

A study of Nurture Groups as a window into school relationships: restorative justice and punishment in primary school settings.

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This narrative account describes approaches to sanctions in primary school settings that also provide Nurture Groups, and the ways in which different approaches may be viewed as helpful or harmful to children's behaviour and to Nurture Group provision. It draws from research conducted as part of a larger comparative Nurture Group study examining whole school aspects of NG provision in seven case study schools. The three most successful settings within the study had relationships at their core, and a de-emphasis on sanction systems. They had an ideological leaning away from any kind of 'will to punish', and a leaning towards social relationships and Restorative Justice. In contrast the least successful settings tended towards social control and sanction systems that provided a sharp contrast between the contexts of nurture and mainstream. Overall it is concluded that in order to avoid harmful and counter-productive effects, sanctions in schools need to be individualised and they need to make sense. In addition, they need to be proportional, non-confrontational and educational. Under these conditions sanctions do not preclude social engagement or represent a punitive and reactionary response. However, it is the relational ecology of the school that dictates whether a punitive strategy of control, or a nurturing strategy of ongoing social engagement is sought overall. Nurture Groups can provide us with a useful way to model complementary aspects of Restorative Justice, as both NG and RJ philosophies are based on a will to develop, maintain, repair and sustain attachments.

Overview of NGs and research

Nurture provision in school has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years, from the inception of the first Nurture Group (hereafter NG) in the 1970s by Marjorie Boxall, up until today when it is estimated that over 2100 groups are currently in operation across the UK (<https://nurturegroups.org/about-us/faq>). Beneficial effects have been found in relation to children making significant social and emotional gains, improvements in self-management behaviours, social skills, self-awareness and confidence, skills for learning, educational

attainment, developing a nurturing environment throughout school, and impacting positively on the parent-child relationship (Sanders, 2007; Doyle, 2001; Cooper & Lovey, 1999; Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Reynolds, MacKay and Kearney, 2009). The Steer Report (DCSF, 2009) pointed to the role that nurture provision can play in early intervention, in line with the importance placed upon this aspect in the Children's Plan (2007). Earlier and often-cited research by Iszatt and Wasilewska (1997) found that placing children in NGs promoted the retention of significant numbers of children within the mainstream school system and a reduction in persistent difficulties. Finally, the success of NGs has been found to be related to the length of time a group has been running. NGs which had been in place for more than two years were found to be significantly more effective than groups which had been in existence for less than two years (Cooper and Whitbread, 2007). Bennet's recent (2015) overview of the impact of nurture has found it to be broadly positive particularly with regard to short term benefits.

This paper is based on a comparative study, commissioned by the Nurture Group Network of seven primary schools in the NW of UK which included nurture group provision or which were based on nurture group principles. A full report of the study (Warin and Hibbin, 2016) is obtainable from the Nurture Group Network. In this paper we focus on a theme which emerged from the analysis: restorative versus punitive responses to children's challenging behaviour.

School discipline and Restorative Justice (RJ)

The landscape in relation to current policy and legislation for behaviour management in schools strongly upholds the disciplinarian function of all teaching staff (including teaching assistants). In addition, official guidance emphasises the importance of "a strong behaviour policy to support staff in managing behaviour, including the use of rewards and sanctions" (DfE, 2014; 3). In the UK, the 'will to punish' has been explored by Parsons (2012) who has noted that the tendency towards punitive responses to difficult behaviour is 'deeply embedded'. He draws attention to high rates of school exclusion and also to high imprisonment rates for young people in the UK and Wales. He notes that therapeutic and restorative approaches are strongly undermined by both right-wing politics and the populist press, arguing that "'goodies for baddies' is hard to sell" (2012; 192). The negative impact of overly punitive disciplinary practices has been noted by Kupchik (2010) who suggests that

the will to punish is counter-productive because it represents an overreaction which can result in a worsening of student's behaviour. In addition, the narrow focus on rules and norms in school results in the real reasons for misbehaviour being missed. Kupchik (2010) goes on to suggest that the disciplinary outcome of breaking these narrowly defined rules does not provide students with opportunities to learn. As suggested by Irby (2014):

“Overly punitive (i.e., deep) discipline nets are not good for students. They alienate children from academic curriculum and erode the moral authority of schools. Students pushed into the bottom of the net are more likely to be funnelled into school-to-prison pipelines that will negatively impact their entire lives.” (529)

RJ stands out as a contrasting approach to the 'will to punish'. It is a concept derived from the criminal justice system that has recently gained popularity in school settings (Hopkins, 2011; Restorative Justice 4 Schools, 2015). The key principles of maintaining relationships, and when necessary working on relationship repair and re-integration, are the hallmarks of RJ. Originating from dissatisfaction with the retributive model of crime and punishment, it has been noted by Reimer (2015) that whilst “RJ is a diverse, multi-layered concept (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Woolford, 2009) it “views harm not primarily as a violation of rules or laws, but as a violation of people and relationships (Zehr, 2002)” (Reimer, 2015; 7).

Behaviour as communication

The intersection between Nurture and RJ in school can be understood as the recognition of *behaviour as communication* as we can see more clearly if we compare the stated principles of Nurture and Restorative Justice. The six principles of Nurture are: children's learning is understood developmentally; the classroom offers a safe base; nurture is important for the development of wellbeing; language is a vital means of communication; all behaviour is communication; transition is important in children's lives (NGN, 2015). According to Evans and Lester, 2013, the seven principles of RJ in schools are: meeting needs; providing accountability and support; making things right; viewing conflict as a learning opportunity; building healthy learning communities; restoring relationships; and addressing power imbalances. Both sets of principles emphasise the importance of behaviour as communication through meeting needs. In this conception of 'relational restoration' (McClusky, 2008) student behaviour is viewed as a function of “unmet needs that can result in aggression, violence and perceived misbehaviour” (Evans and Lester, 2012; 58). In contrast to criminal

models that view students as ‘bad’ and emphasise retribution (Vaandering, 2010), RJ and nurture both focus on trying to understand underlying influences on problematic behaviour and responding to meet children’s needs.

It has been observed that RJ can be understood in different ways by those implementing it with some teachers viewing it as a way to challenge taken for granted school power structures while for others it is viewed as merely another strategy alongside more usual disciplinary practices (McCluskey et al, 2008). Reimer (2015) expands upon these conflicting interpretations and identifies two types of RJ: affirmative and transformative: “affirmative RJ is underpinned by a desire for social control; transformative RJ is underpinned by a desire for social engagement” (Reimer, 2015; 15). Both forms have their advocates with affirmative RJ being seen as a pragmatic choice that may not dismantle the system but surely improves it, while transformative forms of RJ are seen as addressing the conditions necessary for social change, making opportunities for people to evaluate their lives, make changes and address injustices (Woolford, 2009). Since RJ was a resonant concept throughout this study, we make use of Reimer’s typology as a lens for looking more closely at the practices and policies surrounding this concept. Firstly, we present an overview of the context, purposes and methods implicated in our study of seven NG focussed primary school settings.

Comparative Nurture Group Research. Study of 7 primary school settings in NW of England

The study aimed to explore what kinds of psychosocial interventions impact beneficially on vulnerable children, with a focus on the principles and practices of nurture groups. We selected seven settings, discriminating between schools that had a serious engagement with NG principles and those settings who perhaps pay lip service to NG provision and for whom ‘nurture’ is more peripheral. We developed sampling criteria based on Bennett’s overview (2014) of influences on NG outcomes: leadership commitment and whole school understanding; size of setting; longevity of provision; level and quality of staff training. In addition, the Educational Psychologist who acted as a gatekeeper and critical friend to the research, was able to offer insights about settings according to these criteria.

Five of the seven settings were primary schools that employed a traditional NG format in delivering socio-emotional support to children with attachment difficulties and associated problems. A traditional NG format is characterised by part-time provision over an average 2-4 terms after which time children are reintegrated back into the mainstream class, with around 10-12 children and two members of NG staff (Cooper and Tiznak, 2007), located in a 'family' styled room (Boxall, 2002). The Boxall Profile (Boxall, 2002) or similar assessment scales such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) are used by the NG panels to select children for nurture provision and monitor their progress. All of our five selected NG settings conformed to this description (Settings 1- 5). The remaining two settings served as alternative forms of provision: one school (Setting 6) is a primary school who had disbanded their NG in a bid to integrate nurture throughout the whole school, and the second school (Setting 7) was a small residential setting for children (also aged 5 – 11) from the most disadvantaged backgrounds of neglect and abuse. Our intention behind the selection of these latter two 'alternative provisions' was to identify settings based on nurturing principles and ethos with a clear emphasis on relationships and an acknowledgement of the importance of early attachments. This would enable us to examine provisions that are clearly related to NGs although perhaps not always recognised or acknowledged as such.

Methodology and methods

Our methodology aimed at collaborating closely with senior leaders, NG staff, mainstream staff, parents and pupils in each of the schools. Each setting was visited on three occasions and included various data collection strategies: interviews with Heads; focus groups with a mix of NG/mainstream staff; interviews with NG staff; tours of the school; observations within the NG rooms; collection of Boxall profiles and other relevant data. All interviews were semi-structured and based around the identification of emerging themes. In particular, the interviews with the Heads which were the first we carried out, focused upon questions about staff appointment, training, selection of children for nurture, transitions between the NG and mainstream, communication with parents, whole school aspects of NG provision, and support for NGs in school from senior leadership. RJ came out strongly as an emerging theme from these interviews, and also with other staff members in school. As a result, while we did not explicitly pursue RJ as a focus of our research, its prevalence within the dataset

was strongly suggestive of it being an area of significant relevance to nurture provision in school.

We also carried out two child case studies within each school through informal conversations with the child and with a parent/carer. In selecting these 14 children we aimed to have a mix of gender, age group, types of social and emotional difficulties and we particularly wanted some children who had the experience of being reintegrated into mainstream classes. The selection was made in consultation with staff and parents.

Overall findings emphasising a need for ‘whole school’ approaches to nurture

In the discussion that follows we use the terms “most successful” and “least successful” to describe sub groups of the seven settings. These judgements are based on an overview of the value of the NG provision for its targeted group of pupils informed by criteria that were embedded in the five dimensions we scrutinised: The Child; The Nurture Group; The Mainstream Class; The Parents/Carers; and The Whole School. The three “most successful” schools discussed here shared: strong leadership; an emphasis on the importance of relationships to enhance communication and to model positive and functional ways of relating to children, parents and teachers; training for all staff members to instil an understanding of and value for nurture across the school to promote a vision of whole school as therapeutic community and an understanding of behaviour as communication.

Overall, the findings from this study suggested that the least successful settings in relation to nurture provision were characterised by low levels of whole school training in nurture-based approaches, a lack of communication and value clashes between nurture practitioners and mainstream class teachers. In these settings nurture was sometimes seen as ‘a soft option for naughty kids’. An example is Setting 1, where there was a deskilling of the mainstream teaching staff who handed over the more challenging children to the NG trained staff. This was despite the fact that nurture provision had been in place for around 5 years during which time the school had not managed to create consistency between school contexts with the overall result that the nurture approach was being undermined. In the case of Setting 1, nurture provided a window into relationships that were highly divided where nurture served

as a sticking plaster rather than a way to foster more meaningful forms of social engagement and ongoing relationships within school.

In contrast, the most successful settings were characterised by a high level of whole school training in nurture specifically and in psycho-social approaches more generally. These settings also had an emphasis upon recruitment and retention of high quality staff, good communication and bridging activities between the contexts of mainstream and nurture, strong relationships between pupils, nurture staff and teaching staff, and a whole school understanding of *behaviour as communication* (Evans and Lester, 2013).

Whole school understandings and the positive effect of developing a nurturing environment throughout school, is an important aspect of NGs (Cooper, Arnold and Boyd, 2001; Cooper and Whitebread, 2007; Mackay, 2015). In a similar vein, the importance of taking a whole school approach to fostering the mental health and wellbeing of children has been taken up more generally by Spratt et al (2006):

“Unless schools address pupils’ experience of the whole school environment, there is little hope that the targeted endeavours of specialists will have much impact... By addressing mental well-being as a whole school priority, all pupils benefit, not only those experiencing difficulties.” (Spratt et al, 2006; 20)

The findings that came out of this study are highly supportive of such assertions. It was found that the contrast between the NG and the mainstream class in relation to behavioural management strategies is a significant factor in determining the success of nurture in school. The schools that had a strong contrast between mainstream and nurture, with a number of different and complex behavioural management strategies including both sanctions and rewards, and a comparatively punitive response overall, were less successful. In these settings we saw a failure to embed nurture across school, and benefit the targeted NG children. It is this aspect that we wish to highlight specifically in this paper and will now consider in more detail.

In choosing to focus on differences in approaches to rewards and sanctions our purpose is to examine the practices and principles of the schools that were highly successful with regard to their positive impact on the psycho-social wellbeing and development of the vulnerable children in their care. We aim to examine their different approaches to the management and understanding of these children’s behaviour on both an ideological and functional basis.

Ultimately we hope to uncover the ways in which different approaches may be viewed as helpful or harmful within an educational context.

De-emphasising the punitive in the three most successful settings

The good communication and strong relationships found to be characteristic of the most successful settings was accompanied by a move away from more punitive and rigid forms of school discipline. We identified three of the settings as being particularly successful in this respect: Settings 3, 6 and 7. They had differing ways of managing behaviour which we now explore in detail. Settings 3 and 7 combined varying levels of behavioural management in the form of rewards and sanctions with an approach that was relationship-based but not explicitly focused upon RJ. Setting 6, rather remarkably, described itself as being entirely sanction-free and their approach was based around a very explicitly articulated policy in relation to relations and RJ. We overview their approaches as follows:

Comment [R1]: Becs. Made explicit focus on RJ in each of the schools

Setting 3: This school took a highly individualised approach to disruptive behaviour where teachers were entrusted to manage behaviour and each situation was dealt with in isolation. Rewards and sanctions were used but there was not a strong emphasis on behavioural management overall and the behaviour policy of the school was simple and very brief. There was no visual behavioural management scheme such as the Traffic Light System (TLS) or 5 Steps (see below) as had been seen in many of the less successful settings and points and rewards were not taken away for negative behaviour. This setting also included the use of internal isolations within school, and fixed-term exclusions outside of school, for very extreme cases of disruptive behaviour in school. However, these were rarely utilised with an average of two internal isolations being given per year, and two fixed-term exclusions being given in the summer term of 2015 which had been a “very challenging year” (Head: Setting 3). Prior to that, there had only been two days of fixed term exclusions since 2010.

Setting 7: An individualised approach was also taken in this setting where each child’s behaviour was recognised as distinctive for that child. There was no TLS, but points and rewards *were* taken away for bad behaviour, and sanctions such as the loss of ‘Golden Time’, were linked to classroom jobs such as ‘making a cup of tea or doing some laminating’ with an adult. This ‘sanction’ actually had the positive advantage for the child of working with a

trusted adult. The behaviour policy was explicitly articulated giving a number of clear examples of appropriate ways to discipline children in a non-punitive manner, with an emphasis on the importance of positive praise, constructive criticism, self-reflection and repair of relationships.

Setting 6: This setting utilised a singular approach across the whole school based on relationships and RJ. It was this overarching ideological vision that had created the conditions for integrated nurture and had led to a decision, taken nearly two years before our visit, to disband the discrete NG rooms. In addition, the ‘Rounded and Grounded Framework’ was visible on the wall of each classroom. This strategy consisted of a list of words aimed to help children within four areas: Having Relationships; Having Insight; Being Robust; and Being Practical. The Framework was consistently used and modelled by teaching staff to give all children a language and understanding of the emotional attributes that the school was trying to develop and instil. Similarly to Setting 7, the behaviour policy was explicitly articulated with an emphasis upon the wider ethos of the school and a lengthy discussion of restorative approaches including a script for the restorative questioning of pupils.

A typology of approaches to reward and punishment in settings 3, 6 and 7

Setting 3 de-emphasised rewards and punishments overall within their formal behaviour policy and did not utilise behavioural management strategies such as 5 Steps or the Traffic Light System, but still allowed teachers to discipline children according to the sanctions and rewards they felt were most appropriate and effective. In addition, internal exclusions were utilised for particularly challenging behaviour, as suggested by the Head in Setting 3, “I tell them that it’s an internal isolation...to protect the other children, give everybody a breathing space...”. While the school did not explicitly pursue RJ as a philosophical orientation, the overall ethos within this setting seemed to support the affirmative model of RJ (Woolford, 2009; Reimer, 2015). However, there were also strongly transformative elements of RJ in relation to the extensive pastoral system and the consistently nurturing approach that was taken across school overall. A harmonious combination of nurture principles and RJ strategies had permeated the school since the inception of NG provision some 9 years earlier under the leadership of the current Head.

Setting 6, in contrast, explicitly pursued RJ as a central approach and the overall ethos was resonant of more transformative forms of RJ (Woolford, 2009; Reimer, 2015) that challenged taken for granted structures and systems in school through four distinctive school policies:

1. A sanction-free approach coupled with an avoidance of extrinsic motivational strategies such as point systems and rewards
2. A bell-free policy where teachers managed break and lunch times according to whether the class was ready to finish an activity. Relatedly the behavioural trigger-point of lunch-times was avoided through the children eating their lunch in the community of their class-room.
3. The integration of nurture throughout school through in-class provision of NG trained staff.
4. The removal of the pre-existing discrete NG in favour of an integrated whole-school approach to nurture.

Setting 6 has a long-standing history of NGs, paralleling Setting 3's track record of around 9 years NG experience overall. The training and indeed the recruitment of staff meant that the principles of nurture had become embedded across the whole school. Consequently, one and a half years before our research visits occurred, the school had taken a significant decision to disband its discrete NGs and attempt to bring its vision of whole school nurture into operation. The behaviour policy was explicitly framed as a 'relationship policy' and there was a significant focus on RJ practices throughout the school. However, the reality of the integrated nurture approach was proving to be extremely difficult, especially with regard to the "acting out" behaviour of some of the more vulnerable children who would previously have been allocated to the NGs. For example, staff had decided to take up training for positive handling strategies and restraint from the organisation *Team Teach (Team-Teach Ltd, 2015)*, and as a result of these escalating difficulties the decision was taken in this setting to re-instate NGs:

"...we were finding that staff were getting hurt...children were feeling unsafe, and we needed that to create that safety, but when the nurture room went, our team teach soared, absolutely soared. So the amount of restraining we had to do...and that's why we put back the nurture room, and it's gone right back down to nearly none." Safety and Behaviour Team Leader: Setting 6

In Setting 7, RJ was not part of the explicitly articulated school policy and a more affirmative approach was pursued through sanctions and rewards being used as “a useful crutch” that gave children a “reference point of what is ok and what is not ok behaviour” (Head: Setting 7). However, their behaviour policy was also resonant of highly transformative elements of RJ through its strongly individualised and relationship-based character and also their sanction system which pursued a best practice procedure where the children were asked to what extent a consequence had worked for them, and what might work better in the future, in an ongoing and individualised assessment of behavioural management:

“...every child reacts different to everything, you put a boundary in place for one child and it's not going to work for another, you have to nurture that individual child to their specific needs. So everytime a child walks through these doors the first thing we do is read up on a ridiculously huge history of everything that has happened for this child from day one, and you can get a good guideline of 'well that consequence isn't going to work, so it's pointless, get rid of it'. You nurture the actual child and not the behaviours.” (Care worker: Setting 7)

Therefore overall, and echoing Reimer (2015), a mix of transformative and affirmative approaches to managing behaviour, were in evidence to varying degrees in the three most successful settings. While Setting 6 was most obviously transformative in character, both Settings 3 and 7 also had strongly transformative elements of RJ tending towards social engagement over social control, despite their limited use of behavioural management strategies to regulate disruptive behaviour in school.

‘The will to punish’

The less successful settings that formed part of this study were characterised by a much stronger emphasis on extrinsic motivation through the use of rewards and sanctions for good and bad behaviour together with visual behaviour management schemes such as the Traffic Light System, 5 Steps and Class Dojos. TLS and 5 Steps are popular schemes in UK schools that emphasise external motivation through negative reinforcement. With the TLS every child commences with green, can be moved to amber when behaviour is deemed to merit a warning, and finally to red for more serious and persistent misdemeanours. Similarly, 5 Steps involves children progressing from step to step according to the severity of their misdemeanour, with each step having associated behaviours. Class Dojos utilise positive

Comment [R2]: **Becs:** Emphasising the degree to which each school explicitly pursued RJ

reinforcement through an interactive online system of rewards and sanctions where points are added or subtracted in real-time according to judgements about the children's behaviour.

In one of the least successful schools both an isolation room and a behaviour unit had recently been established, and were in frequent use, to manage increasingly problematic behaviour. These strategies had been introduced in this setting despite the fact that a NG had been established four years previously as a means of confronting the same kinds of problems. As has been noted by a number of authors, "despite evidence that punishment leads to negative outcomes for the most at-risk students, zero tolerance discipline policies continue to be the most popular response to students who act out in school" (Sharkey and Fenning, 2014; 99-100).

The contrast between the contexts of nurture and mainstream can be best understood by comparing the plethora of complex methods for behaviour management utilised within the mainstream class with the more simplistic and restorative approach taken in the NG, both approaches co-existing, in tension, within the same setting:

"In terms of the behaviour policy as a whole...we're working with both rewards and sanctions...we have lots of rewards...stickers...a whole class reward system...star charts, the winner of the stars every week in the infants get extra time on the outdoor equipment, in the juniors I think it's half termly...they get taken say bowling if they're the winning class...team points, class dojo's...but we also have sanctions as well, so they get time out...In severe cases they get isolations...We also have timeout where they're sent to another class which gives the teacher breathing space...And within that we've also got meetings with parents..It can be individualised, but it's not supposed to be individualised, there is supposed to be set procedures." Class Teacher: Setting 1

"...in here we don't have rules, because we know that if we drew up a list of rules as soon as our children walked through that door, they'd break them anyway. So it's setting them up to fail and we don't do that here, we don't set our children up to fail. We don't set them up to fail... I never shout at them, I never go on...And I talk it through with them, and they need to understand why these triggers are happening." Nurture Teacher: Setting 1

In direct contrast to the expression of a 'will to punish', the three most successful schools that form the focus of this paper shared a strong value for maintaining an ongoing attachment to each child, often in the face of very challenging behaviour. In addition to the commonalities

already identified in relation to training and whole school consistency these settings were also characterised by a strong desire to avoid the ultimate form of punishment: school exclusion. For example in Setting 3 the Head had taken the decision not to terminally exclude during her leadership of the school. She reflected back on this transformation:

“...It [exclusion] just wasn’t right...it felt unintelligent, it felt clumsy...All the things you were telling the child off for doing in terms of reacting rather than thinking, in terms of showing a lack of understanding, was exactly what we were doing in response to the child. It just didn’t feel right on any level at all.” Head: Setting 3

Similarly, Setting 7 – a small residential school that worked with children from the most serious backgrounds of neglect and abuse - emphasised the counter-intuitive quality of exclusion where the will to punish stands in direct opposition to emotional security. The Head’s leadership emphasised the ongoing nature of attachment that is the theoretical underpinning of NGs:

“...we will never exclude them, we will never send them anywhere else. I’ve worked in places they do exclude and the kids get the message, punch a teacher, scratch a number of cars, break enough windows and you go out of here...that doesn’t feel to me like the right place to get the children through feeling really emotionally secure and safe.” Head: Setting 7

In Setting 6, presented as ‘sanction free’, there was an understanding that a narrow focus on rules and behaviour management through rewards and sanctions was seen as a dead-end street:

"I think its often easier to do rewards and sanctions...you've got certain procedures and you do something wrong, you do it three times and you go into internal exclusions and after that you get an exclusion, but where do you go after that - and thats what rewards and sanctions do, they lead you into an area...if it works it's great, if it doesn't, what do you do?" Social Worker: Setting 6

The importance of relationships in school

The transformative potential of RJ was understood best, and fulfilled most effectively, in the settings where there was a very strong whole school emphasis on social relationships, especially the formation of attachments. In this respect the principles of RJ harmonised with

the principles of nurture. Underpinning both philosophies is recognition of *behaviour as communication*, a commitment to building, repairing and maintaining an ongoing relationship with the child, rather than excluding, and an attempt to enlist the support of the whole school through strong leadership.

In the settings with the most developed understandings of *behaviour as communication* staff were encouraged to respond to students in a non-reactive manner that was supportive of children's needs, and not to 'take it personally'. For example this idea was presented by a member of the 'Emotional Wellbeing Team' in Setting 6:

"And we have quite a lot of tricky children, and some of the staff, particularly the TAs, take it personally...and you find that they don't think a child should speak to them that way and it's their issue really..."

A similar point was articulated by the Head in Setting 3:

"...once you stop reacting to the behaviour and looking at behaviour instead as 'what is that telling me about the child' - it's distress so often that is causing that behaviour... The point where we really turned a corner is when staff, really understood that this isn't personal, that that behaviour isn't personal..."

This restorative approach was most clearly articulated by the Head in Setting 7:

"...it's part of the whole approach... After something negative has happened is it's the adult's responsibility to get that relationship repaired. ... it's not a 'shouty shouty', 'pointy pointy', it's just a matter of fact ... and [the apology's] come from them and that means they own it and that means it has a chance for repairing the relationship." Head: Setting 7

The recent popularity of RJ includes a desire to pursue a more relational approach within a "socially responsible community" (Reimer, 2015; 9). All three settings were distinctive in emphasising the school as a community and the school's existence within its' wider community. For example in both Settings 3 and 6 there were pastoral policies that extended to work with parents including a cookery school, in-school parent and toddler groups, debt counselling, a food bank, and access to therapeutic counselling services. As a residential

school there was less contact with parents in Setting 7, but the organisation of the school was based on the idea of ‘whole school as therapeutic community’. Everyone was responsible for the psycho-social wellbeing of the child, from welfare staff to Head teacher, catering and grounds staff, and they were all trained to a high level, through the school’s own in-house diploma, to reflect this need for a consistent and socially responsible community. We discussed with the Head how far the school’s training approach could be replicated in state primary schools:

“.. if they could involve their welfare staff, their cleaners and caterers and midday supervisors and do as much training as possible.... because it’s really important that every single person who the children come in contact with has got the same approach. It’s no good if the cleaner goes and shouts at them...” Head: Setting 7

The relationship-driven approach was seen most clearly in Setting 7 where attachments with key workers were critical and sanctions involved the input of a trusted adult. In this setting sanctions and rewards were a superficial means of addressing behaviour and a nurturing and relationship-based approach was needed to make “long lasting life changing difference” (Head: Setting 7), especially with children for whom a sanction-based punitive approach was the norm:

“...one of the indicators we use that we’re doing a good job is that the child has a healthy attachment with at least one of us and that’s our responsibility to create, not the child’s....The children here - they’ve been abused. Talk about punitive - they have had the worst possible...the most unbelievable sanction and control that you can possibly imagine, so it’s not going to damage them if somebody wants to give them a detention...We’re pussy cats compared to the abusers.” Head: Setting 7

This is a striking testament to the damage that can be done through perpetuating and entrenching the vulnerable child’s experience of punishment. Whilst Setting 7 was focused on responding to a group of very vulnerable abused children, the philosophy described here by the Head can be extended to children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in all schools.

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper we stated that our goal was to describe approaches to sanctions in primary school settings that provide nurture groups or that operate according to nurturing principles and to shed some light upon the ways in which different approaches may be viewed as helpful or harmful to children's behaviour and to NG provision as a whole.

Our conclusions emphasise the idea that sanctions in mainstream schools need to be individualised and they need to make sense. They need to be proportional, non-confrontational and educational to "turn disciplinary violations into learning experiences" (Suvall, 2009; 547). For example, a child that shouts in class after repeated warnings is better served by a sanction where they are able to practise using a quiet voice under the supervision of a teacher, than a more punitive lunchtime detention. The aim of avoiding sanctions altogether, whilst being admirable, is perhaps less than achievable in practice for many schools struggling with complex and challenging behaviours and socio-cultural constraints.

The most successful settings within this research study had relationships at their core, and a de-emphasis on sanction systems. They had an ideological leaning away from any kind of 'will to punish', and a leaning towards social relationships and RJ.

"The praxis of RJ engages the rich ecologies of individuals' lives, at the social and emotional level of a community of care, be it the classroom, playground, school, or neighborhood. This is a significant paradigm change that can be characterized as a shift away from being a rule-based institution to a relationship-based institution, or from being an institution whose purpose is social control to being an institution that nurtures social engagement..."
(Morrison and Vaandering, 2014; 145).

In contrast the least successful settings tended towards social control and sanction systems that provided a sharp contrast between the contexts of nurture and mainstream. An overly punitive approach to punishment and exclusionary practices reinforce the 'school to prison pipeline' noted by Irby (2014), and needs to be more meaningfully addressed.

It is the relational ecology of the school that dictates whether a punitive strategy of control, or a nurturing strategy of ongoing social engagement is sought overall. NGs can provide us with a useful way to model complementary and reinforcing aspects of RJ. Both philosophies have much in common and are based on a will to develop, maintain, repair and sustain relationships and both use strategies for managing behaviour that reflect an underlying value for attachments.

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