



Matua Victor Mercep and principal Debra Harrod in the Nurture Room at Aorangi School.

Nurturing the future

A programme that nurtures children and helps them express their emotions and needs has been effective at a Rotorua school for the past five years.

Nurture Groups are a restorative intervention for children who have missed key developmental phases, or who are struggling to cope with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

It's a short-term school-based intervention developed in London in the late 1960s by educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall.

Aorangi School in Rotorua introduced a Nurture Programme in 2017 when they found significant numbers of tamariki, particularly boys, were struggling in mainstream classes and needed some extra support.

Between four and 10 tamariki, usually Year 4 upwards, spend at least two terms in the programme. This year two five-year-olds have joined the group.

Principal Debra Harrod says she had been doing some reading about Nurture Groups and thought the concept could help some of their students.

"We are a decile 1 school. Our area, Pukehangi/Western Heights, is the socio-economically poorest area in Rotorua. We knew that a large number of our families were struggling and this was reflected in the behaviour of some of our students at the time.

"We were noticing that a lot of younger children are coming into school and they don't have those self-regulation skills. If they don't have those social skills, they don't empathise with other people," she says.

Gaining trust

Over the past five years, a total of 30-40 students, mainly boys, have gone through the programme. Five days a week, they have breakfast together, go into the classroom for the mainstream curriculum of reading, writing and maths, then return to the Nurture Room in the afternoon to work with Matua Victor Mercep.

Victor has been matua of the Nurture Room since the programme began. He says there can be a range of needs in each cohort – social, emotional and other environmental needs.

Victor is a 'mum-and-dad' role model and works hard to build relationships and trust with his young charges. The Nurture Room is decked out like a child's bedroom with movie posters and bean bags, comfy couches and kitchen facilities.

"From the moment we engage, it's all about gaining their trust and their confidence in me so they are able to open up to me and engage straight off the bat.

"To bring them out of their shell, or break down barriers, I initially do an induction day where we come together and share something with each other that nobody else knows," he explains.

"We honestly find that just being in the Nurture Room itself really helps kids because it's such a warm and inviting space and Victor is in there. It's a really safe space," adds Debra.

"Let's not forget that these boys are our future – so we need to instill love and nurturing and all those good qualities in them at a young age."

Victor Mercep



A cosy corner in the Nurture Room.

Connecting with culture

About 90 percent of the students at Aorangi School are Māori and Victor has been teaching kapa haka at the school for many years. He brings tikanga and te reo Māori into the Nurture Room.

“It goes back to the simple stuff of whakapapa – where you come from, who you are and a sense of belonging. That way you have a direction of where you’re going. Those things are a deep aspect of our culture and of our kids here at Aorangi,” he says.

For the first time, this year Victor has two five-year-olds in the room and is hoping to develop tuakana-teina relationships in the group.

“It means the senior boys get a responsibility and it also gives them room for growth and they can grow self-esteem. And the younger boys look up to our senior boys. We’re getting those two roles starting to happen.”

Victor remains in contact with many of his boys after they leave school. One message gave him deep satisfaction.

“One year a boy, who’s now 17, sent me a message: ‘Kia ora Matua, I just want to take this opportunity to thank you for believing in me when no one believed in me’.

“This kid was from a gang background – adults smoking dope, drinking beers from Wednesday to Sunday. He said to me, ‘My mum and dad, auntsies and cousins said I would be nothing but a gang member, or a drug dealer, but you gave me that opportunity’,” says Victor.

While the boy was in the Nurture Programme, Victor established him as kaitataki tāne (male leader) for kapa haka.

“He’s doing so well at school now – he’s in Year 13. He’s been on Māori television leading his group from Rotorua. All the secondary high schools compete for kapa haka and I thought, ‘That’s my boy on the TV!’,” he says proudly.

How it works

Victor believes that the Nurture programme works because of the positive role modelling.

“That’s an element that may be missing from home; sometimes dad’s in jail, or mum and dad are gang members. Whatever the situation, they come to school and they are able to open up and express emotionally and start developing,” he says.

Debra says that some children may not be getting their emotional needs met and Victor fills that role.

“He’s warm and he really listens to kids and he’s one of those people that can have a joke with children and they’re just naturally drawn to him as he’s moving around the school. I think a big part of the success of the concept here is his personality,” she says.

In the afternoon, after checking in with the boys about how their morning has gone, they do a range of activities. Along with learning life skills, there’s a focus on engaging the boys in conversations about their feelings, appropriate communication skills and dealing with emotions.

“I’ve taken the boys fishing at the beach, I’ve taught them how to gather kai – pipi, seafood. I have showed them how to catch a kahawai, how to smoke the fish. So not only am I educating them, but I’m also giving them life skills,” says Victor.

“We also do a lot of cooking – pizza, pancakes with bananas and chocolate chips – the kids absolutely love the cooking. But also, they can take these skills home and make a cup of tea for mum and let her put her feet up and read the *Women’s Weekly*,” he says.

Zones of regulation

Educational psychologist Dr Adrian Minks is based in the Ministry of Education’s Rotorua office and has worked with Victor on how to use a range of resources to develop emotional literacy and help children to express emotions in a variety of ways.

Often, children in the Nurture Room can have a limited range of ‘go to’ emotions, such as sadness or anger. They benefit from Matua Victor’s ‘scaffolded’ support to understand that they can experience a range of emotions during the day.

Children also learn emotional self-management by using the ethos of the ‘Zones of Regulation’. This popular intervention, which is delivered by Ministry staff, helps children to identify their feelings from green ‘I’m feeling OK’ to red ‘I’m not in a good state’.

“We try not to sort everybody’s problems out because if you keep doing that, you’re not actually helping the child grow the skills themselves,” says Debra.

“It’s just really listening to their feelings and asking,

‘What do you need right now that’s going to put you in a better space?’. Sometimes, they’ll say: ‘It doesn’t matter, I’m all right now’ – purely because they’ve had the opportunity to share it,” she says.

Progress data is usually kept to monitor development. At the beginning, baseline data is captured and children are gradually transitioned back into fulltime mainstream classes, when it becomes evident they have made significant progress.

“Adrian has given us a tool for assessing readiness for being re-integrated back into the classroom – that’s something else that we have implemented this year,” says Debra.

Success stories

The latest group of children spent two terms in the Nurture Room and Debra says they’re a happy, settled group.

“One of them is now engaging in class and is above national expectations in reading, writing and maths. His previous school couldn’t even get him into the classroom. He’s now working away and smiling at us and that’s a huge change – we’re thrilled to bits.

“Another little boy was constantly having issues in the playground – he could barely get through a play time without having an argument with someone. He’s now able to be out there, unsupervised, and actively engaging with the other children. He’s safe and everyone around him is safe.

“Another little boy, new to our school, was painfully shy and he has really grown in confidence since he’s been there. He’s happy at school, engaged in learning and I think that’s pretty much what we’ve seen over the past few years – it’s the personal growth in the child. It’s helping each child to be confident in themselves and their place in the world,” she says.

“Let’s not forget that these boys are our future, so we need to instill love and nurturing and all those good qualities in them at a young age,” adds Victor.

“Nurture Groups provide a structured intervention involving curriculum-based tasks, social learning, emotional literacy development, and opportunities for play.”

Adrian Minks



Nurture Groups explained

Adrian Minks has been in New Zealand for less than a year and previously worked for local government educational psychology services in the UK, where he helped schools set up Nurture Groups by advising them about the environment and what the nurture curriculum should include.

He says attachment theory psychology underpins the Nurture Group concept, and that there's a significant evidence base for its effectiveness that stretches back to the early 1970s in the UK.

"Nurture Groups provide a structured intervention involving curriculum-based tasks, social learning, emotional literacy development, and opportunities for play. There are plenty of opportunities to interact with an adult as well as the other children.

"While attending a Nurture Group, children continue to belong to their mainstream class and still attend registration and other activities with their mainstream peers," he explains.

Dr Adrian Minks



Read this article online for more kōrero from Dr Minks and more information about Nurture Groups.





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