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Nurture Groups –Inclusion of the Most Vulnerable Children and Young People in Catholic Schools.

By

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Abstract

Catholic schools in Scotland have a long and successful history of caring for the poor, whether it is material, emotional or spiritual poverty. This article examines the success of a nurture group initiative in Trinity High School in South Lanarkshire in Scotland. The nurture group cares for some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the school in way that is consistent with the local, national and international vision of the aims of a Catholic school.

Introduction

There are many important aims of contemporary Catholic schools. An aim that is often highlighted is the care for the poor and this can be traced back to the Vatican II era. Section nine of *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) focuses on the role of Catholic schools in caring for the needs of the poor:

This Sacred Council of the Church earnestly entreats pastors and all the faithful to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools fulfill their function in a continually more perfect way, and especially in caring for the needs of those who are poor in the goods of this world or who are deprived of the assistance and affection of a family or who are strangers to the gift of Faith.¹

Gerald Grace in *Catholic Schools. Mission, Markets and Morality* (2002) refers to this as one of the great strengths of contemporary Catholic schools:

...showing a preferential option for the poor in ethnically mixed and poor urban communities' (p.113).²

In the same work, he refers to the 'Catholic schools principle of *preferential option of the poor*' (p.181). This *preferential option for the poor* can be expressed in various ways: care for the materially poor, care for those who experience emotional poverty and care for the spiritually poor. The Catholic schools in Scotland have a long history of care for the poor and deprived. One of the first major initiatives in Catholic school education in the Post-Reformation period was The Catholic Schools Society. This was formed in 1817 in Glasgow to establish Catholic schools for the children of the growing Catholic population.³ The Catholic community, for the most part, had increased due to the steady influx of Irish Catholics seeking employment. The Catholic schools were founded to preserve the faith but also to address the high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy within the predominantly impoverished Catholic community.⁴ The contemporary Catholic schools in Scotland continue to care for the materially poor, the emotionally poor and, in the current context, have an increasing and pressing role in the care for the spiritually poor. This is described by the Congregation for Catholic Education (2014) as *spiritual poverty* and *religious ignorance* or *illiteracy*.⁵ This short article examines one of the ways in which Catholic

schools can care for the most vulnerable children and young people who experience one or more of these types of poverty. These children find daily attendance at school, engaging with teachers, socialising with other children and concentration on schoolwork especially challenging. Nurture groups aim to help children who face these challenges and have been established in the UK since 1969. This article focuses on the nurture group in Trinity High School, a Catholic secondary school in South Lanarkshire. This is the first secondary school in Scotland to be awarded the Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award from the Nurture Group Network.

This article commences with a brief introduction to nurture groups in the UK followed by an explanation of the nurture group in Trinity High School. The article will continue with a report of the voices of the children and young people in the nurture group in Trinity High School as they articulate their experience of the group. The article will then examine the ways in which the nurture group in Trinity High School is coherent with some of the aims of Catholic school education on a local, national and international level and the article will end with some concluding remarks.

Nurture Groups

Nurture groups originated in London in 1969 and were developed by Marjorie Boxall, an educational psychologist.⁶ She sought to include children at primary school level who had severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties into mainstream schooling. Many of these difficulties are a result of an impoverished early nurturing and these children find school life very challenging (intellectually and socially) and struggle to trust the teachers and develop friendships with other children. Marjorie Boxall's solution was to form nurture groups. These are:

In-school, teacher-led psychosocial intervention of groups less than 12 students that effectively replace missing or distorted early nurturing experiences for both children and young adults; they achieve this by immersing students in an accepting and warm environment which helps develop positive relationships with both teachers and peers.

There are currently 2114 nurture groups in schools throughout the UK, 1876 in primary schools and 238 in secondary schools. There are 321 nurture groups in schools in Scotland.⁷ They provide an opportunity for the most vulnerable children and young people to be supported within school and remain in school. The Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award is an accreditation scheme that recognizes excellence in nurturing.

The Nurture Group in Trinity High School

Trinity High School is a comprehensive, state-funded Catholic secondary school in South Lanarkshire in the diocese of Motherwell. The school states that it aims:

...to create an inclusive community based on our Catholic Christian values, and work with our parents, to provide a learning environment which offers the highest quality of education for all our pupils.⁸

The mission statement of the school states that it is the intention of Trinity High School to offer to all students education of the highest quality by:

- fostering a community of faith, whereby all students are informed of the teachings of the Christian Catholic Tradition, and are encouraged to celebrate their faith through prayer and the sacraments of the Church;
- encouraging and enabling each student to achieve his/her full potential;
- promoting the intellectual, physical and emotional development of the individual by encouraging responsible and co operative attitudes;
- providing a secure, stable, disciplined environment in which effective learning and teaching can take place;
- providing a range of courses/experiences which satisfy the individual needs of students regardless of age or aptitude;
- ensuring equality of opportunity;
- providing coherence, progression and continuity in the curriculum to meet national and local authority policies.

The nurture group in Trinity High School was first established in 2009. The group provides support on a daily basis for children and young people who have experienced deep emotional upset or who come from families that have experienced poverty, deprivation, trauma, and even violence and are at risk of suspension and exclusion. Over the years, the nurture group has included children and young people who have experienced abuse/neglect; are school refusers; require learning support; practice self-harm; have behavioural difficulties; have been looked after outside of home and have poor academic progress.⁹

The establishment and maintenance of a nurture group requires the allocation of considerable resource. The first requirement is a designated room that is furnished with an area for work and an area of comfortable soft furnishing for social interaction. There is also the facility in Trinity High School to make snacks and hot drinks. The second requirement is the selection and specialized training of teaching and support staff to work in the nurture group and provide the necessary pastoral care. This allocation of resource requires the commitment and dedication of the school leadership team, led by the head teacher, Mr. Peter Bollen.

The nurture group in Trinity High School has achieved quite remarkable success. It has enabled children and young people to remain in mainstream education and become more integrated in the daily life of the school. As previously noted it is the first nurture group in a secondary school in Scotland to be awarded the Quality Mark Award (currently only three primary schools in Scotland have received the award). The school has positioned itself as a nurture hub for other schools in the local area.¹⁰ There has been increased participation from members of the school teaching staff and steady growth in the engagement of parents of children and young people in the nurture group. The percentage of pupils who have attended the nurture group in the early stages of their secondary school career and who have progressed to an initial positive school leaver destination is an impressive 96%.

Voices of the Children and Young People

We engaged in small-scale research with the nurture group in Trinity High School as part of the School Improvement Partnership Programme, a programme evaluated by the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, School of Education, University of Glasgow.¹¹ This programme is funded and led by Education Scotland.¹² We conducted three sets of interviews with small groups of the children and young people attending the nurture group to explore their experiences of the group. Understandably, these were very sensitive interviews as we had to establish a relationship of trust with these vulnerable children and young people and while most of them engaged in the process, some preferred to contribute very little or disengage altogether. Their experiences of the nurture group have been very positive and the group has been of considerable support to them. We have categorized the main themes that emerged from the interviews as follows: (1) a safe space; (2) quality of relationships with teachers and (3) positive outcomes. The nurture group provides a safe space, a place where pupils are able to take time out from the school day when they are having a bad day and ‘go and talk about feelings’ (female pupil, second year). It is also a place where the children and young people can learn how to establish and sustain friendships with others. They feel that in the group they can: ‘talk about friendship, learn how to treat friends properly’ (male pupil, third year). The nurture group promotes a higher quality of relationship between the pupils and the teaching staff who are assigned to the group. The pupils state that they feel comfortable communicating with these teachers. The teachers are: ‘someone to trust’ (female pupil, second year). These teachers are adults who have ‘time to speak to you’ (male pupil, second year) and ‘are easier to talk to’ than other teachers (male pupil, fourth year). The combined effect of the safe space and the quality of the relationships helps to produce positive outcomes for the children and young people. The nurture group helps them ‘to prepare for other classes’ (female pupil, first year) and get them through the day. It gives them more confidence and enhances their self-esteem: ‘makes us feel better about ourselves’ (female pupil, first year). It also helps them cope with some of the serious emotional challenges that they have encountered in their lives: ‘helps you get over losses in the family’ (female pupil, second year).

The Nurture Group Supporting the Aims of the Catholic School

The nurture group in Trinity High School, as has been seen above, has been very successful as a nurture group and has been recognized with the Quality Mark Award. Nurture groups do not necessarily have to be located in Catholic schools – they did not originate primarily in Catholic schools and there is scope for them in almost any type of school. Further, they are not the only means for inclusion and care of vulnerable children and young people. The leadership of Trinity High School, however, has been very explicit in stating that the Nurture Group is coherent with the aims of their Catholic school and has been instrumental in helping them to realize these aims in the every day life of the school. This can be understood using three levels of analysis: *micro* (at the level of the aims of the school), *meso* (at the level of the aims of the wider network of Scottish Catholic schools) and *macro* (at the level of the international network of Catholic schools). At the micro level of the school, the nurture group helps the children and young people to meet many of the aims of the school. The children and young people are supported to ‘achieve their full potential’ and the group is structured to promote their ‘intellectual and emotional development’. The nurture group provides a special ‘secure, stable, disciplined environment in which effective learning and teaching can take place’. The secure and stable environment of

the group is particularly important for these children as this helps them to focus on their learning. The group provides a 'range of courses/experiences which satisfy the individual needs of students regardless of age or aptitude'. The nurture group is able to provide support for the learning in the timetabled classes and also provide extra learning experiences for the participating pupils. The nurture group provides 'coherence, progression and continuity in the curriculum to meet national and local authority policies'. The nurture group has helped many of the children and young people progress to acquire national qualifications and skills.

At the meso level of the aims of the wider network of Scottish Catholic schools, the nurture group has helped the school to achieve some of the key aims of the Charter for Catholic schools in Scotland, promoted by the Scottish Catholic Education Service.¹³ The nurture group has helped the school to realize the aim of a:

...commitment to the integrated education and formation of the whole person, in close partnership with parents as the first educators of their children.

The nurture group aims to integrate the children and young people intellectually and socially in the school and support them in their progress through secondary school. The nurture group has been a means to enhance the participation of the parents of the children who use the nurture group. The nurture group has emphasised the lived experience of another aim:

...inclusive ethos which aims to honour the life, dignity and voice of each person, made in the image of God.

The leadership of Trinity High School and all of the staff involved in the nurture group are committed to perceiving the success of the nurture group within the understanding of the children and young people created in the image of God and called to share a covenant relationship with God.¹⁴

The nurture group is also coherent with a third aim:

...commitment to communicate Catholic social teaching and thereby to promote social justice and opportunity for all.

Arguably, the nurture group does more than *promote social justice and opportunity for all* – it assists the school in its efforts to construct and sustain a culture of *social justice and opportunity for all*. At the macro level of the international network of Catholic schools, the nurture group has been successful in providing an example of exercising the *preferential option of the poor* in a Catholic school. The nurture group supports the most vulnerable children, not only the ones who are materially poor, but the ones who may experience emotional poverty and lack support from their families.

Concluding Remarks

This article has explained the success of the nurture group in Trinity High School within the local authority and within the nurture group network. The article has also examined the ways in which the nurture group helps the school to meet and live the school aims, the aims of the Charter for Catholic schools in Scotland and support the

school to exercise the *preferential option for the poor*. The school has demonstrated its commitment to *create an inclusive community based on our Catholic Christian values*. This is a school community that recognizes Christ in all members of the community and actively strives to include and retain the most vulnerable and those most likely to disengage.

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http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html

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³ FitzPatrick, T.A. (1986). *Catholic Secondary Education in South-West Scotland before 1872*.

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⁴ Anderson, R.D. (1995) *Education and the Scottish People*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Skinnider (1967).

⁵ Congregation for Catholic Education (2014) *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion. Instrumentum Laboris*. Available at:

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⁶ The Nurture Group Network (2016) *What is a Nurture Group?* Available at:

<https://www.nurturegroups.org/introducing-nurture/what-nurture-group-0>

⁷ The Nurture Group Census (2016) *Nurture Group Census*. Available at:

<https://www.nurturegroups.org/what-we-do/research-and-evidence/nurture-group-census>

⁸ Trinity High School (2016) *Welcome to Trinity*. Available at:

<http://www.trinity.s-lanark.sch.uk/our-school/welcome-to-trinity/>

⁹ Chapman, C., Lowden, K., Chestnutt, H., Hall, S., McKinney, S., Hulme, M. and Friel, N. (2015) *The School Improvement Partnership Programme (2015) Using Collaboration and Enquiry to Tackle Educational Inequity. Report to Scottish Education, August 2015*. Available at:

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¹⁰ Chapman, C., Lowden, K., Chestnutt, H., Hall, S., McKinney, S., Hulme, M. and Friel, N. (2015)

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¹² Education Scotland (2016) *The School Improvement Partnership Programme*. Available at:

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/partnerships/schoolimprovementpartnershipprogramme/intro.asp>

¹³ Scottish Catholic Educational Service (2016) *Charter for Catholic Schools*. Available at:

<http://sces.org.uk/charter-for-catholic-schools/>

¹⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004) *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*, section 108. Available at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html