

“They said they felt normal”: nurture group practitioners’ views on the impact of nurture group provision on autistic pupils

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Abstract

Nurture groups are school-based, attachment-focused interventions for children and young people with social, emotional or mental health (SEMH) needs who may have experienced adversity. Autistic children often present with SEMH needs and experience adversity; therefore nurture groups may be an effective intervention for them, though research in this area is limited. Accordingly, this mixed-method study explored nurture group practitioners’ perceptions of their impact on autistic children. Twenty-seven practitioners completed a questionnaire comprising a mix of closed, Likert scale and open-ended questions. Qualitative data were analysed using abductive thematic analysis, leading to the development of three overarching themes: ‘safe space’, ‘skill development’ and ‘person-centred’. Nurture group practitioners generally perceived the impact of nurture group provision on autistic pupils to be positive, though quantitative analysis suggested that the impact was significantly less positive once children returned to their mainstream class. These findings informed several implications, such as the importance of practitioners considering how nurture principles can be implemented within the classroom.

1.0 Introduction

In the United Kingdom, the prevalence of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties experienced by children and young people has risen, with 229,700 children in England currently identified as having a SEMH need (Department for Education, 2023). Children and young people with SEMH needs are less likely to feel safe at school and report less enjoyment of learning and reduced peer support (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2022). SEMH needs are particularly prevalent in autistic individuals, which is classified as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterised by

difficulties in social communication and restricted, repetitive interests or behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Beyond the deficit-based medical model, which focuses on the individual rather than their societal context, autism can be defined within a neurodiversity paradigm. Within this paradigm, autism is seen as one variation “within a diversity of minds” (Pellicano & den Houting, 2021, page 381). The neurodiversity model promotes acceptance of autistic individuals and highlights societal barriers. This may include changes to the classroom environment to help autistic students deal better with sensory

challenges (Pettersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022) or difficulties regarding friendships (Bailey & Baker, 2020). High rates of behavioural and emotional difficulties are consistently reported in autistic children and young people, as well as poorer levels of mental health and wellbeing compared to non-autistic individuals (Howlin and Magiati, 2017; Eaves & Ho, 2008).

Nurture groups are an intervention designed to support children showing early signs of emotional and behavioural difficulties whose needs cannot be met in the classroom (Bennathan & Boxall, 2012). There are over 5,000 nurture groups across the UK, from early years settings to secondary schools (nurtureuk, 2024). A nurture group is a class of up to 12 children within a mainstream primary school that is highly structured and routinised, containing elements of both home and school environments. The children participate in predominantly pre-nursery level activities, rejoining their mainstream class for key parts of the day, such as registration and playtime. Nurture group principles are rooted in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and were developed to support children who had grown up in circumstances characterised by severe adversity. Adverse childhood events (ACEs) encompass the categories of abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, which include parental separation, incarceration and drug misuse among others (Felitti et al., 1998). Research indicates that autistic children experience a greater number of ACEs than non-autistic peers across multiple ecological levels, with a higher prevalence of exposure to income insufficiency, neighbourhood violence, parental divorce, household mental illness and household substance abuse (Berg et al., 2016) and maltreatment (McDonnell et al., 2019). It has been hypothesised that the experience of ACEs may exacerbate internalising (Rigles, 2017) and externalising (Rigles, 2021) problems in autistic children. There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of school-based interventions that are used to support autistic children presenting with SEMH needs.

A study by Symeonidou and Robinson (2018) reported on eight Scottish nurture group practitioners' perceptions of the effectiveness of nurture group provision on the social and emotional skills of autistic primary school pupils. While the majority of staff members reported a "moderate

change" in autistic pupils' understanding of basic feelings, ability to settle down appropriately and interact and play with peers following nurture group provision, most perceived "little change" in pupils' ability to understand more complex feelings, turn-taking skills and ability to accept discipline. Symeonidou and Robinson (2018) highlighted the need for further qualitative research to cross-validate their findings. The present study aimed to build on Symeonidou and Robinson's (2018) research on school staff's perceptions of the impact of nurture groups on autistic children by exploring nurture group practitioners' experiences on a larger scale and in a national context. Furthermore, this study aimed to add to the literature by investigating staff members' views about specific aspects of nurture group provision that were perceived to impact the progress of autistic children, as well as the perceived impact at different points in the child's attendance of a nurture group. A greater understanding in this area can help education professionals appraise whether nurture group provision may be a beneficial intervention to support the SEMH needs of autistic pupils, as well as provide information about factors to consider during the implementation process. Four key research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do nurture group practitioners perceive the impact of nurture group provision on the outcomes of autistic pupils?
2. Do nurture group practitioners perceive the skills learnt in the nurture group to be applied successfully by autistic pupils?
3. What aspects of nurture group provision do nurture group practitioners experience to be helpful and unhelpful for autistic pupils?
4. What adaptations do nurture group practitioners currently make to support autistic pupils?

2.0 Method

2.1 Design

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Southampton Ethics and Research Governance Committee. A mixed-methods approach was employed.

A pragmatist philosophical view, which entails an understanding that the role of knowledge is to be useful for action and positive change in the world (Peirce, 1974), was adopted. Emphasis was placed, therefore, not on whether the knowledge produced in the study was an accurate representation of 'reality', but whether it had valuable external consequences, specifically for improving the SEMH outcomes of autistic children (Morgan, 2014). Additionally, the perspectives of participants were understood to be pre-structured by existing, socially generated beliefs and values which are constantly subject to revision in light of future experience within a changing world (Morgan, 2014).

2.2 Participants

Participants were 27 nurture group practitioners working within a school setting. Convenience sampling was employed. A total of 23 participants completed all of the survey questions. Four participants completed part of the survey (between 63 per cent and 84 per cent).

2.3 Data collection

To allow replication of the study, the code book and questionnaire can be found in the supplementary material (Supplement A and B). Data were collected using an 18-item questionnaire, which was developed specifically for the purpose of the study by the researcher. This used the online platform Qualtrics and contained nine closed questions (yes/no and multiple choice); three Likert response questions and six open (free response) questions (see Supplement B). Topics covered concerning autistic children included the impact of nurture groups, the value of individual aspects and the need for adaptations.

An advertisement for the study with a link to the survey was posted on a Facebook forum for UK-based nurture group practitioners, as well as on the researcher's X (previously Twitter) social media account, which was re-posted by other X users. The advertisement was also shared via email by the researcher directly with school staff members who worked within nurture groups, and with educational psychologists (EPs) who had professional relationships with school staff working in nurture groups; the EPs then forwarded the advertisement by email to school staff members.

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive analyses of all 27 participants' responses to the nine multiple-choice questions were carried out in order to identify characteristics of the nurture groups that participants worked in.

Quantitative analysis of the three Likert response questions was conducted for the 25 participants who completed all three of these questions. This process consisted of two stages: Friedman's Analysis of Variance (Anova), followed by post-hoc testing using separate Wilcoxon signed-rank tests. A qualitative analysis was carried out on all 27 participants' answers to the six free-response questions. Abductive thematic analysis was selected as appropriate based on the compatibility of the data with a pragmatist approach and mixed-methods design. Abduction represents a middle ground between inductive and deductive methods (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), incorporating prior theoretical knowledge with new insights through empirical research evidence (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). An abductive strategy also provides a transparent and rigorous structure to the analysis. The phases outlined by Thompson (2022) were used as a guide for the present analysis. After familiarisation with the data, an initial round of coding took place, whereby words or short phrases were assigned to each unit of significance. A second round of coding then took place, a heuristic process during which codes were consolidated or removed, and a deeper level of comprehension for relationships within the data was built. A codebook was then developed and tested (see Supplement A) to provide clarity and enable the researcher to reflect on the coding choices. The codebook was then applied in a final round of coding, using the "when to use" and "when not to use" descriptions as a framework, before codes were examined and sorted into themes based on their ability to explain the story behind the data. In line with a pragmatic approach, themes were latent and were clustered and explained guided by existing theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and monotropism – a cognitive style characterised by a focus on a set number of restricted interests (Murray et al., 2005) as a theoretical lens to consider factors that influenced nurture group practitioners' experiences and views, and a thematic map was constructed.

Table 1. Characteristics of nurture groups (NG) worked in by participants

Characteristic	N (27)	%
Years NG operating		
5+	10	37.0
3-5	6	22.2
1-3	9	33
< 1	2	7.4
Number of children in NG		
3-6	14	51.9
7-10	10	37
11+	3	11.1
Time in NG per day		
Part PM	4	14.8
Part AM	4	14.8
All PM	5	18.5
All AM	4	14.8
Part AM and PM	7	25.9
All AM and PM	3	11.1
Days per week NG attended		
1	4	14.8
2	3	11.1
3	1	3.7
4	7	25.9
5	12	44.4
Typical intervention length		
0.5-1 term	3	11.1
1-2 terms	3	11.1
2-3 terms	12	44.4
3+ terms	9	33.3
Number of NG practitioners in group		
1	6	22.2
2	15	55.6
3	6	22.2
NG practitioners with NG training		
None	6	22.2
At least 1	13	48.2
All	8	29.6
Currently supporting autistic child(ren)		
Yes	23	85.2
No	4	14.8
Previously supported autistic child(ren)		
Yes	27	100
No	0	0

3.0 Results

3.1 Demographic data

Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the nurture groups that participants worked in. Most participants (85.2 per cent) supported an autistic child(ren) at the time of completing the questionnaire. The most commonly reported length of time that nurture groups had been running in the school for was more than 5 years (37 per cent). Almost half of participants reported that children attended the nurture group 5 days per week (44.4 per cent); that the intervention typically lasted two to three terms (44.4 per cent); and that at least one member of nurture group staff had received nurture group training (48.2 per cent).

3.2 Quantitative findings

Table 2 provides a summary of simple descriptive statistics when the perceived impact of nurture group provision is compared across three stages of the intervention. The results of the Friedman's Anova demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference in the perceived impact of nurture group provision depending on the setting that pupils were in ($\chi^2(2) = 11.06, p = 0.004$). Post-hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests was conducted and a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level set at $p < 0.017$. There was no significant difference between perceived impact when children were in the nurture group and when they were spending time with their mainstream class ($Z = -2.023, p = 0.043$), and no significant difference between perceived impact when children were spending time with their mainstream class and when they had returned to their mainstream class full time ($Z = -0.52, p = 0.603$). There was, however, a significant difference between perceived impact when children were in the nurture group and when they had returned to their mainstream class full time ($Z = -2.415, p = 0.016$).

Table 2. Means (with standard deviations) of perceived impact by intervention stage

Intervention Stage	Perceived Impact
In nurture group	1.88 (0.93)
Spending time with class	2.32 (0.75)
Re-joined class full time	2.40 (0.71)

Note: 1= very positive; 2= positive; 3= none; 4= negative; 5= very negative

3.3 Qualitative findings

Three themes were developed through the thematic analysis process, each comprising a number of sub-themes, as detailed in the thematic map (Figure 1) and codebook (Supplement A). Theme names were abductively constructed by the researcher to represent the narratives of the data. A concise narrative statement is provided for each theme; the order does not represent a hierarchy of importance. Additional quotes supporting each theme and subtheme can be found in Supplement B.

3.3.1 THEME 1: SAFE SPACE

The theme captures participants' views that autistic children perceived the nurture group to be a place of psychological safety. Participants contrasted aspects of the nurture group setting with the children's mainstream class and highlighted that mainstream classrooms do not always meet the needs of autistic children. Participants also described factors that indicated to them that autistic children felt safe in the nurture

group, primarily behaviours related to their identity and self-expression. They also described factors that contributed to forming a psychologically safe environment, namely prioritising strong relationships, the enhancing of predictability and creating a positive experience for autistic children.

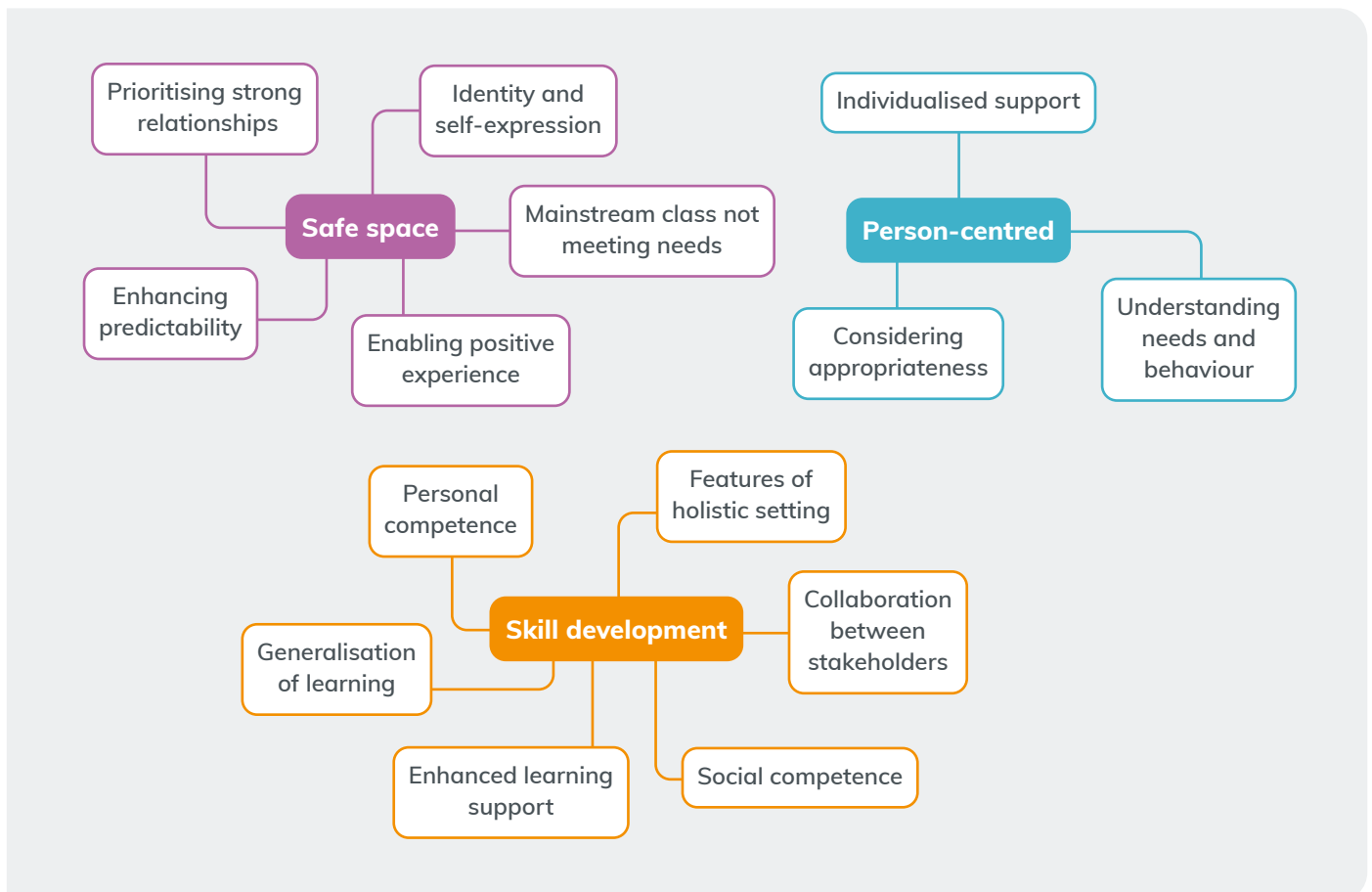
3.3.1.1 Sub-theme: Mainstream class not meeting needs

Data illustrated that the mainstream classroom was viewed by participants to be difficult for autistic children to manage in and was not meeting their needs: "Classroom environment is totally wrong" (participant 2). They described reasons for the mainstream environment being challenging for autistic pupils: "They couldn't cope with the larger, busier and noisier classroom, with less adult attention" (participant 27). In contrast, the nurture group was described as providing respite: "...a brain break away from the classroom..." (participant 1).

3.3.1.2 Sub-theme: Identity and self-expression

Participants described some of the effects that a psychologically safe environment had on autistic children. Many of these effects related to children

Figure 1. Thematic map



feeling able to express themselves: “The children felt safe. One of the children began speaking – he hadn’t spoken before in school due to anxieties” (participant 23). Some of these also related to the children behaving in a way that aligned with their identity, which participants perceived as being different to how they typically behaved in their mainstream class: “...time for them to be true to themselves...stops them from masking behaviours” (participant 1). Some expressed that this changed how autistic pupils felt about themselves: “Safe, secure...they said they felt ‘normal’” (participant 21). Some commented that this impacted how they were perceived by their peers: “...they are able to be heard and have a voice in the smaller class setting, and their peers see them in a totally different light” (participant 13).

3.3.1.3 Sub-theme: Prioritising strong relationships

Participants placed importance on the role that the relationships they built with autistic children played within the nurture group setting. “It enabled the young person to form meaningful relationships with staff [and pupils] creating an overall sense of belonging and giving them a safe space with trusted adults which they knew they could always come too [sic]” (participant 3). One acknowledged that this was not specific to autistic children and described how the strength of the relationship influences the effect that nurture group provision can have: “Regardless of whether the pupil has autism it all come [sic] down to the relationship that you build with the pupil. If you build a positive one then you obviously have a greater impact on that child” (participant 13). Within the relationship building process, an important aspect was perceived to be getting to know the child: “The barriers are lower as you get to know their interests” (participant 13). This participant also described that relationships affect the impact that nurture group provision has when they are spending time with their mainstream class: “...it is about the relationships that have been built up. Once they have the confidence and relationships and feel able to speak or ask out to that trust [sic] adult. Their inclass [sic] support is a positive experience.”

3.3.1.4 Sub-theme: Enhancing predictability

A crucial part of creating a safe space for autistic

children appeared to be putting support in place to enhance the predictability of the nurture group environment. This included providing clear routines and structures, small group size, visual supports and reduced noise. “Within the nurture environment I feel children with ASD respond better to the small numbers, structure and predictability better support the needs of these children” (participant 24). Participants also described how they made more specific adaptations based on the needs of individual pupils. “In the nurture group he has to win all the time and gets worked up if other children win so I am very conscious of not doing games that are too competitive as this triggers him and he can become very frustrated” (participant 2).

3.3.1.5 Sub-theme: Enabling positive experience

Having a positive experience while in the nurture group was perceived to be important. A positive experience was described by some participants in terms of the child being able to succeed or achieve: “The activities are usually fun and achievable too so the autistic child has a sense of purpose...” (participant 2). Being able to succeed was attributed by one participant to be a result of the enhanced predictability of the nurture group: “It also helped create more of a routine for these young people, allowing them to achieve and setting them up for success” (participant 3). Creating a sense of enjoyment was echoed by other participants: “We try to make it fun and enjoyment [sic] for all pupils” (participant 13).

3.3.2 THEME 2: SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The theme captures participants’ views about the progress autistic children were perceived to have made due to nurture group provision. This included specific skills that children developed or found difficult to develop which were primarily related to ‘personal competence’ (ie emotional self-awareness, regulation and motivation) and ‘social competence’ (ie social awareness and relationship management) as defined by Goleman’s (2001) framework of emotional competencies. Participants also described key aspects of nurture group provision that helped or hindered progress, namely the learning support that was in place, features of a holistic setting and collaboration between caregivers and other staff members. They also described positive and negative aspects of the transition between nurture group provision and the

mainstream class, commenting on factors related to the application of skills to environments outside the nurture group context.

3.3.2.1 Sub-theme: Personal competence

Participants described how they perceived the positive impact that nurture group provision had on autistic children's confidence, emotional understanding, emotional expression, regulation skills and attention and listening skills. These skills related to 'personal competence', which Goleman (2001) describes as "knowing and managing emotions in oneself" (p. 2). One participant commented that as a result of nurture group provision, pupils displayed "increased confidence in recognising and understanding feelings in themselves..." (participant 8). Another believed that pupils were "more regulated; able to self-regulate more; promoted their listening and attention skills..." (participant 27). A small number of participants also described approaches they viewed as helpful and unhelpful in supporting the development of autistic children's skills, which included, "use of Just Right" (participant 1) and "the TEACCH approach for emotional literacy and the Zones of Regulation for emotional understanding" (participant 14). There were conflicting views about whether mindfulness is a helpful exercise, with one participant commenting that it worked well and another commenting that it did not work well for autistic children within the nurture group.

3.3.2.2 Sub-theme: Social competence

The sub-theme of social competence was created as a result of participants' descriptions of placing emphasis on the development of social skills, the positive impact on autistic children's social skills and supporting children to develop relationships with their peers. These skills related to social competence, which Goleman (2001) describes as "knowing and managing emotions in others" (p. 2). "Great to build on the autistic child's interaction with others and help to socialise in a controlled environment" (participant 2). Some participants commented on approaches they used to support children's social competence, which included Circle Time and group work. One participant, however, described how the focus on social competence within the nurture group could be a barrier for autistic children: "The social aspect of the group can still make it too difficult for some ASC children

even though it is much smaller than the typical class environment" (participant 7).

3.3.2.3 Sub-theme: Enhanced learning support

Comments from some participants identified provision that was perceived to be beneficial to autistic children in the nurture group setting that represented an additional level of learning support. This included the "...repetition of activities if possible" (participant 19); being "...given extra time..." (participant 21); being able to "...access the curriculum at [sic] their own pace" (participant 9); "...higher staff ratio.." (participant 18); "...sensory activities..." (participant 8); and "movement breaks, time out..." (participant 9).

3.3.2.4 Sub-theme: Features of holistic setting

The sub-theme 'features of holistic setting' was developed as several participants described the importance of play, new experiences and practical activities that were broader than the national curriculum: "Also gives children a chance to try new experiences..." (participant 1). One participant commented that aspects of the nurture group that had been particularly beneficial for autistic children were "...cooking sessions, gardening, opportunity to play" (participant 22). One participant specifically mentioned "structured play" (participant 19) as particularly beneficial, while another mentioned "learning through play" (participant 22).

3.3.2.5 Sub-theme: Generalisation of learning

The sub-theme 'generalisation of learning' encompasses participants' perceptions of the impact of nurture group provision on autistic children when they were spending time with their mainstream class or had returned full-time to their mainstream class. Most, but not all, participants described a positive impact when children spent time with their usual class: "I think our nurture group modelled and set these young people up with the skills to succeed in their mainstream classes" (participant 3). Some described the gradual nature of pupils being able to apply the skills learnt within the nurture group setting to their mainstream class: "As time went on, changes during the nurture group began to be seen in their main class" (participant 23). There was also a sense that the periods of time they spent in their mainstream class provided them with chances to practise new skills learnt: "Nurture also includes

some time to practise working independently and fostering self belief and resilience” (participant 8). A small number of participants described some more negative elements: “Children can find this transition difficult however in the afternoon I and [sic] based in the main playroom to offer support” (participant 24).

The views regarding autistic children’s full-time return to their classroom were similarly mixed. Most perceived the impact to have been positive: “When children are ready to finish attending our sessions, they have acquired a range of transferrable skills which support them in the classroom” (participant 7). Two participants, however, described that the impact had been negative: “Expectations of being in classroom full time difficult for children and adults to manage” (participant 15); “Time in nurture had no affect [sic]” (participant 11).

3.3.2.6 Sub-theme: Collaboration between stakeholders

Data illustrated that working in partnership with the people supporting the child outside the nurture group context was important to participants: “Individual targets and strategies which could be shared with parents [sic] carers and other staff” (participant 15). Other participants expressed that the children’s progress when they spent time in or transitioned back to their mainstream class was dependent upon this collaboration: “Within the provision all pupils make incredible progress however this can be hindered by their mainstream class approach and understanding of nurture and its strategies... It wholly depends on their class teacher and supporting staff. Whether the strategies and skills have been maintained” (participant 14). One described how a lack of collaboration between stakeholders made it difficult to know what the impact of nurture group provision had been: “Childrens [sic] behaviour is varied, and nit [sic] always reported to me” (participant 20).

3.3.3 THEME 3: PERSON-CENTRED

Participants articulated numerous ways in which their decision-making was driven by a need to focus on the individual child, ensuring that they were responsive to each child’s strengths and needs. This aligns with a person-centred approach, which aims to place the child and what

is important to them at the centre of planning and decision-making (Laursen & Hoff, 2006 for review). They described a range of different individualised adaptations they made for autistic children, and some commented on a need to understand each child’s behaviour. Finally, participants described the importance of considering the appropriateness of the nurture group intervention based on a number of factors.

3.3.3.1 Sub-theme: Individualised support

Participants described a range of general adaptations they made to support individual autistic children in their nurture groups: “Yes, seating, sound, routines, working patterns” (participant 21). Some commented on the need to adapt elements of nurture group provision based on their knowledge of the child, taking into account their interests or areas of difficulty: “Yes, we try to amend work sheets, check in prompts [sic] to suit the child. If the pupil really enjoys a television programme then we will make the check in about that so that the autistic pupil feels heard and that they enjoy their time with us” (participant 13).

Some participants commented that they did not make any adaptations to support individual autistic children: “Not really there are some expectations but they usually manage them” (participant 5). Some said they did not make adaptations for autistic children but explained that this is because they adapt for all children in the group: “All planning is done around individual needs so is adapted for all children in the group” (participant 6). One participant explained that they do not make adaptations for autistic children because of the similarities they observed with attachment needs: “No. Supports [sic] for children with attachment issues overlapped, visual timetables, now next boards etc” (participant 15).

3.3.3.2 Sub-theme: Understanding needs and behaviour

Some participants described the importance of understanding the needs of autistic children to ensure that nurture group provision was the correct intervention for them: “The child is assessed on their overall needs. The fact that they are autistic is not reason for them to attend unless their diagnostic profile indicated a need that Nurture can support. Therefore Nurture can make a difference

by addressing these specific issues” (participant 6). Some participants also commented on the need to understand the behaviour of autistic pupils: “...behaviour is understood developmentally” (participant 24).

3.3.3.3 Sub-theme: Considering appropriateness

Some described how nurture group provision had been a suitable intervention for all autistic children who had attended: “...we’ve not had one it hasn’t [sic] worked for” (participant 13). However, numerous participants highlighted that nurture group provision was not a suitable intervention for individual autistic pupils they knew: “We have had some children with asd who have had some very positive outcomes, where we have felt that it is not what the child needs. We have ended the placement earlier” (participant 4). Some provided details about the reasons for the unsuitability of the nurture group, one of which was the behaviours of other children: “Nurture tends to be a mix of children with SEMH. Autistic children will often find this overwhelming” (participant 11). Another was that the nurture group impacted negatively on a child’s view of themselves: “Keeping them from their class making [sic] them feel different” (participant 16). One participant perceived that the Boxall Profile® had not worked well for autistic pupils (participant 15).

4.0 Discussion

Nurture group practitioners generally perceived the impact of nurture group provision on autistic pupils to be positive while they are in the group setting. The data illustrated a contrast between how practitioners perceived the children’s usual mainstream class, which was frequently described as being difficult for them to manage, and the nurture group setting, which was consistently described as representing a safe space. This aligns with qualitative research on the experiences of autistic pupils, who report feeling unsupported and misunderstood in mainstream school environments (Goodall, 2018).

Participants in our study recognised that enhancing the predictability of the nurture group environment and creating a calm, routinised and structured setting with a small number of children was beneficial. This makes sense from a monotropism perspective, as these environmental adaptations

all reduce the need to distribute attention between multiple streams, which is highly effortful – and sometimes impossible. Monotropism can also explain one of the key barriers that was mentioned by participants, which was the SEMH needs of other children in the group, resulting in behaviours that autistic pupils found distressing. Monotropic minds do not easily tune sensory input out, which can result in a highly intrusive experience (Milton, 2012).

Participants had more mixed views on intervention impact outside the nurture group setting. Quantitative analysis illustrated a significant difference in the perceived impact of when the children were in the nurture group compared to when they had rejoined their class full-time, suggesting that practitioners do not perceive skills they learnt to be applied successfully outside the nurture group environment.

Empirical evidence suggests that autistic children can find it particularly difficult to generalise skills to new settings after intervention (eg Hwang & Hughes, 2000). This can be explained by monotropism, which posits that autistic individuals tend to think in ‘closed’ rather than ‘open’ pictures; closed pictures do not take into account the intention, context and scale of the object or event, meaning that linking pictures together – thereby building on and integrating experiences – can be very challenging (Lawson, 2001).

The present data appears to illustrate this, with 31 per cent of participants not reporting a positive impact of nurture group provision when children spent time in their mainstream class, and 36 per cent once they had fully returned to their mainstream class. Narratives suggested that it was crucial to share nurture strategies with school staff and caregivers so that the approach could be consistent across settings. This is supported by research on nurture group provision for non-autistic pupils. O’Connor and Colwell (2002) found that social and emotional skills learnt in a nurture group were not consistently maintained long term and suggested that a whole-school nurturing approach was necessary.

Interestingly, the findings of the present study do not completely align with the research of Symeonidou and Robinson (2018), whose results

indicated that while most school staff perceived moderate change for skills including interacting and playing with peers and understanding basic feelings, most perceived no/little change in autistic pupils' progress across multiple outcomes, including understanding complex feelings, accepting discipline and turn-taking roles. This may be due to how participants in the present study conceptualised a 'positive impact'.

Participants were not asked to comment on specific skills or outcomes as they were in Symeonidou and Robinson's (2018) study, and while many did mention a positive effect on a range of social and emotional skills, their qualitative responses indicate that their interpretation of nurture group provision's impact was often broader than this – including children's ability to express their needs, have a voice, be their true selves or 'mask' less. Masking can make autistic people feel disconnected from their sense of identity and can have a range of person-specific negative effects, including sensory suppression and suicidal ideation (Miller et al., 2021). Participants in the present study, therefore, may have perceived that feeling comfortable in their identity and being able to express their needs were crucial skills that could be supported through nurture group provision, which was not captured by the measures in Symeonidou and Robinson's (2018) study.

Other questions arose around the suitability of the Boxall Profile® to assess change in autistic pupils. One participant commented that the Boxall Profile® did not work well for autistic pupils, which echoes the experiences shared by the majority (n=5) of participants in Symeonidou and Robinson's (2018) study as it includes items that autistic individuals will never be able to improve upon. These views align with a neurodiversity perspective, which challenges the traditional, medical view that autistic traits should be treated or fixed and that autistic individuals should behave more like non-autistic people (Singer, 1998, 2017).

This highlights the question of whether the skills being taught to autistic children – based on completed Boxall Profile® assessments – are always appropriate for them. Items on the Diagnostic Profile section of the Boxall Profile® include “abnormal eye contact and gaze”, “repetitively pursues a limited work or play activity

which does not progress” and “inappropriate noises or remarks, or patterns of behaviour that are bizarre fragments of no obvious relevance”.

While there is debate both within and beyond the autistic community on whether autism should be seen as a difference or a disorder (see for instance: Amaral, 2023; Bervoets and Hens, 2020; Botha and Cage, 2022), this clearly pathologises these characteristics of autism, raising question about how aspects of nurture group practices must be examined in terms of suitability and ethicality for autistic children. Guidance from the National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT; 2020) also cautions against the use of the Boxall Profile® for planning for autistic children and makes specific recommendations for how to apply an “autism lens” to make adaptations to nurturing approaches (p.1). They emphasise the importance of identifying appropriate targets for autistic pupils based on their context and then identifying the best way to meet that target. Notably, a recent systematic review on nurture group efficacy reported more consistent effects of nurture group provision on the Developmental rather than the Diagnostic strand of the Boxall Profile® (Jones et al., 2025), questioning the impact of the intervention on these domains in pupils generally.

Importantly, however, the benefits of nurture groups for autistic pupils that were reported by the participants in the present study were predominantly features of the environment and the quality of the relationships formed within it, as opposed to specific activities aimed at encouraging or eradicating certain behaviours.

Additionally, the impact on autistic children was perceived primarily to relate to the growth of their identity and self-expression, rather than the development of neurotypical social skills. This suggests that nurture groups are perceived by nurture group practitioners to have successfully implemented principles of inclusion that enable autistic children to authentically thrive. While this is undeniably a positive finding, it hints that such principles are not effectively or consistently incorporated into all mainstream classrooms, resulting in interventions being required. This may be reflected in the finding that the impact of nurture groups is most often seen within the context of the group, rather than extending beyond

the intervention setting. This highlights the need for whole-school inclusive practice that enable all children to be successful within their classroom.

4.1 Strengths, limitations and directions for future research

The present study builds upon Symeonidou and Robinson's (2018) research by exploring nurture group practitioners' experiences on a larger scale and in a national context. This study also adds to the existing literature by investigating staff members' views about specific aspects of nurture group provision that were perceived to impact the progress of autistic children, as well as at different stages of the intervention. Additionally, the survey questions were designed to take into account a wide range of participants' interpretations of how nurture groups might impact autistic pupils.

There were also limitations of the study to be acknowledged and discussed. Firstly, no demographic information about the individual participants or the children and young people they have worked with was gathered, meaning that it was not possible to draw conclusions regarding the views of participants who might be associated with specific characteristics of nurture group provision. For example, this could be whether they practised in a primary, secondary, or early years context, unless they explicitly stated this in their responses, or whether there were differences in regard to age or gender of the pupils.

Secondly, the survey data collection methodology used meant that a lower level of detail was captured within participants' accounts than anticipated. It is also possible that the focus on autistic pupils resulted in participants conceptualising autistic children as a homogenous group based on the label of autism. Future researchers should, therefore, consider using interviews in order to gain richer and more nuanced data, allowing participants to talk in detail about individual children and their experiences of their different strengths and needs.

Finally, the generalisability of this research is limited by the small sample size.

4.2 Implications for practice

Several practical suggestions can be identified from the research. Educational psychologists could support school staff in understanding the needs underlying autistic pupils' behaviour so that appropriate support can be put in place, as well as sharing research in an accessible way that encourages school staff to consider how nurture groups might support autistic pupils and how progress could be measured. They could further work with school staff to support the implementation of nurture groups that might be accessed by autistic pupils, and collaborating with autistic pupils and stakeholders to create a neurodiversity-affirming tool for those accessing nurture group provision is a valuable step in ensuring effective support. Nurture group practitioners and special educational needs coordinators within schools could provide continuing professional development for school staff to ensure nurture group principles are used across the school. This could be facilitated by embedding nurture group strategies into a whole-school approach, which could further be supported by Education Mental Health Practitioners working with these schools.

4.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlighted that, while overall, nurture group practitioners perceive the impact of nurture group provision to be positive for autistic children, impact is perceived to differ according to the stage of the intervention, with significant differences between the perceived impact while children are in the group setting compared to when they have returned to their mainstream class full time. This has implications for the generalisability of nurture group provision for autistic children beyond the nurture group setting. The qualitative data from this study suggests that nurture group practitioners understand the impact of nurture groups for autistic pupils in terms of their contribution to skill development, provision of a safe space and person-centred approach. Future research should explore practitioners' views in further detail, as well as the perceptions of other stakeholders, including autistic pupils themselves.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplement A: Codebook

SAFE SPACE

Mainstream class not meeting needs

Code #1 Mainstream classroom wrong

Definition: Participants reflecting on the environment of a mainstream classroom not suiting autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about how the mainstream classroom is not right for the child

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to breaks away from mainstream class

Example: "Classroom environment is totally wrong [sic] the time a child spends in a small nurture group so I feel the positive impact is mainly when that child is in the nurturing environment..."

Code #2 Unable to cope in mainstream

Definition: Participants reflecting on nurture groups providing the opportunity for autistic children to have time away from mainstream classroom environment

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about how nurture groups give autistic children a break

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to effects that the time away from their class has on their sense of self

Example: "Children weren't coping in a mainstream classroom with 30 children. In the nurture provision they had time to breath [sic]..."

Code #3 Attending mainstream class alongside nurture group challenging

Definition: Participants reflecting on how children spending time with their mainstream class (while still enrolled in the nurture group) was difficult for autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about not being able to cope with the environment of the mainstream class

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to children being back in mainstream class full time

Example: "They couldn't cope with the larger, busier and noisier classroom, with less adult attention."

Prioritising strong relationships

Code #4 Relationships with nurture staff as important

Definition: Participants reflecting on the importance of forming relationships with key school staff members

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about meaningful and/or trusting relationships with staff; positive relationships having a greater impact on child

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers to the development of social skills, interactions with peers and staff, or the forming of relationships with peers

Example: "As before, it is about the relationships that have been built up. Once they have the confidence and relationships and feel able to speak or ask out to that trust [sic] adult. Their inclass [sic] support is a positive experience."

Code #5 Getting to know the child important

Definition: Participants reflecting on how getting to know an autistic child within the nurture group is important

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about getting to know a child, finding out about them, learning about their interests

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers to building a relationship with the child

Example: "The barriers are lower as you get to know their interests."

Enhancing predictability

Code #6 Routine is an important feature

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the routine of the nurture group has a positive impact on autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about routine

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to features that do not include consideration of routine

Example: "It also helped to create more of a routine for these young people allowing them to achieve..."

Code #7 Structure is an important feature

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the routine of the nurture group has a positive impact on autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the structure of the nurture group being positive

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to features that do not include consideration of structure

Example: "Our children enjoy the structure of the lesson..."

Code #8 Calmness is an important feature

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the calm environment of the nurture group has a positive impact on autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about calm or quiet being positive

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to features that do not include consideration of calmness or quietness

Example: "...enjoyed the calm and quiet atmosphere of nurture."

Code #9 Predictability is important

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the predictability of the nurture group has a positive impact on autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about predictability

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to features that do not include consideration of predictability specifically

Example: "...and predictability better support the need [sic] of these children."

Code #10 Small group size is an important feature

Definition: Participants reflecting on how nurture groups provide a small group size relative to the children's mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the small group, small numbers, smaller class

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of reduction in group size

Example: "Within the nurture environment I feel children with ASD respond better to small numbers..."

Code #11 Sense of safety

Definition: Participants reflecting on how nurture groups enable autistic children to feel safe

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about an increased sense of safety and/or security, and the perception of nurture groups as a safe space

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations to make the group physically safe and secure

Example: "The children felt safe."

Code #12 Visual timetable beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from a visual timetable in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about visual timetables

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to other visual supports

Example: "...visual timetables..."

Code #13 Avoiding competitive games

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children can respond negatively to competitive games in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about making a choice not to plan competitive games for the benefit of autistic children in the group

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to avoiding games with no competitive component

Example: "In the nurture group he has to win all the time and gets worked up if other children win so I am very conscious of not doing games that are too competitive as this triggers him and he can become very frustrated."

Code #14 'Now/next' support beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from 'now/next' support in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about 'now/next' board

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of now/next support

Example: "...now/next boards etc."

Code #15 Emphasis on teaching rules

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from being taught how the rules work in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about teaching how rules and boundaries work, clear rules, clear instructions

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to children managing rules

Example: "...establishing how rules and boundaries work."

Code #16 Time with mainstream class supports exploration of identity

Definition: Participants reflecting on how spending time in their mainstream class outside the nurture group helps autistic children explore their identity

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about how joining their mainstream class helps them explore who they are and identify areas of strength and need

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to child exploring their identity/ being their true self while in the nurture group

Example: "Allowed them to explore who they were, identify strengths and areas to develop..."

Identity and self-expression

Code #17 Peers view child differently in nurture group

Definition: Participants reflecting on how an autistic child's peers view them differently in the nurture group setting compared to in their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about peers seeing the child in a different light

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to interactions or relationships with peers

Example: "...and their peers see them in a totally different light."

Code #18 Provides child with sense of purpose

Definition: Participants reflecting on how features of the nurture group provide a sense of purpose for the child

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children having a sense of purpose

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to children finding specific activities purposeful

Example: "...so the autistic child has a sense of purpose..."

Code #19 Can be true self in nurture group

Definition: Participants reflecting on autistic children having time away from mainstream classroom impacting positively on their sense of self

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about how nurture groups enables an autistic child to be themselves, mask less and feel 'normal'

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to other positive benefits on the autistic child

Example: "...and time for them to be true to themself."

Code #20 Children feel able to express themselves

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children feel more able to express themselves as a result of nurture group provision

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about autistic children being heard, having a voice, feeling able to speak and being able to express their needs to others

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to the development of language skills

Example: "One of the children began speaking – he hadn't spoken before in school due to anxieties."

Code #21 Fosters sense of belonging

Definition: Participants reflecting on how nurture groups provide autistic children with a sense of belonging

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children developing a sense of belonging within the nurture group

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to a sense of belonging not connected with the nurture group

Example: "...creating an overall sense of belonging..."

Positive experience

Code #22 Enjoyed by autistic children

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the intervention is an enjoyable experience for autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children enjoying their time or having fun in the nurture group

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to enjoying specific activities

Example: "...find that children enjoy the sessions..."

Code #23 Making the group fun

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they attempt to provide a fun experience

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about making it fun or enjoyable

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to a child finding the group fun

Example: "We try to make it fun and enjoyment [sic] for all pupils."

Code #24 Sets up for success

Definition: Participants reflecting that nurture groups provide autistic children with opportunities to be successful

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about nurture groups providing autistic children with opportunities to succeed, be successful, or achieve

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to success/achievement at a particular skill, a positive impact, or making progress

Example: "...allowing them to achieve and setting them up for success."

SKILL DEVELOPMENT**Generalisation of learning****Code #25 Positive impact seen after returning to mainstream class fulltime**

Definition: Participants reflecting that nurture group provision has had a positive impact on an autistic learner when they have re-joined their mainstream class on a fulltime basis

When to use: Apply this code when participants make general comments about a positive impact or effect

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to a positive impact when the child is in the nurture group or has rejoined their mainstream class full time

Example: "Generally we have had a positive impact."

Code #26 Attending mainstream class alongside enables skills practice

Definition: Participants reflecting on how skills learnt within nurture group are successfully transferred to their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children being able to practise their skills outside the nurture group environment

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to transfer of skills

Example: "Children that learn skills in nurture can practise them in their [sic] usual class."

Code #27 Successful transfer of skills to mainstream class

Definition: Participants reflecting on how skills learnt within nurture group are successfully transferred by the child to their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make general comments about skills being transferred

When not to use: Do not use if specific skills are referred to

Example: "Skills learnt in Nurture are transferred [sic] in class."

Code #28 Application of coping strategies in mainstream class

Definition: Participants reflecting on how coping strategies taught in nurture group were used successfully in mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about coping strategies being used in mainstream class

When not to use: Do not use if participant makes a general comment about the transfer of skills

Example: "Coping strategies were being used."

Code #29 Transfer of skills takes time

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the transfer of skills from being used in the nurture group to the mainstream class is not instant

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about gradual transfer and changes being seen after time

When not to use: Do not use if the transfer of skills is referred to in general without reference to the time taken

Example: "As time went on, changes during the nurture group began to be seen in their main class."

Code #30 Less progress when in mainstream class

Definition: Participants reflecting on how children demonstrate less progress when they are spending time with their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children making less progress at times when they are with their mainstream class

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to progress during the time period when the child has returned full-time to their mainstream class

Example: "although progress is lesser than within the nurture group there were and are [sic] clear evidence of progress and transferred skills."

Code #31 Coped in class after nurture group ended

Definition: Participants reflecting on how children could cope in their mainstream class after returning full-time

When to use: Apply this code when participants make

comments about children coping in mainstream class after nurture group provision finished

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to development of coping skills

Example: "Able to cope in mainstream class and used [sic] the nurture provision as a safe space if needed."

Code #32 Spending time in mainstream class positive

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the time spent with their mainstream class is positive for autistic learners

When to use: Apply this code when participants make general comments about the experience of mainstream class (alongside nurture group) being positive

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to being back with mainstream class permanently being positive (ie after nurture group provision has ended)

Example: "Their inclass [sic] support is a positive experience."

Code #33 Transitions between nurture group and mainstream can be hard

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children can find making the transitions between their mainstream class and the nurture group difficult

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the transition back and forth between nurture group and class being hard

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to the final transition back to the mainstream class (when time in nurture group has finished)

Example: "Children can find this transition difficult however in the afternoon I and [sic] based in the main playroom to offer support."

Code #34 Improved attention in mainstream class

Definition: Participants reflecting on how children's attention skills had improved when returned to mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children displaying better ability to maintain attention and/or focus in their mainstream class

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to attention and listening skills while in nurture group setting

Example: "Most of the children were able to focus more in class..."

Code #35 Positive impact seen when child spending time with mainstream class

Definition: Participants reflecting that nurture group provision has had a positive impact on an autistic learner when they have been spending time with their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make general comments about a positive impact or effect on the child while they were with their mainstream class

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to a positive impact on a specific skill, or when the child is in the nurture group or has rejoined their mainstream class full-time

Example: "Generally we have had a positive impact."

Personal competence

Code #36 Growth in confidence

Definition: Participants reflecting on how nurture groups positively impact autistic children's confidence

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about increased confidence

When not to use: Do not apply this code when confidence is referred to in conjunction with increased progress in a specific skill, eg 'increased confidence in recognising and understanding feelings.'

Example: "Our pupils who have autism and have been in nurture always grow in confidence..."

Code #37 Development of emotional understanding

Definition: Participants reflecting on autistic children demonstrating improved ability to understand emotions in themselves and others

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about improved recognition of emotions, understanding of feelings

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to emotional expression or regulation skills

Example: "Increased confidence in recognising and understanding feelings in themselves and others."

Code #38 Development of emotional expression skills

Definition: Participants reflecting on autistic children demonstrating improved ability to express emotions

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about expressing emotions, language for emotions

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to understanding of emotions or emotional regulation

Example: "Provided language to express emotions..."

Code #39 Development of regulation skills

Definition: Participants reflecting on autistic children demonstrating improved emotional regulation skills

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about regulation, self-regulation, or emotional regulation, behaviour management

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to understanding of emotions or expression of emotions

Example: "More regulated; able to self-regulate more."

Code #40 Improved attention and listening skills

Definition: Participants reflecting on how nurture group provision can improve the attention and listening skills of autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about promoting attention and listening skills

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to attention, listening, or focus skills outside the nurture group context

Example: "...promoted their listening and attention skills..."

Code #41 Zones of Regulation programme beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from use of the Zones of Regulation programme for emotional understanding in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about Zones of Regulation

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to other social emotional teaching programmes

Example: "and the Zones of regulation for emotional understanding."

Code #42 TEACCH approach beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from use of the TEACCH approach to emotional literacy learning in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the TEACCH approach

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to other approaches to teaching emotional literacy

Example: "We use the TEACCH approach for emotional literacy..."

Code #43 Just Right approach beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from a visual timetable in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the Just Right approach

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to other approaches

Example: "Use of Just Right."

Code #44 Sharing feelings beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from sharing feelings in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about sharing feelings as a beneficial activity

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to a child making progress with sharing feelings

Example: "Sharing feelings..."

Code #45 Mindfulness work beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from mindfulness work in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about mindfulness work as a beneficial activity

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to mindfulness work being difficult or unsuccessful

Example: "...mindfulness..."

Code #46 Mindfulness doesn't work

Definition: Participants reflecting on how sometimes mindfulness does not work well for autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about mindfulness not working well

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to mindfulness work being successful or helpful

Example: "Mindfulness [sic]"

Social competence

Code #47 Development of social skills

Definition: Participants reflecting on how children's social emotional skills increase through nurture group provision

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about supporting the understanding of social cues or norms (eg eye contact), social learning and/or social skills; building interaction with others; engaging with others; meeting other children; learning to interact; helping to socialise.

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers specifically to relationships, communication skills, social emotional skills, or emotional regulation skills

Example: "Improved social skills and peer interaction."

Code #48 Focusing on social emotional skills beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from activities that focus on developing social emotional skills

When to use: Apply this code when participants make general comments about a focus on developing emotional social skills, working on emotions

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to specific social emotional skills or approaches to teaching them, or refers to a child making progress with social emotional skills

Example: "...focus on developing social skills..."

Code #49 Enable formation of peer relationships

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the group allowed autistic children to develop relationships with their peers

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about children developing peer relationships or friendships

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers to social interaction skills or relationships with adults

Example: "It enabled the young person to form meaningful relationships with [staff and] pupils..."

Code #50 Circle Time beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from Circle Time in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about Circle Time as beneficial

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to other approaches being beneficial

Example: "Circle Time..."

Code #51 Group work beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from group work in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about group work as a beneficial activity

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to social interaction or peer relationships

Example: "...group work..."

Code #52 Social aspect of group can be challenging

Definition: Participants reflecting on how social elements of nurture group provision can make it challenging for autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the social aspects being difficult for autistic children to manage

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to progress with social skills

Example: "The social aspect of the group can still make it too difficult for some ASC children even though it is much smaller than the typical class environment."

Collaboration between stakeholders

Code #53 Sharing strategies with others

Definition: Participants reflecting on how sharing strategies with others outside the nurture group helps when children spend time in their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about sharing/providing strategies for other staff members, parents/carers and the child

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers to strategies shared not being used

Example: "Individual targets and strategies which could be shared with parents, carers and other staff."

Code #54 Impact dependent on wider understanding of nurture

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the impact of nurture group provision after it has ended is dependent upon the understanding of nurture principles

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about impact of nurture group being impacted by the understanding of nurture

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to being dependent on mainstream staff

Example: "...however this can be hindered by their mainstream class approach and understanding of nurture and its principles."

Code #55 Impact dependent on mainstream class staff

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the impact of nurture group provision after it has ended is dependent upon the staff in the mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about impact being dependent on teachers or support staff in mainstream class after nurture group provision finished

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to being dependent on staff not directly in mainstream class (eg senior leadership)

Example: "It wholly depends on their class teacher and supporting staff. Whether the strategies and skills have been maintained."

Code #56 Impact in class not communicated

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they do not always know what the impact of nurture group provision is when the children are in their mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about behaviour in mainstream class not being reported

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to the impact being positive or negative

Example: "Childrens [sic] behaviour is varied, and nit [sic] always reported to me."

Features of holistic setting

Code #57 Child-led curriculum beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how a curriculum led by the child is beneficial for autistic children in a nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the use of a child-led curriculum

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to the National Curriculum

Example: "...we deliver a child led curriculum."

Code #58 Opportunities for play

Definition: Participants reflecting on how play is a part of nurture group provision that benefits autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about learning through play, structured play, opportunity to play,

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to activities that do not involve play

Example: "...opportunity to play."

Code #59 Opportunities for new experiences

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the intervention has provided autistic children in the nurture group with opportunities to take part in new experiences

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about new experiences being provided in nurture group provision

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to new experiences in specific activities

Example: "Also gives children a chance to try new experiences..."

Code #60 Practical activities

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the intervention has provided autistic children in the nurture group with opportunities for practical activities

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about practical activities, such as gardening and cooking

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to activities without a significant practical component

Example: "...cooking sessions, gardening..."

Enhanced learning support

Code #61 Repetition of learning is important

Definition: Participants reflecting on how repetition of learning in the nurture group has a positive impact on autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about repetition being positive

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of repetition

Example: "...repetition of activities if possible."

Code #62 More time provided to learn

Definition: Participants reflecting on autistic children benefitting from a slower pace

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about autistic children benefitting from the slower pace, extra time, slowness provided in the nurture group

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to an individualised or flexible approach, eg 'their own pace'

Example: "...given extra time..."

Code #63 Higher staff ratio beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how a higher staff to pupil ratio is an important feature of a nurture group for autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about higher staff ratio, more adults

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adult attention or connection

Example: "...higher staff ratio..."

Code #64 Modelling in nurture group important

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they need to provide modelling for autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about modelling

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of modelling

Example: "...adult modelling..."

Code #65 TA support in mainstream class

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children spent time in mainstream class with the support of a teaching assistant

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about TA support in mainstream

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to TA support in the nurture group

Example: "Autistic student like [sic] being within the classroom sometimes with support of TA."

Code #66 Sensory activities beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from sensory activities in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about sensory activities and toys as beneficial

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to activities that do not have a primary sensory component

Example: "...sensory activities..."

Code #67 Movement breaks beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children benefit from movement breaks in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about movement breaks

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of movement levels

Example: "Movement breaks..."

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Individualised support

Code #68 Individualisation of support

Definition: Participants reflecting on how support is tailored to individual needs

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about strategies being individualised, learning at own pace, planning to individual needs, adaptations as per student, tailoring of support for pupils, activities suited to the child

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers to specific adaptations being made

Example: "If the pupil really enjoys a television programme then we will make the check in about that so that the autistic pupil feels heard that they enjoy their time with us."

Code #69 Differentiation difficult

Definition: Participants reflecting on how differentiation of work within the nurture group can be difficult

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about differentiation being difficult

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to the specific skills being difficult for children to learn

Example: "Differentiation can be tricky within work."

Code #70 Adaptations made for all pupils

Definition: Participants reflecting on how adaptations are made for all pupils, including autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make general comments about adaptations being made to nurture group provision that is not specifically for autistic children but benefits them

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to no adaptations being made to support autistic children

Example: "Constantly adapting NG [nurture group] based on dynamics and needs of all pupils."

Code #71 No adaptations

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they do not make any adaptations to the nurture group for autistic learners

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about providing no adaptations and nurture principles working well for all

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to making adaptations for all children, adaptations per the individual, responding to individual needs, or planning tailored for all

Example: “Not really there are some expectations but they usually manage them.”

Code #72 Flexible approach beneficial

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they provide flexibility to support autistic children within nurture group provision

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about flexible availability of activities

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to individualised strategies or activities

Example: “...flexibility in activities available.”

Code #73 Adapting transitions

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they adapt transitions to support autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about changing the time or way that children transition

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of transitions

Example: “Two of our children go home [sic] from the provision as they found the transition very difficult.”

Code #74 Seating adaptations

Definition: Participants reflecting on how seating adaptations support autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about seating arrangements

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of seating arrangement

Example: “Yes, seating...”

Code #75 Sound adaptations

Definition: Participants reflecting on how sound adaptations support autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about sound adaptations

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of sound

Example: “...sound...”

Code #76 Working pattern adaptations

Definition: Participants reflecting on how working pattern adaptations support autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about working pattern adaptations

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of working patterns

Example: “...working patterns.”

Code #77 Worksheet adaptations

Definition: Participants reflecting on how worksheet adaptations support autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about worksheet amendments

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of worksheets

Example: “Yes, we try to amend work sheets...”

Code #78 Individualised check-ins

Definition: Participants reflecting on how check in prompts support autistic children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about check in prompts

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to adaptations that do not include consideration of check ins

Example: “...check in prompts [sic] to suit the child.”

Code #79 Autistic children visiting group

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children regularly join the nurture group in a visiting capacity

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about a child visiting the group

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to a child attending the group for the same length of time as the other children in the group

Example: “We welcome an autistic child who struggles in class as a regular visitor to the group.”

Understanding needs and behaviour

Code #80 Seeking to understand child's behaviour

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they try to understand an autistic child's behaviour

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about behaviour being understood developmentally, reading the behaviour

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to specific aspects of the child's behaviour

Example: "...behaviour is understood developmentally."

Code #81 Similarities with attachment needs

Definition: Participants reflecting on the needs of autistic children being similar to children who have attachment needs

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about overlap with attachment needs

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to autistic children having attachment needs

Example: "Support for children with attachment issues overlapped..."

Code #82 Basing support on needs, not diagnosis

Definition: Participants reflecting on how they base support in the nurture group on the needs a child presents with as opposed to their diagnosis of autism

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about being assessed on their overall needs, being autistic not being a reason for attending

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to not adapting provision for autistic children

Example: "The child is assessed on their overall needs. The fact that they are autistic is not reason for them to attend unless their diagnostic profile indicated a need that Nurture can support. Therefore nurture can make a difference by addressing these specific issues."

Considering appropriateness

Code #83 Separation from class enhances differences

Definition: Participants reflecting on how separating autistic children from their mainstream class can enhance differences

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about nurture group provision can create a sense of difference

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to children feeling different from other children in nurture group

Example: "Keeping them from their class making [sic] them feel different."

Code #84 Child wanting to be with class

Definition: Participants reflecting on when autistic children did not want to be part of the nurture group because of preferring to be with mainstream class

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about child wanting to be in mainstream class instead

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to child not wanting to be in nurture group for other reasons

Example: "He wanted to be with his class rather than being in nurture but his behaviour in class had a negative impact on his classmates."

Code #85 Not benefitting as much as neurotypical children

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children did not benefit as much from the nurture group as neurotypical children did

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about autistic children not progressing or responding in the same way as non-autistic children

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to not benefitting as much as other neurodivergent children

Example: "Although the autistic child did well in the nurture group, enjoyed the routine, understood the rules, etc they did not really thrive or grow as other, neurotypical children did."

Code #86 Boxall Profile® doesn't work

Definition: Participants reflecting on how sometimes the Boxall Profile® does not work well for autistic children

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the Boxall Profile® not working well

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to the Boxall Profile® working well or being helpful

Example: "Boxall profile"

Code #87 Nurture group not always suitable intervention

Definition: Participants reflecting on how sometimes a nurture group is not the most suitable intervention for the child

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about a nurture group not being a suitable or required intervention for an autistic child

When not to use: Do not use if the comment refers to nurture group never being an appropriate intervention for an autistic child

Example: "We have had some children with asd who

have had some very positive outcomes, where we have felt that it is not what the child needs. We have ended the placement earlier.”

Code #88 Negative impact of other children's needs

Definition: Participants reflecting on how autistic children can be negatively impacted by the needs of other children in the nurture group

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about the SEMH needs of other children overwhelming

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to impact of autistic children's own needs

Example: “Nurture tends to be a mix of children with semh. Autistic children will often find this overwhelming.”

Code #89 Some benefit more than others

Definition: Participants reflecting on how some autistic children benefit from nurture group provision more than others do

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about how some autistic children benefit from nurture group provision more than others

When not to use: Do not use if comment refers to comparison between neurotypical and neurodivergent children

Example: “Some benefitted more than others.”

Code #90 Beneficial for all autistic children

Definition: Participants reflecting on how the intervention has had a positive impact on all the autistic children who have accessed it

When to use: Apply this code when participants make comments about nurture group working for all autistic children or not having an autistic child that the intervention hasn't worked for

When not to use: Do not use if the participant refers to the child working for all children regardless of an autism diagnosis

Example: “...we've not had one it hasnt [sic] worked for.”

Supplement B: Survey questions

Views and experiences of supporting autistic children in nurture groups

Q1

- I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study. (1)
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time **before** submitting the questionnaire for any reason without my participation rights being affected. (2)
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study after submitting the questionnaire that it will not be possible to remove the data as it will not be possible to link it back to individual participants. (3)

Q2 How long has your school's nurture group been running for?

- Less than 1 year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 3-5 years (3)
- 5+ years (4)

Q3 How many children are typically in your school's nurture group at any one time?

- Fewer than 3 (1)
- 3-6 (2)
- 7-10 (3)
- 11 or greater (4)

Q4 What best describes the time that children typically spend in your school's nurture group in a day?

- Part of the morning only (1)
- Part of the afternoon only (2)
- Part of the morning AND part of the afternoon (3)
- All morning (4)
- All afternoon (5)
- All morning AND all afternoon (6)

Q5 How many days per week do children typically attend your school's nurture group?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)

Q6 How long does each child typically spend in your school's nurture group before returning to their usual class full-time?

- Less than half a term (1)
- Half a term to one term (2)
- One term to two terms (3)
- Two terms to three terms (4)
- More than 3 terms (5)

Q7 How many members of staff work in your school's nurture group during a typical nurture session?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- More than 3 (4)

Q8 Have the staff members who run the nurture group in your school received nurture group training?

- All nurture group staff have attended training (1)
- At least one member of nurture group staff has attended training (2)
- No nurture group staff members have attended training (3)

Q9 Do you currently support any autistic children within your school's nurture group?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q10 Have you previously supported autistic children within your school's nurture group?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q11 In your experience, does attending a nurture group have a positive, negative, or no impact on autistic children while they are within the group setting?

- The impact was very negative (1)
- The impact was negative (2)
- There was no positive or negative impact (3)
- The impact was positive (4)
- The impact was very positive (5)

Q12 Please explain why you gave the answer you did.

Q13 In your experience, does attending a nurture group have a positive, negative or no impact on autistic children when they are spending time in their usual class?

- The impact was very negative (1)
- The impact was negative (2)
- There was no positive or negative impact (3)
- The impact was positive (4)
- The impact was very negative (5)

Q14 Please explain why you gave the answer you did.

Q15 In your experience, does attending a nurture group have a positive, negative or no impact on autistic children after they have returned to their usual class full-time?

- The impact was very negative (1)
- The impact was negative (2)
- There was no positive or negative impact (3)
- The impact was positive (4)
- The impact was very negative (5)

Q16 Please explain why you gave the answer you did.

Q17 In your experience, are there any aspects of the nurture group that have been particularly beneficial for individual autistic children?

Q18 In your experience, are there any aspects of the nurture group that have not worked well for individual autistic children?

Q19 Do you currently make any adaptations to the nurture group to support any individual autistic children?

End of survey message:

Thank you for taking part in our research project. Your contribution is very valuable and greatly appreciated.