p> <p>S3: it could affect home and school links</p> <p>S3: Um.....we were just, I think we said that we were starting this new provision where groups of children were taken out...err...to build their confidence...um I think that was how it was worded.</p> <p>S3: but we didn't say...um...anything that was, you know, bad against the child or parent</p> <p>S3: it was worded so that um you child needs perhaps a little bit of confidence building, they're not going to be missing out on anything else, we're working on the same planning as the classes,</p>



	<p>S3: You can't really say to a parent that you don't sit down with your child to eat breakfast properly, it could be really tricky. I don't know how they would take that.</p> <p>S4: I'm not sure whether...not that I wouldn't want the parents in here with us but parents are a pain (laughing). I know that sounds bad but they are.</p> <p>S4: if I do bring them in here and we do let them in will they like what they see or will they kick off because they'll think oh my god all they're doing is playing,</p> <p>S4: I don't think I'm sure how to work with parents.</p> <p>S4: you just don't know what they're going to be like. So it can be easier not to have them in.</p> <p>S4: I know as a parent...if somebody had said to me that we'd like your child to go into a NURTURE group...I'd feel quite offended.</p> <p>S4: I would think...why does my child need nurturing by the school? You know because that, that's my job.</p>
<p>Use of terminology</p>	<p>S1: she sells it on the fact that this is a place for your child, your child is not accessing the curriculum and school in a group of 25 children. If they come here they will have a smaller group, it will be more consistent</p> <p>S2: I'm just sort of going to put it very gently...it's just going to be a small group out, sometimes just to boost their confidence a little bit</p> <p>S2: Say things about their children not being to keep up with the pace of the classroom all day. So I'll tell them I'll take them out and do some nice things after their work</p> <p>S3: We avoid using the words nurture group in our paperwork, or parents refuse for their child to have anything to do with it</p> <p>S3: they looked up the whole definition of nurture and how they aren't nurturing their child and felt really bad.</p> <p>S3: we don't tell them it's a nurture group. We tell them about the principles but not the words.</p> <p>S3: although we haven't called it a nurture group they need to understand why their child is there.</p> <p>S3: we had heard that a lot of people, they look up the word nurture, they google it and they find all these different things and you think oh. We specifically try to stay away from that word, the nurture room.</p>

	<p>S3: We called it the bumble bees, and we haven't mentioned the word nurture at all and we try and stay away from that word when we're talking to the parents.</p> <p>S3: we were told there was a lot of people um...um...googling it and coming up like I said with all the reasons, that they didn't want any involvement with their children</p> <p>S3: it might seen as bad parenting</p> <p>S3: Um.....we were just, I think we said that we were starting this new provision where groups of children were taken out...err...to build their confidence...um I think that was how it was worded.</p> <p>S3: it was worded so that um you child needs perhaps a little bit of confidence building, they're not going to be missing out on anything else, we're working on the same planning as the classes,</p> <p>S4: I know as a parent...if somebody had said to me that we'd like your child to go into a NURTURE group...I'd feel quite offended.</p> <p>S4: I would think...why does my child need nurturing by the school? You know because that, that's my job.</p> <p>S4: that's why we don't really call it a nurture group. We call it the twinkle room. They come out to the twinkle room and what we say is sometimes certain children find school a difficult place to be, you know, and coming to the twinkle room helps with that.</p> <p>S4: you know it was considered maybe not best practice not to call it a nurture group. Nurture by the very name, you know is quite emotive and you think some parents might think to describe it as that, thinking of the needy parents. I'm sure they know it's a nurture group, but it's just never mentioned in great detail that that's what it is.</p>
Power dynamics	<p>S1: I don't do the discussion, the head does the discussion with that parents, what she says to the parents to sell it</p> <p>S2: Most parents accepted it. They didn't say my child's not going in there. They knew they needed it.</p> <p>S2: It's authority isn't it</p> <p>S3: I think you need to suss them out and work them out,</p> <p>S4: I don't deal with parents initially, the headmistress deals with that.</p> <p>S4: if the parents are confrontational, not not that there has been any</p>

	<p>confrontation but she's a great seller and she, she's big believer in nurture groups and she's just the best person to do it really.</p> <p>S4: because it's coming from the top. I think if someone else had done it I think there would have been more issues with parents letting their children come in. But of course, because it's her and she's the head and she is saying we think that this would be the right place for your child right now that they probably think I can't really say no.</p> <p>S4: the head doesn't often give up</p> <p>S4: I really want the head in here because I think that adds gravity, you know because she's the head and if she's blowing it from the roof tops I think the parents take a lot of notice of that where as they probably wouldn't take much notice of little old me.</p>
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## Appendix 14: Written feedback for parents

### **An exploratory study of parental involvement in nurture groups – from a practitioner and parent perspective**

The audience of this paper are the parents who participated in my research. The results will also be shared with the nurture groups (NGs) who also participated, and xxx Psychology Service.

#### **1. Introduction**

##### *Nurture groups*

- NGs emphasis that “...‘bad starts’ could be modified.” (Kearney, 2005, p.3) through developing opportunities for children to gain security and attachment from alternative sources other than their parents.
- The difficulties children who attend NGs are as a result of an interaction between the child and their environment, with the home strongly emphasised.
- However levels of parental involvement in NGs vary significantly.

##### *Parental involvement*

- Parenting is a complex task, with many challenges.
- Research indicates the positive impact parental involvement in their child’s educational and emotional development can have on parents *and* children.
- But parents may require further support to be involved in this aspect of their child’s life.

- Parental involvement in NGs is generally encouraged in schools, but research indicates that current levels of practice vary widely. “...most schools only pay lip service to meaningful school-family partnerships.” (Pena, 2000, p.43).

#### *The aim of the research*

- Exploring the experiences of parents and NG staff, providing an insight into their perceptions regarding parental involvement in NGs.

#### *What I wanted to find out*

1. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with parents about parental involvement in nurture groups?
2. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with nurture group staff about parental involvement in nurture groups?
3. How can these themes be used in supporting the development of parental involvement in nurture groups?

## **2. Method**

I interviewed (using semi structured interviews) four parents and four NG staff. Participants were from four different schools (and therefore four different nurture groups). I used a method of analysis called thematic analysis to find themes in what participants told me in the interviews.

### 3. Results

The thematic analysis led to number of themes being identified. Findings highlight different experiences of parents and staff.

#### Findings – parents

##### *Forms of parental involvement*

- Parents felt that they were kept informed, received practical and emotional support, and were developing their knowledge and understanding.
- This highlights the types of interaction that took place as well as indicating the developing relationships between the two groups.

##### *Barriers to parental involvement*

- Parents described the difficulties and negative experiences they had gone through whilst their child was attending a NG. This includes circumstances, experiences or emotions that are seen to hinder effective staff-parent interactions.
- They were deemed barriers to the parents in their understanding as well as in their relationships and involvement with the NG.

##### *Other factors affecting parental involvement*

- Some of the results highlight the individuality and specificity of parents' experiences and situations. This included different personal circumstances and trying to support their child's needs at home.

### Findings – nurture group staff

#### *Parental involvement - communication*

- Staff communication was more often one directional, telling or giving information to parents. A less frequent form of communication (but still present) was the subtheme of staff consulting with parents, working together and seeking parental views.
- Staff talked about their style of communication with parents, including considering their use of language and non-verbal cues.

#### *Parental involvement - support*

- Staff reported feeling empathy for the parents' situation, as well as providing emotional and practical support.

#### *Parental involvement - developing relationships*

- This theme includes factors that have influenced how staff may have attempted to form relationships.
- Staff raised the need to have to create opportunities to get parents involved in the work that takes place in the NG, including coffee mornings and inviting parents to come in to join in part of the NG sessions.
- Despite the challenges felt by staff they are still hopeful for the future of parent-nurture group relationships, and had plans for increasing parental involvement for future groups.

### *Staff barriers to parental involvement*

- This theme describes staff descriptions of difficulties and negative experiences. This includes circumstances, approaches or emotions that are seen to hinder effective staff-parent interactions.

### *Parental barriers to parental involvement*

- This theme included staff views of parents understanding and knowledge, parents' own needs, parents hard to reach, parents' influence on child's difficulties, individual differences.
- Staff felt that parents did not understand the aims of the nurture group, and tended to focus on educational aspects of the group instead of considering their child's emotional needs. However the staff interviewed were unable to provide examples of trying to overcome this observation. Also may be linked to the subtheme of 'terminology'.
- Staff describe how working with parents in nurture groups can be challenging due to their own needs – which can relate to their own learning difficulties, medical needs, social or emotional needs.
- Perhaps as a consequence of these first two subthemes staff felt that parents whose children attend nurture groups are hard to reach and are distant from the work that takes place in nurture groups.
- One further barrier to staff working with parents is the lack of consistency regarding what parents want, their level of engagement and their personal circumstances – all of these mean that it can be difficult to develop an overall 'one size fits all' approach.

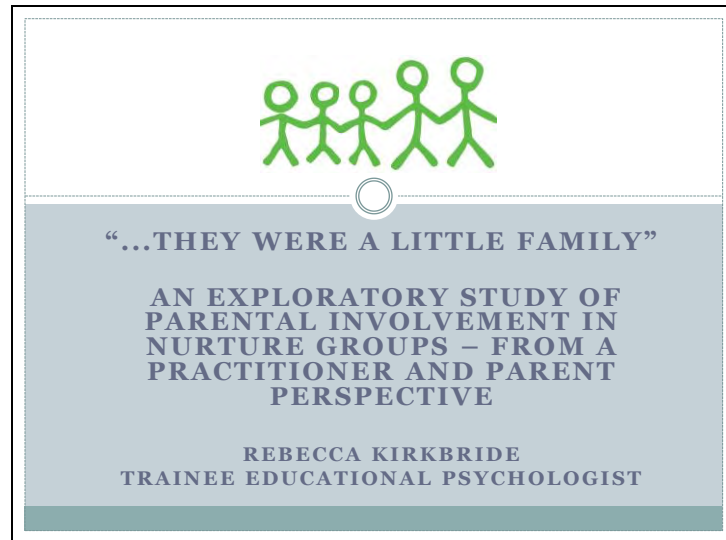


Common themes between the two groups (parents and staff) of relationships, communication and sharing practice were discovered.

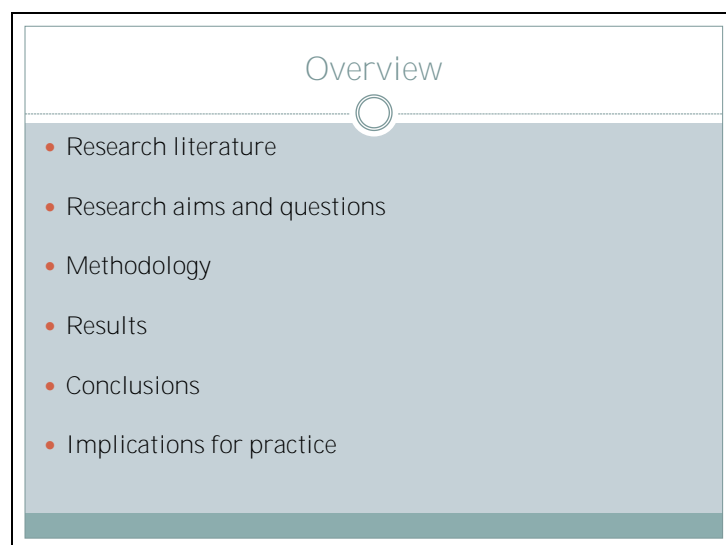
#### **4. Conclusions and Implications for practice**

- Both staff and parents wanted a stronger partnership model of working together in NGs.
- But barriers experienced by both groups had led to NGs and parents becoming hard to reach. This had led to low parental involvement and feelings of cautiousness about interacting with the other group.
- Therefore both parents and NG staff require additional support.
- The importance of communication, sharing practice, developing relationships and working together collaboratively are all areas identified in the research.
- Suggestions for practice in NGs, schools and for educational psychologists have been made.

**Appendix 15:** PowerPoint presentation for nurture group staff participants and the nurture group steering committee (with notes)



- Nurture groups run in the area since 2009.
- Originally became involved via an evaluation I was conducting of the impact NGs make on children. A few members of staff made comments about parents, which led me to read around the subject further.
- Part of my Doctoral training with the University of Birmingham.



## Literature review – nurture groups

- Key outcomes of effective nurture groups include:

1. An increase in **children's** social and emotional well-being
2. An increase in motivation to learn
3. Increase in academic achievement

(Cooper, Arnold and Boyd, 2001; O'Connor & Colwell, 2003; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Sanders, 2007).

- Warnock Report (DES, 1978)
- 'Educational opportunities for all?' (Fish, 1985)
- Green Paper 'Excellence for all children' (DfES, 1997)
- Steer's report (DCSF, 2009)

- There are currently 900 nurture groups registered with the Nurture Group Network (Nurture Group Network, 2011), although it is thought that in total there are approximately 1500 nurture groups in the UK.
  - Boxall developed NGs in late 1960s in inner London boroughs to support the development of children who display emotional or behavioural difficulties (Boxall, 2002), and who often display behaviours that are inappropriate for their developmental stage (Cooper & Lovey, 1999; Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001).
  - Curriculum concentrates on three areas: self-esteem, the use of play to teach social skills; and developing language for communication.
  - Research indicates that NGs can play a positive role in children's social and emotional development.
  - Also recognised in policy development, which helped in raising nurture groups profile and popularity.
1. Warnock (conceptualising SEN, and leading to Ed Act 1981) and Fish's reports (for inclusive education) praised NGs.
  2. Excellence for all children – supporting SEN
  3. Steer – learning behaviour.

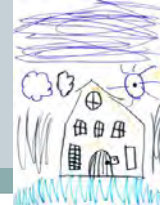
## Literature review – parental involvement

- Impact on child and parent
- Support and barriers - material and psychological factors
- Parental-school dynamics
- Parental involvement needs to include three areas (Desforges , 2003):
  1. Providing parents with information
  2. Developing parental voice
  3. Encouraging parental/school partnerships

- The impact of parental support and involvement has been suggested to have a greater impact on many measures than other factors such as education, particularly for those children raised in challenging or deprived environments.
- Increasing parental involvement has positive outcomes for the parents themselves, including an increase in confidence in seeking help at the school, better attitudes towards their child's education and school staff, and an increase in parent-child communication.
- Supporting factors and barriers (can be the same things) – help understand areas requiring support. Self-efficacy, socioeconomic status and educational experiences. Also time, money, feelings of suspicion and hostility.
- Dynamics: Voice and power imbalances. Who is hard to reach – the parents or the school?
- Desforges (2003) highlights that parental involvement needs to include three focus areas...
- Literature suggests that an “Authentic” parent-school relationship (Wolfendale, 1985), with a positive strengths-based approach to parental involvement (Benard, 2006) is needed.

## Links between nurture groups and home

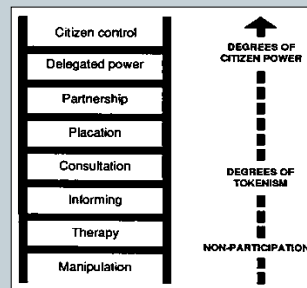
- “Some children had been brought up in disorganised and chaotic homes, without structure, order and consistency of experiences or managements, and with little or no opportunity to make trusting attachments, to immerse themselves in experiences and to learn.” (Boxall, 2002, p.3)



- So why consider the links between home and the work in NGs?
- Highlights the importance of why work with parents needs to be developed in NGs.

## Literature review – frameworks

- Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’ model (1969)



- Cunningham & Davis (1985):

1. Expert model
2. Transplant model
3. Consumer model

- Frameworks were examined to help conceptualise where parental involvement in NGs currently is, and the next steps to develop practice. Several were examined.
- Expert model - professionals control interventions and parents are the passive recipients.
- Transplant model - professional skills or knowledge are passed to parents. Perhaps the most frequently adopted
- Consumer model - ideal model in which there is a more equal partnership, with parental knowledge and rights being acknowledged.

## Literature review – frameworks

- Blamires, Robertson & Blamires (1997) - types of collaborative working, with parents as...
  1. Passive partners
  2. A source of information
  3. Consumers
  4. A resource managed by professionals
- Epstein et al's (1997): family-school-community involvement.
- Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997, 2005) parental motivations for involvement.
- Barton et al (2004): Ecologies of Parental Engagement framework.

- Various types of collaborative working including parents being passive partners, parents being viewed as a source of information, parents as consumers, and parents as a resource to be managed by professionals.
- Epstein et al's (1997) framework focuses on family-school-community involvement. Examples of activities such as volunteering, learning at home and decision making.
- Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) outline five levels that need to be considered in order to understand parental motivations for involvement. Involvement decisions, choice of type of involvement, mediating variables, outcomes for the child.
- Barton et al. (2004) describe parental engagement as an object rather than an outcome of processes, which is influenced by factors outside of school as well as within school.

## Literature review – parental involvement in nurture groups

- “**Research** into effective support for the parents of children in a nurture group would be extremely beneficial.” (Sanders, 2007, p.59).
- Encouraging parental involvement with children in nurture groups needs to take place, in order to enable consistency in approaches (Bennathan & Boxall, 1996).
- Parents themselves often require some element of nurturing (Bennathan & Kettleborough, 2007).

## Literature review – parental involvement in nurture groups

- Parental involvement in nurture groups is generally encouraged, with collaboration having positive outcomes (Renwick & Spalding, 2002; Cooper & Tiknaz, 2005; Sanders, 2007).
- However levels of practice varies widely (Boxall, 2004) and power inequalities can exist between parents and staff.
- “**Only** a few nurture groups involve parents in a sustained and planned way” (HMIE, 2009, p.6).

## Research study

- The area of parental views and understanding of nurture groups is sparse – exploratory study.
- Exploring views of staff and parents - highlight positive experiences as well as themes of areas requiring further research and development.



- As identified in the literature review, little research exists on the topic of nurture groups and parents.
- When the search term “parents nurture group” was used, initially only three titles were found, and only one of these explicitly focussed on the interaction between home and school (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007). This highlights the value of conducting the current research in this area.
- The current research was exploratory in nature, guided by the data collected. However there were also be a comparison of elements of the theoretical frameworks and concepts developed from parent partnership literature to the area of parent partnership in the context of nurture groups.

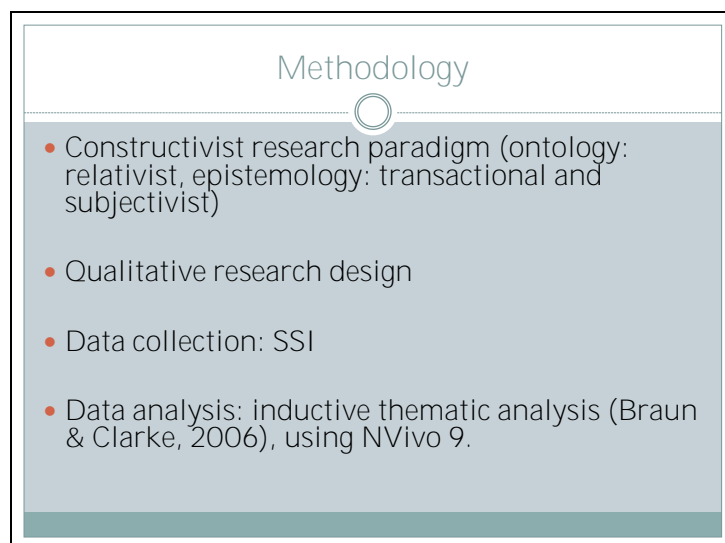
## Research questions

1. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with parents about parental involvement in nurture groups?
2. What are the themes that emerge from interviews with nurture group staff about parental involvement in nurture groups?
3. How can these themes be used in supporting the development of parental involvement in nurture groups?

- The current research has three aims:

1. To explore the existing practice in nurture groups in terms of parental involvement in one LA.
2. To explore parental views and experiences of their involvement with nurture groups.
3. To explore nurture group staff views and experiences of parental involvement with nurture groups.





- A constructivist paradigm was adopted in order to develop an understanding of the subjective realities as well as the objectified knowledge that exists from prior research. The constructivist methodology views reality as socially constructed, and acknowledges that no account is more or less true. This was appropriate for the current research as I aimed to explore the multiple perspectives when talking about nurture groups and parental involvement.
- Ontological assumption adopted in this study was relativist. The basis of this assumption is that the researcher acknowledges the complex and multi-layered nature of reality specific to the phenomenon being discussed. Although some aspects of these realities will be shared between individuals, experiences and interpretations will be constructed differently by different people.
- The participants and researcher both influence the transformation of the experiences, from verbal information through to the transcription and hermeneutical analysis process. Therefore the epistemological stance of the researcher is one that is transactional and subjectivist.
- Analysis – parent and staff data separately.

Participants

- Four nurture group staff and four parents (from four different nurture groups)
- Consent - Head teacher, staff and parents
- Opportunity sampling
- Sample size

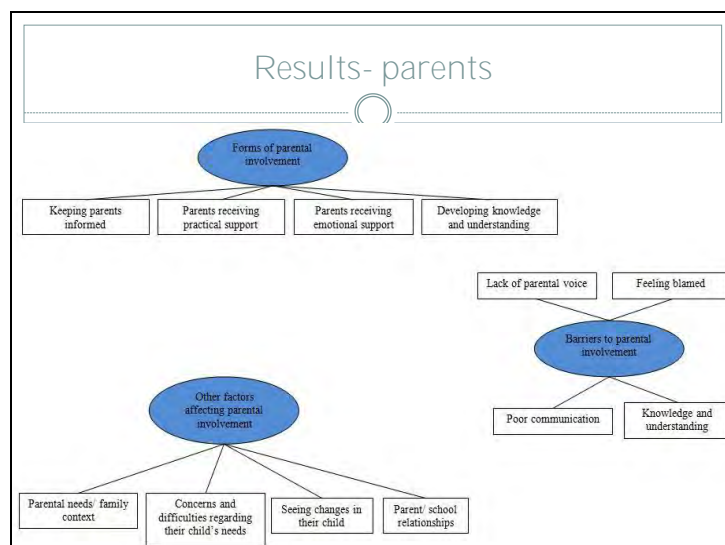
- The research aimed to gain the perceptions of nurture group staff and parents of children who have previously or currently attending a nurture group.
- All schools running nurture groups in the LA were initially contacted to ask head teachers for their consent.
- From the seven schools contacted, five gave their consent. However one of these were omitted from the study as it was felt that their model of nurture group delivery was not in line with the theoretical assumptions of the original nurture group model. This left four nurture groups used in the current study.
- However the eight participants interviewed is in line with many guidelines on the sample size for qualitative studies (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999).

## Data collection

- Information sheet sent to participants prior to meeting.
- Semi-structured interviews (location chosen by participant).
- Use of photos as additional materials in SSI (Hurworth et al, 2005).



Example of photos used during SSI



### Parents: Forms of parental involvement

- *"...when I got in there everybody was really friendly, they, and so welcoming, they were all on first name terms with each other and with myself, so that relaxed you. They showed me round and explained everything and it was just an open house, it felt like if I had anything I could bring it to them, which I needed with my mum being ill (starts to cry)." P2*

1. Keeping parents informed
2. Parents receiving practical support
3. Parents receiving emotional support
4. Developing knowledge and understanding

- Subthemes: keeping parents informed, parents receiving practical and emotional support, developing knowledge and understanding.
- Interacting with staff, including incidents of receiving information and how they were supported throughout their child's time in the nurture group.

1) The theme reflects parental views of the function of these connections and their experiences of staff working with them.

2) Generally informal routes of passing on information to staff, which created functions of support and the opportunity to develop parental understanding.

3) But methods of keeping parents informed were mainly staff to parent, rather than two-directional.

### Parents: Barriers to parental involvement

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>“At first I thought nurture, you think oh gosh I haven’t done a very good job at home I haven’t done the nurturing at home and I felt like I failed.” P2</i></li>   <li>• <i>“I found it very patronising, very you know, it I just felt that it didn’t matter what I said I weren’t gonna, weren’t gonna get through.” P1</i></li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of parental voice</li> <li>2. Feeling blamed</li> <li>3. Poor communication</li> <li>4. Knowledge and understanding</li> </ol>
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- Subthemes: lack of parental voice, feeling blamed, poor communication, knowledge and understanding.

1) Parents felt that they weren’t heard and weren’t able to raise concerns.

2) There were feelings of blame regarding the child’s difficulties as well as for difficulties with not being in contact in the nurture group.

3) Parents felt that the nurture group did not always communicate clearly to them, not fully informing parents of why their child was selected for a nurture group. Parents also felt that they were not kept up-to-date with developments within the nurture group. This subtheme also included the environment in which nurture group staff spoke to parents and the appropriateness of the time or location for those discussions.

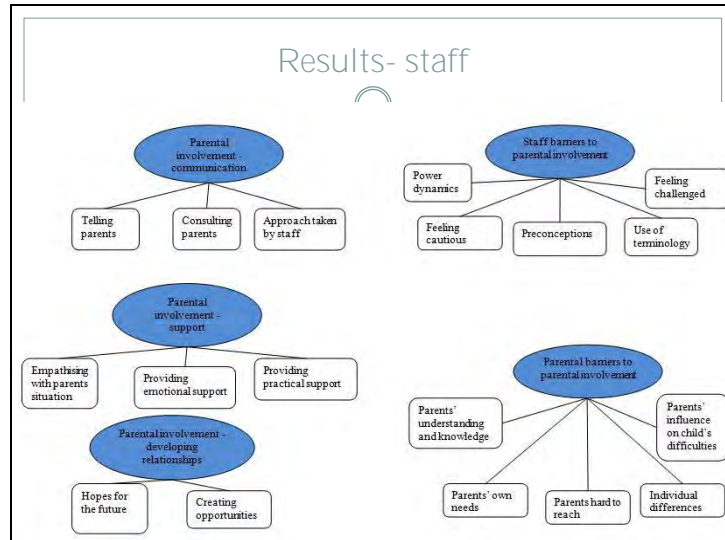
4) Consciously or unconsciously, the knowledge and understanding parents lacked was a barrier to them understanding the work that was carried out in the nurture group. There were gaps in parents’ knowledge regarding what a nurture group was and how this could help their child’s development.

Parents: Other factors affecting parental involvement

- “I’ve got cancer as well but then I didn’t know that and I’m on watch and wait so everything’s good for me at this stage but um it was all spiralling, I was ill, feeling ill but couldn’t think why. Mum was really ill, Tim was having all of this.” P2*
- “Oh definitely made it a lot easier for me, yeah, because I’ve got my own problems as well.” P3*

1. Parental needs/family context
2. Concerns and difficulties concerning their child’s needs
3. Seeing changes in their child
4. Parent/school relationship

- Parents’ were experiencing situational factors relating to themselves and/or the whole family whilst their child was in a nurture group. The various stresses placed on the family could be seen as having implications on how parents may engage with nurture groups, as well as how they cope with their child’s needs at home.
- Parents found that in addition to other stressors occurring in the family home, effectively caring for their child was emotionally and physically tiring. Parents talked about not knowing what to do, and feeling drained by the continuous contact from school regarding their child. The specific challenges varied, depending on the needs of the parent and the child.
- The extent of their expressed relief is perhaps indicative of the degree of concern they had prior to the nurture group. Parents implied that as the experience was positive for their child, this also had a positive impact for the parent.
- It seemed from the interviews that parent-nurture group staff relationships were influenced to some extent by the parent-school relationships. Parents who had experienced previous difficulties with the school also appeared not to have overly positive interactions with the nurture group.



- Staff views and experiences are mixed and sometimes contradictory. Whilst staff were able to give examples of positive and successful interactions with parents, they also seemed to find these challenging and time consuming – often resulting in limited tangible success.

Staff: Parental involvement - communication

• *“...it’s just that you’ve got to be positive when you’re talking to parents haven’t you, you can’t, you’ve always got to find something positive, you can’t just go in on the negative side.” S3*

1. Telling parents
2. Consulting parents
3. Approach taken by staff

- 1) Communication tended to be more one way than a consultative two-directional style. This mainly took place was at the beginning of the nurture group and if there were issues with a child.
- 2) Although two directional communication did not take place as frequently as one directional communication, it seemed to have a more positive impact on staff-parent relationships.
- 3) Staff outlined their approach to communication, recognising that certain approaches are more successful where their language and non-verbal communication is altered.

## Staff: Parental involvement - support

• *“...we do extend that nurturing out to the parents because I think that's important you know. because if they're feeling nurtured and they're getting a bit of nurture, coz actually you don't know if they were nurtured as kids you know. so if you nurture the parents a bit and show them, it's good practice.”<sup>51</sup>*

1. Empathising with parents situation
2. Providing emotional support
3. Providing practical support

- Staff empathised with the parents regarding challenges they face with personal circumstances as well as supporting their child's needs. Whilst some demonstrate empathy with current situational factors, some other members of staff also demonstrated that they empathised with how perhaps parents have developed their own parenting from early childhood experiences.
- Being available for parents and giving them methods of contacting staff if needed appears to be a strategy that has been successful. There was also a focus on taking a positive stance with parents, who may not be used to hearing encouraging feedback.
- Practical support tended to come in the form of behaviour management strategies and praise, and signposting on to other services, for example with parenting classes.

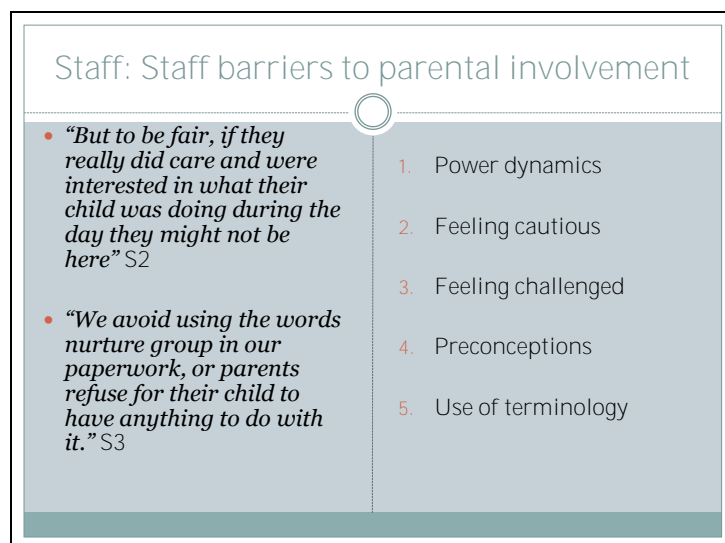


Staff: Parental involvement - developing relationships

- “I do think we need to have the parents more aware and more on board perhaps. More involved but I don’t want them coming in every day, you know just...I think um...yeah, I think there definitely needs to be that to be improved. There’s definitely areas that you know you need improving and I think last year was our first year and our setting up year, and that was hard enough as it was.” S4*

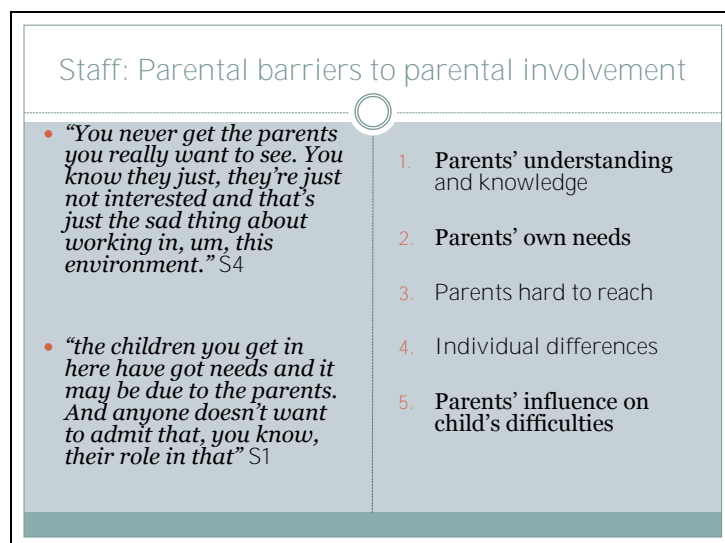
1. Creating opportunities
2. Hopes for the future

- Staff raised the need to have to create opportunities to get parents involved in the work that takes place in the nurture group. This predominately involved coffee mornings and inviting parents to come in to join in part of the nurture group sessions. In line with this staff recognised that they needed to use opportunistic invitations, which required the least effort from parents – for example when parents would already be on the school site. Staff felt that they had to create such opportunities, as without these the level of engagement from parents was low. Staff highlighted the need to have an ‘open invitation’ in which the offer was made to parents. However only one nurture group staff member talked about additional strategies to ensure that parents did attend.
- Despite the challenges felt by staff they are still hopeful for the future of parent-nurture group relationships. All of the nurture groups had plans for increasing parental involvement for future groups, based on past experiences of successes and failed strategies. However there was a recognition that developing work with parents can be time consuming, which can be challenging.



Some barriers staff were aware of, others were more subtle.

- Staff appeared to take a cautious approach to working with parents. This seemed to be either due to previous experiences or due to worries about upsetting or offending parents
- Some staff have attempted to work with parents but have been unsuccessful. Continually trying to work with parents and experiencing set-backs has resulted in staff barriers feeling challenged and sometimes low in motivation.
- Other staff barriers are more value based and could perhaps be more difficult to address. Staff held preconceptions about the ‘type’ of parent whose child attends a nurture group, which seems to convey a parent centric view of further challenges.
- Furthermore the use of power dynamics can create a barrier to parents wanting to, or having the opportunity to work collaboratively with staff. Staff either seemed to use the power dynamics between staff and parents intentionally, such as involving the head in getting parents to consent, or they seem unaware of possible unequal partnerships.
- In the case of the use of terminology nurture groups appear to intentionally avoid the term ‘nurture group’ in order to prevent parents from finding out more about the type of needs that are targeted.



- Staff felt that parents did not understand the aims of the nurture group, and tended to focus on educational aspects of the group instead of considering their child’s emotional needs. However the staff interviewed were unable to provide examples of trying to overcome this observation. Also may be linked to the subtheme of ‘terminology’.
- Staff describe how working with parents in nurture groups can be challenging due to their own needs – which can relate to their own learning difficulties, medical needs, social or emotional needs.
- Perhaps as a consequence of these first two subthemes staff felt that parents whose children attend nurture groups are hard to reach and are distant from the work that takes place in nurture groups.
- Highlighting the need for work to be carried out with parents in their own skill development, one subtheme that arose was the belief that the parents have some influence over their child’s difficulties.
- One further barrier to staff working with parents is the lack of consistency regarding what parents want, their level of engagement and their personal circumstances – all of these mean that it can be difficult to develop an overall ‘one size fits all’ approach.

Support needs to be “...finely differentiated.” in order to meet the specific needs of families

## Conclusions

- Staff and parents could give examples of positive parental involvement.
- Both expressed a desire for parents to be more involved.
- Barriers had led to both parents and staff to become hard to reach.
- Both parents and nurture group staff require additional support.
- Developing relationships, communication, sharing practice.

- Small exploratory study is one of the first research studies to consider the role of parents and staff in nurture groups, from their individual lived perspectives.
- The results are specific to the population and experiences of the participants interviewed. Therefore claims about generalisability are not made. However aspects could be taken to other nurture groups following further research.
- It has considered the experiences of nurture group staff and parents, and from these, highlighted several areas which could be developed to promote positive parental involvement and staff-parent interactions in a nurture group setting. Both

## Implications for practice

- Future areas of development:
  - 1) Developing relationships
  - 2) Communication
  - 3) Sharing practice
- Nurture groups
- Schools
- Educational psychology practice



1. **Developing relationships:** Future practice needs to develop the level of participation to a more collaborative partnership, which is what parents' desire and is key to successful outcomes. A positive strengths-based approach to parental involvement (Allison et al, 2003). Home-school collaboration should be built around the core principles of being pro-active rather than being reactive, and should be sensitive to family circumstances.
2. **Communication** plays such a large role in relationships. It needs to be clear and two-directional, whilst adopting an approach that is non-judgemental and empowering. If the more basic forms of involvement are not present (such as communication), successful involvement will not be achieved. Parental role construction and parental sense of efficacy needs to be addressed in order for parents to be involved in their child's school experiences. Parents need to feel listened to, and have opportunities to provide their views and express their concerns in both informal and formal meetings with nurture group staff.
3. **Sharing practice:** involving community, ecological perspective. Building parental confidence and developing skills.

**Schools:** NGs need to be supported on a whole-school level, ensuring that there is an awareness of the practice that takes place within NGs. Development of parental involvement in NG needs to be part of a whole-school approach to engaging parents of children with SEN.

**Nurture groups:** invest more time in the strategies working with parents. Higher level of communication, creating more opportunities to update each other and raise concerns. Staff become more 'contactable', assigning specific times for meeting with parents throughout the time of the NG, as well as providing contact details. Staff need to adopt a needs and strength-based form of support, also signposting on for parents to receive support.

**EPs:** development of strategies within NG and developing nurturing schools, to ensure that NG staff are able to have support and reassurance. EPs are in a good position to co-ordinate support with other professionals, promoting inter-agency work to support the whole family.

**Appendix 16:** Braun and Clarke (2006) 15 point checklist for good thematic analysis (p.96)

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
Analysis	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
Overall	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.