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What is This?
‘When they’re making breakfast they’ll talk. . .’: Narrative approaches in the evaluation of Nurture Groups

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Abstract
This article reports a small-scale qualitative study of work with staff in five Nurture Groups (NGs) for pupils aged 5–11 years. Three separate sessions in each Nurture Group were conducted according to narrative methodology and the following themes emerged in analysis within the context of the relationships developed with staff including: 1) the positive accounts of children who might otherwise be perceived negatively and ‘at risk’ from a number of factors associated with life outcomes (e.g. low academic attainments, school exclusion, family breakdown); 2) an emphasis on the value of establishing good relationships with parents who would otherwise be alienated from school processes (e.g. on account of language, cultural or other social barriers), and 3) expressions of dedication, commitment and the sheer enthusiasm of Nurture Group staff for their work, the children and their parents. It is suggested that narrative methods are a valuable resource in both research and professional practice, in particular, for professionals who work with children considered vulnerable and their families and who also wish to evaluate the quality of their own work.

Keywords
narrative research and practice, nurture groups, qualitative research methods, young children

Introduction
This article reports on the development and use of narrative methods to evaluate the work of the Nurture Group Network (NGN) in the UK and the work reported here is informed by a social constructionist paradigm (Billington, 1997, 2000, 2003). Social constructionism takes particular theoretical positions in relation to epistemology and ontology and on this basis I had previously articulated the following five questions in relation to critical and evaluative work with children and young people, whether research or practice:

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How do we speak of children?
How do we speak with children?
How do we write of children?
How do we listen to children?
How do we listen to ourselves [when working with children] (Billington, 2006a: 8)

These questions underpinned the narrative study reported here which itself sits within a larger study employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, commissioned by the NGN and which was originally designed to establish the methods by which the impact and effectiveness of NGs could be evaluated (Farrell et al., 2009). The greater part of the Evaluation Framework to be developed would offer measurement of selected variables of interest to government and purchasing authorities (e.g. attendance, behaviour targets, attainments). The qualitative approach discussed here, however, operationalized the ‘five questions’ and provided a critical framework for exploring the issues of meaning and experience which seem to be at the core of the NGN’s claims to be a unique intervention in the lives of vulnerable young children.

Following consultations and pilot work with over 30 NGs a ‘Framework for the Evaluation of Nurture Groups’ was devised which was intended ultimately for the NGN to operate themselves (Farrell et al., 2009). However, while on the one hand a series of measurement activities formed the bulk of the Framework, the narrative work was devised according to certain ‘critical’ principles and involved modelling an activity and working with NG staff over the course of three sessions of approximately one hour each.

Out of the full sample of 30 schools (all of which were in receipt of the NGN Charter Mark) five volunteer schools participated in the narrative research. Narrative methodology was chosen on the basis that it would be best placed to produce data which would be attuned to the context of the intervention model being applied in NGs, considering especially meaning and experience which have always proved elusive to more customary positivist research methods. Data in this study took the form of recorded narratives developed with the staff as participant accounts which were written verbatim at the time told to me, and drawing on diary sheets and notes which were made by the participants during the course of the research. The NG staff were also invited to provide other written materials before the end of the last session.

Thematic analysis was carried out after the final session on researcher notes and participant data and I articulated a number of themes (overarching, super-ordinate and sub-ordinate). The focus of this article is not on those themes, however, but rather on, first, the principles underpinning the research context (i.e. the relationship between researcher and researched) and second, the narrative data co-constructed with the participants.

In this article I will first provide brief accounts of NGs, the larger evaluative framework and narrative approaches to research and professional practice. The principles of the narrative research will be critically examined together with the procedures adopted in this study. A range of participant narratives (verbal and written) will then be presented prior to a brief analysis and discussion.

Nurture Groups

There are about 1000 Nurture Groups across the UK many of which have been awarded the NG Charter mark. Some well-established groups have been in existence for several decades and were originally and specifically conceived as an alternative intervention for young children who were presenting a range of complex social and emotional, and in particular, attachment difficulties.
NGs have claimed to offer vulnerable young people an educational and quasi-therapeutic experience which is theoretically coherent and run by appropriately trained staff. They thus provide one means of responding to UK government concerns about the mental health and well-being of young people (DCSF, 2008).

NGs are most frequently to be found in schools for children aged 5–11 in the UK although the NGN supports interventions in a variety of essentially educational settings, for example, High Schools, Special Schools and Young Offenders’ institutions. The ‘classic’ NG would contain between 6 and 12 children aged around 4 to 8 years and would be a teacher-directed intervention lasting a term and more but unique in its foundation on (psycho-) therapeutic principles, broadly conceived. In short, staff in NGs are encouraged to accord the lives and experiences of the young people particular respect and the more usual focus on cognitive approaches to learning shifts towards a sensitivity to the emotional lives of the children involved. In addition, the relationships between NG staff and the young people are considered to be of vital importance both as a focus for change (including attachment) and support for the vulnerable children. Staff:pupil ratios are therefore more favourable in NGs and there would usually be a teacher and a teaching assistant dedicated to the 10 or so children.

The nurture room itself is a crucial part of the NG model and provides a base, or rather a ‘home’ for NG staff and children, which is intended to be a welcoming and relaxing environment with soft furnishings, a kitchen and other comfortable features. The nurture room is the hub for the intervention and is intended explicitly as a bridge between school and home. While academic progress is an important part of the nurture model, there is an added emphasis on emotional and social development. It is not just the room which is marked out as being so clearly different from other rooms in the school, therefore, but the kinds of relationships which are encouraged between NG staff and children. At root NGs are founded on the principles of attachment theory which focuses on the needs of children to form secure and fulfilling relationships.

**Approaches to Nurture Group evaluation**

Previous studies have been ‘based either on pupil progress on a rating scale, typically the Boxall Profile and those which consider long term outcomes in relation to the educational provision that these children receive sometime after they have left the nurture group’ (Farrell et al., 2009: 2). Such approaches to research and evaluation were extended and incorporated in the larger evaluation of which this narrative study is a part.

While research approaches employing measurement can be useful, the qualitative aspects of what occurs in NGs, for example, relating to the experiences of children and their teachers, can be elusive. In the study reported here we believed that quantitative measures alone would not capture evidence of the unique claim being made by NGs – that through the strength and quality of relationships with staff, children who have experienced social and emotional difficulties in their early years could gain confidence in building their own positive relationships and as such a NG could have a remedial impact on children’s attachments, general sense of security and well-being.

The intention in the narrative work reported in this article was to engage in a particular relationship with NG staff in a manner which would be consistent with those relationships encouraged by NG staff in their work with children. This would facilitate a model for research which would be theoretically compatible with the NG intervention. The narrative approach was intended to provide staff, not only with the eventual means of evaluating qualitative aspects of the NG experience (the emotional lives of children) but also with an ongoing theoretical model to support their daily work.
Narrative – as research and practice

In the short history of the social sciences narrative work has emerged in the various forms of talking therapies which became popular during the first half of the 20th century and then more specifically towards the end of the 20th century across other sites of professional endeavour, principally philosophy and social science research (Arendt, 1958; Hiles and Cermak, 2008; MacIntyre, 1981; Reissman, 1993). Narrative work began to interest social psychologists, for example:

Insofar as we account for our own actions and for the human events that occur around us principally in terms of narrative, story, drama, it is conceivable that our sensitivity to narrative provides the major link between our sense of self and our sense of others in the social world around us. (Bruner and Haste, 1990: 94)

More recently, narrative methods have become established across different domains and are now being utilized specifically within early childhood research (for example, Barrett, 2009; Priddis and Howieson, 2010). Such approaches are proving useful both as a vehicle for new theoretical and empirical research but also as the basis for interventions such as Narrative Therapy developed by practitioners working with vulnerable children (Morgan, 2000; Smith and Nylund, 1997; White and Epston, 1990). Narrative, of course, has more ancient roots, and Genette (1980) provided definitions of three types of narrative:

- the most central in common usage – has narrative refer to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or series of events;
- less widespread but current today among analysts and theoreticians of narrative content has narrative refer to the succession of events real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse;
- a third meaning, apparently the oldest, has narrative refer once more to an event; not, however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something, the act of narrating itself.

As such this article, while attempting to represent aspects of the opportunity which the research created for NG staff to express their own narratives, constitutes its own narrative event – which is in accord with the older tradition.

Narrative methods have thus been embraced by social science researchers and are underpinning alternative professional practices and interventions, providing a context for addressing social issues, including social justice, encouraging the ‘voice’ of the subject (in research and professional practice) and working towards social inclusion and cohesion in accordance with legislation (variously, Billington, 2000, 2006; DfES, 2004; Unicef, 1999; White and Epston, 2000).

There are persons who are endeavouring to situate their own lives in preferred stories and to embrace their own knowledge, but who are finding it difficult to do so because of the dominant and disqualifying stories or knowledges that others can have about them and their relationships. (White, 1989: 20)

The rationale for narrative approaches is that all human beings construct narratives in order to make sense of their experience (Kearney, 2002) and that this process fulfils an important function in the lives of young people. However, ‘Narrative work. . . should not be confused with a notion of story-telling as. . . entertainment. . . ’ (Billington, 2006: 134) and indeed it possesses possibilities for positive outcomes long since recognized in therapeutic work:
where children are able to talk more openly about the processes of change that affect their lives they are more likely to develop coping strategies themselves. This has been seen as a major contributor to resilience in childhood. (Dowling and Barnes, 2000: 67)

An important feature of narrative research shared with narrative practice is that it ‘respects each individual story and whatever shape of life that emerges. . .’ (Parker, 2005: 72). While narrative research respects every story, however, there is no expectation that the narrative practitioner, or indeed researcher, need accept every story as ‘truth’:

in everyday informal dealings with each other, we do not take each other’s accounts at face value. . .we question, disagree, bring in counter-examples, interpret, notice hidden agendas. . . (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 3)

In the study reported here it is thus not so much a question of whether we can believe individual narratives (whether research or practice) but rather focusing on the contexts in which particular kinds of narratives can emerge, that is, in the relationships between young people and their teachers or in this case between the researcher and NG staff.

Whilst until recently narrative approaches have been rooted in therapeutic, literary or philosophical epistemologies, support for the complex links between human experience, meaning and the human narratives which ensue is provided in contemporary neuroscientific research (e.g. Damasio, 2000; LeDoux, 1999; Linden, 2007). This interesting twist provided by more conventional positivist research once again suggests that narrative might even be the defining feature of what it is to be human:

the narrative constructing function of the left cortex cannot be switched off, even during sleep. . . the left cortex predisposes us to create narratives from fragments of perception and memory. . . (Linden, 2007: 229–230)

Narrative is thus of contemporary interest, in practice and in research, both positivist and postmodern. It is a core aspect of our lives and is central to the ways in which children learn to think, feel and learn in the form of the stories which they see others construct about them and which they construct about themselves.

The evidence base for narrative approaches to research and practice is both theoretical and empirical (for example, Billington, 2000, 2003; Salmon and Reissman, 2008; White and Epston, 1990). While the study reported here draws mainly upon principles of narrative research, in my professional practice I utilize certain concepts developed in narrative therapy. This experience too informed the research conducted with NG staff.

**Principles of narrative work adopted in this study**

From the outset of the study the narrative strand of the research was seen as

. . . engaging with NG staff in a manner that made sense to them and valued their expertise and which would then represent as data something of their experiences in a manner which would be meaningful to others. (Rose, 2010: 22)

The three narrative sessions conducted with NG staff in this study were constructed upon specific principles and operational features which sought to achieve the above aims, in particular, that narrative approaches could:
• evaluate the work of NG staff through a research methodology which is attuned to the primary focus of NGs: the development of relationships between staff and children; between staff and parents;
• support those NG practices which acknowledge the importance of children’s participation and ‘voice’;
• value the commitment of individual NG staff;
• provide a means by which NG staff can better understand their own experiences in the groups;
• provide NG staff with a way of assisting the children to make sense of their experiences.

While narrative approaches have developed as distinct practices in the professional work of psychologists and therapists, in this research strand only the basic principles were explained in sessions with NG staff and many techniques associated with the method were omitted. The basic principles presented to NG were that:

- NG staff will be the ‘experts’ in their own narratives;
- there are ways in which NG staff can develop confidence in articulating their own chosen narratives;
- NG staff can make choices about preferred narratives, for example, those which are associated with feelings and the emotional lives of the children and themselves.

In order to prepare for the data collection phase, I introduced members of staff in the NGs to three elements. First, we discussed a number of concepts derived from narrative therapy (for example, ‘externalizing the problem’, ‘relative influence questioning’, ‘unique outcomes’; White and Epston, 1990: 39).

Second, staff were encouraged to engage in reflexive practice which could potentially contribute to a model of peer supervision which would be an additional source of support for those who work closely with emotionally vulnerable young people. The process would thus potentially add another layer of analysis which would involve NG staff as researcher-practitioners (Billington, 2006b).

The narrative data were formative and of a nature which enabled individual NG staff (and the NGN as a whole) to evaluate aspects of work with children which might otherwise fail to be recognized.

However, in contemporary qualitative research the researcher is part of the process and is influential in its outcomes. It is important, therefore, to make transparent my own experience as underpinning the process undertaken during the NG sessions; as an educational and child psychologist working with children and young people across the care and education systems, their families and professionals (in the courts, in schools); my post-qualification training in family therapy, group analytic and psychodynamic approaches and their application in practice and research (for example, Bion, 1961; Minuchin and Fishman, 1981; Perls et al., 1951; Winnicott, 1971). I also have a history of conducting research in a range of applied settings informed by post-modern and social constructionist theories (Burman, 2008; Foucault, 1972, 1977; Lacan, 2006; Parker, 1992).

The ‘five questions’ cited at the opening of this article have provided a resource for the on-going (co-)construction of ideas and narratives in this study. The psychotherapeutic ideas implicit in NGs was also reflected in my approach to the sessions in that the subtleties of the relationships between myself as researcher and the NG staff were considered important and within a broad understanding of transferential possibilities (Emerson and Frosh, 2009; Freud, 1973; Klein, 1988). The narratives in this research were thus co-constructed by the researcher and the research participants (NG staff)
within the context of a relationship. This relationship would be central to the method and would mirror the principles of the NG as an intervention being practised by staff in their work with children and their families.

**Methods**

The work was conducted in five Infant/Primary School Nurture Groups across the northwest of England, west Yorkshire and Staffordshire (children between the ages of 5 and 11). The three (hour-long) sessions were conducted between October 2008 and January 2009 and the process was as follows:

- initial letter contact with the headteacher;
- follow-up telephone conversation with the head/NG staff;
- Session 1 – an information sharing exercise around the exposition of initial narratives;
- Session 2 – a presentation of some of the basic principles of a narrative method;
- NG staff began to develop narratives of their choice;
- ‘Follow-up’ work was given to participating staff in which they were encouraged to reflect on their own feelings and thinking in respect of any situation, incident (possibly major but especially minor), involving children, parents or staff which held some significance for them personally;
- NG staff were encouraged to consider various means of recording the data to suit, for example, a notebook/diary;
- Session 3 – staff shared their chosen narratives in various forms, spoken, in the form of diary/notes or a detailed portfolio.

There were 15 sessions in total, each one hour in length, engaging a total of 18 staff which included two headteachers, three deputy/assistant headteachers, two SENCOs, one year head, five NG Leaders and five NG class assistants.

There were two principal data sets. First, my own handwritten verbatim record of comments made by the NG staff made during the sessions. Second, NG staff were encouraged to keep a research diary or notes in the form of comments made, reflections upon events or feelings experienced or perhaps in the form of drawings or other media. Following the data collection phase all the data were subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to emphasize the narrative extracts – the words used by the NG staff themselves to make sense of their own experience which contain some of the ‘meanings’ from which we might be distracted if presented in the context of a quantitative study. This article does not, therefore, present the body of empirical evidence but rather draws on extracts to focus on specific meanings.

My own voice and power as the researcher is thus brought into stark focus for I have chosen what is selected. The following extracts constitute their own narrative in which I have exercised editorial control over the participant data. While I will analyse the data in a later section I present without comment at this juncture in order to allow you as reader a greater freedom to engage in narrative co-construction of your own.

**Some verbal narratives from Nurture Group staff**

I think [the value of NGs is] through talk. . . constant communication. . .
[the NG room was] initially perceived as the naughty room. . . this has changed. . .

[we create] listening experiences. . .

very educational, thinking, comprehension, listening, self-control. . .

it’s not just a job, it’s a commitment. . .

the moment when [child ‘a’ who did not speak] came out with a sentence! [was unforgettable]. . .
mum has worked so hard at creating boundaries at home. . .
mum. . . very talented, very caring but so under-confident. . . giving mum the belief that she can do it herself. . .

lots of emotional breakdowns [with parents]. . . they have someone [here] to go to. . .

putting the NG in place stopped the rot [in the school]. . . changed to a positive ethos. . .

if we hadn’t this room [child ‘b’] would have floundered. . . in a special school by now. . .

[we are able to] put yourself in the child’s position. . . sensitive to their feelings. . .

we invite the kids to talk. . .

got a Head who cares about the children. . .

important to have conversations [with the children]. . .

built up trust with mum. . . spent time with her. . . an awful lot of coaxing to get mum to interact with him. . .

when they’re making breakfast they’ll talk. . .

it’s all conversation, talking to them all the time. . .

[we have the time to be] very sensitive communicators, in a classroom there’s no time to analyse the baggage with which he comes into school. . .

it’s about people. . . how they perceive children. . .

it’s got to be in teacher training. . .

we have children with terrible family circumstances. . . may seem extreme to people outside, they are our everyday. . .

80% of our work is talking to children. . . getting them to talk to us. . .

laughter too. . . tears to the eye. . .

speaking and listening. . . huge part in what we do. . . explaining things. . . [the children] just want some time. . . to talk. . . with someone who cares. . .
one of the privileges in the NG. . . we have the time. . .
when we started to speak positively about the children conversations became more positive. . .

we pick up whether they’re sad. . . or happy. . . or if something happened at home. . .

we’re valued. . . by a group of [staff]. . . by some parents. . . by [Local Authority co-ordinator]. . .

as a teacher, don’t have the resources to respond [to a difficulty or incident]. . . some of [our work] is
through the National Curriculum. . . haven’t got the pressure. . .

stress the importance of parents. . . our relationship with them and the children’s relationship with
them. . .

need to be able to talk to parents in the right way. . .

it’s not a nurture group it’s a [e.g. ‘bear’s cavern’]. . .

one parent said, ‘you go on classes until you have the baby, but then there’s no one to say how to be a
good parent’. . . [some parents] have never been parented themselves. . .

Examples of NG staff narratives written in diaries and notes about individual children

[child ‘a’] wouldn’t talk. . . wouldn’t speak. . . eventually started to bond with [NG Leader]. . . got to form
an attachment. . . [eventually] got to do this throughout the school. . .

[‘b’] who has recently gone back into mainstream class came over for a cuddle. . . he said that he had
dreams about coming to live at my house. . .

the children often ask when they can come [back to NG having left]. . .

Nurture has made her feel safe and secure in our school and allowed her to overcome her withdrawn
anxieties. . .

[for ‘c’] dancing is a story in itself. . . when he had finished every child clapped spontaneously, one little
girl got up and gave him a hug. . .

relationships with parents. Gaining their trust is the key to helping their children. . .

All of a sudden [‘d’] threw a chair and ran away from the group, crying and took himself off to the sofa. I
approached him and put my hand gently on his back and told him it was OK to feel sad and he could have
a rest on the sofa. . . He eventually stopped crying and sat up. I said ‘do you feel better after a little rest?’
He nodded but didn’t say anything. I could sense he didn’t want to talk so I moved away back to the other
two children. . .

After dinner [‘e’] appeared very tired, rubbing his eyes and yawning. During circle time I finished the
session with ‘feeling tired after a busy day with school and mosque’. I aimed it at all the children saying
that if they wanted to have a little lay down they could. ‘[‘e’] laid down but all the others left. . . after 20
minutes and a short sleep he was ready to join in and produced a lovely picture. . . which he was proud of
and took it home to show his family. . .
['f'] took the photo album into the home corner . . . was saying how he looked happy in some photos and sad in others. I . . . sat alongside of them, said ‘oh that’s a lovely photo [of you]’. He said ‘I was building’. I said ‘you look to be enjoying yourself. . .’. He said ‘I was happy’.

['g'] was sat writing his name. He usually only writes ['g'] but he now has the confidence to try other letters . . .

['h'] did not speak . . . [two months later] . . . talking to his friend about . . . his photos . . . [two more weeks later] reading a book . . . re-acting the story . . . expressing all the emotions that occurred in the story . . . [two more weeks later] [child ‘i’] was really upset and crying . . . ['h'] showed concern and asked if he was sad . . . [in circle time] said ‘I feel sad when I lose something special’.

It was a steep learning curve for me . . . [through one particular incident] I learned how a child’s emotional baggage doesn’t just go away if you throw tinsel at it. Nurture is a slow process that takes endless patience and dedication.

The overall feeling about nurture sessions is how much laughter there is . . . Laughter, the best way to make a child remember . . .

Snack time and its associated chores starts these children on the path to achievement.

there is no such thing as a naughty child . . .

Longer extracts from narratives written by NG staff

This boy was 10 going on 40 . . . the most dominant Alpha male I have come across at that age. He terrorized the other children . . . family background grim . . . two and a half terms of input . . . ‘Fancy a story?’ I asked . . . we sat together on the sofa . . . he sat quite close . . . I could feel him move a little closer until his arm was brushing mine. A few more minutes . . . I felt pressure on my shoulder and listening to the story, wide eyed and attentive. I felt so moved, he actually looked like a little boy . . .

There is no end or closure to nurturing . . . ['j'] had built up a close relationship with the nurture staff, particularly Mrs E. One day he was . . . in an obvious sulk. When I asked him what was bothering him he said,

‘I’m not friends with Mrs. E any more.’

‘Why?’ I asked, ‘what has she done?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Then why don’t you want to be friends with her?’

‘Because there’s no point, when I leave this school I’ll never see her again.’

‘Two years on . . . is now in High School . . . we keep in touch by letter . . .’

['k'] has a severe speech disorder . . . in reception . . . started an intensive programme of speech therapy . . . Some weeks ago we were working on the sound sssssss . . . could say it in isolation but not connected to a word . . . [our work] reinforce it with the Jolly Phonics action. Conversation in NG was about animals and the children were asked about their favourite animals. ['k'] said:
‘Mine is a dug.’

‘Do you mean a dog?’ queried C [NG leader].

‘No, no it’s a dug’, [‘k’] insists.

‘Do you mean a duck? I don’t know what a dug is’, says C.

‘No, no a DUG!’ insisted [‘k’]. ‘You dow, a dail nidout it’s dell!’

‘Oh, you mean a ssss-lug’, says C, separating the sounds and using the Jolly Phonics action.

‘Yes’, shouts [‘k’]. ‘A sss-lug, a sss-lug, a sss-lug!! I can day it!!!’

Analysis: Narrative approaches in the evaluation of NGs

Certain overarching themes in relation to NG staff experience of working in NGs were co-constructed in the talk between researcher and the NG staff. First, around children’s language and communication (in particular, having the space and time to talk with and listen to children), parental needs (in particular, NG staff getting to know the parents and working with them), positive ethos (there were far more positives than negatives in the narratives; progress and confidence were mentioned far more frequently than difficulties), links with the ‘mainstream’ (NG staff had well-developed understandings regarding issues of status, relationships with individual teachers and school systems).

These overarching themes were broken down further into super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes. However, my response to the data as a whole, was that in the binding of the fragmented individual narratives was the underlying and powerful effect of being personally almost overwhelmed by the sheer energy and enthusiasm of NG staff who wanted to tell stories about their work with individual children. These stories were recounted both through their written narratives and also in their verbal accounts during sessions in school. NG staff provided countless examples of highly sensitive understandings of the importance of human relationships whether with one another, with the children, with parents or with the rest of the staff.

I would re-iterate that even though the verbatim quotations are directly attributable to NG staff and have not been altered, they should in research terms be considered as a co-construction with the researcher although this does not necessarily diminish their impact, communicated initially as they were by many different NG staff. This is in no way an attempt to seize ownership of those original narratives but in acknowledging the power of my own researcher position in being able to select, omit and juxtapose I would prefer to see myself as an interlocutor.

This research was originally designed in order to give greater ‘voice’ to NG staff in order that they might contribute more creatively to the development of an evaluation framework which would be in accord with their own narratives and meaning-making. My interpretation of that ‘voice’ in this study was of the positive nature of the NG staff narratives. Once given the opportunity staff just wanted to talk about individual children and their families and while they did not sidestep the problems with which they had to deal, the underlying nature of the narratives was almost always positive. Not only was there a belief in the importance of their work but they also spoke of the resources in the NGs and indeed the personal qualities which gave them confidence that they would be able to affect the lives of the children and their parents.
In summary, the staff believed in the work which the NG model encouraged and believed also in their ability to bring about positive change to the lives of the children. This positive approach seemed representative of a meaningful engagement with and commitment to the children and their parents.

Negative narratives seemed mainly connected to what might otherwise be considered to be purely educational issues but invariably NG staff developed those into sophisticated critiques of conventional approaches to how children learn and of the demands of the National Curriculum. There were also tensions in the narratives in which some NG staff referred to relationships with other members of staff in other parts of the school. In particular, some NG staff perceived the wider school staff to be envious of their work, while at the same time perceiving that some members of mainstream staff could sometimes present the value or focus of the NG in negative terms (for example, questioning its ability to deal with specific ‘within-child’ problems, in speech and language, behaviour, attentional or emotional issues).

However, on the basis of the above narratives, obtained from analysis of 15 sessions, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the NG staff in this study believe that the kinds of relationships they are able to develop with the children and their parents can be fundamentally different from those which they perceive to be possible outside the NG. They also believe that they are able to bring about successful change in the lives of young children with social and emotional difficulties.

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Notes

The original research proposal was developed in order to provide the NGN with the means of accessing ongoing data to support their fundamental claim, that is, that NGs offer a distinctive opportunity for vulnerable young people to receive an educational and therapeutic experience which is theoretically coherent and run by appropriately trained staff. In the process I endeavoured to be true to the five critical questions posed earlier in the article as a way of ensuring that the narrative constructing remained open and active – the ‘how’ in respect of our work with children.

I would claim that the research meets the four essential ‘criteria’ for qualitative research in psychology, adhering to ‘sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, impact and importance’ (Yardley, 2008). The narrative study was designed on the basis that the qualitative aspects of what takes place in NGs, for example, relating to the unique experiences of young people and their teachers, remains difficult to capture in forms of data which would be meaningful to NG staff as well as to others. The narrative approaches adopted in this study have, therefore, provided useful data in respect of this methodological concern and the co-constructed narratives support the development of narrative research and practice as a model for practice and research in NGs:

1) NGs provide a distinctive approach to pedagogy which needs to be evaluated on its own terms especially in relation to the development of relationships within a specific social context.

2) Given these theoretical and practical foundations it is necessary to develop methods and frameworks of evaluation which can acknowledge and represent the quality and value of the relationships and experiences enjoyed by children and their teachers in NGs (and with parents).
Narrative approaches facilitated the gathering of data and were also powerful as interventions and thus accord with the underlying principles of the NGN, that is, by taking seriously the qualitative aspects of relationships and their centrality in the development of well-being, for children and adults alike.

Many of the children and families who were presented in NG staff narratives in this research were spoken of, and written about by staff with a care and attention to detail which would clearly be difficult to sustain with larger numbers of children. However, while the narratives above would not be unique in education they do suggest that NG staff are indeed attempting to provide vulnerable children and families with the kinds of relationships and experiences which would be difficult to sustain in many mainstream environments.

References