AN EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF RENFREWSHIRE'S NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS APPROACH

Dr Amy Nolan

Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service

May 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A nurturing approach has been promoted as key to supporting mental health and wellbeing and attainment in Scottish schools. It is also recognised as a way of supporting the needs of children and young people who have experienced ACEs and trauma (Education Scotland, 2017). This Doctorate research forms part of the evaluation for Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach (RNRA) which is a whole school nurturing approach developed by Educational Psychologists in Renfrewshire Council.

A systematic review was carried out focusing on the impact of Nurturing Approaches on pupils and schools. Findings suggest:
- Nurturing approaches can have a positive impact on:
    - Pupils (social, emotional, behavioural needs and academic progress)
    - Pupils in mainstream class/school
    - Parents and home life (due to pupil social/emotional gains, more positive parent/school interactions)
    - The whole school (enhancing the support on offer across the school, enhancing staff capacity and practice, school ethos, gains for pupils and staff)
- The length of time a nurturing approach is in place for has an impact on its effectiveness. Nurture groups in place for more than two years were found to have a greater impact than those in place for less than two years.

This provided part of the evidence base for developing and implementing RNRA

The second phase of the doctorate research was an empirical study with two research questions:
- What is the impact of RNRA on school staff's practice in the primary and secondary sectors?
- Does RNRA have social, emotional and behavioural effects on pupils?

Pupils in Primary 2, Primary 4, Primary 5, Secondary 1, Secondary 2, and Secondary 3 were tracked over two school years in four intervention (RNRA pathfinder) schools and four comparison schools. Teacher, pupil and parent Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) (Goodman, 1997) and the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2015) were used to measure social, emotional and behavioural effects pre-intervention and at the end of the second school session. Staff, pupil and parent focus groups were conducted at the end of the second school session in the four intervention schools to measure the impact of RNRA on staff's practice and investigate if RNRA has social, emotional and behavioural effects on pupils.

Findings suggest:
- RNRA had a positive impact on staff's practice. This included:
    - Changes in staff skills, knowledge and understanding
    - Changes in staff mindset

- o Changes in staff practice through implementing new interventions as part of RNRA
  - o Better relationships
  - o Changes in communication and language
- RNRA had positive social, emotional and behavioural effects on pupils in the primary and secondary sector.
  - o Quantitative analysis suggests a statistically significant difference in Teacher SDQ scores between the intervention and the comparison groups in the primary sector, and a statistically significant difference in parent SDQ prosocial scores between the intervention and the comparison group in the secondary sector
  - o Positive social effects for pupils included: better relationships, better social interactions and better understanding of other pupils' needs
  - o Positive emotional effects for pupils included: pupils feeling better about themselves (happier, more confident, less worried), improved self-regulation skills, and changes in the way pupils reflect, understand, manage and express emotions.
  - o Positive behavioural effects for pupils included: better behaviour, classes more settled and getting more work done, less conflict.

Working points for each individual pathfinder school and next steps for RNRA are discussed. RNRA illustrates the significant and unique role that Educational Psychologists can have in developing evidenced based approaches that support pupil wellbeing to large scale interventions at the local authority level.
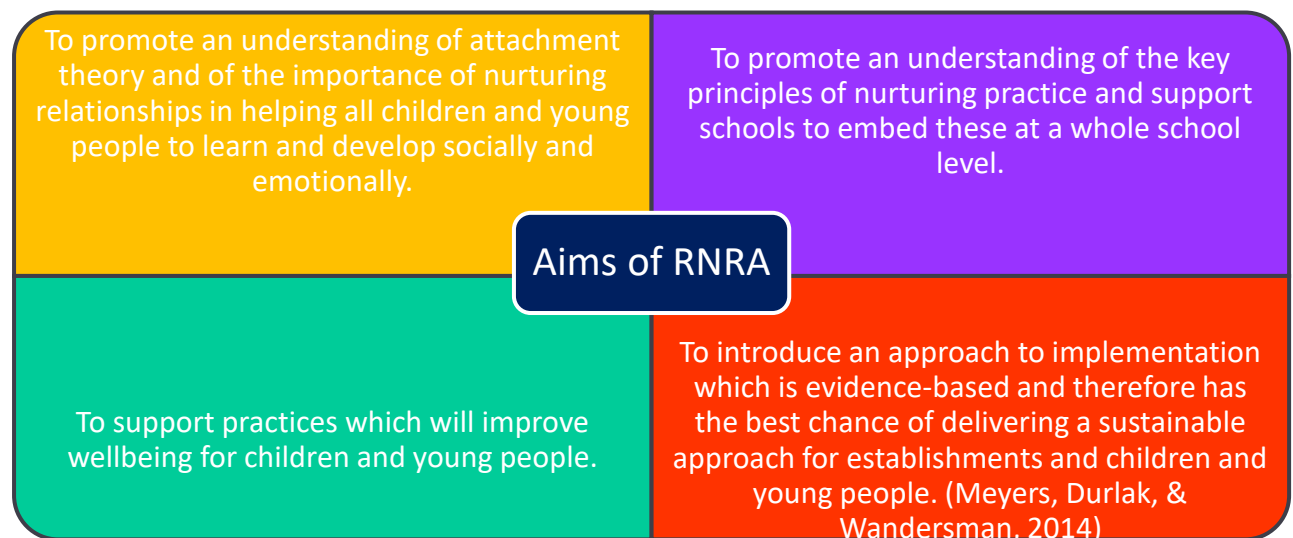
WHY A NURTURING APPROACH?

A nurturing approach has been promoted as key to supporting mental health and wellbeing and attainment in Scottish schools. It is also recognised as a way of supporting the needs of children and young people who have experienced ACEs and trauma (Education Scotland, 2017).

Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach (RNRA) emphasises that relationships are at the heart of nurturing approaches and provides an implementation process for establishments to develop nurturing relationships across schools, Early Learning and Childcare Centres (ELCCs) and communities (REPS, 2020).

WHAT IS RENFREWSHIRE'S NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS APPROACH?

RNRA has the following four aims:

To promote an understanding of attachment theory and of the importance of nurturing relationships in helping all children and young people to learn and develop socially and emotionally.	To promote an understanding of the key principles of nurturing practice and support schools to embed these at a whole school level.
Aims of RNRA	
To support practices which will improve wellbeing for children and young people.	To introduce an approach to implementation which is evidence-based and therefore has the best chance of delivering a sustainable approach for establishments and children and young people. (Meyers, Durlak, & Wandersman, 2014)

Through providing staff training for establishments and using a coach/consult model, RNRA supports staff to embed the Nurture Principles across their establishment and measure the impact this has had on the school community. As of January 2020, there are 10 Secondary Schools, 43 Primary Schools, 12 Early Learning and Childcare Centres, 2 Specialist Provisions and 4 Partnership Nurseries involved in developing RNRA (REPS, 2020).

Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach

EVALUATION

The RNRA evaluation has three strands which link to the aims of the intervention:

School self-evaluation	Process evaluation	Doctorate evaluation

School self-evaluation
Educational Psychologists from Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service (REPS) support school and ELCC staff to self-evaluate their nurturing relationships approach through developing RNRA action plans and using approaches such as Quality Improvement (QI) to evaluate change ideas.

Process evaluation
RNRA processes are constantly evaluated to allow REPS staff to improve the intervention on a termly basis. Processes such as: EP support to establishment staff, training, and action planning are all evaluated. The process evaluation allows REPS staff to identify what's working and what needs to be adapted in order for the intervention to meet its aims.
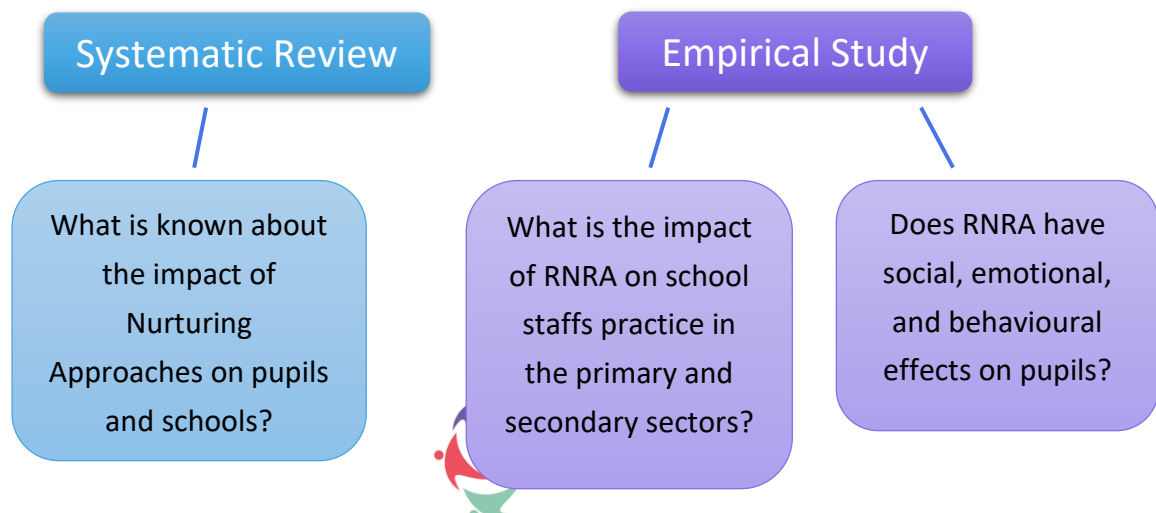
Doctorate evaluation
The doctorate evaluation focuses on the impact of RNRA on staff practice and pupil wellbeing which links mainly to the third RNRA aim. This summary paper focuses on the doctorate evaluation.

DOCTORATE EVALUTAION

This part of the evaluation was carried out by the author as part of her Doctorate research at the University of Dundee.

The research consisted of two phases:

Systematic Review	Empirical Study	
What is known about the impact of Nurturing Approaches on pupils and schools?	What is the impact of RNRA on school staffs practice in the primary and secondary sectors?	Does RNRA have social, emotional, and behavioural effects on pupils?

SYSTEMATIC LITRATURE REVIEW

> ## What is known about the impact of Nurturing Approaches on pupils and schools?

An extensive literature search was carried out to investigate what the research says about the impact of nurturing approaches on pupils and schools. It was hoped that this research would influence RNRA and ensure the intervention was evidence based. To the authors knowledge this systematic review was the first of its kind on whole school nurturing approaches. It was presented at the European Congress of Psychology in Moscow in July 2019.

The main findings of the systematic review include:

Nurturing approaches can have a positive impact on:

- Pupils (social, emotional, behavioural needs and academic progress)
- Pupils in mainstream class/school
- Parents and home life (due to pupil social/emotional gains, more positive parent/school interactions
- The whole school (enhancing the support on offer across the school, enhancing staff capacity and practice, school ethos, gains for pupils and staff)

The length of time a nurturing approach is in place for has an impact on its effectiveness

- Nurture groups in place for more than two years were found to have a greater impact than those in place for less than two years.

This systematic review highlighted implications for future practice and future research, by identifying the following gaps in the literature:

- Better quality and more robust research is needed in this area
- More research needed on whole school nurturing approaches
- More research needed in the secondary context

The second phase of the doctorate research, the empirical study, aimed to address these gaps.

Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach
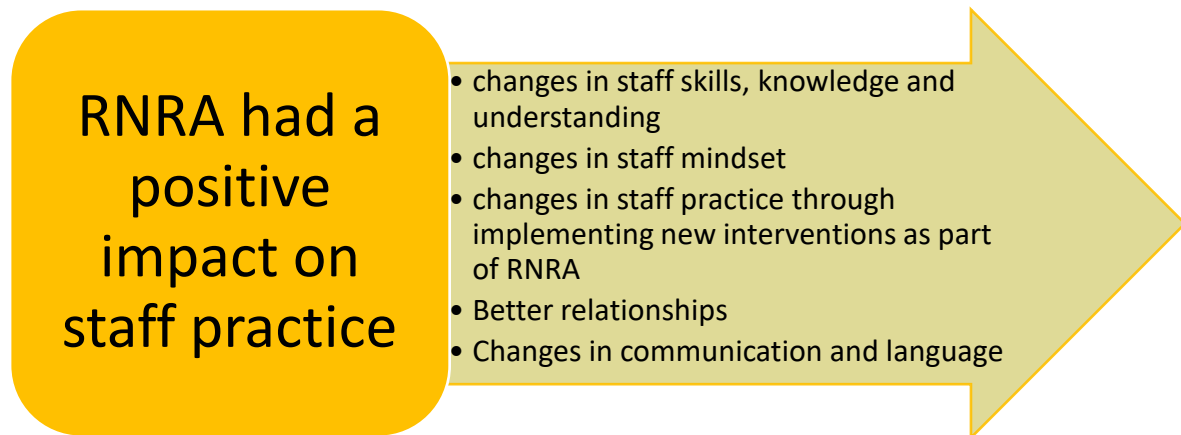
EMPIRICAL STUDY

The second phase of the doctorate research was an empirical study with two research questions:

- What is the impact of RNRA on school staffs practice in the primary and secondary sectors?
- Does RNRA have social, emotional, and behavioural effects on pupils?

> What is the impact of RNRA on school staffs practice in the primary and secondary sectors?

Three primary schools and one secondary school who were piloting RNRA took part in research. These schools were known as pathfinder schools. Separate pupil, parent and staff focus groups were conducted in each of these pathfinder schools, twelve focus groups in total. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed word for word. Each transcript was thematically analysed according to the research question above and these were collated together.

Findings indicate:

RNRA had a positive impact on staff practice

- changes in staff skills, knowledge and understanding
- changes in staff mindset
- changes in staff practice through implementing new interventions as part of RNRA
- Better relationships
- Changes in communication and language

These findings were triangulated with school self-evaluations and the process evaluations. Quotes from pupils, parents and school staff on the following page illustrate some of the wider themes identified.

Renfrewshire's Nurturing
Relationships Approach

Comments from pupils

'If there was some person...and they are like tired or they are being bad...the teacher would ...take them to the teaching table...so they could go to the front and get the help they needed.'

'Some guidance teachers go out of their way to make sure the children feel nurtured and that they've someone to talk to.'

'If someone...had done something wrong...they wouldn't be screamed at...they would like be allowed to like calm down first and they you would maybe have a conversation with the teacher but you know they wouldn't be shouted at.'

'We were learning about surprises and how surprises can be a comfortable and uncomfortable feeling.'

'They talk to you and make you feel better'

'My teacher says to me, look how far you have come.'

'Now they understand why I would do that.'

'The teacher sort of made it clear that you are all one class and make sure you help each other, if anyone has problems even if you don't talk to each other outside this classroom, when you're in this classroom you're friends with each other and can ask for help.'

'When you get on the thinking face...they would talk to you...say to you like why did you do this.'

Comments from parents

'They build strong relationships.'

'I do constantly get feedback from G (*child's name*) talking about emotions so it's not just a one-off lesson it seems to be constant.'

'Not being made to feel as if you're a bit thick'

'Staff use a common a common language, which I think helps...we weren't doing that before.'

'Having someone to try to unpick his emotions and feelings, and not just shout at him...you know, not just...treat him like a bad boy...understand where he is coming from.'

'They are speaking to the pupils the way you would like to be spoken to.'

'It's a silly wee thing but it makes a massive difference in the maths problems. They get problems out, and each week someone in the class's name, and it's something they are involved in. So my boy and his Dad, they go to St Mirren every week, so 'A (*child's name*) and his dad went to a St Mirren game, and there was 5800 fans and 2900 Falkirk fans and then'...They love that...but it shows that the teacher takes an interest in them, so he knows every individual child's interest'

'We've got the numeracy, the literacy, and then the health and well-being classroom and just having the fact that health and well-being is taken up with numeracy and literacy is massive. That's not what I remember from school, nobody cared if you were happy or healthy'.

Comments from staff

'You now feel freer as a management team to trust in their professional judgement and say actually that child needs 10 minutes of your time.'

'There's more staff shifting their mentality...classrooms where everyone is just a human and it's not me versus you, which is helpful.'

'RNRA has helped give everyone the same platform...and same level of knowledge and understanding.'

'A major shift in the staffroom.'

'Changes in the way that staff interact with children.'

'Training has helped to shift the mentality of some members of staff.'

'Increased level of discussion around pupils' emotions.'

'My knowledge has increased and that's helped to increase my understanding when dealing with situations.'

'I think I mean in terms of stats and things; exclusions have gone down, we know that's not the way, it's not going to help.'

Renfrewshire's Nurturing
Relationships Approach

Does RNRA have social, emotional, and behavioural effects on pupils?

The second research question investigates the impact of RNRA on pupils social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing.

Participants

In the Primary sector pupils from P2, P4, P5, and in the Secondary sector pupils from S1, S2, and S3 were tracked over two school sessions in four pathfinder and four comparison schools. These schools were matched to comparison schools by looking at school roll, SIMD, geographical areas and general school statistics.

Procedure

Quantitative measures were taken from pupils, parents and staff at both the pathfinder and comparison schools. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 2001) and the Stirling Wellbeing Questionnaire (Liddle & Carter, 2015) were used as pre/post measures over two school sessions. This quantitative data was triangulated with 12 pupil, parent and staff focus groups in pathfinder schools. The focus groups were carried out at the end of the pathfinder period which was two academic years. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed word for word. Each transcript was thematically analysed according to the research question above and these themes were collated together.

Results

Highlights from findings suggest that RNRA had positive social, emotional and behavioural effects on pupils in the primary and secondary sector. Highlights from quantitative and qualitative results are reported in the tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Quantitative results

Quantitative Results	
Primary Sector	**Secondary Sector**
▪ There was a significant difference in Teacher SDQ total difficulties scores between the pathfinder and comparison schools. Teachers mean scores reported a reduction in difficulties in the pathfinder schools and an increase in difficulties in the comparison schools. ▪ There was a significant difference in Teacher SDQ pro social scores between the pathfinder and comparison schools. Teachers mean scores reported significantly more pro social behaviours in the pathfinder schools than the comparison schools.	▪ There was a significant difference in the Parent SDQ pro social score between the pathfinder and comparison school. Parents mean scores suggest that children in the pathfinder group displayed significantly more pro social behaviours than children in the comparison school.

Table 2: Qualitative Results

Qualitative Results		
Positive Social Effects	**Positive Emotional Effects**	**Positive Behavioural Effects**
• Better relationships • Better social interactions • Better understanding of other pupils' needs	• Pupils feeling better about themselves – happier, more confident, listened to, less worried • Improved self-regulation skills • Changes in the way pupils reflect, understand, manage and express emotions	• Better behaviour • Classes more settled, getting more work done • Less conflict

Working points were identified for each individual pathfinder school. These include:
- More explanation required for parents about new behaviour system and its rationale (1 school)
- More work with pupils on their understanding and tolerance of other children's social, emotional and behavioural needs (1 school)
- Supporting transitions as a next step (1 school)
- Clarity needed about interventions implemented as part of RNRA (2 schools)

Additionally, results suggest that more support needed for establishments with Action Plans and self-evaluation.

Quotes from pupils, parents and school staff on the following page illustrate some of the wider themes identified.

Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach

Comments from pupils

'Less fights and arguments.'

'Feel better'

'You can express yourself more in their class, which gives you confidence and belief in yourself.'

'They're helping with their mental issues...you can kind of see it helps them...when they come back you can see that they are happy.'

'I think people have got a lot better now with it, and they've stopped laughing at everyone else.'

'More confident'

'Don't have the guilt stay with you for ages.'

'Then there are teachers that even if you annoy them, they'll approach you in a certain way that makes you know you've done wrong, and then it's fine you're not going to shout back at them. It's just you move on.'

'It was really helping in the arguments.' (*Learning about feelings*)

Help 'clear the mind and calm down a bit and focus on your work.' (*Calm boxes and mindfulness*)

'We know what to do and everything...hear both sides of the story and calm them down.'

(Older pupils helping younger pupils to resolve conflict)

'People think, if they were going to say something not nice.'

'Less worried

Comments from parents

'I can see a massive change in her socially and interacting with groups.'

'Instead of wanting his own way all the time, he is more able to understand other people's opinions.'

'They are more civilised to each other.'

'Less bother in the playground.'

'He is more able to understand other people's opinions.'

'Well he's gone from walking out of school to staying in school.'

'Happier and coming out a wee bit more.'

'Our house isn't as chaotic and the tensions aren't there as much.'

'It doesn't change his whole day it just changes part of his day.'

'That kind of approach is helping get *(child's name)* get back into classes and get him back on with his work.'

'Can go to work in peace...don't need to worry.'

Comments from staff

'Speaking nicer to each other'

'They talk about what they're feeling and what happened.'

'Repair relationships quicker'

'He can get himself back on track...instead of ruining the rest of the day, that's a blip, it's a really small part of the day.'

'Exclusions have gone down.'

'The conversation between children and the teacher is happening more frequently.'

'We are not having to deal with any more behavioural issues.'

'Their emotional wellbeing has improved.'

'They are able to regulate better.'

'I'm seeing a reduction in the number of kids who are isolated, both within the class and the playground.'

'I think a change in our children is wanting to see their peers actually doing well now.'

'Much more settled.'

'The behavioural impact of that is that they are calmer because they are more able to regulate themselves.'

'Less downtime after playtime and lunch time.'

'I've found that those relationships became stronger, so the work I was getting from them was much better. So it had a direct consequence to the outcomes I was getting from the class.'

'They're actually doing more and they're learning better and achieving better.'

'They weren't particularly good at opening up and they are now.'

Renfrewshire's Nurturing Relationships Approach

NEXT STEPS

Several next steps have been identified. These include:

- Providing a research summary paper for each of the four pathfinder schools who took part in the research.
- Supporting pathfinder schools with individual working points.
- Increasing the number of schools in Renfrewshire who are implementing RNRA.
- Supporting all RNRA establishments to measure the impact of RNRA in their establishment by adapting the action plan format, providing additional training, use of QI, and organising RNRA network meetings.
- Utilising RNRA Accreditation to recognise the positive contribution staff have made to pupils wellbeing, maintaining the fidelity of RNRA and supporting the sustainability of the intervention.
- Disseminate the research through publication and presentations.

RNRA illustrates the significant and unique role that EPs can have in developing evidenced based approaches that support pupil wellbeing to large scale interventions at the local authority level.

REFERENCES

Education Scotland (2017). Retrieved from <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/inc55ApplyingNurturingApproaches 120617.pdf >.

Goodman, R. (2001). Psychometric properties of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *40*(11), 1337-1345.

Liddle, I., & Carter, G.F., (2015). Emotional and psychological well-being in children: the development and validation of the Stirling Children's Well-being Scale. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *31*(2), 174-185.

Meyers, D. C., Durlak, J. A., & Wandersman, A. (2012). The quality implementation framework: A synthesis of critical steps in the implementation process. *American journal of community psychology*, *50*(3-4), 462-480.

REPS (2020). Retrieved from <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/re/renfrewshireedpsych/rnra/>.

Renfrewshire's Nurturing
Relationships Approach