Exploring teacher perceptions of nurture provision through Q-methodology

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Abstract

Nurture provision is an attachment-based intervention, prioritising the development of relationships to build key social and emotional skills, often limited by early traumatic experiences. Previous study of nurture provisions has examined their effectiveness, through qualitative and quantitative methodologies, finding conflicting results on nurture group outcomes, approaches, reasoning, integration and staff effectiveness. Research also suggests the approach and attitudes of teachers, towards school interventions and pupils with SEND is vital in effective implementation. Perceptions of nurture provisions within primary education settings were analysed using Q-methodology. Three perspectives were drawn from the research placing priorities on classroom outcomes, the methods of nurture groups and the distinct nature of nurture as a separate provision. These perspectives highlight the disparity in understanding and approaches towards nurture groups within educational settings and their place within SEND support across the whole school.

Introduction

Nurture groups are intervention provisions, centred around social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs (Boxall, 2002). These hubs are usually implemented on school sites, as opposed to alternative provision (AP) which are separate provisions operating separately off-site, although can also nurture-informed. Nurture groups allow for further connection and integration within day-to-day school life and improve support systems for pupils identified with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), although largely focusing on SEMH needs. The initiation of nurture groups began with the work of Majorie Boxall in the 1960s. Boxall integrated theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1969) within educational contexts, to tackle rising SEMH concerns (Boxall, 2002). Nurture groups emphasise building key developmental steps missed, possibly due to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Boullier and Blair, 2018), including maltreatment and abuse, as well as providing support for young people with neurodivergence and other needs. Understanding of SEMH needs vary but often include themes around internalising problems, such as anxiety or depression, and behavioural difficulties, such as aggression (Poulou, 2015). Exhibiting these behaviours during childhood can lead to harmful effects in adulthood, such as social problems and criminal behaviours (Linsell et al., 2019; Basto-Pereira & Farrington, 2022). Whilst SEMH is often viewed as the primary need for those attending nurture provision this is not the sole need of nurture group attendees. The initial

nurture groups were designed with primary aged children in mind (Boxall, 2002; Boxall and Lucas, 2012) and focused on developing early attachment behaviours, for pupils with insecure attachment patterns (Baldwin et al., 2023; Boxall & Lucas, 2012).

The emphasis on early development was promoted by providing a nurturing environment where pupils develop a trusting relationship with secondary attachment figures (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). These ideas formed six key nurture principles: children's learning is understood developmentally, the classroom offers a safe base, the importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing, language is a vital means of communication, all behaviour is communication, and the importance of transitions in children's lives (nurtureuk, 2023).

The use of nurture provision within primary settings has steadily grown, to tackle rising SEMH needs witnessed across the UK (Doyle & Thomas, 2022). There are currently more than 2,000 on-site nurture groups (nurtureuk, 2019). There are hypotheses behind the increase, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of social media (Boddison & Curran, 2022; Morris et al., 2021). Behavioural difficulties have risen across UK primary schools (Bennett, 2017) and an increasing number of education, health and care plans (EHCPs) suggests a rise in needs across primary settings. Some projections suggest that 10 per cent of pupils may possess an EHCP by 2042, rising from 2.5 per cent in 2017 (Marsh, 2023).

The use of on-site hubs is an important part of SEND support, with further impacts on classrooms and the work of teachers, making it vital to understand how teachers understand and interpret nurture provision. Previous research has used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore viewpoints from multiple perspectives, including teachers, nurture practitioners and pupils (Cloran et al., 2022a; Vincent, 2017). However, these findings are varied and contrasting. For instance, some research finds teachers view nurture groups as providing a positive impact on reintegration within the classroom (Vincent, 2017), whereas Bishop & Swain (2000) suggests while reintegration may be achieved it is not the primary aim (p. 22). Similarly, Sloan et al. (2020) stress the positive impact seen on academic growth after nurture group attendance, whereas Cooper & Tiknaz (2005) suggests that teachers view nurture groups as having a lack of academic focus. As there are divergent understandings of nurture within different stakeholder groups, a mixed-method 'by person' approach to analysis, through Q-methodology (Stephenson, 1935; 1936), was adopted within the research.

There is current concern around the increase of SEND in England (DfE, 2025), heightened attendance of specialist schools (Norwich, 2019) and the pressure on parents of pupils with SEND to move schools or adopt home education (Done et al., 2021). This led Ofsted (2022) to publish a report stressing the need for specialist help for pupils with additional needs. Within this report Ofsted emphasises the pressure that mainstream settings are put under managing "physically or verbally violent behaviour" (p. 1), leading to 7,000 pupils attending some form of AP, having risen by a quarter in the previous five years. Ofsted state improvements are required on-site to support pupils with SEND before AP is required. As such nurture groups are vital, allowing for on-site provision to work closely with pupils with SEMH needs. Nurture groups play an important role in providing pupils with SEMH needs, who may not otherwise function in a typical classroom environment, an opportunity to develop key developmental skills, preparing students to manage/reintegrate within classroom environments. Hughes & Schlösser (2014) outline how nurture groups allow children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties to better access the curriculum, increasing academic achievement. This places nurture groups in a key position for the implementation of inclusive practice and education, allowing pupils who may not get the opportunity to access the classroom and curriculum alongside development on key emotional skills.

Nurture groups adopt a social model approach towards SEND, prioritising developmental aspects of learning and interpreting behaviour as a method of communicating need (nurtureuk, 2023). There are also concerns around the perceptions of differing needs. Paseka & Schwab (2019) describe how parents/carers often view physical and learning disability students positively, while withholding this view for pupils with behavioural disorders. Similarly, teachers may hold negative perceptions of pupils with behavioural difficulties,

as experienced by the pupils themselves (Bernier et al., 2022). There is further suggestion that teacher's levels of professional experience predispose them to negative views of children with SEMH needs, with those who have worked for longer maintaining prejudice towards pupils with SEMH needs (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Power & Taylor (2018) describe how pupils viewed as difficult are often excluded to non-classroom areas within schools, such as on-site provision, rather than official exclusions to improve school statistics. These reflect negative perceptions within teachers of inclusive education, due to the spreading of resources, increasing workload and the behavioural needs of certain children (Jury et al., 2023; Saloviita, 2020). Teacher perceptions of students and intervention hubs influence their ability to deliver effective interventions, with Wang et al. (2018) providing evidence on teacher expectations and their influence on outcomes.

Therefore, the following research question was developed:

RQ1. How do primary school teachers understand and experience nurture groups?

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, across primary schools in the north of England, which possessed an on-site nurture hub. The choice of solely primary settings mirrored Boxall's initial design of nurture (Boxall, 2002), in line with Watts & Stenner (2012) ideas of 'strategic sampling' where participants are chosen for relevant connections to the topic. The use of teachers as a sample group reflects previous educational Q-methodology studies (Lundberg et al., 2020).

Sixteen teachers were recruited to take part across two settings. There were 12 females and four males aged between 23 and 42, with a mean age of 30.50 (SD = 6.12), 32.50 (SD = 6.8) for the male group and 29.83 (SD = 5.40) for the female. This sample is representative of the gender differences within the teaching profession (DfE, 2023). Six of the participants held a leadership role, making up 37.5 per cent of the participants group, of these two were SEND coordinators (SENDCos) making up 12.5 per cent. All participants, except for one, had experience of a child within their classroom attending nurture provision. The number of years teaching ranged from one to 17, with an average of 6.56 (SD = 4.64). At both sites nurture provision operated as part-time nurture groups.

Q-methodology

Q-methodology is a mixed-methods approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches, requiring interpretive analysis while considering empirical experience (Yardley & Bishop, 2017). The approach accepts both the subjective and objective as coexisting rather than opposing (Ejkjaer & Simpson, 2011; Watts and Stenner, 2012). This made it a useful methodological tool in capturing the variety of perspectives taken around topics such as nurture groups and inclusive education while also illustrating these perspectives with further explanation.

Materials

As part of Q-methodology a concourse must be developed, which is a set of statements to be sorted by the participants. This was generated from a range of sources including literature, interviews and legislation (Webler et al., 2009) and designed to represent the 'conversational possibilities' around the topic (Stephenson, 1936). The list of literature sources forming the statements and the relative statements they linked to can be found in Appendix 1. These statements were designed to represent the thematic elements found within each source. A set of 50 statements was generated for use within the study (Appendix 2). Certain statements were included to purposefully elicit responses to certain topics around nurture and its place as a form of inclusive education, such as statements being designed to include the word "treatment", existing within the medical model of SEND (Rolfe, 2019).

These were designed to fit within a Fisher's balanced block (1960), a design that functions in providing optimal variance across the variety of statements. This was implemented to maintain a balanced and diverse concourse and ensure content validity of results (Haynes et al., 1995).

Table 1. Fisher's balanced block

	Outcomes	Approaches	Reasoning	Integration	Staff training
Student	*7 statements*	*7 statements*	*5 statements*	*2 statements*	
	30, 31, 32, 41, 44, 45	11, 14, 21, 24, 29, 37, 47	16, 20, 25, 42, 46	39, 49	
Other	*5 statements*	*3 statements*	*3 statements*	*3 statements*	
	1, 2, 40, 43, 50	3, 4, 15	5, 22, 27	9, 23, 38	
Neither	*3 statements*	*3 statements*	*2 statements*	*3 statements*	*4 statements*
	12, 17, 34	6, 10, 48	13, 36	7, 26, 28	8, 18, 19, 33

The statements were presented in person on laminated cards alongside the q-grid. The numerical code of each statement was printed on the back of the card, so after the procedure they could be flipped and the sort could be recorded.

Procedure

Before the procedure was undertaken participants were asked to answer questions around their position as a teacher and understanding of nurture provision. These were then included within analysis to examine contextual information relating to each factor.

Participants first sorted cards into three piles: agree, neutral and disagree. This was done to aid participants in the q-sort grid that followed. Participants then placed statements into a grid of 50 boxes. This grid was presented after the initial sort task (**Table 2**). Only two boxes were placed at the extreme ends gradually growing towards the centre of the grid. There were 11 possible columns from -5 to 5, designed not to be too 'deep' or 'shallow' a distribution (Brown, 1980), meaning not too many statements were placed at the extremes or centrally to affect results.

Participants were given the prompt: "Based on your understanding and experience of nurture provision, please look at these statements. Then sort them into this grid from those that you agree with most [points to right-hand side] to those you agree with least [points to left-hand side]" to sort the cards.

The use of face-validity terms 'agree with most' and 'agree with least' aids in confusion of having more statements initially sorted into agree/neutral/disagree piles than any other, as well as being

Table 2. *Q-grid*

–5	–4	–3	–2	–1	0	1	2	3	4	5

preferable instead of a most/least dialectic as to not elicit strong feelings (Watts & Stenner, 2012). It was clarified to participants that positions within the same column had no difference in value. It was also explained that the numbers heading columns had no bearing on agreement with statements, statement placement was only relevant in comparison to statements in surrounding columns. A forced q-sort was implemented, where participants had to fit statements within the grid, instead of an unforced q-sort where participants got free placement of statements.

Participants could fill the grid in any order they liked but were given advice by the interviewer of starting at the ends and working into the middle. Throughout the process, participants were reminded that they could ask questions about statements they did not understand. Participants could alter positions of any statements during the process. When the participants stated they were finished it was confirmed again by the interviewer asking if they wanted to change any placements before finishing.

Alongside data provided from the q-sort activity, qualitative data was collected by asking participants to explain their reasoning for placements. This was informed to participants during the briefing script, at the start of the procedure and was encouraged again by repeating the phrase "you may explain any of your reasons behind placements verbally, if you wish". These were documented at the time, by the interviewer, who noted down the relevant statement and wrote the participants words verbatim.

The research was conducted in accordance with the *British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (5th ed., 2024). All schools and participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the purpose of the study, what their participation would involve and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and participants were provided a two-week period after data collection in which they could withdraw their data. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was anonymised into a sorting code and data was securely stored in line with UK GDPR requirements. These conditions were approved by the ethics committee at Sheffield Hallam University.

Data analysis

After collection, data was correlated and centroid factor analysis (Brown Centroid Factors) was used to generate various factors. This uses a correlation matrix where factors are analysed based and loaded upon their influence on the correlation. This was performed using PQMethod (Schmolck, 2014), a free open-source software for generating factors in Q-methodology studies, with integrated Brown Centroid Factor Analysis.

After initial factor analysis, factors possessing an eigenvalue (EV) above one were kept for interpretation, reducing the chance of meaningless factors being accepted (Webler et al., 2009). Eigenvalues are a measure of variance within a dataset that indicate the level of significance each factor possesses.

Qualitative data was thematically analysed, based upon factor analysis from the q-sort, to add further depth to the factors drawn. This follows a Deductive Thematic Analysis framework, due to the top-down analysis, as the factors were already drawn and the qualitative research was analysed to support these factors.

Results

In total, four factors were formed from the data (Appendix 3). Of the four factors drawn only three possessed an EV more than one, the factor possessing an eigenvalue of 0.65 was dismissed from interpretation and analysis. Cumulatively, these three factors explained 48 per cent of the statement variance in factor scores. None of the factors were bipolar, containing both extreme positive and negative of the same perspective, so none needed to be split. The full table of loaded q-sorts to each factor is presented in Appendix 3, highlighting which q-sorts were flagged as significant for each factor.

For each factor a visualisation of typical statement placings will be presented, with statements that define each factor at a significance of $p < .05$ highlighted in a bold box. Additionally, defining statements in a lower position than any other factor are highlighted in orange and higher than any other factor in blue.

Factor 1 – Positive outcomes of nurture groups as a SEND specialist centre

Factor 1 (F1) prioritises outcomes from nurture provision seen within the classroom. These outcomes can be positive or negative but remain the most salient factors within this perspective. In contrast, statements around experiences inside nurture provision themselves were rated highly, which can also be displayed as diminishing staff within nurture groups.

F1 has an eigenvalue of 5.355 and explained 33 per cent of the variance. A group of four participants placed within F1.

Overall, there is emphasis on the positive impacts nurture groups have on school (28, 5), a reduction in disruptive outbursts (31, 2) and the effect of early intervention in nurture (16, 3), which place higher in F1 than other factors. The negatively based outcomes are also promoted including statement 43 ("Nurture groups increase children's demands for time and attention outside of the

−5	−4	−3	−2	−1	0	1	2	3	4	5
10: Nurture groups provide an academic focus to continue learning	**18: Nurture groups have experienced staff**	17: Nurture groups reduce the number of exclusions at the setting	40: Nurture groups case confusion over responsibility for children's needs	21: Nurture groups provide tailored curriculums for the children's needs	6: Nurture groups work school-side to provide a nurturing approach	47: Nurture groups provide positive adult role modelling	15: Nurture groups staff develop key positive relationships with pupils	30: Nurture groups help students communicate their feelings better	11: Nurture groups develop children's social skills	25: Nurture groups provide a safe space within school
38: Nurture group targets and work is regularly shared with me	**29: Nurture groups are more attentive to children than mainstream classes**	45: Nurture groups increase the maturity of children	23: The nurture group staff and I are working towards a common goal	36: Nurture groups are a cost-effective way of tackling school-wide issues	9: The aims of nurture groups are supported by leaders	5: Nurture groups work towards reintegration in the classroom	2: Nurture groups provide a break for classmates to learn	**16: Nurture groups provide early intervention to help with escalation of pupil behaviours**	32: Nurture groups help children identify their triggers	28: Nurture groups have a positive impact on school operations
	4: Nurture groups work with parents to implement strategies for support	**37: Nurture groups work better with younger pupils**	41: Nurture groups improve home life for children	48: Nurture groups utilise representative measures to monitor progress	19: Nurture groups have a solid understanding of the various needs within the school	14: Nurture groups provide a calming setting to aid with feelings of anger	**31: Nurture groups reduce the number of disruptive outbursts**	13: Nurture groups help with the treatment of SEND within the setting	1: Nurture groups provide respite to the classroom teachers	
		26: Nurture group education is seen as equal to classroom learning within the setting	**3: Nurture groups aim to build positive relationships with parents**	34: Nurture groups improve children's attainment	46: Nurture groups are designed for children with experiences of trauma	42: Nurture groups allow for more attention to be given to children	**50: Nurture groups highlight children as unique and different**	**7: Nurture groups are integrated within the setting**		
			8: The aims of nurture groups are understood by leaders	12: Learning within nurture groups translates to experiences outside the group	**20: Children attending nurture groups are purposefully selected**	39: Nurture groups help to reduce school anxiety	44: Nurture groups increase school enjoyment			
				33: Nurture groups have bespoke curriculum work from a trained professional	24: Nurture groups provide an opportunity to develop positive peer relationships	**43: Nurture groups increase children's demands for time and attention outside of the group**				
				22: The work done in nurture rooms is unable to be delivered within the classroom	35: Nurture groups help improve children's autonomy	49: Nurture groups make children feel included within the school				
					27: Nurture group staff act as an advocate for pupils					

Figure 1. Factor visualisation for Factor 1

Notes on Figure: bold boxes symbolise statements that are significant at p < .05, blue boxes indicate significant statements placed higher than any other factor, and orange boxes indicate significant statements placed lower than any other factor.

group") and 50 ("Nurture groups highlight children as unique and different"), placed at position 1 and 2 respectively. Nurture groups being more attentive than mainstream classes was placed lower than any other factor (29, -4). On the other hand, statements about nurture groups' staff are placed lower in F1 than any other factor, such as those around staff experience (18, -4), acting as an advocate for pupils (27, 0), building positive relationships with parents (3, -2) and working with parents to implement consistent strategies (4, -4). This negative reflection on staff is continued by school leaders, with statements about their understanding (8, -2) and selection of attending pupils (20, 0) being placed lower than other factors. However, the integration of nurture groups (7, 3) and their working better with younger pupils (37, -3) are both placed higher than other factors.

Contextually, three of the four participants who loaded for factor 2 worked at setting one. There were three females and one male. Ages ranged from 23 to 37 with an average age of 27.50 (SD = 6.61). Participants worked across Y1 and Y2, with 3 in Y2 and all currently had a child attending nurture provision within their class. Two of the participants were part of the senior leadership team (SLT), with one being a SENDCo and another an assistant headteacher. Self-ratings of experience varied from 1 to 4 with a mean of 2.75 (SD = 1.50). Teaching experiences ranged from two to 15 with an average of 5.50 (SD = 6.35).

Factor 2 – Nurture group method-oriented

Factor 2 (F2) places priority on approaches implemented within nurture groups. It places these approaches as key to understanding and experience, above other statements on outcomes or reasons behind nurture group implementation. F2 takes a factual approach to understandings of nurture groups placing strategies implemented higher than any outcomes or responses witnessed first-hand.

F2 had an eigenvalue of 1.4 and explained 9 per cent of the variance. 7 participants loaded for F2.

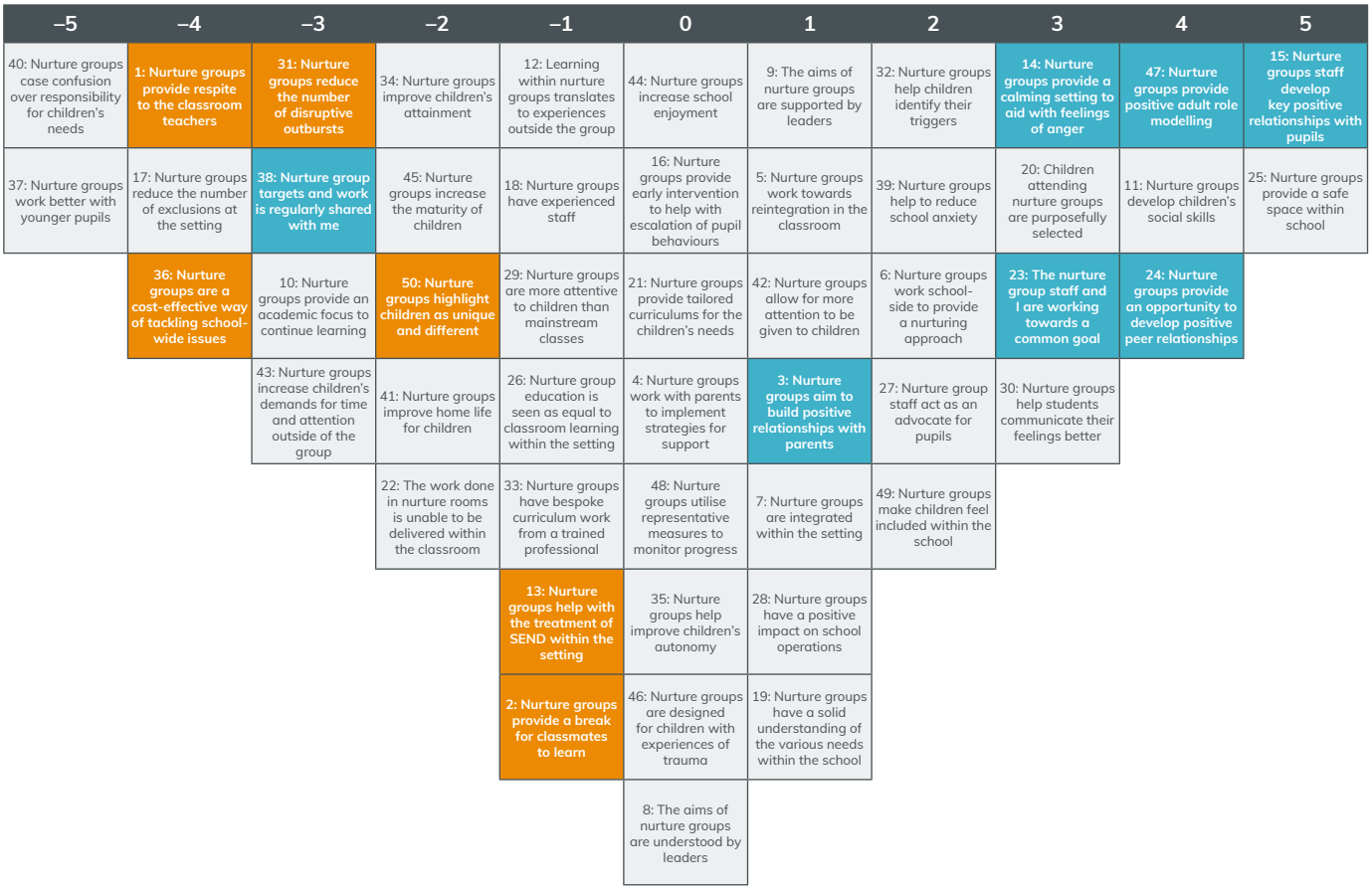

Figure 2. Factor visualisation for Factor 2

Notes on Figure: bold boxes symbolise statements that are significant at p < .05, blue boxes indicate significant statements placed higher than any other factor, and orange boxes indicate significant statements placed lower than any other factor.

These approach-oriented perspectives are shown by developing key relationships with pupils (15, 5), relationship building with parents (3, 1), providing an opportunity to develop peer relationships (24, 4) and helping with feelings of anger by providing a calming setting (14, 3) being placed higher than other factors. The approach-based regular sharing of targets (38, -3), despite being low, was the highest of all factors. Similarly, while not the highest in any factor, F2 places approaches such as early intervention (16, 0), attentiveness (29, -1) and positive adult role modelling (47, 4) as significant for interpreting and understanding nurture provision. Outcome-based statements are diminished such as nurture groups reducing disruptive outbursts (31, -3) and highlighting pupils as unique and different (50, -2). These outcomes include the treatment of SEND (13, -1), providing a break for classmates (2, -1) and providing respite to teachers (1, -4). The 'Integration' and 'Reasoning' loaded statements 36, 7 and 23 were defined with 36 (-4) the lowest placement on any factor, 23 (3) the highest and 7 (1) neither.

Contextually of the seven participants in F2, six were from setting one. The ages ranged from 25 to 42 with an average age of 30.71 (SD = 6.10). There were two males and five females. Two of the seven participants had leadership positions with one SENDCo. All participants had experience of nurture pupils in their classes, with five of the seven currently having children attending nurture. Participants' self-rated understanding of nurture groups ranged from 1 to 4 and averaged 2.86 (SD = .90). The number of years teaching ranged from 1 to 11, with a mean of 6.43 (SD = 3.69). Six of the seven participants were currently teaching, across Y1 to Y5.

Factor 3 – Nurture groups as a separate provision

Factor 3 (F3) stresses the view of nurture groups as separate and unique entities from the rest of school. This perspective diminishes statements highlighting inclusive elements of nurture within a whole-school perspective. Statements around the disruptive effects of nurture pupils, both in the

−5	−4	−3	−2	−1	0	1	2	3	4	5
37: Nurture groups work better with younger pupils	10: Nurture groups provide an academic focus to continue learning	45: Nurture groups increase the maturity of children	**7: Nurture groups are integrated within the setting**	12: Learning within nurture groups translates to experiences outside the group	31: Nurture groups reduce the number of disruptive outbursts	27: Nurture group staff act as an advocate for pupils	44: Nurture groups increase school enjoyment	**29: Nurture groups are more attentive to children than mainstream classes**	13: Nurture groups help with the treatment of SEND within the setting	42: Nurture groups allow for more attention to be given to children
38: Nurture group targets and work is regularly shared with me	40: Nurture groups case confusion over responsibility for children's needs	**5: Nurture groups work towards reintegration in the classroom**	34: Nurture groups improve children's attainment	23: The nurture group staff and I are working towards a common goal	46: Nurture groups are designed for children with experiences of trauma	32: Nurture groups help children identify their triggers	**25: Nurture groups provide a safe space within school**	2: Nurture groups provide a break for classmates to learn	20: Children attending nurture groups are purposefully selected	1: Nurture groups provide respite to the classroom teachers
	41: Nurture groups improve home life for children	**16: Nurture groups provide early intervention to help with escalation of pupil behaviours**	18: Nurture groups have experienced staff	48: Nurture groups utilise representative measures to monitor progress	24: Nurture groups provide an opportunity to develop positive peer relationships	**22: The work done in nurture rooms is unable to be delivered within the classroom**	9: The aims of nurture groups are supported by leaders	15: Nurture groups staff develop key positive relationships with pupils	30: Nurture groups help students communicate their feelings better	
		43: Nurture groups increase children's demands for time and attention outside of the group	33: Nurture groups have bespoke curriculum work from a trained professional	35: Nurture groups help improve children's autonomy	14: Nurture groups provide a calming setting to aid with feelings of anger	19: Nurture groups have a solid understanding of the various needs within the school	28: Nurture groups have a positive impact on school operations	39: Nurture groups help to reduce school anxiety		
			26: Nurture group education is seen as equal to classroom learning within the setting	36: Nurture groups are a cost-effective way of tackling school-wide issues	50: Nurture groups highlight children as unique and different	8: The aims of nurture groups are understood by leaders	47: Nurture groups provide positive adult role modelling			
				49: Nurture groups make children feel included within the school	4: Nurture groups work with parents to implement strategies for support	**11: Nurture groups develop children's social skills**				
				6: Nurture groups work school-side to provide a nurturing approach	3: Nurture groups aim to build positive relationships with parents	21: Nurture groups provide tailored curriculums for the children's needs				
					17: Nurture groups reduce the number of exclusions at the setting					

Figure 3. Factor visualisation for Factor 3

Notes on Figure: bold boxes symbolise statements that are significant at p < .05, blue boxes indicate significant statements placed higher than any other factor, and orange boxes indicate significant statements placed lower than any other factor.

classroom and within nurture groups, are highly promoted.

F3 has an eigenvalue of 1.02, explaining 6 per cent of the variance. Five participants loaded significantly for F3.

F3 places statements around nurture groups integration lower than other factors, such as working towards reintegration (5, -3), making children feel included (49, -1), working school-wide (6, -1), providing a safe space within school (25, 2), delivering early intervention (16, -3) and nurture groups being integrated within school (7, -2). While not the highest or lowest of any factor, statements around highlighting children as unique and different (50, 0) and reducing disruptive outbursts (31, 0) were both significant. Reducing school exclusions (17, 0) was placed higher than other factors. This perspective promotes nurture groups providing more attention with both statement 42 ("Nurture groups allow for more attention to be given to children") and 29 ("Nurture groups are more attentive to children than mainstream classes") placed at 5 and 3 respectively, higher than other factors. The inability to do nurture group work in the classroom (22, 1) was placed higher than other factors. The idea of nurture groups developing children's social skills (11, 1) was placed lower than other factors. Statements around parent engagement were significant, while not the highest or lowest of any factor ((4, 0) and (3, 0)).

Contextually, of the five participants who loaded for F3 three were from setting two and two from setting one. There were two members of SLT, with one middle leader and an assistant headteacher. There were four female participants and one male participant. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 40, with a mean of 32.60 (SD = 6.84). Four of the participants had experience of nurture pupils in their classes; two with currently attending pupils. Self-ratings of nurture group understanding varied from 1 to 3, with an average of 2.40 (SD = 0.89). Teaching experience ranged from 3 to 17, with a mean of 7.60 (SD = 5.73). Only one participant did not have a current year group, the other participants ranged from Y1 to Y5.

Discussion

Analysis of the three factors builds upon previous knowledge on the use of nurture groups within primary education sites. Therefore, each perspective is elaborated upon below, alongside qualitative data to support perspectives and their links to previous literature. Only once these ideas are understood can practical implications be drawn to influence future provision plans.

Factor 1 – Positive outcomes from nurture

F1 stresses impacts seen within the classroom. Prioritising statements such as reducing the number of disruptive outbursts and positive impacts on school operations. These were further supported by participants stating, "I personally have positive experiences of reduction [in disruptive outbursts] after attending nurture" (P9) and it is "useful to have them [nurture groups]" (P1). The classroom-focused ideology is evidenced by the idea of nurture groups as more attentive than mainstream classes, being met with disapproval within qualitative data "I disagree as sometimes in nurture one child may be more focused but that doesn't mean we aren't giving them attention in the classroom" (P9) and "disagree... there is more ability to attend to needs with less kids and more adults" (P6). This was a shared feeling that the classroom was still the priority of education, viewing nurture as a useful intervention to support classroom learning. This perspective also exhibits itself through dismissal of nurture practitioner, supported by statements such as "some children they [nurture staff] are positive about, but others I get a few complaints so they're not always positive" (P9) and "some [nurture groups] have really well-trained staff but not all the time" (P6). Overall, across the perspective there was a view that teachers felt they were not kept up to date with what was occurring in nurture provision stating, "it's hard to answer when you don't really know what's going on down there" (P1) and "I just don't really know what they are doing there, that's the main area to work on" (P7).

The classroom-focus of F1 may be due to the phrasing of the research question. As teachers expressed, they have little communication or sharing of targets with nurture groups and when asked about their understanding and experience, they can only reflect on changes witnessed within classrooms. Alternatively, it may be suggested that teachers possess a prioritisation of their classroom and behaviour shown there, above that of nurture groups.

The finding of a reduced number of disruptive outbursts matched previous research by MacPherson & Phillips (2021) who observed that as emotional literacy and regulation improved, disruptive outbursts reduced. However, much like the current research, one of the biggest concerns regarding these behaviours was levels of experience and training possessed by nurture staff (MacPherson & Phillips, 2021). This was reflected again by this factor with the placement of statement 18.

Additionally, this factor placed statement 37 ("Nurture groups work better with younger pupils") higher than any other factor. This may be due to all participants loading for this factor teaching in Y1/Y2, again relating directly to their own experiences of nurture provision.

Factor 2 – Methods-focused

F2 takes an approach-based understanding of the nurture curriculum, presenting factual aspects of methods and strategies put into practice within nurture groups. This includes promotion of nurture groups as developing key positive staff-pupil, parent-staff and peer relationships, providing a calming setting and the effect of adult role modelling. Participants stated that they agree with "all the ones that fall within emotional regulation, recognising feelings and vocalising more effectively" (P10). However, while placing these items highly, participants stressed a dependence on group mixture and staff with comments such as "a lot of it for me is the kids and adults currently in there" (P4) and "it [positive peer relationships] depends on the mix of children in there" (P12). Furthermore, they stress that the point of nurture is not about removal of pupils from classrooms, stating, "I don't think it's respite, but it frees up your time" (P11), "the word respite just has a really negative connotations" (P15) and "I don't think it's a break and that's not how I view it" (P4).

The antithesis to the term "respite" is in line with Bishop & Swain (2000) who state that while respite is a primary aim, it is a covert aim, with more amenable aims stated as direct targets of nurture

provision. This was reflected by participants in F2 pre-empting responses to statement 1 with negative points around the term "respite" but following it with an agreement of the statement principle. Participants chose to focus on the wording, "the word respite just has really negative connotations" (P15), rather than the idea itself. This suggests a similarity between this research and the work of Bishop & Swain (2000) as while respite is achieved and appreciated, teachers may not wish to acknowledge this as a direct outcome from nurture provision.

Out of all the approaches implemented within nurture the clear priority within this group was the promotion of emotional literacy and relationship development. This demonstrates clear understanding of the attachment principles, upon which nurture is based (MacKay et al., 2010). This model begins exemplifying the social model (Rolfe, 2019) through its promotion of environmental factors (statements 14, 25) and diminishing of ideas around pupils being different (50), placing statements regarding the "treatment" of SEND (13) the lowest of any factor. This was verbalised by one participant describing "I don't like the word 'treatment' in this one" (P15). This may be suggestive of F2 being the most aware of inclusion issues and as such more attuned towards negatively phrased statements.

Factor 3 – Separate provision

F3 views nurture groups as a separate provision disconnected from the rest of school. This involves demoting the integration of nurture settings and dismissal of impacts seen in the classroom. Participants noted that "the hubs do segregate children as they go there until they can go somewhere else" (P5) while describing nurture pupils as "separated off" (P2). This idea of segregation between nurture and classrooms elaborates itself through the teacher's view of the nurture pupil's inclusion within school, stating that "some [nurture students] feel picked on, others it might help to feel more included, but I don't know" (P3). There was a general feeling that nurture groups were utilised to "get rid of all the difficult children" (P8), with participants highlighting there are "some children who will never exit nurture provision" (P8) or they will be "in there until they find funding for a specialised place" (P5). This view of the "difficult children" (P8) within nurture affects perspectives on providing a calm setting due to "volatile children that disrupt it" and "[nurture provision] should be a calming setting but some children disrupt that" (P5). Concerns around mirroring behaviour were raised as "one child is a copier and when put with younger children it digressed her rather than progressed her" (P8).

The feelings of nurture groups being used to "get rid of all the difficult children" (P8) fits closely within Power & Taylor (2018) who describe how students are sent out-of-class to provisions within school, avoiding reputation damage of exclusions. This is supported by the understanding of some children "who will never exit nurture provision" (P8). This perspective is represented by teaching staff in Garbett (2022), using the phrase "out of sight, out of mind" (p. 220) to describe excluded children. It is these ideas that encourage formation of negative perceptions of pupils with SEMH needs from parents and teaching staff (Gottfried, 2014; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). While these ideas are acknowledged by participants, there is a theme of the term "difficult children" within F3, pre-labelling nurture pupils as "abnormal and inferior" (Ho, 2004, p. 87). Furthermore, there is a belief that challenging children were disturbing others' access to the nurture curriculum due to "volatile children that disrupt it" (P5). This is supported by the work of Bishop & Swain (2000) who found teachers described children accessing nurture groups as "bad children... bad behaviour... children who were really uncontrollable" (p. 21). These ideas place blame on pupils and lead to internalisations of them being the culprit, rather than a victim of their own circumstances (Caslin, 2021). This is consistent with ideas around self-fulfilling prophecies of pupils negatively labelled, tending to impact student's cognitive changes, affective changes, behaviour and peer relationships (Chandrasegaran & Padmakumari, 2018).

Overall statement points

Overall, there was strong disagreement that nurture groups were designed for younger pupils. This was reflected across all three factors, stating "I think it's for those who need it, I think age is not relevant" (P10). There was a shared belief that nurture provision was necessary for pupils who "need to be provided an opportunity to regulate emotions" (P9). This contrasts the original design of nurture groups for primary schools (Boxall, 2002). However,

this may be due to more modern expansions, with nurture groups now extending into secondary settings (Grantham & Primrose, 2017).

Furthermore, there was strong agreement that work was not shared on a regular basis between nurture provision and the classroom teachers, with various participants stating, "I don't have a clue what the kids are doing" (P16), "if targets aren't being shared, we're not working towards a common goal" (P4) and "I don't hear loads about how my pupils get on... I think that's due to work demands" (P14). Another significant issue across all factors was the lack of academic work being done within current nurture provision, with perceptions such as "there is not any academic focus" (P8) and "there probably should be [academic focus] because children probably don't want to go back into the classroom and do structured work" (P5). The lack of academic work contrasts with Sloan et al. (2020), who found significant academic improvements for nurture pupils. This difference may be due to the lack of nurture group acknowledgement from teachers on the academic improvement, instead placing this focus on improvements occurring in the classroom. Additionally, it may be due to a lack of understanding on the impacts SEMH improvements can have on other areas of development (Carroll & Hurry, 2018).

There were statements loaded as extreme positives across all factors without being defined to any one factor itself. This included nurture being a safe space for pupils and staff developing key positive relationships with children. Aligning with previous research, prioritising the relationship development between nurture staff and attending pupils as one of the biggest causes for change (MacPherson & Phillips, 2021). Teachers' knowledge surrounding these aspects of the nurture curriculum exemplify the embedded ideas within education around the importance of relationships and attachment theory (Hajovsky et al., 2020).

Limitations and future research

Due to time constraints the concourse generation was limited to a literature analysis. Other q-methodological studies have utilised focus groups and interviews as additional methods for statement generation. These increase validity and ensure that the concourse covers all conversational aspects (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This process is time consuming and was not possible during the time frame of the research. However, various qualitative interview-based studies were used in the generation of statements (MacPherson & Phillips, 2021; Vincent, 2017; Bishop & Swain, 2000). It is believed that the set of statements utilised still reflected true conversational possibilities. Further research may wish to add additional focus groups to expand the concourse generation beyond the capacities of the current research.

Another limitation may be regarding the use of the Fisher's balanced block (1960). This was implemented in accordance with previous literature (Nag et al., 2022) to ensure a spread of statements across all topics. However, when analysing the results it was noted that the three factors drawn all fit within the initial categories of the balanced block. Therefore there may be a question as to whether these categories formed their own factors. As such, further research is required to examine whether the factors found continue without the use of a balanced block or whether they were the result of the balanced block design.

Furthermore, F2 specifically may be a result of both the balanced block design and the initial research question. Participants loading for this factor took a factual approach to placing statements. This may be a result of the balanced block design, but also could be due to the phrasing of the initial question. By using the term "understanding" it may be interpreted as a test of describing the process of nurture groups rather than a subjective view or opinion. However, while the overall sort of F2 may not provide an entirely subjective perspective, the use of qualitative measures aided in developing a clear personal viewpoint within this factor. As well as this, the term "experiences" was used alongside "understanding" to encapsulate the subjective perspectives.

Due to the social constructionist perspective taken within Q-methodology, both reliability and generalisability were not a concern, as perspectives are a dynamic system that are not identical at any one point. It is assumed that should the procedure be completed, participants may not provide the exact same viewpoint as previously presented.

Additionally, due to the interpretive analysis there is scope for the impact of positionality within the researcher, leading to researcher bias. The primary researcher had experience in working within and leading nurture settings, which impacted positively in regard to statement formation. This may have further impacted the interpretation of the findings through the bias of personal experience, but it was felt that the quantitative elements of this study group the findings within the participants own constructs of reality.

Overall, these results provide a variety of understandings of the purpose of nurture groups within education. They evidence the need for further psychoeducation with teachers to improve their understanding of the principles of nurture. Further research may examine the impact that teacher buy-in/understanding has on the outcomes on the young people accessing nurture education.

References

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Concourse generation database

Statement basis	Direct links to statements (if applicable)
Research	
MacPherson, E., & Phillips, R. (2021). Primary teachers' experiences of the effectiveness of nurture groups on children's social and emotional skills, academic attainment and behaviour. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 7(Summer), 15-26.	16, 19, 35, 45, 46
Bishop, A., & Swain, J. (2000). 'The Bread, the Jam and Some Coffee in the Morning': Perceptions of a Nurture Group. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 5(3), 18-24.	1, 4, 5, 10, 18, 20
Sanders, T. (2007). Helping Children Thrive at School: The Effectiveness of Nurture Groups. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 23(1), 45-61.	18
Binnie, L.M., & Allen, K. (2008). Whole school support for vulnerable children: the evaluation of a part-time nurture group. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 13(3), 201-216.	6, 41
Cloran, P., Rivard, M., & Bennett, A. (2022). Reaching and teaching students: Using Nurture Groups to improve school functioning. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 8(Autumn), 23-36.	12, 22, 25, 31, 36, 42, 46
Doyle, R. (2005). 'I Hate You. Please Help Me': A Case Study from A Classic Boxall Nurture Group. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 23(1), 3-11.	1, 5, 12, 14, 15, 17, 25, 30
Vincent, K. (2017). 'It's small steps, but that leads to bigger changes': evaluation of a nurture group intervention. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 22(4), 303-316.	5, 21, 23, 24, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 38, 44, 47
Bennett, H. (2015). Results of the systematic review on nurture groups' effectiveness. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 1(1), 3-8.	
Kombou, E., & Bunn, H. (2021). Nurture Groups and their Staff's Resilience. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 7(Summer), 45-55.	8, 9, 26, 40
Pyle, A., & Rae, T. (2015). Nurture groups and parent-child relationships. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 1(1), 9-14	3, 4
MacKay, T. (2015). Future directions for nurture in education. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 1(1), 33-39.	
Cooper, P., & Whitebread, D. (2007). The effectiveness of nurture groups on student progress: evidence from a national research study. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 12(3), 171-190.	
Hosie, C. (2013). *An Evaluation of the Impact of Nurture Provision upon Young Children, Including their Language and their Literacy Skills*. DEdCPsy thesis, University of East London.	21, 30
Edmunds, J. (2021). "It Feels like the Whole Nurture Group is my Family": What Pupils Say about their Time in Nurture Group Provision. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 7(Summer), 6-14.	15, 39, 44

Kirk, J. (2023). Primary school nurture group curriculums: an exploratory study of the curriculum in primary school nurture groups. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 9, 45-59.	3, 10, 11, 15, 25, 34, 41, 44, 49
Bines, H. (2000). 'Inclusive standards? Current developments in policy for special educational needs in England and Wales.' *Oxford Review of Education*, 26(1), 21-33.	
Cunningham, L., & Kearney, M. (2023). A nurturing approach in the early years: supporting implementation at a whole-establishment level. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 9, 6-23.	37
Atkinson, G., & Rowley, J. (2019). Pupils' views on mainstream reintegration from alternative provision: A Q-methodological study. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 24(4), 339-356.	
Warin, J., & Hibbin, R. (2016). A study of nurture groups as a window into school relationships. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 2(1), 7-14.	3, 15, 27
Holder, T. (2022). *Exploring staff perspectives of teacher-student relationships in an Alternative Provision, using focus groups guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles*. DEdCPsy thesis, University of Sheffield.	
Rennie, R., & Smart, L. (2023). Applying nurture as a whole-school community approach: an interim report into developing a universal programme to support the practical implementation of whole school nurture within a local authority in Scotland. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 9, 24-44.	7, 28
Warnes, E., Done, E.J., & Knowler, H. (2021). Mainstream teachers' concerns about inclusive education for children with special educational needs and disability in England under pre-pandemic conditions. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 22(1), 31-43.	50
Middleton, A. (2022). The NurtureUK Violence Reduction Unit programme: Exploring a model for reducing school exclusions and instances of youth violence through nurture practice. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 8, 67-88.	17
Cooper, P., & Tiknaz, Y. (2005). Progress and challenge in Nurture Groups: evidence from three case studies. *British Journal of Special Education*, 32(4), 211-222.	2, 26, 38, 40, 43
Nolan, A.D., Hannah, E.F.S., Lakin, E., & Topping, K.J. (2021). Whole-School Nurturing Approaches: A Systematic Analysis of Impact. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 38(1), 10-23.	6
Coleman, M. (2020). Leading the change to establish a whole-school nurturing culture. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 25(1), 68-79.	9
Rolfe, S. (2019). Models of SEND: the impact of political and economic influences on policy and provision. *British Journal of Special Education*, 46(4), 423-444.	13
Legislation	
Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). *Lamb Inquiry Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence*. Nottingham: DCSF.	21
Department for Education (2015). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*. London: DfE	48
Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2022). *Schools need more specialist help for primary age children with additional needs*. London: Ofsted.	5
Department for Education (2014). *Schools: guide to the 0 to 25 SEND code of practice*. London: DfE.	
Roberts, N. (2022). *March 2022 schools white paper (England)*. London: House of Commons.	
Department for Education. (2019). *Main Text: Special Educational Needs (SEN) in England – January 2019*. London: Department for Education.	
Nurtureuk	
Nurtureuk. (2023). *The Six Principles of Nurture*.	14, 15, 25, 27, 39
The Boxall Profile® Handbook	48

Appendix 2: Statement list

1. Nurture groups provide respite to the classroom teachers
2. Nurture groups provide a break for classmates to learn
3. Nurture groups aim to build positive relationships with parents
4. Nurture groups work with parents to implement strategies for support
5. Nurture groups work towards reintegration in the classroom
6. Nurture groups work school-wide to provide a nurturing approach
7. Nurture groups are integrated within the setting
8. The aims of nurture groups are understood by leaders
9. The aims of nurture groups are supported by leaders
10. Nurture groups provide an academic focus to continue learning
11. Nurture groups develop children's social skills
12. Learning within nurture groups translates to experiences outside the group
13. Nurture groups help with the treatment of SEND within the setting
14. Nurture groups provide a calming setting to aid with feelings of anger
15. Nurture group staff develop key positive relationships with pupils
16. Nurture groups provide early intervention to help with escalation of pupil behaviours
17. Nurture groups reduce the number of exclusions at the setting
18. Nurture groups have experienced staff
19. Nurture staff have a solid understanding of the various needs within the school
20. Children attending nurture groups are purposefully selected
21. Nurture groups provide tailored curriculums for the children's needs
22. The work done in nurture rooms is unable to be delivered within the classroom
23. The nurture group staff and I are working towards a common goal
24. Nurture groups provide an opportunity to develop positive peer relationships
25. Nurture groups provide a safe space within school
26. Nurture group education is seen as equal to classroom learning within the setting
27. Nurture group staff act as an advocate for pupils
28. Nurture groups have a positive impact on school operations
29. Nurture groups are more attentive to children than mainstream classes
30. Nurture groups help students communicate their feelings better
31. Nurture groups reduce the number of disruptive outbursts
32. Nurture groups help children identify their triggers
33. Nurture groups have bespoke curriculum work from a trained professional
34. Nurture groups improve children's attainment
35. Nurture groups help improve children's autonomy
36. Nurture groups are a cost-effective way of tackling school-wide issues
37. Nurture groups work better with younger pupils
38. Nurture group targets and work is regularly shared with me
39. Nurture groups help to reduce school anxiety
40. Nurture groups cause confusion over responsibility for children's needs
41. Nurture groups improve home life for children
42. Nurture groups allow for more attention to be given to children
43. Nurture groups increase children's demands for time and attention outside of the group

44. Nurture groups increase school enjoyment
45. Nurture groups increase the maturity of children
46. Nurture groups are designed for children with experiences of trauma
47. Nurture groups provide positive adult role modelling
48. Nurture groups utilise representative measures to monitor progress
49. Nurture groups make children feel included within the school
50. Nurture groups highlight children as unique and different

Appendix 3: Factor matrix with defining sorts

Q Sort Number	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
	Z Score	Flagged	Z Score	Flagged	Z Score	Flagged
1	0.7171	X	0.0634		0.2831	
2	0.2747		-0.0324		0.6683	X
3	0.0786		0.4464		0.6953	X
4	-0.0637		0.5546	X	0.1862	
5	0.335		0.0844		0.5431	X
6	0.4025	X	0.1902		0.2573	
7	0.5645	X	0.2804		0.3517	
8	0.3158		0.202		0.6148	X
9	0.6999	X	0.2572		0.0834	
10	0.1879		0.6436	X	0.2522	
11	0.2118		0.7772	X	0.0759	
12	0.3041		0.5796	X	0.2304	
13	0.0276		0.1225		0.6231	X
14	0.5079		0.595	X	0.0242	
15	0.1669		0.5745	X	-0.0636	
16	0.2133		0.5055	X	0.2734	