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The International Journal of Nurture in Education

In this issue:

The International Journal of Nurture in Education

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Editorial Advisory Board

Aims of the Journal

The *International Journal of Nurture in Education* aims to attract papers that explore themes related to the effectiveness of nurture groups, nurture in education, whole-school approaches to nurture and related subjects. The intention is to present the most up-to-date research of how nurture principles and practice improve children and young people's socio-emotional functioning and academic achievement.

The journal aims to cater for a wide audience and the intended readership includes:

- Nurture practitioners, special needs practitioners and mainstream teachers and practitioners.
- Academic researchers and students concerned with education, psychology and child development.
- Educational and clinical psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists.
- School leaders, consultants, social workers and local authority officers working to support children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing.

Review process

Articles submitted to the *International Journal of Nurture in Education* will first be seen by the editor who will decide whether the article will be considered for review or not.

Articles then go through a rigorous double-blind review process where both the author and the reviewer remain anonymous throughout the evaluation.

More information on the review process can be found at: www.nurtureuk.org/research-evidence/

A guide for authors wishing to submit their research is accessible at: www.nurtureuk.org/research-evidence/

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Dr Henry Wood-Downie is an educational psychologist and an academic and professional tutor for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Southampton. Henry has a range of interests, including autism, social-emotional wellbeing, belonging and safeguarding.

Welcome

Dr Tristan Middleton, Editor of the *International Journal of Nurture in Education*

It is with great pleasure that I present to you the 11th volume of the *International Journal of Nurture in Education*. In this volume there are seven articles which contribute to the growing evidence and understanding of nurture practice in education settings.

Bethan Jones, Dennis Golm and Henry Wood-Downie present their research into the perception of nurture group practitioners that nurture provision has for autistic pupils. This article reflects the developing understanding of the needs of autistic learners and contributes to understanding about effective support.

Laura Beaumont, Bex Holmes and Ricky Stevens, practitioners in an English special school, explore how introducing a dialogic approach, with an emphasis on student voice, can impact the use and perception of restrictive physical interventions with learners. This article bravely addresses a difficult element of practice used in schools, which is often not discussed in research.

Rowan OA Munson, Martine Nurek, Juliet Brookes, Anjali Babu, Oreofe Ogunleye and Maria Kordowicz present their research into the Nurturing Kent Programme, identifying practitioner perceptions of the impact of this three-year long programme where nurtureuk worked to support the development of inclusive school environments within one council region. This article reflects upon the wide-ranging work that nurtureuk has been undertaking across the country.

Katharina Schaal's article reflects the growing international interest in nurture approaches. Katharina presents their research into introducing nurture in a special school in Switzerland, exploring the links between nurture and attunement principles and practitioners' experiences of nurture training and implementing a nurture approach.

Corinne Syrnyk and Sepidar Yeganeh Farid present a case study of the development of a nurture approach in a rural school in Canada, focusing on the impact on educator perceptions of nurturing approaches following a programme of professional development.

Benjamin Clutterbuck and Lisa Reidy share the findings of their research within two primary schools in the north of England which have nurture group provision. Q-methodology was used to explore the perceptions and attitudes of teachers within these schools about nurture practice.

Leanne Maher, Margaret Nohilly and Gerard Farrelly present their research into the intersection of nurture practice and trauma-informed practice in Irish primary schools. Through data gathered from teachers, school principals and educational psychologists, they explore how nurture practice contributes to the support of children impacted by trauma.

There are also two book reviews, written by education practitioners, to introduce you to some recent publications. John Belardini presents a review of the recently revised *Beyond the Boxall Profile®* and Rebecca Hawkes reviews *Love and Nurture in the Early Years*.

Volume 11 of the *International Journal of Nurture in Education* is the last for which I will act as editor, as I am moving on to the role of editor-in-chief at the *British Journal of Special Education*. I have been proud to edit this journal over the past five years and would like to thank the following people:

- Marianne Coleman, who established the journal and has continued to support me, as well as regularly peer reviewing articles for the journal.
- All of the Editorial Board, who regularly commit to providing peer reviews of articles.
- The authors who have contributed to the journal over the past five years. Not only have

they contributed to maintaining a healthy and vibrant journal, they have also moved forward the understanding of nurture practices in education

- nurtureuk staff and trustees, in particular Arti Sharma, Laura Lehman and Emily Huggett, who have supported me in my role and continue to relentlessly promote nurture approaches in education.

It has been a privilege to oversee the academic consideration of the development of the concept of nurture. I believe we have reached a time where the concept of a nurture approach in education settings is becoming central to many approaches seeking to develop a more inclusive approach to education.

Within discussions about a nurture approach, there has been a move from the focus being on nurture groups to the promotion of wider nurturing approaches that include nurture groups. The discussions now make clear links between nurture, inclusive education, relational education, compassionate education, trauma-informed practice, child-first and child-centred approaches, restorative practice and strategies to support learners with special educational needs. This is exemplified by the work of Education Scotland, who are at the vanguard of progressing nurture approaches.

There is a gap in the theoretical literature about what constitutes a nurturing approach, and I hope to see those interested in nurture approaches contributing to new definitions of nurture that will support practitioners and policy makers to understand and communicate ways in which we can continue to improve the outcomes for all learners.

"They said they felt normal": nurture group practitioners' views on the impact of nurture group provision on autistic pupils

Bethan Jones, Dennis Golm, Henry Wood-Downie
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Data information statement: Due to the nature of this research, the data is not able to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.
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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 (Petersson-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.

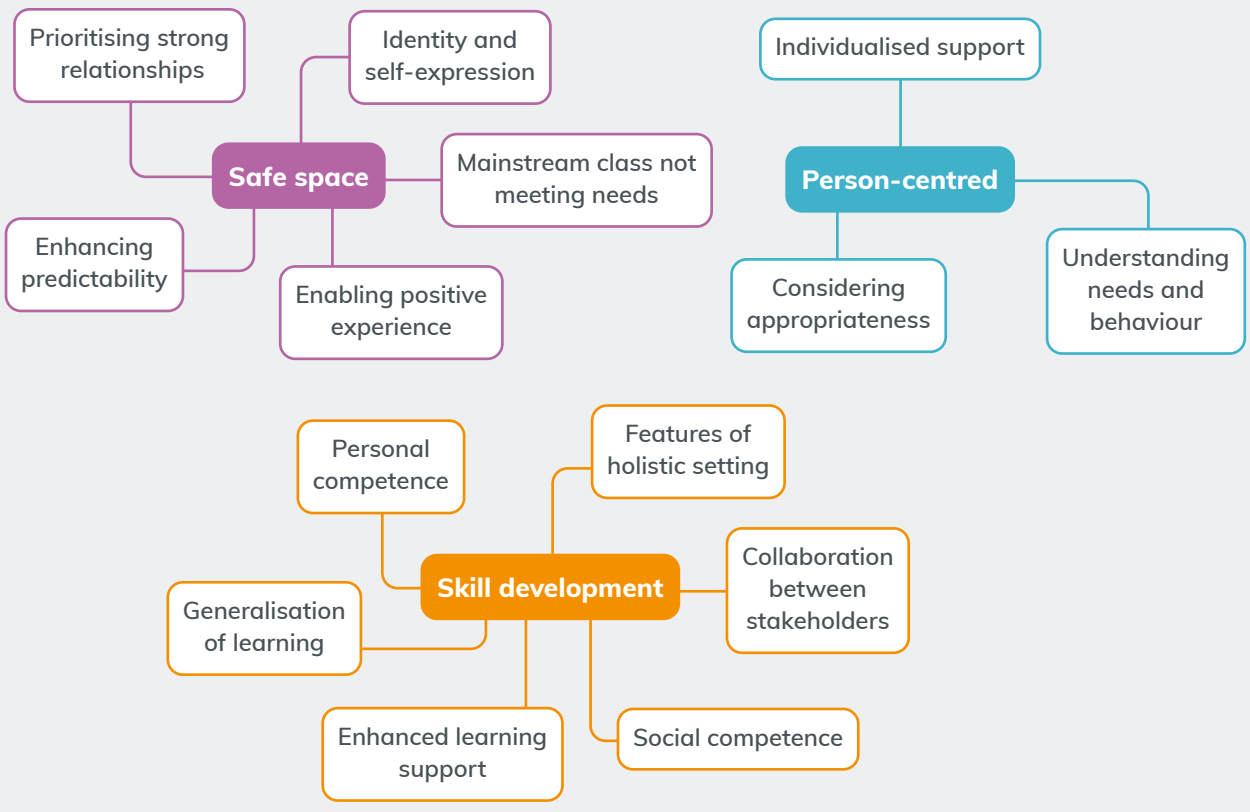
3.3.1.1 Sub-theme: Mainstream class not meeting needs

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 themself...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 st [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 promps [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 hasnt [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 transfered [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: "Mindfullness [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..."

PERSON-CENTRED

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 promps [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.

“Have you asked the child?”: student voice and restrictive physical intervention: reducing restrictive physical interventions through pupil advocacy and guided reflection in a social emotional and mental health primary school

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Abstract

This study examined whether strengthening pupil voice, enhancing pupils’ understanding of restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) and embedding structured reflective dialogue could reduce restrictive physical intervention use within a UK primary school specialising in social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. A two-phase mixed-methods design was employed: an exploratory pilot with six pupils (2023/24) followed by whole-school implementation (2024/25). Interventions included co-constructed positive support plans (PSPs), semi-structured pupil interviews and weekly reflective ‘Target time’ sessions. Quantitative behaviour log data (behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs) were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings indicated reductions in behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs during periods when pupil participation and reflective routines were embedded. Qualitative themes highlighted pupils’ mixed emotional responses to RPIs, balancing recognition of their safety rationale with feelings of frustration or discomfort and emphasised the importance of transparent explanations and relational repair.

The study contributes to growing evidence that nurture-informed, trauma-aware and pupil-centred approaches can help create safer, more attuned and collaborative environments in SEMH settings.

Introduction

Schools specialising in social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) education face the complex challenge of balancing operational efficacy with the pastoral care of pupils who often present with trauma and complex needs. Restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) are regulated practices guided by official policies aimed at reducing their use wherever possible. These interventions should be employed with careful professional judgement to ensure the safety of pupils and staff during situations of significant distress or risk, in line with national guidance on minimising restraint in educational settings (Department of Health and Social Care & Department for Education, 2019).

The school in this study is committed to providing a safe, nurturing environment where every pupil is supported to navigate their educational journey. Central to this commitment is the strategic and carefully considered use of RPIs within a broader relational and trauma-informed framework. Although RPIs are sometimes required to ensure immediate safety, their use is informed by an awareness of the potential physical and psychological harm that restraint can cause.

Within the study school, nurture principles are not abstract ideals but are operationalised daily through the school's values of happiness, high expectations, nurture, consistency, understanding and positivity (HENCUP). These values map closely onto the Six Principles of Nurture that (1) children's learning is understood developmentally; (2) the classroom offers a safe base; (3) nurture is important for wellbeing; (4) language is a vital means of communication; (5) behaviour is communication; (6) transitions matter (nurtureuk, 2023), as articulated in contemporary nurture literature (Colley, 2009; Procter-Legg, 2024). Together, they guide adults to provide predictable structures, attuned responses and relational safety, creating environments where pupils feel secure, valued and understood. In this way, the school's values form a practical mechanism through which nurture principles shape daily interactions, including the behaviour-support practices examined in this study.

Building on this values-led, nurture-informed foundation, the present study explores how pupils' understanding and participation in behaviour-support processes might further strengthen relational safety. Specifically, it investigates whether increasing pupils' awareness of RPIs and involving them in guided, developmentally attuned reflection may help reduce the need for such interventions. Rather than functioning solely as reactive safety procedures, RPIs are understood within nurture models as relational events that require emotional processing, repair and meaning-making.

Many of the sector-wide challenges identified in the literature were mirrored in the study school, particularly regarding the limited integration of pupil voice within behaviour-support documentation. The use of positive handling plans (PHPs), documents outlining pupil strengths, behavioural triggers and staff responses, had been a longstanding process. PHPs were historically reviewed mainly by senior staff and typically only after significant incidents. Limited routine involvement from class teams and pupils restricted opportunities for shared understanding or meaningful collaboration. This reflects wider challenges in SEMH settings, where embedding pupil voice is widely endorsed but often constrained by time, confidence and resource pressures (Bynoe et al., 2021).

In response, the school adopted positive support plans (PSPs) in place of positive handling plans (PHPs), intentionally reframing the language from 'handling' to 'support' to reflect a shift from crisis management towards collaborative, relationally attuned practice. Nurture research emphasises that language shapes meaning and influences adult behaviour, signalling whether adults position themselves as regulators, supporters or collaborators (Procter-Legg, 2023). The move to PSPs was therefore more than procedural; it represented an intentional cultural shift aligned with the principle that 'behaviour is communication' and that adults' interpretations profoundly influence their responses.

Finally, RPIs themselves are not solely indicators of pupil behaviour but also reflect adult decision-making, emotional regulation and relational stance (Ryan & Peterson, 2004). Nurture and trauma-informed frameworks emphasise that adult behaviour, including the timing, necessity and manner of intervention, is central to relational safety and co-regulation (Bath & Seita, 2018). Accordingly, this study examines the relational system as

a whole, rather than attributing behavioural outcomes solely to pupils.

Against this backdrop, the study is guided by one central research question: Does enhancing pupils' understanding of RPIs and involving them in guided reflection lead to a reduction in RPI occurrences? To deepen the inquiry, three subsidiary questions further shape the investigation. First, does integrating pupil voice into PSPs influence pupils' perceptions of adult support and the strategies used with them? Second, how do pupils' descriptions of their lived experiences of RPIs provide insights that may guide more empathetic, responsive and relational approaches to behaviour support? Third, does a collaborative, pupil-led approach to positive support planning contribute to strengthening emotional regulation, enhancing staff-pupil collaboration and reducing the need for RPIs?

Literature review

Restrictive physical interventions: harms, limitations and policy context

Restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) continue to present significant ethical, emotional and relational challenges within SEMH education. Cusack et al. (2018) highlight that even when used with professional intent, restrictive interventions can generate fear, distress and long-term emotional impact, underscoring the need for minimisation and careful relational repair. National and international guidance consistently advocates reducing the use of RPIs and promoting preventative, rights-based and relationally grounded approaches (Department of Health and Social Care & Department for Education, 2019; ProActive Approaches, 2023). These frameworks emphasise emotional safety, transparency and participation, expectations that align closely with nurture principles such as secure relationships, predictable structure and language as a vital means of communication (nurtureuk, 2023).

Broader research examining the harms associated with restraint indicates that emotional and psychological distress is consistently underacknowledged in policy and practice (Cusack et al., 2018). Early critiques by Mohr et al. (1998) and later analyses by Ryan and Peterson (2004), argue that restrictive interventions may escalate rather than de-escalate crisis behaviour, thereby compounding distress. More recent studies reinforce such concerns: Fogt et al. (2008) report that pupils frequently describe RPIs as frightening, painful or humiliating, while Marques-Barnard et al. (2022) identify risks of retraumatisation and reduced trust in adults among children with neurodevelopmental needs. Despite clear policy commitments to restraint reduction implementation gaps persist, with organisational culture, staff confidence and resource pressures often constraining schools' capacity to embed reflective, preventative practice (Deveau & Leitch, 2015; Bynoe et al., 2021). Phillips (2025) further observes that RPIs place an ethical and emotional burden on staff, reinforcing the need for nurturing, collaborative and pupil-led approaches to behaviour support.

Nurture principles, behaviour as communication and relational safety

A growing body of SEMH literature emphasises the value of relational, student-centred and nurture-informed approaches to behaviour support. The Six Principles of Nurture conceptualise behaviour as a form of communication and emphasise the need for secure, predictable and attuned relationships as the foundation for emotional development (nurtureuk, 2023). Doyle (2003) argues that nurturing models require staff to work from an attuned, co-regulatory stance, offering the emotional containment and relational consistency needed for children's developing self-regulation.

These ideas align with foundational attachment research. Ainsworth and Bell's (1970) work on caregiving sensitivity and Oosterman and Schuengel's (2008) findings on the links between relational security and behavioural regulation, demonstrate that children's behavioural expressions are deeply shaped by the availability of attuned adults. Such principles reinforce the idea that RPIs must not be understood as isolated crisis-management events but as moments requiring relational repair, reflective dialogue and opportunities to rebuild trust (Steckley, 2017; Bath & Seita, 2018).

Contemporary relational and trauma-informed frameworks further support this perspective.

Porges' (2011) polyvagal theory positions emotional and physiological regulation as dependent on cues of relational safety, while Perry and Szalavitz (2017) highlight the importance of predictable relational routines in supporting the integration of overwhelming emotions. Together this evidence positions nurture-aligned practice, not procedural compliance, as central to reducing distress-based behaviours and preventing escalation toward RPIs.

Pupil voice, participation and behaviour support

A substantial body of work highlights the significance of pupil voice in shaping effective, ethical behaviour support. Sellman (2009) argues that without meaningful participation, behaviour systems risk reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and exclusion, particularly among pupils with SEMH needs. Willis et al. (2021) show that students who receive clear explanations of RPIs can better maintain trust in adults and show improved emotional regulation following incidents. Hodgkiss and Harding (2024) similarly note that while pupils may recognise the protective intent of RPIs, they often experience fear, confusion or frustration, particularly when adult communication is inconsistent.

More recent research reinforces the relational importance of collaborative behaviour planning. Dolton, Adams and O'Reilly (2020) found that structured reflection enables pupils to better understand their triggers, participate in co-producing behaviour strategies and take greater ownership of their emotional regulation. These studies collectively highlight that pupil voice is not merely an ethical imperative but a mechanism through which relational safety, shared meaning-making and behavioural stability are strengthened.

However, implementation remains uneven. Structural pressures and limited staff time can restrict opportunities for genuine consultation (Bynoe et al., 2021). Research examining whole-school nurture approaches echoes these concerns, emphasising the need for systems that embed relational dialogue, attuned responses and reflective opportunities in everyday school routines (Paterson, 2025; Procter-Legg, 2024).

Identifying the gap

Despite growing theoretical consensus and a strong policy mandate, the empirical evidence base examining how nurture-informed, participatory approaches directly influence RPI use remains limited. Existing studies highlight the harms of restraint (Fogt et al., 2008; Cusack et al., 2018), the benefits of relational and co-regulatory practice (Doyle, 2003; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) and the value of incorporating pupil voice into behaviour planning (Sellman, 2009; Dolton, Adams & O'Reilly, 2020). However, research rarely examines how these elements operate together within everyday practice in SEMH schools and studies exploring their combined impact remain scarce.

Very little empirical work has investigated how pupils make sense of RPIs when supported through structured, developmentally attuned dialogue, how co-constructed behaviour plans influence emotional understanding and relational trust, or how whole-school relational approaches grounded in nurture principles affect RPI frequency over time.

This study directly addresses this gap by evaluating a model that integrates co-constructed PSPs, reflective dialogue and weekly Target time sessions as mechanisms for operationalising nurture principles and strengthening pupil participation within an SEMH school context.

Methodology

Study design

The study employed a mixed-methods design to examine both the behavioural trends associated with pupil-led approaches to support planning and the experiential, emotional and relational meanings pupils attributed to RPIs. This design was selected because the aims of the study required attention to change at two levels: (a) observable behavioural patterns over time and (b) the subjective, relational and developmental processes underlying pupils' responses. No single methodological tradition could capture both dimensions.

Alternative designs, such as single-case experimental designs (SCEDs), were considered but rejected because they require clearly isolated variables and controlled conditions that are incompatible with the relational and co-constructed

nature of nurture-informed practice. Behaviour in SEMH contexts is influenced by complex, interacting ecological and relational factors that cannot realistically be manipulated experimentally without compromising ethical and practical feasibility (Bath, 2008; Hart & Yin, 2021).

Mixed methods therefore provided the most appropriate framework for addressing the study's aims: descriptive quantitative analysis allowed the identification of directional changes in behaviour over time, while qualitative analysis provided insight into pupils' meaning-making, emotional experiences and perceptions of staff support – dimensions essential to understanding nurture-based and trauma-informed processes.

Phase One (2023/24) piloted co-constructed positive support plans (PSPs) and semi-structured pupil interviews with six pupils, generating insight into pupils' interpretations of RPIs and their engagement in reflective dialogue.

Phase Two (2024/25) implemented refined versions of these approaches across all classes, incorporating weekly Target time sessions following whole-school training. This developmental structure enabled the study to capture both the depth of individual pupil experience and the broader organisational patterns that emerged when relational and reflective routines were embedded school-wide.

Participants and setting

The study took place in a UK primary school specialising in SEMH education, serving approximately 90 pupils aged 5-11. All pupils have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and present with complex profiles including developmental trauma, attachment disruption, neurodevelopmental conditions and significant social, emotional and behavioural needs. This context provided a relevant environment for examining how collaborative and reflective behaviour-support processes influence the use of RPIs.

Participants for Phase One were drawn from lower key stage 2 (years 3 and 4). Pupils were selected based on regular interaction with pastoral staff and feasibility of engagement. Six pupils aged 7-9, five boys and one girl, were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure an intentionally diverse mix of behavioural presentations, communication profiles, backgrounds and capacities to engage in reflective work. This sampling strategy aligned with recommendations to select "information-rich cases" for exploratory school-based research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Selecting a diverse pupil sample ensured that early learning from the pilot could inform behaviour-support approaches that would be both representative of the wider school population and scalable across classes.

Interventions

Phase One focused on introducing pupil-led PSPs and conducting semi-structured interviews with the six participating pupils. PSPs were developed collaboratively, drawing on the Six Principles of Nurture, trauma-informed practice and co-regulation theory. Pupils worked with trusted adults to identify their strengths, sensory and emotional triggers, behaviours that challenge and preferred strategies for support. Staff contributed contextual knowledge alongside pupils and used these discussions to shape personalised, developmentally attuned plans. PSPs were reviewed iteratively across the term, informed by weekly behaviour log data.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken in term 3 to explore pupils' lived experiences of RPIs and their perceptions of behavioural support. These interviews provided insight into pupils' emotional responses, understanding of safety and experiences of communication with adults. They were designed to promote reflective meaning-making and align with evidence that post-incident dialogue enhances relational trust and reduces confusion about RPIs (Willis et al., 2021; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). These interviews also informed refinements to PSP content and highlighted the need for more consistent, structured opportunities for reflection.

Although ad-hoc reflective conversations occurred as part of existing practice, they were informal and inconsistently applied. Insights from these relational interactions shaped Phase Two, which expanded the interventions school-wide during the 2024/25 academic year.

Phase Two extended the PSP and reflection model across all classes. At the start of the year, whole-school training was delivered to support all staff in developing PSPs collaboratively with pupils. This work was embedded within a dedicated "belonging and togetherness" focus in term 1, during which class teams were allocated time and resources to build relationships and gather pupil insights for PSP development. Reflective practice became systematically embedded through the introduction of weekly timetabled Target time sessions. These sessions enabled staff and pupils to revisit behavioural events, explore emotional cues, celebrate progress and co-construct individual targets. This marked a shift from informal, ad-hoc reflection toward a whole-school routine grounded in nurture-based and trauma-informed principles.

Data collection

Quantitative data were drawn from the school's existing behaviour-logging system. Weekly measures included behaviour weightings, incident counts and occurrences of RPIs. Behaviour weightings reflect the relative intensity of behaviours recorded by staff; in this system, higher values indicate a greater accumulation of moderate-to-severe behaviours and the scale ranges from 1-10, where 1 represents low-level disruption (eg a short period of off-task behaviour) and 10 represents the most serious events (eg threatening a pupil or staff member with a weapon). Incident counts captured the number of behaviour events recorded each week; and RPIs represented instances where restrictive physical interventions were used in accordance with school policy. Data were collated weekly for terms 2, 3 and 4 in Phase One and for terms 1 and 2 in Phase Two following whole-school rollout.

Qualitative data consisted solely of transcripts from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the six Phase One pupils. Notes from informal reflective sessions supplemented this data. These interviews provided rich descriptive accounts of pupils' experiences and were used to explore meaning-making processes, emotional responses and emerging shifts in understanding.

Data analysis

Quantitative behaviour log data (behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs) were analysed using descriptive statistics. This decision reflects both the exploratory nature of the study and the methodological constraints inherent in SEMH contexts. The Phase One pilot involved only six pupils, providing a dataset unsuitable for reliable inferential testing. Even during Phase Two, although whole-school data were available, the study design did not involve randomisation, controlled comparisons, or stable groupings across the two academic years, conditions required for meaningful inferential statistics (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Descriptive analysis was therefore selected to examine patterns and directional changes rather than to test hypotheses. This aligns with methodological recommendations for early-stage or developmental research in specialist settings, where the aim is to understand trends within a complex system rather than attribute causation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2014).

The study acknowledges that future research, particularly with controlled designs or larger, stable samples, would benefit from inferential statistical analysis to examine potential associations or causal relationships between pupil-led approaches and reductions in RPIs.

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in accordance with Braun & Clarke's updated methodological guidance (2006). Coding followed an iterative, inductive process involving familiarisation, open coding, development of candidate themes and recursive refinement. Peer debriefing with colleagues supported theme development and helped check emerging interpretations against pupil language.

Triangulating the descriptive quantitative trends with the qualitatively generated themes enhanced the credibility and richness of the findings, consistent with guidance on mixed-methods behavioural research in specialist settings (O'Reilly & Parker, 2014).

Researcher reflexivity

The primary researcher was a senior leader with pastoral responsibilities who knew all participating pupils well. This positionality brought both advantages, trust, rapport and insight into pupils' relational needs and potential risks

related to perceived authority. Pupils may have felt an implicit pressure to comply or to present themselves favourably, although sessions were conducted at pupils' pace, with breaks offered and in comfortable familiar spaces to reduce power imbalance.

The primary researcher designed the PSP process independently but did not devise Target time, which was introduced school-wide by a colleague, reducing bias in interpreting its purpose. Behaviour data were logged by class staff rather than the researcher, further limiting direct influence on quantitative findings.

Reflexive journalling and peer debriefing were used to critically interrogate interpretations, particularly during thematic analysis where coding was undertaken by the researcher alone. Attention was given to matching interpretations closely to pupil language, checking assumptions against raw data and acknowledging how professional training and beliefs in nurture-based practice may have shaped analytical decisions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures prioritised emotional safety, agency and ongoing assent throughout the study. Pupils were given clear, developmentally appropriate explanations of each activity and assent was revisited continuously during PSP co-construction, interviews and reflective conversations. This approach reflects guidance emphasising that assent for children, particularly those with additional needs, must be ongoing, relational and responsive to emotional cues (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Coyne, 2010).

In addition to pupil assent, parental and carer informed consent was obtained for all participating pupils. At the time of the pilot phase, the activities formed part of routine pastoral practice; however, separate consent was later sought once the intention to use the data for research and publication became clear. All parents and carers subsequently provided written informed consent for their child's data and anonymised quotations to be used externally. This retrospective process adhered to ethical expectations for transparency, respect for parental authority and protection of children's rights.

All activities were embedded within normal pastoral and relational practices, ensuring participation felt familiar and low-pressure. Trauma-informed principles guided all interactions; tasks were adapted to pupils' communication styles and regulation needs and sessions were paused or stopped if any pupil showed signs of distress (Porges, 2011; Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2019).

Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data handling, with statutory safeguarding duties observed where necessary (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The methodological choices were also ethically grounded: semi-structured interviews are widely recognised as appropriate for eliciting the perspectives of children with SEND (Lewis & Porter, 2004), while pupil-led PSPs align with rights-based principles emphasising participation and agency (Lundy, 2007). Behaviour log data analysed in the study were drawn from routine school monitoring, ensuring no additional burden on pupils.

Together, the use of parental consent, pupil assent, trauma-informed processes and safeguarding protocols ensured that participation was voluntary, emotionally safe and aligned with ethical expectations for research involving children with additional needs.

Findings

Phase One results: academic year 2023/2024

Quantitative findings

Term 2 marked the introduction of collaboratively developed, pupil-led PSPs. Behaviour logs, recording weekly behaviour weightings (severity of behaviours), incident counts (frequency of behaviour events) and RPIs (instances of restrictive physical intervention), showed an early increase during week 3, with weightings reaching 9.8 and incidents 4.4. These patterns then stabilised across the remainder of the term. Mean weekly scores indicated behaviour weightings of 6.7, incidents of 3.3 and RPIs of 1.2 (**table 1**), providing an initial indication of how pupils' behavioural presentations shifted following the introduction of pupil-led planning.

Table 1. Term 2 behaviour data 2023/2024

Week	Behaviour weightings	Behaviour incidents	RPI occurrences
1	7.0	3.5	1.3
2	8.2	4.0	1.4
3	9.8	4.4	1.6
4	6.0	3.0	1.0
5	5.5	2.8	1.0
6	5.6	2.7	1.1
Average	**6.7**	**3.3**	**1.2**

Note: RPIs are calculated as weekly averages over each academic term.

Term 3 (Addition of semi-structured pupil interviews)

Following the introduction of semi-structured interviews at the start of term 3, behaviour data for the same six pupils showed greater fluctuation. Behaviour weightings ranged from 4.0 to 7.6 weekly, while incident counts varied between 2.3 and 3.5. RPI use remained relatively stable, averaging 1.3 per week (**table 2**). Although the quantitative trends varied, the qualitative findings later demonstrate how pupils' increasing understanding of RPIs shaped their emotional responses and capacity to engage in reflective conversations, offering contextual explanation for this variability.

Table 2. Term 3 behaviour data 2023/2024

Week	Behaviour weightings	Behaviour incidents	RPI occurrences
1	4.0	2.3	0.0
2	5.2	2.7	0.8
3	6.1	3.0	1.0
4	7.3	3.3	1.2
5	7.6	3.5	1.4
Average	**6.0**	**3.0**	**1.3**

Note: RPIs are calculated as weekly averages over each academic term.

Term 4 (Continuation of pupil-led planning and ongoing ad-hoc reflection)

Behavioural data for term 4 continued to be collected for the pilot pupils. As shown in **table 6**, behaviour weightings averaged 7.2 per week, incident counts averaged 3.2 and RPIs averaged 0.9 per week – the lowest weekly RPI average across the three terms reviewed. Weekly fluctuations were evident: behaviour weightings ranged from 4.8 to 11.8, incidents from 2.3 to 4.5 and RPIs from 0 to 1.5 (**table 6**). Taken alongside pupils' qualitative accounts, term 4 data illustrates how behavioural presentations fluctuated while emotional understanding and communication began to shift, reinforcing the need to interpret quantitative patterns alongside lived experiences.

Table 3. Term 4 behaviour data averages

Week	Behaviour weightings	Behaviour incidents	RPI occurrences
1	4.8	2.3	1.0
2	5.0	2.8	0.0
3	11.8	4.5	1.0
4	7.8	3.4	1.5
5	6.6	2.8	1.0
6	6.8	3.1	1.3
Average	7.1	3.2	1

Across terms 2-4, descriptive analysis shows that behaviour weightings, incidents and RPI occurrences for the six participating pupils fluctuated week to week but demonstrated broadly consistent averages across the three terms. Notably, term 4 recorded the lowest mean RPI frequency (1 per week), although behaviour weightings and incident counts remained comparable to earlier terms. These results provide the quantitative foundation for the qualitative findings that follow and inform the transition into the whole-school implementation described in Phase Two.

Phase One results: academic year 2023/2024

Qualitative findings

Semi-structured interviews conducted in term 3 provided insight into how the six participating pupils understood RPIs and experienced behaviour support. All interviews were conducted by the

researcher in their pastoral role, a familiar adult known to pupils, which likely contributed to pupils' willingness to speak openly. Thematic analysis identified two overarching themes that reflect pupils' emotional responses, perceptions of safety and preferences for communication and support.

Theme 1: The balance of safety and sensibility – navigating student perspectives on RPIs

This theme captures the varied and often ambivalent emotions pupils hold toward RPIs. While all participants understood RPIs as safety measures, their feelings ranged from reluctant acceptance to discomfort, frustration and distress, mirroring findings in previous research that pupils often interpret RPIs through both protective and punitive lenses (Willis et al., 2021; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024).

Many pupils articulated an awareness of the adults' intention to keep them safe. Blue contrasted the physical discomfort of RPIs with the reassurance provided by adult protection:

"*Hurts a lot… [adults] keep me safe… I'm still a little bit frustrated that they have to hold me.*"

Similarly, Red emphasised the safety rationale for RPIs:

"*I think they're just trying to keep me safe and the other children safe and the adults safe. They don't want me to get hurt or for another child to lash out because I'm making too much racket.*"

For some pupils, increased understanding helped them manage the emotional impact of being held. Green stated:

"*Once I had done enough learning about RPIs… if I get angry and have to go into a hold, I'll be able to understand it and keep calm.*"

Across interviews, pupils consistently expressed mixed emotional reactions. Five of the pupils described predominantly negative feelings, frustration, anger, sadness or feeling overwhelmed, while one pupil conveyed a more neutral or increasingly accepting perspective over time. These qualitative accounts reflect the complexity of children's interpretations and their need for clarity, predictability and relational security surrounding RPIs.

Theme 2: Voices heard: bridging gaps with meaningful dialogue

The second theme highlights pupils' clear desire for communication and relational support before, during and after RPIs. Effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal, emerged as central to helping pupils regulate their emotions and maintain trust in adults, an emphasis strongly aligned with trauma-informed and relational models of practice.

Red described a simple but effective emotional signalling system that helped them communicate escalating feelings:

"*Thumbs up is okay… sideways is getting angry… thumbs down is when I'm not okay… I think I should just have an adult to chat to me about my feelings.*"

Blue similarly emphasised the therapeutic impact of a supportive adult presence:

"*How did it feel when the teachers came to help you?*"

"*Good*"

"*Why did it feel good?*"

"*Because I had someone to actually talk to*"

Pupils consistently highlighted the importance of adults listening carefully, explaining what was happening and providing space to express their emotions. These insights illuminate the relational dynamics that influence how pupils make sense of RPIs and provide essential context to the behavioural data observed in Phase One.

The behavioural fluctuations observed in the quantitative data correspond with pupils' qualitative descriptions of confusion, emerging understanding and emotional ambivalence surrounding RPIs. As pupils developed clearer understandings of the purpose of RPIs through PSP discussions and interviews, their narratives indicated greater emotional regulation and trust. These qualitative insights provide important interpretive context for the stabilisation of RPI averages and reductions observed by term 4.

Phase Two results: academic year 2024/2025

Quantitative findings

Following the pilot with six pupils, PSPs and weekly reflective routines (Target time) were implemented across the whole school, a population of 90 pupils, at the start of 2024/2025 academic year. Whole-school behaviour data for 2024/2025 was then compared with the previous academic year to examine whether the patterns observed in the pilot were reflected at scale (**table 4**).

Whole-school behaviour data comparisons for 2023/2024 to 2024/2025 academic years showed that although behaviour weightings and incident counts increased across terms 1-3, the use of RPIs nevertheless declined. Term 1 RPIs decreased from 262 to 247 (a 5.7% reduction), term 2 RPIs fell from 253 to 147 (a 41.9% reduction) and term 3 RPIs reduced from 168 to 139 (a 17.3% reduction). From term 4 onwards, behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs all showed steady reductions, indicating a sustained downward trend across the final three terms of the year. The total number of RPIs from 2023/24 to 2024/25 saw a decrease from 1,418 to 922 (34.97% reduction).

These reductions in RPIs from the start of the 2024/2025 academic year occurred during the period in which every class developed PSPs collaboratively and embedded weekly reflective routines through Target time. Although the study cannot isolate the cause of these changes, the magnitude and consistency of the reductions in RPIs align with the introduction of whole-school collaborative planning and weekly structured reflection.

Discussion

This study explored whether strengthening student voice, enhancing pupils' understanding of RPIs and embedding structured reflective dialogue could contribute to a reduction in RPI use within a UK SEMH primary school. Findings from both phases, the small pilot with six pupils in 2023/24 and a full-school implementation in 2024/25, indicate that relational, participatory and nurture-informed practices may support improvements in behavioural patterns and reductions in restrictive interventions. Although no causal relationship can be inferred**,** the overall direction of the findings aligns with theoretical and empirical work emphasising the importance of relational safety, emotional containment and pupil participation for children with SEMH needs (Doyle, 2003; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). These processes reflect the Six Principles of Nurture, including the provision of a safe base, understanding behaviour as communication and supporting developmentally appropriate transitions, each of which is directly enacted through the participatory practices examined in this study.

In Phase One, the behavioural data remained broadly stable, with only modest fluctuations rather than a clear downward trend in behaviour weightings, incident counts and RPIs followed the introduction of pupil-led PSPs and reflective conversations. Although limited in scale, these patterns still align with nurture-based and attachment-informed practice, which asserts that predictable, attuned and co-regulated relational environments promote children's capacity for behavioural stability and self-regulation (Doyle, 2003). The collaborative construction of PSPs

Table 4. Whole-school behaviour data comparison 2023 / 2024 – 2024 / 2025

	Weightings academic year 23/24	Weightings academic year 24/25	Incidents academic year 23/24	Incidents academic year 24/25	RPIs academic year 23/24	RPIs academic year 24/25
Term 1	2779.5	3815.5	1037	1791	262	247
Term 2	2944	3313	1294	1570	253	147
Term 3	2193.5	2318.5	912	1162	168	139
Term 4	2711.5	2002	1177	1036	252	101
Term 5	2445	1581.5	1085	828	197	82
Term 6	3240.5	2334	1445	1144	286	106

emphasised pupils' communication needs, emotional cues and preferred strategies for co-regulation, echoing the trauma-informed emphasis on relational clarity and shared understanding (Cusack et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2023). While Phase One did not demonstrate strong behavioural change, the stability observed may itself indicate the beginnings of relational safety and predictability, processes identified as precursors to more sustained behavioural regulation (Dolton, Adams & O'Reilly, 2020; Willis et al., 2021).

However, the fluctuations recorded across both phases of the data set highlight the non-linear nature of behavioural change often seen in SEMH contexts. Many children with developmental trauma or communication needs demonstrate cycles of progress and regression as part of their regulatory development (Porges, 2011; Bath & Seita, 2018). The variability seen in the behaviour logs is characteristic of this developmental complexity and emphasises the importance of the relational consistency and emotional containment that sit at the core of nurture-oriented and trauma-informed practice. Rather than signalling intervention failure, such fluctuations reflect what relational neuroscience describes as "expected dysregulation" during periods of emotional learning and relational adjustment (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

The qualitative findings provide further insight into the emotional meaning-making processes underpinning these behavioural shifts. Pupils described RPIs as simultaneously protective and distressing, a duality widely reported in the literature (Steckley, 2017; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). Some pupils clearly recognised that adults were attempting to maintain safety, which aligns with research showing that when the rationale for RPIs is understood, pupils' trust in adults can be preserved (Willis et al., 2021). Yet the pupils also shared feelings of fear, frustration and confusion, reaffirming longstanding concerns that RPIs can compromise relational security when communication is insufficient (Ryan & Peterson, 2004; Mohr et al., 1998). The pupils' desire for clear explanations, emotional check-ins and opportunities for reflective dialogue reinforces Sellman's (2009) contention that meaningful student participation is essential for fostering engagement and reducing feelings of disempowerment.

Phase Two findings, drawn from whole-school implementation during 2024/25, further illuminate the potential value of these relational and reflective approaches. Unlike Phase One, where behavioural patterns remained largely stable, Phase Two demonstrated reductions in behaviour weightings and recorded incidents from terms 4-6 and in RPIs across the entire academic year.

While these reductions cannot be attributed solely to the intervention and may also reflect broader contextual, staffing or cohort-related factors, they correspond with broader evidence that whole-school relational and preventative approaches are associated with reductions in restrictive practices (Deveau & Leitch, 2015; Bynoe et al., 2021). The embedding of weekly Target time sessions, predictable opportunities for reflective conversation, emotional processing and collaborative target-setting, appears consistent with nurture principles and the wider literature that identifies structured relational reflection as a key mechanism for reducing distress-based behaviours (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). These findings particularly reinforce attachment-informed frameworks that emphasise the role of predictable, attuned adults in supporting regulatory development (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008).

The early-year focus on belonging, relationship-building and PSP development through whole-school continuing professional development also mirrors findings from attachment-informed research, which demonstrates that the availability of attuned, predictable adults is a core predictor of children's emotional and behavioural regulation (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008). The school's values of happiness, high expectations, nurture, consistency, understanding and positivity (HENCUP) were operationalised explicitly during this phase and appear to have provided a framework for enacting nurture principles reliably across classrooms. This explicit values-led structure likely strengthened the relational culture within which the behaviour-support processes were embedded, a factor repeatedly linked to reductions in restrictive practices (Bynoe et al., 2021).

When considered together, the findings suggest that relationally grounded, pupil-centred and reflective practices may help to strengthen pupils' emotional understanding, foster shared ownership of behaviour planning and reduce reliance on

RPIs. The data indicate a general reduction in RPIs during phases of increased pupil involvement, though this study does not demonstrate correlation or causation. The findings should therefore be interpreted as associative rather than indicative of direct intervention effects; nevertheless, the alignment between the data and existing theoretical frameworks strengthens the plausibility of the relationships observed.

Implications for practice include the systematic embedding of pupil voice within behaviour planning, the use of structured reflective routines such as PSP meetings and Target time and continued staff development in relational attunement and co-regulation. These practices operationalise key nurture principles, particularly providing a safe base, understanding behaviour as communication and modelling attuned relationships, and may support schools in reducing their reliance on restrictive interventions.

Limitations

A notable limitation is that the study did not collect staff-perception data. Given that RPIs are enacted by adults, understanding staff decision-making, confidence, relational approaches and experiences of the PSP/Target time model would provide valuable contextual insight. Future research should incorporate staff perspectives to explore how adult behaviour, interpretation and relational stance interact with pupil-led approaches to influence RPI frequency.

The qualitative sample was small, reflecting the exploratory nature of Phase One and cannot therefore be generalised beyond this context. The sequential introduction of interventions complicates the isolation of their individual effects. Behavioural patterns in SEMH settings are highly context-dependent and likely influenced by staffing, environmental factors, group dynamics and external stressors, none of which were controlled within this design. Behavioural data were analysed descriptively rather than using inferential statistics, meaning conclusions are illustrative rather than statistically robust. Future research should incorporate inferential analyses, larger samples and multi-informant perspectives (including pupils and staff) to deepen understanding of how relational and nurture-informed approaches influence behaviour over time.

Conclusion

This study examined whether strengthening pupil voice, enhancing pupils' understanding of RPIs and embedding structured reflective dialogue could contribute to reducing the use of RPIs within a UK SEMH primary school. Across both phases of implementation, findings suggest that nurture-informed, relational and participatory approaches can support more regulated behavioural patterns and contribute to safer, more emotionally attuned environments.

Behavioural data showed consistent indicative reductions in behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs following the introduction of pupil-led PSPs and reflective practices. While causation cannot be inferred, the correspondence between these reductions and the relational practices introduced offers plausible evidence of positive association, consistent with research emphasising predictability, co-regulation and emotional safety as mechanisms for reducing restrictive practices (Kelly et al., 2023; Ryan & Peterson, 2004).

The qualitative findings highlighted pupils' mixed emotional responses to RPIs, balancing recognition of safety with feelings of discomfort or frustration, mirroring wider evidence of the emotional strain connected to restraint (Cusack et al., 2018; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). Their desire for clearer explanations and relational repair reinforces research showing that transparent communication and reflective dialogue support trust and emotional regulation after incidents (Willis et al., 2021; Steckley, 2017). These insights strengthen the argument that RPI processes must be embedded within emotionally literate, relationally attuned communication.

The study also supports foundational theoretical perspectives: that behaviour communicates need (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), that attuned and predictable adult responses enable containment and regulation (Doyle, 2003; Colley, 2009) and that meaningful participation enhances agency and belonging (Sellman, 2009). By situating PSPs and Target time within a nurture-based relational framework, the school operationalised principles widely recognised as essential in SEMH contexts. However, behavioural change in SEMH settings is influenced by multiple interacting variables and reductions should therefore be interpreted

cautiously and without implication of direct causal impact. Future research would benefit from longer-term controlled or quasi-experimental designs to examine these relationships more robustly.

Overall, this study adds to evidence demonstrating the value of nurture-informed, trauma-aware and pupil-led approaches in SEMH behaviour support. By foregrounding pupil voice, embedding relational safety and creating regular opportunities for reflective dialogue, schools may move towards cultures that rely less on restrictive interventions and more on shared understanding, collaboration and emotional development.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Pupil voice positive support plan

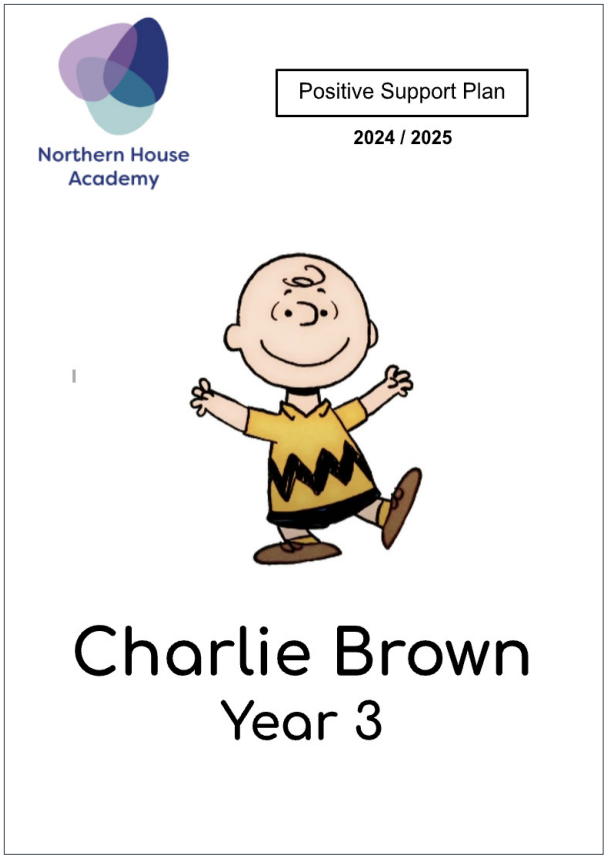
Appendix B: Interview questions

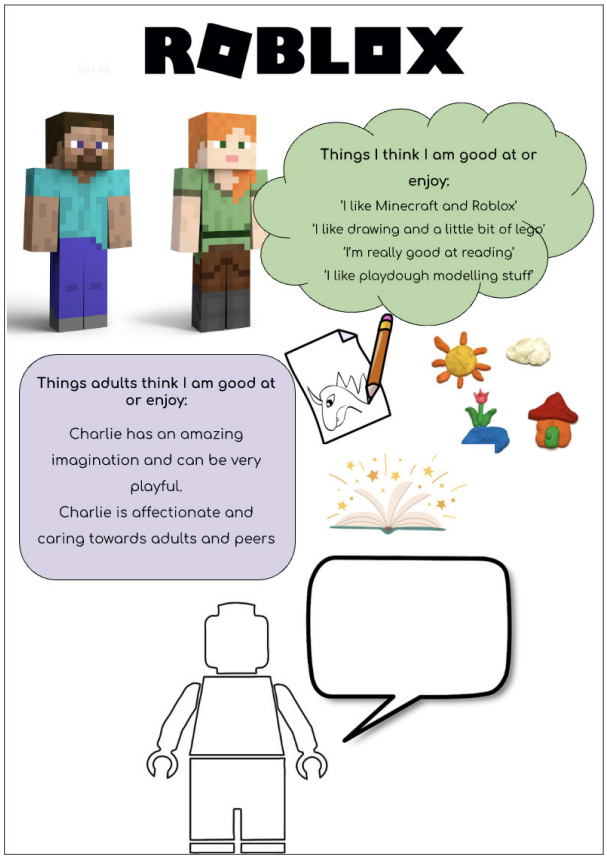
Appendix C: Student interviews

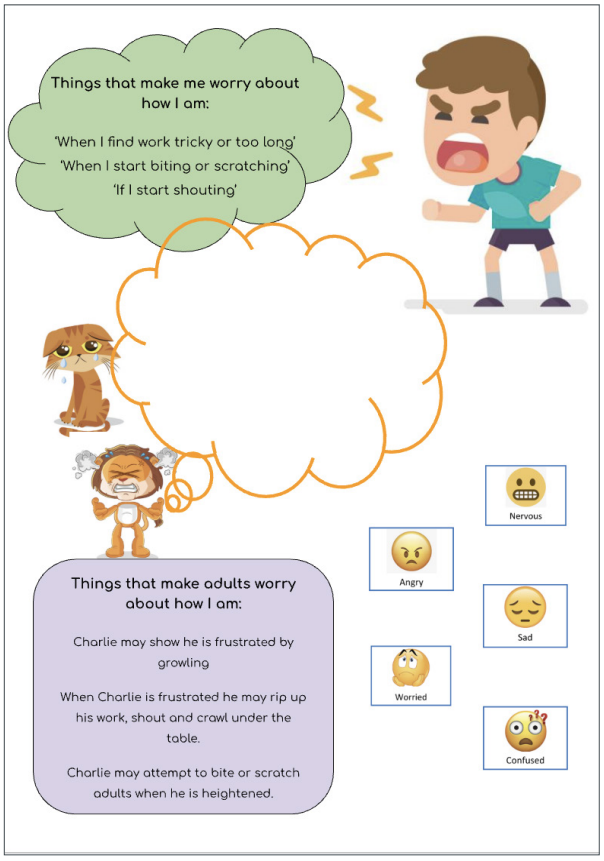
- Interview with Blue
- Interview with Green
- Interview with Red
- Interview with Purple
- Interview with White
- Interview with Yellow

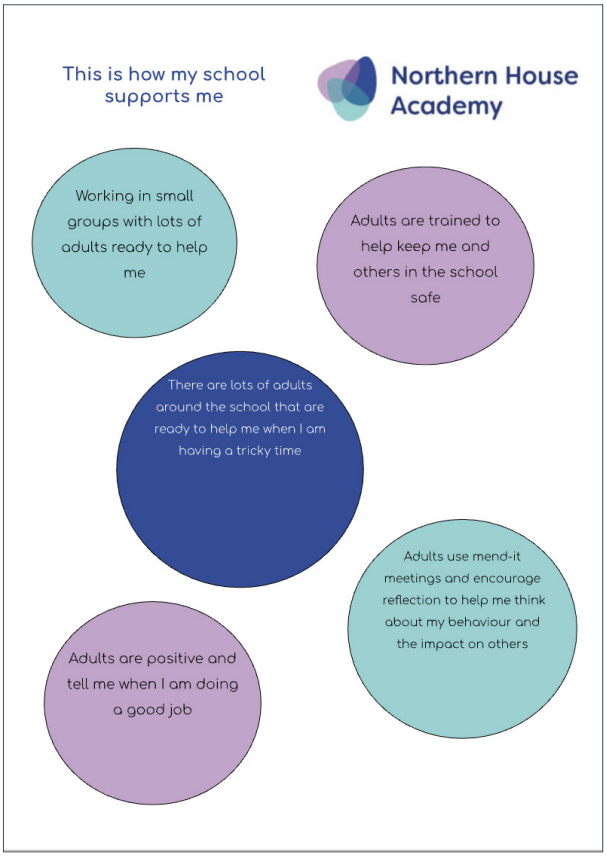
Appendix D: Target time

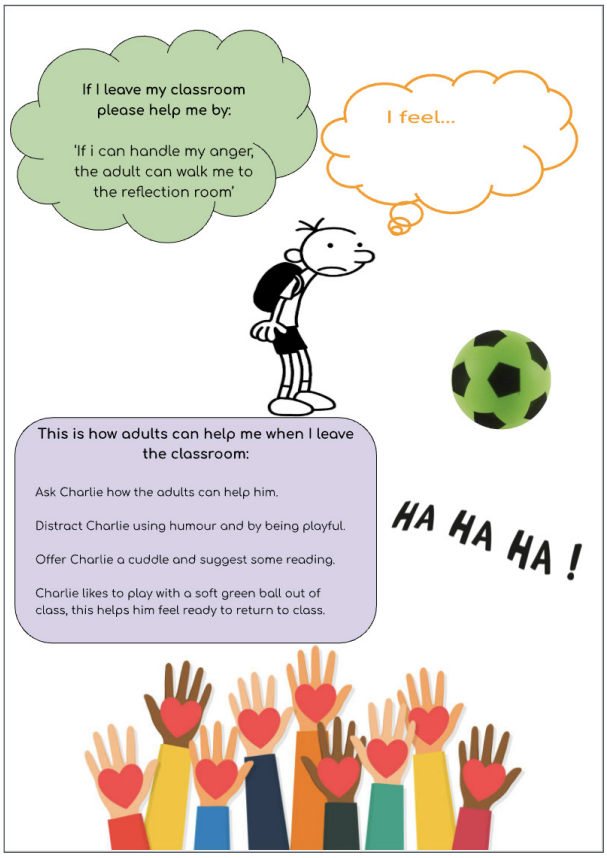
Appendix A: Pupil voice positive support plan (example)

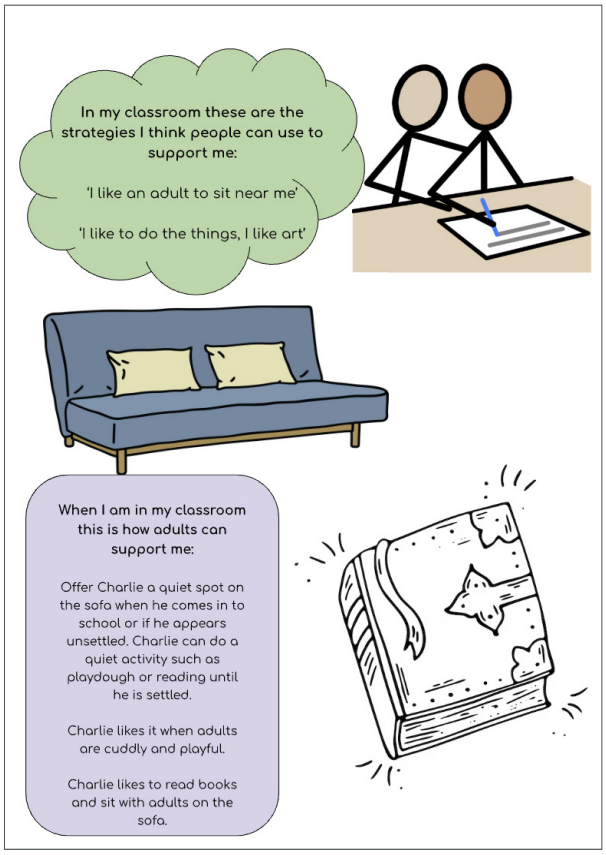


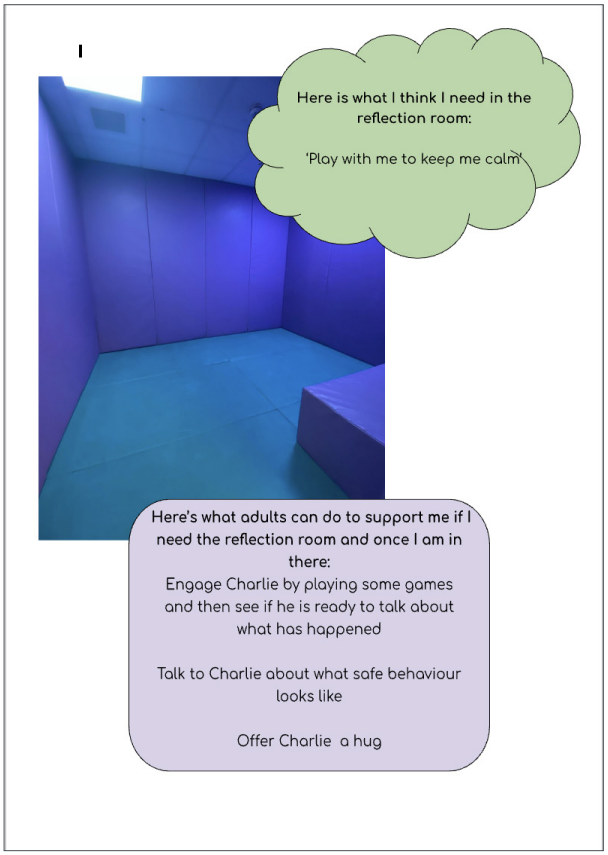












Appendix B: Interview questions

1. **Introductory questions:**

   Can you tell me about your experiences at school? What is your favourite part about coming to school?

   What do you think about the teachers and staff at your school?

2. **General questions:**

   Can you describe a time when you needed some help from your teachers or other adults at school? What happened?

   How did it make you feel when you received support from teachers or staff?

   Can you tell me about a time when you felt scared or upset at school? What caused those feelings?

3. **Questions about physical support:**

   Sometimes the adults have to support you in school to help keep you and others safe, which might mean adults have to stand and sit with you or move you.

How did you feel when someone had to stand and sit with you or move you?

Can you describe what it's like when a teacher or staff member supports you in this way?

What are the adults trying to do when they stand and sit with you or move you?

4. **Coping and emotional questions:**

   How do you usually calm down when you're upset or angry at school?

   Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you didn't need any help, and you were able to manage your feelings on your own? What did you do?

5. **Suggestions and feedback:**

   If there is something you could change about how adults help you at school, what would it be?

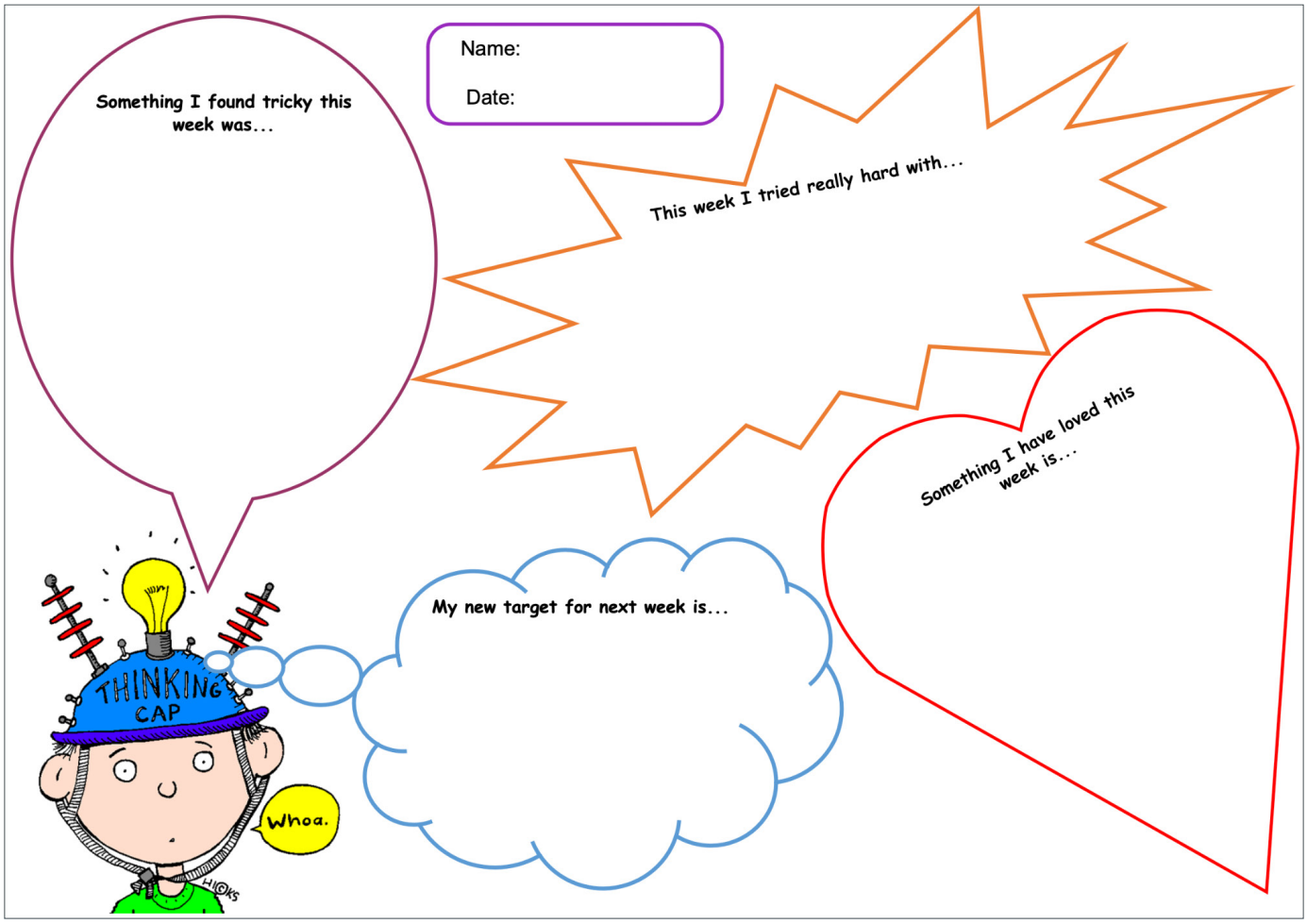
   Do you have any ideas to make school feel even better for you or your friends?

6. **Closure:**

   Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences at school or the support you receive from teachers and staff?

   How do you feel after talking about these things today? Is there something you'd like to do or talk about now to help you feel better?

Appendix C: Target time



Shifting perspectives on pupils: staff perceptions of the Nurturing Kent Programme

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Keywords: special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), social emotional mental health (SEMH), Whole-School Nurture Approach, staff training and development
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Abstract

The Nurturing Kent Programme aimed to enhance the support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in Kent schools. This study explored how school staff perceived the programme's impact on: staff confidence in managing social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, pupil engagement and relationships within the school community.

Data were gathered through focus groups and two Likert-scale surveys of teaching and non-teaching staff in schools taking part in the Nurturing Kent Programme. Qualitative data were analysed through an inductive-deductive thematic analysis approach. Quantitative data were grouped, graphed and interpreted.

Findings indicate staff confidence increased as they shifted from punitive measures to an approach that views behaviour as communication. Staff reported improved communication skills and the ability to implement flexible behavioural policies tailored to individual pupil needs, fostering a supportive environment for addressing SEMH challenges. Staff perceived that the nurturing approach positively influenced pupils' wellbeing, particularly those with SEND. Collaborative relationships among staff, senior leaders and parents were crucial for the programme's success, with staff perceiving that strong communication reinforced whole-school approaches and nurturing approaches at home.

Limitations include a focus on primary school staff and poor survey response rate (19 per cent of schools participating in the Programme to one survey and 10 per cent to the second), suggesting the need for further research to encompass secondary education perspectives and longitudinal studies to track outcomes over time.

Introduction

The Nurturing Kent Programme is an adapted version of The National Nurturing Schools Programme, delivered in Kent from 2021 to 2024 by nurtureuk and commissioned by Kent County Council. Its commissioning was prompted by a 2019 Ofsted and Care Quality Commission inspection, which found that "too many children and young people with SEND do not get the support they need in Kent" (Minns et al., 2019, p. 2). Nurtureuk was commissioned to work with 300 mainstream primary and secondary schools to create inclusive environments that foster a sense of belonging for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). As of September 2024, 298 schools in Kent had enrolled in the programme, which was delivered in a phased approach over three years.

Rooted in attachment theory (Boxall, 2002) and neuroscience (Gerhardt, 2004), the programme focuses on school staff identifying and meeting pupils' social and emotional developmental needs. It aims to help pupils build relationships by encouraging staff to focus on their social skills, confidence and resilience, and ultimately improving attendance, behaviour and academic outcomes.

Fully funded, the programme offers 18 months of support, accredited training and one-to-one consultancy. It includes the Boxall Profile® tool for identifying and responding to pupils' social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Training is based on the Six Principles of Nurture (Lucas et al., 2006), and staff learn how to implement nurture groups to provide targeted support for pupils facing SEMH challenges.

Lucas (2020; see also Bennathan & Boxall, 2000) explained how they developed the first nurture groups in the early 1970s, relying on the attachment theory of John Bowlby (1951, 1953). This theory helped Lucas to formulate the first draft 'Diagnostic Developmental Profile' focused on nurture in 1973, which later became the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998). Today, the programme is notable for its focus on: relationships, SEMH and a whole-school approach that is inclusive of pupils with SEND.

Positive relationships are a hallmark of a nurturing school, whether that's between school staff and pupils within the school, or additionally with parents and professionals beyond the school (Boxall, 2002; Jones et al., 2024). Empirical research has explained how staff modelling positive relationships builds trust with pupils and leads to a sense of belonging, to the extent that some even feel like they are part of a family (Cassar & Abela, 2023; Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; Edmunds, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2014; Syrnyk, 2014). Seeing these positive relationships also helps pupils to navigate their own relationships with their peers and parents both inside and outside school (Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; Edmunds, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2014; Cunningham et al, 2019).

In the context of increasing calls for schools to focus on pupils' SEMH (previously known as SEBD: social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) (Fusar-Poli et al., 2021; Langford et al., 2014; Margaretha et al., 2023); nurturing relationships have been identified as a base for helping pupils to self-soothe and regulate their own emotions (Linsell et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2025). Empirical evidence associates nurture groups with improvements in pupils' mental wellbeing from the teacher, parent and pupil's own perspective (Callahan, 2023). It also suggests that pupils' social and emotional skills improve, which in turn improve behaviour and then impact on learning (Callahan, 2023; Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Pace, 2024; Seth-Smith et al., 2010; Syrnyk, 2014).

This contrasts against the traditional use of exclusions and part-time timetables to manage SEMH incidents. A bidirectional relationship seems to exist between school exclusion and SEMH difficulties: children with SEMH difficulties are disproportionately excluded from schools in England (Thompson et al., 2021) and exclusion in turn exacerbates psychological distress (Ford et al., 2018). As an alternative, part-time timetables give schools a structured way to de-escalate crisis behaviour while planning for reintegration, rather than resorting to exclusions. It is therefore essential that staff are confident about when and how to use these strategies. Confident, well-judged decisions help prevent unnecessary / repeated exclusions and ensure that part-time timetables are supportive, time-limited and not misused.

Benefits of a nurturing approach have been experienced particularly by pupils with SEND, which is an overarching term which includes pupils

with SEMH needs (Department for Education & Department of Health and Social Care, 2015). Lucas (1999), however, identifies the importance of taking a "whole-school approach" that includes pupils with SEND and sets in motion a positive cycle of growth and development where teaching and learning become more effective for all pupils and their morale improves. Insley (2024) identifies that relationships run throughout the whole school and argues that school leaders need to lead by example. Empirical evidence supports the commitment of school senior leaders being key to implementing nurture approaches (Coleman, 2020; Rennie & Smart, 2023). A whole-school approach ensures that all members of its community – including teaching staff, non-teaching staff and parents – are included and able to benefit (Colley et al., 2024; Insley, 2024). This approach creates an atmosphere where nurturing support is both viewed and experienced positively (O'Farrell et al., 2022).

This study explored three main research questions, of how staff in the 298 schools participating in the Nurturing Kent Programme perceived the programme's impact.

- How did staff perceive the impact of the programme on their own and their colleagues' confidence levels in supporting and managing pupils' SEMH needs?
- How did staff perceive the impact of the programme on levels of engagement and learning of pupils with SEND?
- How did staff perceive the impact of the programme on relationships with their colleagues, governing bodies, parents/carers and pupils?

This study builds upon previous evaluations of the impact of nurture groups on pupils (Callahan, 2023; Cassar & Abela, 2023; Edmunds, 2021) and whole-school nurture practices in single schools (Colley et al., 2024; Rennie & Smart, 2023) to consider the impact of a nurturing programme, from the perspectives of teaching and non-teaching staff across multiple schools within a county council area. This will enable a broader perspective that focuses on identifying key drivers from the whole of a nurturing programme. The study's key purpose is to provide evidence that can inform county-wide educational policies and practices.

Methods

Study design

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm that combines a relativist ontology, viewing reality as constructed through social interactions, with a subjectivist epistemology, emphasising that knowledge is inseparable from the individuals who possess it. This study concerns several relative and subjective factors such as confidence, improvements on levels of engagement and learning and relationships. In many of these cases there will not be one absolute and objective right answer, so this study has chosen to focus exclusively on the perspectives of school staff members.

The study involved four focus groups of school staff along with two surveys entitled *Practice* and *Staff* which were distributed to nurture leads and all school staff respectively. Nurture leads are a single member of staff in each school who coordinate the Nurturing Kent Programme delivery there. This data indicates the experiences and reflections of teaching and non-teaching staff in the 298 schools taking part in the Nurturing Kent Programme.

The study adopted an inductive-deductive approach to thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach allows for both a priori understandings and data to inform the codes and themes.

Recruitment

Invitations to focus groups and to complete surveys were sent by nurtureuk to the nurture lead at each school with specific instructions for them to circulate the staff survey to all staff at their school. Prospective focus group participants were invited to contact researchers directly for a video-conferencing link and to obtain a consent form. In the first email contact the researcher explained the general aim of the study and that the focus groups would be recorded, confidential, conducted via video conference and would last approximately 90 minutes. They also attached more detailed written information which explained that participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time by contacting the lead researcher. It specified that contributions would be anonymised and non-attributable. At the start of the focus

group all participants were given information about the study verbally, offered the opportunity to ask questions and signed a written consent form.

Data collection

Focus groups were conducted with school staff in April to July 2024 via video conference, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. They were semi-structured, covering their perceptions of: responding to SEMH incidents and managing behaviour, SEND provision and relationships among the school community. The semi-structured nature of these focus groups offered a consistent framework across the focus groups, and flexibility was used to ensure that participants' experiences and perspectives could be richly explored. With the consent of participants, focus groups were audio recorded and automatically transcribed.

Data from the focus groups were complemented by two surveys asking some Likert-scale questions to gather quantitative data, as well as some free-text response questions. The surveys were revised in collaboration with nurtureuk during the design process. The practice survey collected data from nurture leads to understand how the programme has influenced practice in schools and its impact on pupils (particularly those with SEND), staff and wider stakeholders. Responses were gathered in two waves, first in April to October 2023, then June to July 2024. The staff survey collected data from a range of staff at participating schools to understand the impact of the programme on staff confidence to support pupils' SEMH needs. Responses were gathered in a single wave from June to July 2024.

Participants

The study involved four focus groups each comprising between one (a single focus group was conducted as an interview) and five participants. 10 members of staff, each from different schools participated in total. A breakdown of their characteristics, along with those of survey respondents, can be found in **Table 1**. Due to the small size of some of the focus groups, to preserve

Table 1. Participant characteristics

		Focus groups	Practice survey	Staff survey
Participants	Teaching and learning support assistants	0 (0%)	58 nurture leads (100%)	11 (42%)
	Class teachers	1 (10%)		3 (12%)
	Special educational needs co-ordinators	7 (70%)		3 (12%)
	Deputy head & special educational needs co-ordinators	0 (0%)		4 (15%)
	Senior leadership team	2 (20%)		5 (19%)
Phase of education	Primary	10 (100%)	54 (93%)	24 (93%)
	Secondary	0 (0%)	4 (7%)	2 (8%)
School type	Community[1]	2 (20%)	14 (24%)	4 (15%)
	Foundation[1]	1 (10%)	5 (9%)	1 (4%)
	Voluntary controlled/aided[1]	2 (20%)	13 (22%)	8 (31%)
	Multi-academy trust[2]	4 (40%)	24 (41%)	13 (50%)
	Standalone academy[2]	1 (10%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)
Start date / cohort	Year 1 (cohorts 1-3)	–[3]	35 (60%)	10 (39%)
	Year 2 (cohorts 4-6)	–[3]	16 (28%)	12 (46%)
	Year 3 (cohorts 7-8)	–[3]	7 (12%)	4 (15%)

[1] local authority maintained
[2] includes academy converters, academy sponsor-led and free schools
[3] Start date data were not collected for focus group participants.

anonymity, quotes are attributed throughout to the focus group, rather than to individuals.

The practice survey received 47 valid responses in wave one and 19 in wave two. Nurture leads from eight schools completed the survey in both waves (analysis gives preference to their later responses), the remainder only in a single wave, giving a total of 58 participating schools whose nurture leads responded to the survey at least once (19 per cent of the schools participating in the Nurturing Kent Programme). The staff survey received responses from 26 staff members from 15 participating schools (10 per cent of the schools participating in the Nurturing Kent Programme). The low response rate could be due to the shorter duration of the June – July 2024 wave of the survey and academic pressures present at this time of year, when teachers are often busy with final assessments, grading and preparing for the next academic year. Unfortunately it was not feasible to extend the survey period in this study.

Analysis

For focus groups coding proceeded using Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) inductive-deductive six-phase analytic framework. Firstly, prior to any data collection, The first, second and third authors developed a code manual that organised data into predefined categories based on existing literature (Colley et al., 2024; Kombou & Bunn, 2021; A. J. Middleton, 2019; Rennie & Smart, 2023; deductive). Second, once data were available, we applied the codes to the free-text response questions asked in the surveys to assess their reliability and make any necessary modifications (deductive). Third, as free-text responses were transcribed, we summarised each one, outlining key points made by participants to identify initial themes (inductive). Fourth, all authors were involved in applying the template of codes to the focus group transcripts, as they were transcribed, allowing both predetermined (deductive) and new, data-driven codes to emerge (inductive). We each coded transcripts independently before cross checking and validated each other's analysis. Each transcript was coded by at least two people. Fifth, after coding all transcripts, we connected the codes to discover overarching themes and patterns across different data sources, working with participants to iteratively cross-check our understanding of these themes. Finally, we corroborated and legitimised the coded themes by clustering them and ensuring they accurately represented the initial data analysis. As the surveys were descriptive, different questions were grouped, graphed and interpreted.

Ethical approach

An ethical approach was taken in line with *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 5th edition (British Educational Research Association, 2024). As detailed above, voluntary informed consent was obtained from participants at the start of the study, and we remained open to the possibility that participants may have wished to withdraw their consent at any time. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw and how to exercise it. We were transparent with participants, including about the use of their data and the commissioning of the research. We considered the demand of the research on participants, minimising workload and any potential distress. We maintained data in line with General Data Protection Regulations and pseudonymised data attributing it only to particular focus groups or survey responses.

Results

Staff confidence improved when supporting and managing pupils' SEMH needs

Staff survey data suggests that the programme has successfully increased staff confidence in supporting and managing pupils SEMH needs, shown in **Figure 1** where all bars extend above the midpoint. In particular, staff reported feeling more confident in supporting pupils' SEMH needs since starting the programme and more confident in responding to scenarios requiring SEMH-related behaviour management (mean ratings above 4; see Appendix C for scenarios). Staff confidence towards the use of exclusions and part-time timetables also increased, but slightly less so (mean ratings below 4). In comparison to supporting pupils' SEMH needs or managing SEMH incidents, excluding a pupil or implementing a part-time timetable is comparatively rarer (Department for Education, 2025). As a result, staff may have had fewer opportunities to practice the skill and gain confidence through the Nurturing Kent Programme.

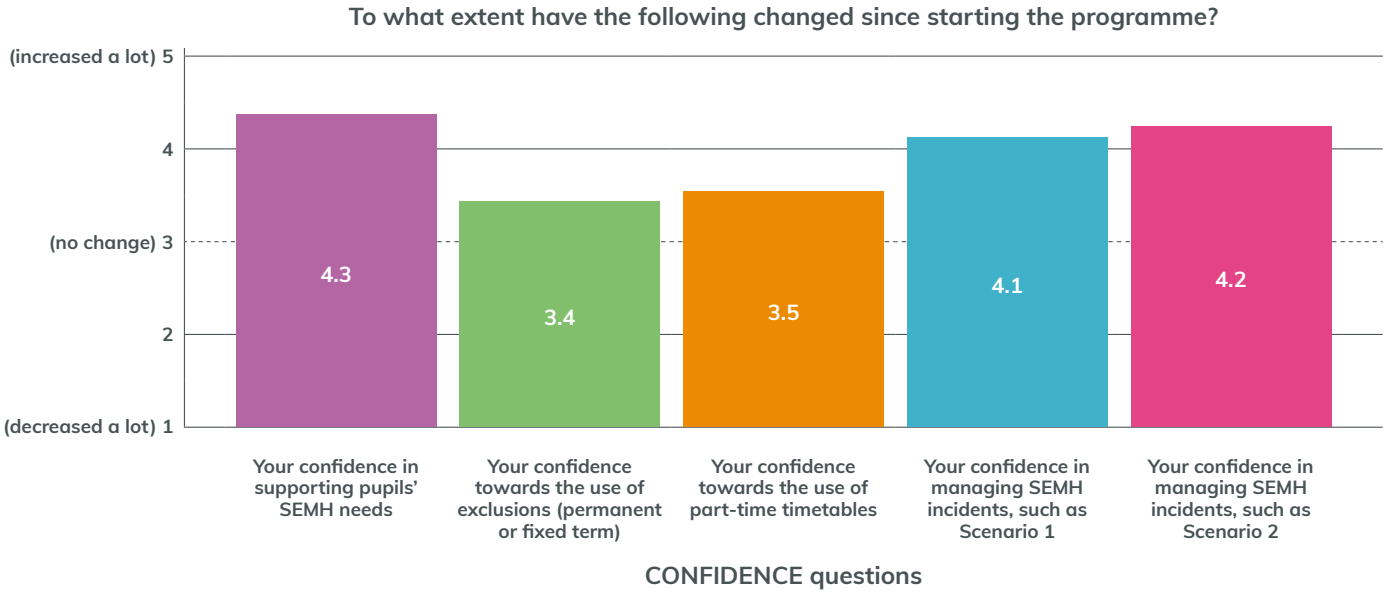

Figure 1. Perceived impact of the programme on staff confidence in supporting and managing pupils' SEMH needs. This graph displays the mean ratings from 26 staff members, who rated their change in confidence since starting the programme on a scale from 1 ('decreased a lot') to 5 ('increased a lot') in the staff survey. The dotted line represents the midpoint ('no change'). Green bars indicate mean ratings above 4 ('increased somewhat'), while yellow bars indicate ratings below that threshold.

More effective communication in SEMH incidents

Focus group participants felt more confident responding to SEMH incidents as a result of the programme helping them to improve their communication skills. A participant in focus group 3 (FG3) noted how the "immediate reaction from everyone [to SEMH incidents] has definitely improved". Specifically, staff attend to incidents in a mode of inquiry, trying to identify the pupil's needs from the behaviour they are exhibiting. FG3 explained "[...] the communication has improved and everyone's more confident, kind of, not going all guns blazing when something's gone on. And, kind of, try to figure out what has been the trigger to them, understand why a child has reacted in that way". This inquiry mode also continues following incidents: "It's very much about listening to them [the pupils], and the restorative conversations that take place after an incident. It's looking at the reasons behind it. They communicated a need. So that's been the biggest turning point for us" (FG1). The focus on SEMH needs was assisted by nurtureuk funding the Boxall Profile® SEMH needs assessment tool for schools (FG2, FG3). The pupils' needs shape the language that staff use in response: "[Staff] feel a lot more confident now, to kind of, know what, how to say it appropriately to the situation, rather than just be, like, 'okay that was really awful or dramatic'" (FG3).

Participants also noted improvements in their colleagues' confidence to respond to SEMH incidents. Different schools were at different stages, but participants all noticed a transition between previous ways of responding to incidents and the ways that are encouraged by the programme. For example, FG4 said that "there are other staff members who have done things really well and, so like, we're thinking about transition now". Participants also noted how schools' behaviour policies and systems empowered staff by giving them more flexibility in this response: "We reviewed our behaviour policy as part of the implementation and we've realised that it's not going to suit everyone, so we have to have more flexibility than we probably previously had." (FG1) As a result, staff feel capable of responding to incidents by themselves. FG3 explained: "It's, kind of, changing that viewpoint [...] And that terminology has helped empower staff to deal with the more low level behaviour that might have really sought out advice, you know, in previous years". Where staff are still hesitant to respond to SEMH incidents, it is because they are high-intensity (eg

when students are more angry or violent): "[Staff] sometimes can be more reluctant, especially when children are more angry, to deal with it; and they want the support from the senior leadership team" (FG3).

Pupils' wellbeing (particularly those with SEND) improved

Almost all of the nurture leads that completed the practice survey (90 per cent) agreed that a nurturing approach has had a positive impact on the social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing of pupils across the whole school ('strongly agree' = 64 per cent, 'somewhat agree' = 26 per cent; **Figure 2**). Five respondents chose 'neither agree nor disagree,' indicating uncertainty rather than absence of a positive link. One respondent 'somewhat disagrees', suggesting a potential negative view or belief in no link.

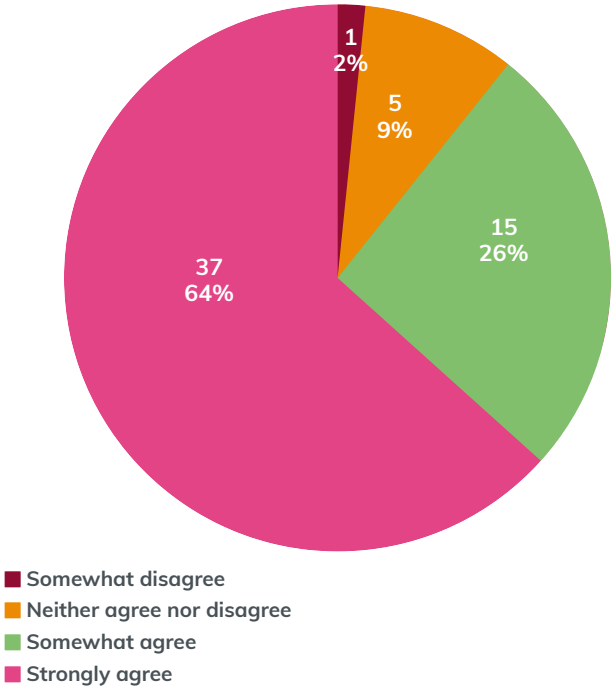

Figure 2. Perceived impact of the programme on the social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing of pupils across the whole school. This graph shows the responses of 58 nurture leads to the statement 'I can see that a nurturing approach has had a positive impact on the social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing of CYP across the whole school' on a five point scale between 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' in the practice survey.

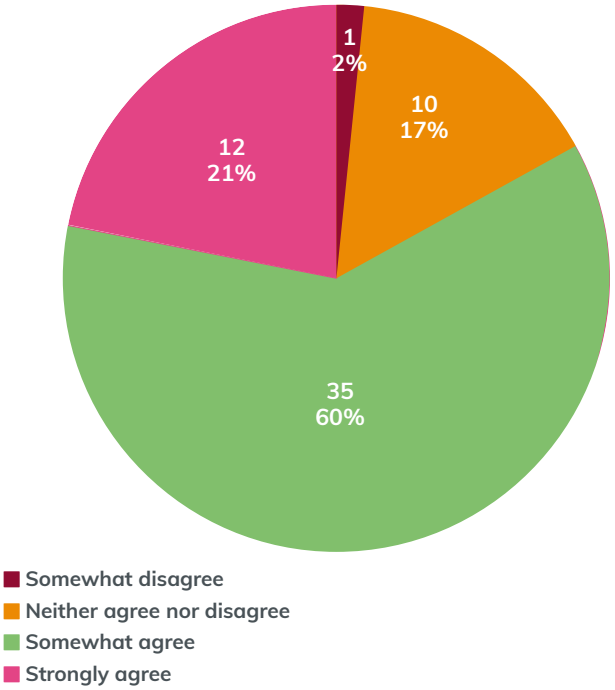

Figure 3. Perceived impact of the programme on engagement and learning of pupils with SEND. This graph shows the responses of 58 nurture leads to the statement 'Staff can see an improvement in the engagement and learning, including attainment and progress, of CYP with SEND needs' on a five point scale between 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' in the practice survey.

Most survey respondents (81 per cent) also agreed that staff have seen improvements in the engagement and learning of pupils with identified SEND, including better attainment and progress ('strongly agree' = 21 per cent, 'somewhat agree' = 60 per cent; **Figure 3**).

Taking a whole-child and whole-school approach

Focus group participants explained how the inquiry mode of the programme changed their perspectives towards provision for pupils with SEND. FG4 said "[The programme], kind of, raised questions, maybe that child is struggling a bit more than I thought". For example, they explained how they'd received training on reading body language to understand pupils' needs. Participants recognised how SEMH could present academic barriers: "[a pupil] might not be making progress with reading, but that's because they've got a barrier in their way for social, emotional, [and] mental health" (FG3). FG3 coined the term "whole-child approach" and explained

how "nurtureuk is not a 'cookie cutter' approach, rather it is all about adaptability and flexibility. It is meeting children where they are at". Having a greater awareness of the Six Principles of Nurture has enabled staff to identify and consider the causal factors for pupils' behaviours. FG1 explained how they were then able to adapt to the needs of pupils with SEND through "the approach that you take, and basically, how to keep those children's self-esteem, and [their] anxiety levels lower, and ways that we can adapt the environment and not be so confrontational".

Participants explained how focussing on provision for pupils with SEND had been core to driving a whole-school approach. FG3 explained how working with pupils with SEND in a nurturing way was "changing [colleagues'] viewpoints ... actually it's getting them to start to think, to process what's going on. A lot of what we have learned through nurture has become a whole-school approach". "It's about ensuring that kind of fairness for all children and their access" (FG1). For example, nurtureuk had provided schools with funding to buy resources. They agreed that these resources could benefit more than one pupil as long as it benefitted the pupil with additional needs (FG3). However, two participants mentioned how colleagues had been reluctant to implement nurture groups in particular, because of the time it takes to see results. FG4 said:

> I don't really think I've had anyone disagree with the principles of nurture and the ideas behind it. But I've had some resistance in trying to put it into place [...] I think initially some of the things they felt didn't add a lot of value, but that's because you don't see a change immediately.

Relationships within the school improved

When asked whether a nurturing approach had helped to reduce relationship difficulties within the school, 64 per cent of school-based nurture leads agreed that it did ('strongly agree' = 28 per cent, 'somewhat agree' = 36 per cent; **Figure 4**).

Staff and colleagues/governing bodies worked collaboratively

With all bars extending above the midpoint, **Figure 5** indicates staff perceived an increase

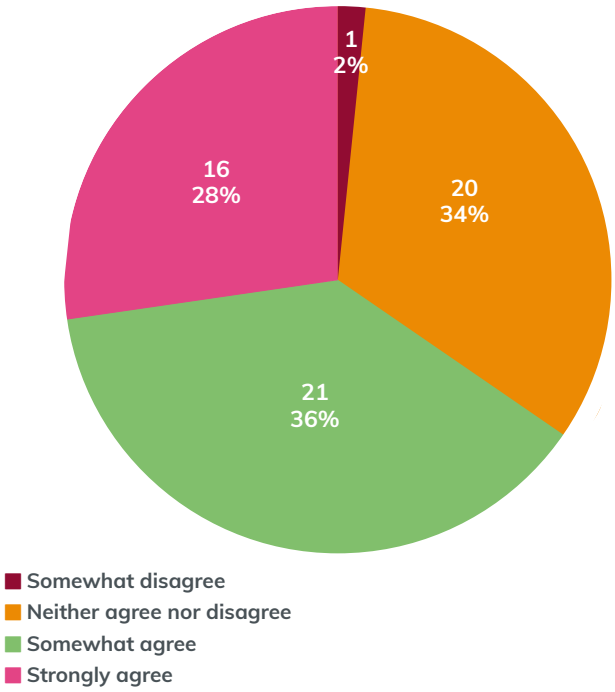

Figure 4. Perceived impact of the programme on relationships within the school. This graph shows the responses of 58 nurture leads to the statement 'Embedding a nurturing approach has helped to reduce relationship difficulties within the school since the start of the programme' on a five point scale between 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' in the practice survey.

in appreciation for providing pupils with SEMH support. The increase was most prevalent among colleagues and school, slightly less so from governing bodies. In focus groups, staff described colleagues as being "on board" (FG3) and confident when discussing nurturing principles (FG1). They reported having "a better understanding of nurture and are more skilled in being able to support children with nurturing needs" (FG3). FG3 also highlighted that "working collaboratively within the [academy] trust has been really beneficial" during programme implementation.

Participants suggested that additional training for senior leaders would be beneficial to increase buy-in for the programme and underpin the whole-school nurturing implementation (FG2). In particular, training should aim to "sell [the programme] to the more cynical or the more data-driven people within the schools" (FG1).

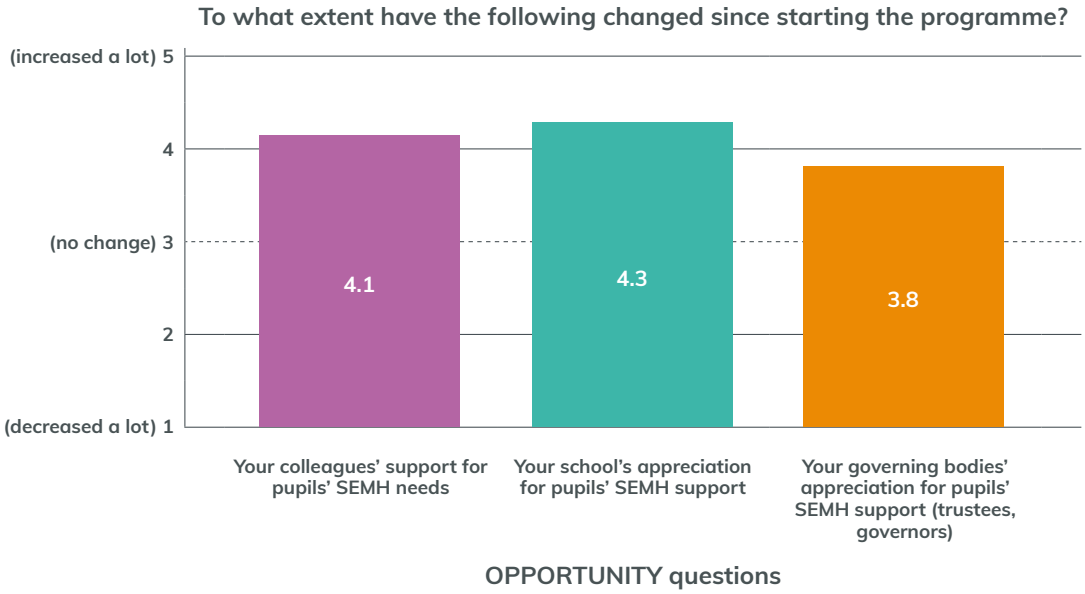

Figure 5. Perceived impact of the programme on appreciation for pupils SEMH support provision. This graph displays the mean ratings from 26 staff members, who rated the change in appreciation since starting the programme on a scale from 1 ('decreased a lot') to 5 ('increased a lot') in the staff survey. The dotted line represents the midpoint ('no change'). Green bars indicate mean ratings above 4 ('increased somewhat'), while yellow bars indicate ratings below that threshold.

Parents/pupils are supported, communication has improved and trust has grown

Staff explained in both the survey and focus groups how support, communication and trust had grown between staff and parents and staff and pupils.

Survey respondents number 12 and 21 (SR12, SR21) reported that relationships with parents were mutually supportive and that pupils felt supported. Parents welcomed advice on strategies to use at home (SR9, SR13, SR21, SR27) and were reassured by the nurturing approach (SR9, SR17). Focus group participants emphasised that a nurturing environment "helps [parents] to feel that their child's needs are being met in a better way" (FG1). Staff explained how relationships with pupils improved through supportive nurture spaces that were "safe" (FG1) and provided a "soft start" to the school day (FG2). One participant remarked that "children's wellbeing is being tracked more diligently" (FG3).

Improved communication had developed increasingly positive relationships between staff and parents/pupils (SR9, SR12, SR23, SR24, SR25). SR12 remarked: "Parents are more aware that we have a framework [...] This has made them feel more supported". They emphasised consistent language (SR9, SR18, SR19, SR21, SR27), which focus group participants said aided pupil self-regulation. FG3 stated: "It really does help [to say] 'I understand you're feeling angry' [...] Using that terminology rather than going in a more, you know, authoritarian viewpoint". Focus groups explained how parents experienced the nurturing approach themselves during open mornings and coffee sessions, which helped them feel welcomed into school (SR22, SR27).

Trust was highlighted as a key component of relationships between staff and parents/pupils (SR22, SR23). Working in partnership with parents was seen as crucial to successfully implementing a nurturing approach. FG4 spoke about one parent who said "I think she feels quite confident in our [the school's] ability to deal with her child". FG4 explained how, in this case, trust had led to mutual sharing of information and a pupils' success. Staff also explained how trust led to "better relationships" (FG2) with pupils and how "children are calmer, able to regulate, able to process and seek out advice and support" (FG3). One survey

respondent noted that the nurturing approach had "worked really well with [their] school refusers" (SR25).

The impact on relationships of the programme was considered transformative. FG3 remarked: "Staff training has been a journey and it has made an impact [...] being more nurturing is supporting not only the children but also the parents have noticed as well." However, "time is invested in these relationships to make them valuable and trusting" (SR10).

Discussion

The cornerstone impact of the Nurturing Kent Programme on staff was that it made them think about their pupils' needs differently and more developmentally. "[The programme made me] think about the children differently [...] it kind of raised questions, maybe that child is struggling a bit more than I thought" (FG4). The programme encouraged staff to take an inquisitive approach, that is to say, it encouraged staff to consider, inquire into and cater for pupils' needs; particularly focusing on those relating to their SEMH. This approach is marked by its move away from punitive and social control options that are often used to manage pupil behaviour and this is a particular characteristic of successful nurture schools (Warin & Hibbin, 2016). King (2025) explains how there is still a "will to punish" (Parsons, 2005) evident in many school behaviour management and disciplinary processes in the UK, such as isolation booths and both permanent and fixed term exclusions (Ford et al., 2018; Mills & Thomson, 2022). This leads to children either seeing the school system as unjust (Condliffe, 2023), or accepting the idea that they do not belong in school (King, 2025).

At the beginning of her book, Boxall (2002, p. 1) defines nurture groups as "an in-school resource for primary school children whose emotional, social, behavioural and formal learning needs cannot be met in the mainstream class". The focus in nurture has always revolved around need. This new way of inquiring into students' needs supports staff to better communicate during SEMH incidents, take a whole-child approach and a whole-school approach and to collaborate better with parents, pupils and colleagues.

Staff confidence in supporting and managing pupils' SEMH needs

The programme builds the ability of staff to communicate better with pupils where there are behaviour or SEMH incidents, which improves their confidence in managing these incidents. Rather than being reactive, staff are inquisitive and listen to the pupil's responses, endeavouring to find out what unmet needs the pupil is trying to communicate with their behaviour. FG3 explained: "[...] the communication has improved and everyone's more confident, kind of, not going all guns blazing when something's gone on. And, kind of, try to figure out what has been the trigger to them, understand why a child has reacted in that way". This idea that 'all behaviour is communication' has been identified as a "hinge commitment", a foundational belief, underpinning whole-school approaches to nurture (Procter-Legg, 2024). Staff, in turn, communicate well with their pupils, modelling the sort of consistent language and measured behaviour that they would like pupils to emulate. Staff have also reported elsewhere how consistent and non-confrontational language is particularly helpful (Colley et al., 2024). Pupils have reported that this behavioural modelling, along with regular feedback and the opportunity to get things wrong, helps them to explore better ways of behaving and communicating (Edmunds, 2021; Syrnyk, 2014). If staff are seeing the benefits of their new ways of reacting, it is not surprising that their confidence, and that of their colleagues, has improved. As they grow in confidence they are better able to make use of flexible behavioural policies and systems, in conjunction with data from the Boxall Profile®, to best meet pupils' needs and to support pupils to find helpful ways of behaving and communicating. FG1 said: "We reviewed our behaviour policy as part of the implementation and we've realised that it's not going to suit everyone, so we have to have more flexibility than we probably previously had."

Impact of the whole-child approach on pupils

Our results showed how taking a whole-child approach (FG3) had a positive impact on the SEMH and wellbeing of pupils across the whole school and particularly for those with SEND. FG1 explained how they adapted to the needs of pupils with SEND through "the approach that you take,

and basically, how to keep those children's self-esteem, and [their] anxiety levels lower, and ways that we can adapt the environment and not be so confrontational". This is consistent with previous qualitative evidence of improvements in pupil wellbeing from the judgement of teachers, parents and pupils themselves (Callahan, 2023); as well as quantitative evidence of improvements in social, emotional and behavioural functioning (Cooper & Whitebread, 2007). These improvements in wellbeing have been seen to drive improvements in general academic progress too (Seth-Smith et al., 2010).

The whole-child approach speaks to nurture constituting a holistic approach to pupils' needs (see also O'Farrell et al., 2022). Following inquiring into a pupil's needs, staff adapt and flex to meet them. Given that the needs of pupils with SEND are often most prominent, it is only natural that they are the starting point for the implementation of a nurturing approach. But as staff practice nurture, they start to realise that each pupil has their own individual needs to support. FG3 explained how working with pupils with SEND in a nurturing way was "changing [colleagues'] viewpoints … actually it's getting them to start to think, to process what's going on. A lot of what we have learned through nurture has become a whole-school approach". Being flexible and adaptable to needs of all learners has been identified as a key element in the planning (Rennie & Smart, 2023) and execution (Cassar & Abela, 2023; Cefai & Pizzuto, 2017; O'Farrell et al., 2022) of a successful whole-school nurturing approach.

Staff relationships with their senior leaders, colleagues and governing bodies

Our results indicate that two key influences of a whole-school approach to nurture are the school leadership and the behaviour policies in place. Staff mentioned the importance of collaboration with academy trusts ("Working collaboratively within the [academy] trust has been really beneficial", FG3) and senior leader buy-in (FG2). The importance of good communication between school staff has been stressed elsewhere in the literature (Kombou & Bunn, 2021). Understanding of the nurture programme is required throughout the school (A. J. Middleton, 2019; T. Middleton, 2018), with leaders setting out a clear vision and values (Coleman, 2020; Rennie & Smart, 2023). Senior leaders also take responsibility for implementing this vision and values through support and training (T. Middleton, 2018; Warin, 2017), as well as behavioural modelling (Coleman, 2020). This results in improved relationships with colleagues (Grantham & Primrose, 2017; Kombou & Bunn, 2021) and improvements in staff wellbeing (Colley et al., 2024). Our findings indicate that staff worked collaboratively with their colleagues and governing bodies to ensure that everyone was "on board", able to understand the nurturing approach and to support it from their vantage point.

Staff also mentioned how they valued having flexible behaviour policies that enabled them to take a nurturing approach. FG1 said: "We reviewed our behaviour policy as part of the implementation and we've realised that it's not going to suit everyone, so we have to have more flexibility than we probably previously had." Insley (2024) explains how the Ofsted advice regarding behaviour and attitudes focuses on "identifying poor behaviour, sanctions, suspensions and exclusions" noting that "this all seems to be the opposite to what we have been arguing for in a whole-school nurturing approach". Without a whole-school approach, staff risk being forced to use contradictory approaches to managing behaviour by the school's behaviour policy.

Staff relationships with parents, carers and pupils

Working in partnership with parents/carers was seen as crucial to a whole-school approach in the Nurturing Kent Programme and elsewhere (Grantham & Primrose, 2017). Parents/carers were welcomed into school through open mornings and coffee sessions (SR22, SR27). Staff understand that parents/carers felt reassured their child's needs were being met (FG4) and they welcomed advice on nurturing approaches to apply at home (SR9, SR13, SR21, SR27). Staff used consistent language with parents/carers and pupils (SR9, SR18, SR19, SR21, SR27), which has been successful elsewhere to reinforce the adoption of nurture in the home (Coleman, 2020). Positive feedback from parents/carers, as well as pupils, has been reported to improve wellbeing of both teaching and non-teaching staff (A. J. Middleton, 2019).

Similarly, pupils' understanding of the nurturing approach (O'Farrell et al., 2022) and integration of their pupil voice through student councils, is also prized (Coleman, 2020; O'Farrell et al., 2022). Staff heard that pupils felt "safe" (FG1) through the nurturing approaches and aided pupils' self emotional regulation (FG3) with consistent language (SR9, SR18, SR19, SR21, SR27). Elsewhere, pupils have even described nurturing approaches as feeling like they are part of a family (Edmunds, 2021; Griffiths et al., 2014). As a result, in the Nurturing Kent Programme, staff identified that pupils were calmer, more able to regulate their emotions, process their experiences and seek out advice or support.

Programme limitations

In an educational environment where schools face mounting pressures to improve academic performance amid time constraints, competing demands and limited financial resources, pitching a relational approach to effectively address pupils' social and emotional needs can be challenging (Durlak et al., 2011; Alaimo & Kelly, 2025). Firstly, relationship building takes time. Participants mentioned how colleagues had been reluctant to implement the nurture groups in particular because of the time it takes to see the results. FG4 said: "I've had some resistance in trying to put it into place [...] but that's because you don't see a change immediately." Second, there are costs associated with giving nurturing support, particularly for small groups. These two criticisms are not failings of the programme, but are simply the requirements for the programme to be strong. Nurturing Kent Programme participants should be prepared to defend the importance of spending time and money on nurturing approaches for all of the benefits previously outlined, especially in a resource poor public sector climate.

Third, staff noted that senior leader buy-in could have been improved (FG1, FG2). They suggested that there be additional training for senior leaders (FG2), particularly to "sell [the programme] to the more cynical or the more data-driven people within the schools" (FG1). The training might therefore educate leaders using the data that is available, emphasising both qualitative and quantitative forms of evidence and exploring which metrics actually matter and why.

Finally, staff also noticed that they were hesitant when managing SEMH incidents that were high intensity (eg when students are more angry or violent): "[Staff] sometimes can be more reluctant, especially when children are more angry, to deal with it; and they want the support from the senior leadership team" (FG3). While confidence in managing high intensity incidents may come with time and practice, it might be possible for the Nurturing Kent Programme to explore specific strategies for these situations, to avoid staff falling back on confrontational and punitive approaches.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

1. Nurtureuk presents both qualitative and quantitative data to senior leaders demonstrating the effectiveness of a nurturing approach, to increase their buy-in and underpin the whole-school nurturing implementation.

2. Nurtureuk develops targeted training to equip staff to manage high-intensity SEMH incidents. This could include role-playing scenarios and de-escalation techniques to build confidence in handling challenging situations.

3. Senior leaders in schools articulate a clear vision and values of their nurturing approach, accompanied by flexible behaviour policies. These should be developed with nurtureuk, multi-academy trusts, trustees and governors. This vision should be communicated across all teaching and non-teaching staff to foster a united approach. Behaviour policies should align with nurturing principles and be flexible to enable staff to respond to pupils' needs rather than resorting to punitive measures.

4. Nurtureuk develops nurture leads' confidence in working with parents/carers and pupils by involving them in strategic planning and discussions about culture changes relating to the Nurturing Kent Programme. Multi-academy trusts and school senior leaders, trustees and governors should be involved. They should foster partnerships with parents/carers through regular engagement activities, such as workshops and open sessions to gather their views. This will also help parents understand the nurturing approach and how they can

support it at home. They should establish mechanisms for pupils to express their thoughts and feelings about the nurturing approach, such as student councils or feedback sessions. This will enhance their sense of belonging and ownership in the process.

5. Commissioners and schools ensure that sufficient resources, in both time and money, are available to support the implementation of a nurturing approach, including for the nurture groups. They should work with nurtureuk, Kent County Council, multi-academy trusts and school senior leaders. If time and funding barriers are anticipated, then we recommend a staggered approach: participating schools regularly assess all children's SEMH needs using the Boxall Profile® Online and then graduate to developing nurture groups once the needs of all pupils have been clearly identified.

6. Nurtureuk reviews the information provided to schools, reinforcing that it is not uncommon for full implementation to take approximately 18 months. This is in order to manage the expectations of multi-academy trusts and school senior leaders about how long it can take for whole-school implementation of the Six Principles of Nurture and Boxall Profiles®. We also recommend that school senior leaders and governing bodies recognise that building relationships takes time and factored this into the school's operational planning and the school development plan.

Conclusion

Staff reported a significant increase in confidence when managing SEMH incidents thanks to the Nurturing Kent Programme. The programme encouraged a shift from punitive measures to an inquisitive approach, where staff learnt to view behaviour as communication. As they became more skilled in using consistent and non-confrontational language, staff felt empowered to implement flexible behavioural policies tailored to individual pupil needs. They also noted an increase in their colleagues' confidence, creating a supportive and inclusive environment for addressing SEMH challenges. The nurturing approach positively impacted the wellbeing of all pupils, especially those with SEND. By adapting their methods to meet diverse learner needs, staff enhanced engagement and learning outcomes. While the needs of pupils with SEND were often most prominent, staff recognised the unique requirements of each pupil, contributing to a whole-school approach to nurture. The success of the programme was also linked to collaborative relationships among staff, senior leaders and parents/carers. Strong communication and support from school leadership facilitated a unified understanding of the nurturing approach. Positive interactions with parents, including open sessions and consistent language, reinforced the nurturing ethos at home, further supporting pupil development.

This paper has considered the impact of a nurturing programme, from teaching and non-teaching staff perspectives across multiple schools within a county council area. We focussed on their confidence levels in supporting and managing pupils' SEMH needs; levels of engagement and learning of pupils with SEND; and relationships both within and beyond the school.

We have made recommendations that: nurtureuk convenes a stakeholder group to identify additional training needs for school staff; school senior leaders articulate a clear vision of nurture and flexible behaviour policies; nurtureuk works to build nurture leads' confidence in engaging parents and pupils; commissioners and schools ensure sufficient time and funding are available to support implementation of nurturing approaches; and nurtureuk be more transparent with the time needed for relationship building.

This study is not without its limitations. In this study, we only gathered data from school staff. As a result, any comments on the thoughts, feelings and actions of parents, carers and pupils were anecdotes recounted by staff. We note that many of the subjective factors that we look at, including confidence, improvements on levels of engagement and learning and relationships were self-reported constructs from school staff. Additionally, the response to the surveys was small (19 per cent of schools participating in the Nurturing Kent Programme for the practice survey and 10 per cent for the staff survey). Running surveys for a longer period over several school terms would enable more teachers to contribute, but unfortunately this was not feasible during this study. Finally, only staff from primary schools attended the focus

groups and staff from secondary schools were under-represented in survey responses. Therefore the data may represent the experiences of primary schools better than those of secondary schools.

Future research in nurturing programmes could focus on longitudinal studies tracking staff confidence and pupil outcomes including attainment over time. Developing a comprehensive assessment framework that combines qualitative and quantitative metrics might enable regular feedback and adaptation of nurturing approaches. Additionally, a detailed analysis of parental involvement could clarify their role in supporting the nurturing approach, enhancing its effectiveness and fostering a collaborative environment for pupils' success.

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Appendix A – Focus group questions

1. How has the programme changed your thoughts about and experiences of the SEND provision (if at all)?

2. How confident do you feel when responding to SEMH incidents and behaviour management? How has this changed during the programme (if at all)?

3. Has there been any improvement in relationships with parents and pupils since the start of the programme? In what ways?

Appendix B – Practice survey instructions and questions

Instructions

Thank you for considering taking part in this survey.

It should take **5-10 minutes** of your time.

The survey forms part of an **evaluation of the Nurturing Kent Programme**. We are inviting you to participate because your school has taken up the programme.

The evaluation has three aims:

1. To understand the **whole-school impact** of the nurtureuk programme on social and emotional wellbeing across Kent schools engaged on the programme.

2. To understand the impact on emotional wellbeing, attendance and educational engagement of **pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)** and particularly those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs on the nurtureuk programme.

3. To understand the **improved staff response** to the social and emotional needs of all children and young people and particularly those with SEMH needs.

The present survey focuses on **Aim 2: impact of the programme on pupils with SEND.**

Participation is entirely voluntary, and choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. We encourage you to read the participant information sheet (link below) and contact us if you have any questions.

You will not be asked to provide any personal information. You will be asked to provide the name, postcode and URN of your school, so that we can link data from multiple sources (eg publicly available data from the Department for Education). **Neither you nor your school will be identifiable in outputs.**

Anonymised findings will be presented in evaluation progress reports, which will capture participant insights, themes and recommendations.

If you have any queries regarding the survey, please email [redacted].

To view the participant information sheet, please copy and paste this link into your browser: [redacted]

Questions

Question	Response
I consent to take part in this survey.	Yes / No (If No, then branch to end of survey)
What is the name of your school?	Short text
What is your school's postcode?	Short text, postcode validation (check whether MS/Google Forms has a postcode validation function)
What is your school's URN (Unique Reference Number)?	Short text, URN validation (must be a six-digit number)
So far, have you been able to apply the Six Principles of Nurture within your school setting?	Yes / Partially / No

As part of the programme, you should have been provided access to a Boxall Profile® Online subscription. How have you been using this within your setting so far?	Using the Boxall Profile® across the whole school setting / Using the Boxall Profile® for a specific cohort ie year group / Using the Boxall Profile® for specific children and young people only / We have not yet taken up the two-year subscription nurtureuk provides but would like to / Other (please state)
Has the Boxall Profile® helped you to identify and respond to the needs of the children and young people within your setting?	Yes / No / Not begun to use the Boxall Profile® yet
If you have been using the Boxall Profile® Online within your setting, how many children and young people have you assessed since starting the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Number < 10,000
How many children and young people with SEN or an EHCP have you assessed using the Boxall Profile®?	Number < 10,000
At the time of completing this survey, does your setting have a nurture group provision in place?	Yes / Planning to develop one / No (and not planning to develop one)
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:	
I can see that a nurturing approach has had a positive impact on the social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing of the children and young people across the whole school since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme.	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree
Staff can see an improvement in the engagement and learning, including attainment and progress, of children and young people with SEND needs since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme.	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **Embedding a nurturing approach has helped to reduce relationship difficulties within the school since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme.**	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree
[For those that Strongly Agree / Agree] How has the nurturing approach improved relationships with parents and pupils? Can you give some examples? (NB: New question)	Long answer
Is your school looking to apply for the National Nurturing Schools Award once you have completed your NNSP (national nurturing schools programme)?	We've already achieved it / We've already applied / Yes / No / Unsure
[If Unsure above] Why are you unsure about applying for the National Nurturing Schools Award?	Long answer
To what extent do you agree with the following statements?:	
We have been able to bring staff on board with the changes needed to implement our learning from the Nurturing Kent Programme	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree
We have been able to use the NNSP as a framework to manage changes to staffing and support wellbeing.	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree

We have been able to engage our stakeholders such as parents, carers and the wider community with the changes to our setting	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree
The whole-school approach has been less financially challenging than others for our environment and resources.	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree
The content of the programme has helped to improve the overall skill level of staff and assist them with supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health.	Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree

Appendix C – Staff survey instructions and questions

Instructions

Thank you for considering taking part in this survey.

It should take **5-10 minutes** of your time.

The survey forms part of an **evaluation of the Nurturing Kent Programme**. We are inviting you to participate because your school has taken up the programme.

The evaluation has three aims:

1. To understand the **whole-school impact** of the nurtureuk programme on social and emotional wellbeing across Kent schools engaged on the programme.

2. To understand the impact on emotional wellbeing, attendance and educational engagement of **pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)** and particularly those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs on the nurtureuk programme.

3. To understand the **improved staff response** to the social and emotional needs of all children and young people and particularly those with SEMH needs.

The present survey focuses on **Aim 3: impact of the programme on staff.**

Participation is entirely voluntary and choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. We encourage you to read the participant information sheet (link below) and contact us if you have any questions.

You will not be asked to provide any personal information. You will be asked to provide the name, postcode and URN of your school, so that we can link data from multiple sources (eg publicly available data from the Department for Education). **Neither you nor your school will be identifiable in outputs.**

Anonymised findings will be presented in evaluation progress reports, which will capture participant insights, themes and recommendations.

If you have any queries regarding the survey, please email [redacted].

To view the participant information sheet, please copy and paste this link into your browser: [redacted].

Questions

Question	Response
I consent to take part in this survey.	Yes / No (If NO, then branch to end of survey)
What is the name of your school?	Short text
What is your school's postcode?	Short text, postcode validation
What is your school's URN (Unique Reference Number)?	Short text, URN validation (must be a 6-digit number)

What is your primary role?	• Senior leadership team • Deputy head/SEN(D)Co • SEN(D)Co • Class teacher • Teaching / learning support assistant
How has your knowledge of supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How have your skills in supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your feeling of responsibility towards supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your confidence in supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How have your levels of optimism in supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How have your beliefs about the positive consequences of supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your intention to support pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your prioritisation of supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your ability to focus on supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your ability to keep track of your behaviour as you work towards supporting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your confidence towards the use of exclusions, whether permanent or fixed term, changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot, not applicable to my role
How has your confidence towards the use of part-time timetables changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot, not applicable to my role
How has your general mood changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your colleague's support for pupils' social, emotional and mental health support changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
How has your school's appreciation for pupils' social, emotional and mental health support changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot

How has your governing bodies' appreciation for pupils' social, emotional and mental health support changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme? (eg trustees, community governors, co-opted governors)	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
Please imagine the following scenario: **You see a child/young person in school who is responding in an inappropriate way eg being disruptive, annoying their peers, wandering around the room with no purpose and not engaging with staff.**	
How has your confidence in dealing with social, emotional and mental health incidents, like these, changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot
Please imagine the following scenario: **You see a child/young person upset and inconsolable, resulting in disruption in the school environment (eg outside in the playground or in the classroom).**	
How has your confidence in dealing with incidents where you have to manage behaviour like this changed since the start of the Nurturing Kent Programme?	Decreased a lot, decreased somewhat, no change, increased somewhat, or increased a lot

"All behaviour is communication": the impact of refining staff attunement to pupils in a Swiss special school setting

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Data information statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.
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Abstract

Nurture practice provides educational settings with methods that support the emotional needs of children and young people. The attunement principles present themselves as efficient tools that will assist educational staff in their work (Education Scotland, 2025). This study examined the application and the impact of the nurture approach and more specifically the attunement principles within a special school setting in a German-speaking region of Switzerland. The aim of this research project was to evaluate the experiences of staff with the application of the nurture approach and the training given in attunement, and to examine their thoughts and feelings on the effectiveness of the attunement principles. The educational staff had been newly introduced to the nurture approach and the attunement principles, and the study shows how educational staff in this specific environment have been positively affected by the inputs of the nurture approach and training in attunement.

The research study indicates that the nurture approach is an appropriate one for a special school setting as it portrays the benefits for educational staff and the children and young people with SEND. Findings are in line with research showing that the nurture approach is suitable to strengthen relationship-building and attachment in children and young people on a whole-school basis.

Introduction

The nurture approach is a child-centred approach that may be particularly appropriate for children and young people with special needs and disabilities (SEND) (DfES, 2002). Research in this field (Boxall & Lucas, 2010; Lucas, 1999) has clearly established that it is important to include the nurture approach into educational settings. However, there is an overall lack of research regarding how best to apply the Nurture Principles (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006), and more precisely the attunement principles (Education Scotland, 2025), in a special school setting, where a high number of staff, (who are not always well trained and have a high turnover) collide with children and young people with SEND. The aim of this research was to identify staff's level of understanding in a Swiss special school setting regarding the nurture approach and attunement, and to evaluate the developments made by staff following training in those areas.

Relationships are central to successful educational

engagement (Colley, 2012) and as teaching is a relationship-based profession (Carpenter, 2023) the attunement principles support staff in fostering secure attachment (Education Scotland, 2025). The attunement principles may help regulate children's neurophysiological states (Porges, Tucci & Mitchell, 2015) and enhance staff responsiveness to learners' social, emotional and behavioural needs (Geddes, 2017), increasing opportunities for attuned interactions (Kohut & Ornstein, 2011). Such interactions strengthen connection and attachment (Cairns & Cairns, 2016).

Few studies include children and young people with SEND in this research context. Nurture groups have been shown to be effective interventions for children and young people with SEND (Bennathan & Boxall, 2015; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014 and Sloan, 2020); however, much of the existing research has focused on their delivery within designated, safe and structured spaces rather than on a whole-school basis (Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022a). Given the limited research on the whole-school application of the nurture approach in special school settings (Lyon, 2017), this inductive, exploratory study aimed to examine educational staff's understanding of the nurture approach and attunement as applied in a special school setting. In particular, the aim was to evaluate the impact that the attunement training had on the staff.

There were two research questions:

1. How do staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement in relation to the children and young people that they teach or support?
2. How does training in attunement impact their practice?

Literature review

Nurture work

The term "nurture approach" was based on the work of Marjorie Boxall (Boxall, 2002), an educational psychologist, who developed the concept of the nurture group in the 1960s. The nurture approach is based on the understanding that we should relate to children and young people in a "developmentally appropriate way" (Boxall, 2002 p. 4). It focuses on the unmet social, emotional and behavioural needs of children and young people (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000) and helps to create attachment (Bowlby, 1969) while endeavouring to establish secure relationships (Ainsworth, 1987). Boxall & Lucas (2010) emphasise that only when children and young people feel attached will their needs come to the surface. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1944) is founded on Bowlby's observations of children's reactions to separation from and reunion with their primary caregivers (Follan & Minnis, 2010) and emphasises the caregiver's responsiveness and accessibility for the child, which Bowlby calls "availability" (Bowlby, 1973). Nurture practice is a term that contains the work that was initiated by Marjorie Boxall in the 1960s. The developments pushed forward in that field by, amongst others, Sylvia Lucas (Lucas set up one of the first nurture groups in the 1970s), nurtureuk (https://www.nurtureuk.org, 2025) and Education Scotland (2025) have been instrumental in evolving the field since then. Nurture practice nowadays not only takes into account attachment theory, but also consideration of the impact of early childhood adversity, trauma, child development and the latest knowledge from the fields of neuroscience and psychotherapy (Middleton, 2022). Nurture practice relies strongly on the Six Principles of Nurture:

1. Learning is understood developmentally.
2. The classroom offers a safe base.
3. The importance of nurture for the development of self-esteem.
4. Language as a vital means of communication.
5. All behaviour is communication.
6. The importance of transitions in the lives of children and young people

(Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006)

Attunement

Siegel (1999) depicts attunement as "mindsight", when words become unnecessary to feel the other person's emotions and when the empathetic comprehension takes place without discomposure. Attunement means a deep emotional understanding that entails an engagement generating trust and improving overall wellbeing (Decety et al., 2014). Fishbane (2007) describes

attunement as "primal empathy" (p. 402) and Miehls (2008) stresses how that neuronal linkage, which is attunement, enabled by interactions in secure attachments, accelerates the development of the social brain of the infant. For Erskine (2015, p. 45), attunement represents a "kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others knowing their rhythm, affect and experience". It is the experience of being in the other person's skin (Erskine, 2015) and recognising one's own perspective and subjectivity in the process (Wang, 2020). Being attuned means engaging with the world and revealing oneself through this act of engagement, thus consequently allowing oneself access to new forms of thinking (Wang, 2020). Martin Heidegger discussed this notion in his lecture course of 1929-1930 (Heidegger, 1995) where he clearly separates emotions, as internal representations, from attunement (*Befindlichkeit* = "disposedness"), which is not a state in the individual but the result of people interacting with each other. "Attunement is not some being that appears in the soul as an experience, but the way of our being there with one another" (Heidegger, 1995, pp. 65-67).

The fifth principle of nurture and its relationship with attunement

The fifth principle of nurture – "All behaviour is communication" (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) – evaluates the understanding of behaviour and takes the requirements for staff in a nurturing environment into consideration. The key requirements for staff in a nurturing environment are to use the attunement principles (Kennedy, Landor & Todd, 2010) and to recognise the powerful role of sensitivity and its undeniably positive impact on shaping secure attachments (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2003; Herbert, 2023), as well as to have the openness and the flexibility to modify one's own behaviour strategies in order to interrupt repeated cycles of confrontations (Colley, 2013). Cubeddu & MacKay (2017) emphasise the importance of applying the attunement principles in schools and suggest using them as the foundation for teaching tools within nurturing school environments (p. 270). Education Scotland (2025) has adapted these attunement principles and reorganised them into an attunement profile with five attunement principles. Miller (2023, n.p) renamed them slightly and expressed them in a more simplified form:

1. Being attentive;
2. Encouraging;
3. Receiving;
4. Attuned together;
5. Guiding and supporting.

Attunement in educational settings

In order to apply the attunement principles in educational settings we need to remind ourselves of the power of mirror neurons and how we connected through direct stimulation to other people in the beginning of our lives (Trout, 2011). The attunement principles address the core principles of connecting with each other. They oblige educational staff to briefly pause, to observe and to use their full senses to be able to focus on the right things (Trout, 2011). Education Scotland (2025) supports educational staff in implementing the nurture approach and provides guidance on how to apply the attunement principles in educational settings. Attunement enables teachers to understand classroom group dynamics and promotes positive co-living (McGuire, 2019). It plays a crucial role in early peer experiences (Hoffmann, 2012), supports secure attachment and emotional safety (Zeller, 2008) and underpins effective learning and academic progress (Poulsen & Fouts, 2001). Porges (2021) underlines that it is attunement and a feeling of safety that admits sociability and permits social interaction in classrooms and schools. Porges (2021a) asserts that attunement contributes to the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual and assists in acknowledging that cues of safety differ from one person to another. Educational staff need to be great listeners and trust in children's and young people's bodily reactions because they are accurate (Porges, 2007). Educational staff must be able to attune to their own physiological states, as well as those of the children and young people they work with. This self-awareness supports meaningful social engagement and helps to prepare students for future opportunities in life (Porges, 2011). For example, in a challenging classroom moment, a teacher who attunes to their own stress can respond calmly to a student's meltdown, modelling regulation and supporting the student's coping skills. The attunement principles (Education Scotland, 2025) help us to feel differentiated and linked at the same time (Siegel, 2020).

Methodology

This research took place in a special school for boys and girls (aged 4 to 18 years) with SEND, situated in a German-speaking region of Switzerland. The objective of the research was to explore the opinions and perceptions of staff on the nurture approach and attunement in relation to their practice in that special school setting. The study intended to reveal the impact of training in attunement for staff and to detect improvement and development for change for the individual. The researcher was the full-time teacher of one of the classes in the school. A qualitative methodology was adapted in this research. Qualitative methods enable participants to articulate experiences in their own words, revealing how they make sense of their contexts (Hammersley, 2002; Silverman, 2017). As an inductive and exploratory approach, qualitative research is well suited to examine lived experiences (Jones & Gratton, 2015). This study explored the nurture approach and the attunement principles, largely unrecognised in German-speaking educational contexts, making its impact particularly striking.

Two separate groups of participants; (Group 1: teachers and therapists; Group 2: teaching assistants) participated each in two focus group discussions (FGs) and three training sessions (one hour each over a period of three months). The first FGs (Appendix 1) had the aim to elicit the general knowledge around nurture and understanding of attunement. The training sessions were built upon the insights provided by the data from the first FGs. The first training focused on Emotion Coaching (Gottman, 1996), the 'hand model of the brain' (Siegel, 1999), stress responses, the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Felitti et al., 1998) and included exercises for self-reflection. The second training introduced the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1944), attachment experiences (Ainsworth, 1978) and explored the nurture approach (Boxall, 2022) with its relevance in supporting secure relationships. The third training centered on attunement and availability (Bowlby, 1973), as well as the Attunement Profile (Education Scotland, 2020) with the attunement principles (Education Scotland, 2025). Emphasis was placed on applying these principles effectively with children and young people with SEND and participants applied the attunement principles over a period of five weeks in their practice. The second FGs (Appendix 2) were informed by participants' answers from a questionnaire with open-ended questions (Appendix 3) about the training sessions and their experience with the application of the attunement principles (Appendix 4).

The groups were made up to respect the power imbalance of the staff (Bourgeault, Dingwall & De Vries, 2010). The purpose of the sorting of the participants was not to compare these two groups but to explore their different perceptions, possibly based on education and professional training, to the fullest. In total, eight participants (three teachers and one therapist with an average age of 51 years, and four teaching assistants with an average age of 26 years) agreed to take part in the research. Data from all participants were included in the analysis and the results.

All participants provided written informed consent and were informed of potential risks, their right to withdraw and data confidentiality in accordance with the Oxford Brookes University Research Code of Practice and GDPR requirements (Oxford Brookes University, 2020). Ethical considerations, including transparency, participant wellbeing and integrity in data analysis were prioritised throughout the study. Participants were offered opportunities for reflection, were thanked and debriefed at the study's conclusion with ongoing communication available upon request. All access to data and research tools was ethically approved by relevant institutions and contributors.

The two focus group discussions were recorded, then transcribed and coded. A second, neutral coder was involved in enhancing the credibility of the thematic decisions. Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun und Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to identify patterns of meaning. Themes were actively constructed, reflecting the researcher's positionality and reflexivity, and represented interpretative stories shaped by the study's specific context and timing (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

Findings

As a result of coding the transcripts and analysing the questionnaire responses, four themes relating to the first research question could be identified (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Thematic map of understanding of the nurture approach and attunement.

1. How do staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement in relation to the children and young people that they teach or support?

The participating staff of this special school setting did not have the know-how on emotional intelligence, attachment theory, the nurture approach and attunement/ the attunement principles before entering this research project.

The first theme illustrates the meaning of attunement for staff in relation to the children and young people in their working environment. Attunement was, for example, understood as alertness and attentiveness. "One needs to absorb everything, one is occupied with one pupil, but one has to pay attention to everything else as well" (FG2S4 = Focus Group 2, participant S, section 4). "One has to be fully alert all the time" (FG1P8). Good observation skills were thought to be essential to accomplish the "complete alertness that needs to be there from beginning to ending" (FG2A4), but also in order to communicate with the children and young people and to get to know them better. Attunement was also understood as a specific kind of empathy that would help staff to "predict behaviour patterns" (FG1P2), by help of some sort of "antenna" (FG2S2). Participants had difficulties in explaining this ability in words but said that it was something "that is hard to capture, but one simply feels it" (FG2S1).

The topic of openness was closely linked to the topic of empathy, because a specific kind of openness "is required to be able to begin each day anew and to be able to be open to the fact that everything is vague each day" (FG2S5). Openness

was explained as the ability to "be flexible enough in order to get involved, to obtain new experiences" (FG1U5) and to be able to "allow things to take longer and to offer more time" (FG1M24).

The second theme depicts the understanding of a nurturing environment for staff and it gives way to comments on the conditions of the working environment in the school. The need for more "staff" (FG2S14) and more "quiet space" (FG2S13) was expressed. The lack of room was voiced in connection to the lack of staff, due to "the need for constant supervision of the children and young people in the school" (FG1B21). The concern about the general atmosphere in the school building was raised. In a nurturing environment it would be "okay to demand help and to obtain the help from colleagues" (FG2S19). In a nurturing environment "staff can openly discuss issues and one can rely on each other to flexibly assist each other where help is needed" (FG1P22). The importance of working together "as a team" (FG2S19; FG1P22) was evoked. The nurturing environment would elicit the notion of security in everyone and this would be made possible through "the constant, regular and reliable structuring and scaffolding of the days with the requested aids" (FG2S12) in which everyone would be able to "feel safe and sheltered" (FG2S12).

The third theme suggests the topics around the personality traits of the nurturing staff and the fundamentals of how staff would need to act around children and young people with SEND. Staff are expected to be "patient, calm, steady in their demands but also generous and tolerant in regard to the special needs and disabilities of the children and young people" (FG2Aa/S15). Theory of mind, described by Siegel (1999) as the ability to understand others' thoughts, feelings and perspectives, is reflected in the focus group participants' emphasis that staff should be "accepting of the needs and disabilities of the children and young people" (FG2A16), "valuing" (FG2A16) them, adopt a "solution orientated manner" (FG2S16) and strive to "understand the child's and young person's needs and comprehend their actions and behaviour" (FG1U3). The significance of attachment was included in the discussion. It was formulated that staff should demonstrate an image like the "mother or father" (FG2Aa17) that will enable "an attachment that is unconditional" (FG1P14) and "can represent the required steadiness that is very important for secure attachments" (FG1P14).

The fourth theme focused on the needs of children and young people with SEND, highlighting the role of staff expertise. Attunement was considered to be a skill that had to "be existent in staff that worked with children and young people with SEND" (FG1B2) but certainty was not gained on "if the skill could be learned" (FG2A24). However, it was stated that "experience in the work field will improve the ability of attunement" (FG1P4). There was agreement on the fact that strategies and methods could be learned "that will be useful in relation to the work with children and young people with SEND" (FG2Aa27). One participant raised the issue of "pupils with a mental health issue" (FG3U21) and that "their individual needs would have to be especially considered by everyone" (FG3U21). It was clarified that staff reacted in an appropriate way when there was a "fear of insects, for example" (FG1U25). Participants claimed also that staff "must put focus on their own needs in order to be able to look after themselves psychologically" (FG2A10).

2. How does training in attunement impact their practice?

For the second research question, three themes relating to the impact due to the training sessions and staff's experiences with the attunement principles could be identified (**Figure 2**). With the knowledge gained from the training sessions, participants were prepared to include the attunement principles in their practice. They were equipped with guidelines to support them in implementing the attunement principles, along with a self-evaluation sheet to document observations for each principle. The self-evaluation sheet (Education Scotland, 2025 and Miller, 2023) was tailored and translated by the researcher to suit this specific setting of the research (Appendix 4).

The first theme reflects staff's expressions of having experienced support from the structured guidelines for the application of the attunement principles (Appendix 4) and overall participation in the research study. Staff stated that the "logical and sensible concept" (FG3U41) of the input "can easily be applied with our children and young

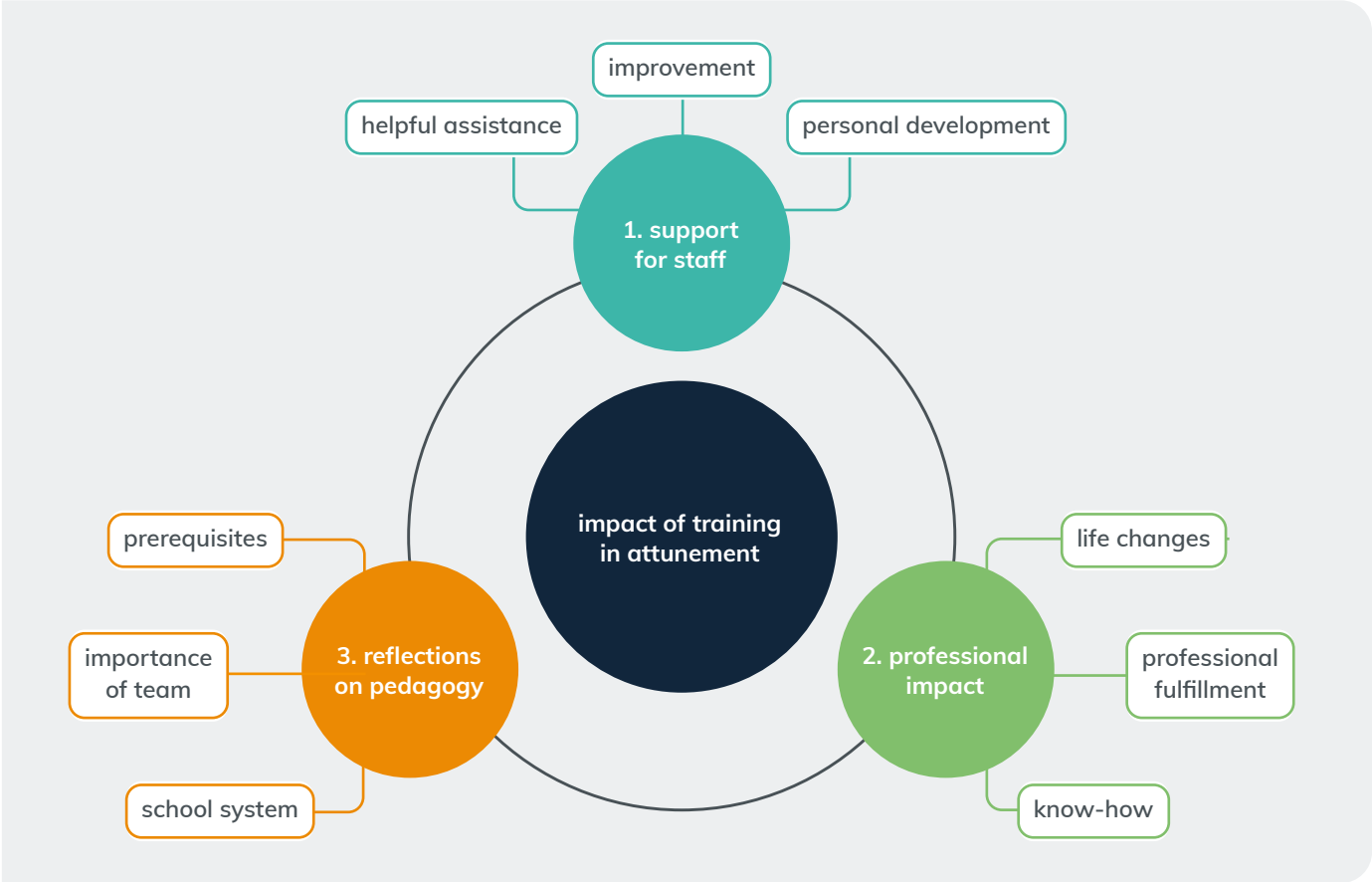

Figure 2. Thematic map of impact of training in attunement.

people" (FG3U41) and they praised its simplicity: "The practical applications can be used on all occasions" (FG4Aa24). The input of the study's training enabled staff "to take a step away in order to brave the daily grind" (FG3U41). Those with more work experience particularly talked about having appreciated the evaluation sheet as helpful assistance "to self-reflect and to self-criticise one's own doing" (FG3U6) and used it as a practical pattern "to check one's own behaviour and professional abilities" (FG3U6). They added that "the guidelines and instructions improved my teaching and led to personal growth, offering reassurance by letting me match my pupils' pace"; "I do not feel as much pressure to finish each and every task anymore" (FG3M12); "I am more patient and more understanding now" (FG3M12) and that "Everything is more agreeable" (FG4Aa7). Participants also said: "The work is more efficient" (FG3B12) and "takes less of my energy" (FG3U10); "even though I am required to concentrate more" (FG3U9). They claimed the guidelines had improved "their relationships with the children and young people" (FG3B12) and that it allowed staff "to be more open towards their patterns of behaviour" (FG4Aa6).

The second theme highlights the professional impact staff experienced from the training input. Staff reported a sense of peace of mind: "Less often I stand around clueless now and know better what to do" (FG4Aa7), which also increased their confidence and helped them "get a better overview and a broader understanding of group dynamics" (FG4Aa4). The training led to more "reflected actions from me and also to actions in which I did not feel I lost control over them" (FG4S22), creating opportunities "to better get to know the pupils" (FG4S22) and resulting in "more attentiveness towards their individual needs" (FG4A2). The given training in attunement helped staff to better understand early childhood experiences and insecure attachments, which they then incorporated into their reflections. This knowledge also restored their job satisfaction and a sense of personal fulfillment: "When I focus more on my pupils, then I can feel that I am rewarded by this focus and notice it in the pupils" (FG3U6) and "at

the end of the day I am tired but very happy with myself and with my pupils" (FG3U10). Participants reported that, thanks to the "instructive guidelines and the training, the work with my pupils is fun again" and that "it is great to attempt these on our pupils" (FG3U35). One noted: "I am not demoralised by my efforts because they show effect now" (FG3U14), while another shared that the inputs enabled them to "relax with my pupils, to enjoy the small things and to take pride in their doings; to voice my pleasure with them" (FG3B27). Staff also observed that the acquired knowledge made them more courageous and calmer in challenging situations: "I am more at ease to attempt presumably difficult situations now" (FG4S22). One participant emphasised that the inputs encouraged them "to carry on and not to give up! Without the inputs from this study, I would have renounced working with one specific pupil, maybe with my work in general" (FG3U15), adding that previously, "I was trapped with my own thoughts, my doings and this pupil. The new inputs helped me to resolve this" (FG3U20). A calmer approach was formulated: "I ask for explanations from the pupils now instead of judging them straight away, which takes out the pressure in all of us" (FG4Aa24). The professional impact on another participant resulted in that person leaving the workplace and planning to "inform the world about this revolutionary concept". High hopes were voiced for "a better world, without war, if everyone is aware of this approach and the attunement principles" (FG4S25).

The third theme treats the reflections on pedagogy by staff. They concluded that the offered concept represented "the fundamental pillars of the relationship between pupil and educational staff" (FG3B13). It was stressed that "without inclusion of the pupils' perceptions and emotions, no pedagogical work is possible" (FG3B40). That this was the "basis of all pedagogical work" (FG3B40) and it was underlined that all "beginners in the field of education should hear about these inputs" (FG4S16). It was voiced that "the concept would need to be lived in the classrooms in order to pass the knowledge on to inexperienced staff" (FG3B17) because "it was a gain and emphasised pedagogical issues that were new to me" (FG3U40). Staff claimed that "it is the only reasonable method to apply with children and young people with SEND" (FG3U11). One participant concluded that "it is this attentiveness and the putting the focus on our pupils that really makes the difference and is worth the effort and the concentration" (FG3U32). It was argued that the school system would need "to be adapted to the inputs of this research study" (FG4Aa28), so that these inputs would be more recognised and more easily accepted by schools and their staff. Staff agreed on the fact that "everyone in the team should know these inputs; so that everyone applies them" (FG4Aa28).

Discussion

1. How do staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement in relation to the children and young people that they teach or support?

The findings from the first research question suggest that participants of this specific special school setting understood attunement as emphasised attentiveness and as a pronounced focus on the children and young people that they teach or support. Participants described attunement as empathy that required openness and flexibility to allow observations to better understand the children and young people that they were working with. Like prior research (Siegel, 1999 and Erskine, 2015) participants of this research recognised the power of interactions which is the foundation for attunement (Baker, 2000). Nevertheless, they did not comprehend attunement as "availability" that Bowlby (1973) thought paramount for forming bonds in secure relationships. Guidelines by Glasgow City Council (2011) and studies on the nurturing environment in a school setting (Colley & Seymour, 2021; MacKay, 2015) elicit the emphasis on the whole-school nurture approach where all staff feel valued and secure (Doyle, 2003). Here, participants expressed sentiments of feeling left alone. The teaching staff, not the teaching assistants, mentioned the lack of cooperation in the team in particular. The general climatic conditions in the school building remained in the foreground for participants.

Prior studies show that in relation to the nurture approach certain characteristics in staff and of the environment in a school setting are necessary (Colley, 2012).

Unlike previous research (Syrnyk, 2012), participants in this study did not highlight emotion

coaching (Gilbert et al., 2021) or the "context of responsiveness" (Rose, 2015, p. 1768) in staff-pupil relationships. They overlooked attachment experiences (Ainsworth, 1978) and the concept of "dyadic communication" (Schore, 2001, p. 20), focusing solely on staff perspectives. Their understanding of "needs" was limited to basic survival (Maslow, 1999), ignoring social, emotional and behavioural needs (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000) and childhood adversity (Boxall, 2002). Findings from the first research question portray participants' reasoning on work experience and work ethic to inform good practice (Carpenter, 2017).

The gaining of knowledge from continuous training would help staff to learn more about mental health difficulties in general and to show more "availability" in their practice. Participants of the current study seemed to be focused on themselves. A gain of knowledge may support them in fulfilling "authentic attunement", as described in research (Mössler et al., 2020; Wang, 2020).

2. How does training in attunement impact their practice?

The findings of the second research question provide a convincing picture of the importance of new inputs and continuous training for staff. They suggest that this research study about the nurture approach and the attunement principles on staff has had an impressive impact. It has ignited discussions and provoked reflections relating to their work with children and young people with SEND. The self-evaluation approach by Education Scotland (2023) supports schools to improve practice. Participants of this study endorsed the tools by Education Scotland (2023). This study encouraged participants to "be curious" (Carpenter, 2017), explore approaches that may improve outcomes for children and young people (Carpenter et al., 2015) and consolidate staff strengths (Kombou & Bunn, 2020). Training in attunement provided security in their work, fostering a clearer professional vision for both their "micro-system" (Bronfenbrenner, 2006) and themselves. Participants reported that the knowledge gained improved their understanding of the children and young people they worked with, enhancing relationships (Syrnyk, 2012). Teaching assistants emphasised relationship building, while teaching staff highlighted the improved quality of their work and the value of new tools for viewing issues from different perspectives. Research supports the positive impact of reflecting on habitual methods and approaches (Roma, Monaro & Mazza, 2022; Bethune & Seldon, 2018).

Participants expressed opinions about the work setting and formulated perceptions on the significance of the unification in the school community and a shared whole-school approach (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006). As a result, they produced strong support for research (Colley & Seymour, 2021) that asserts the value of the culture of a whole-school community (Abram, 2020) and the importance for a whole-school approach. Participants consented with research that recognises the nurture approach as a relevant approach for schools (McGuire, 2019; Hoffmann, 2012; Zeller, 2008; Poulsen & Fouts, 2001). They confirmed the findings of prior research (Middleton, 2022; Porges, 2022) that maintain that knowing about neuroscience is essential. Learning about the physiological aspects of safety (Porges, 2021) proved to be eye-opening for participants. Participants seemed favourable to applying the attunement principles in their work field, as the practical attention given to the pupils appeared to convince them that it was worth the effort.

Participants also spoke about the effort required to apply the attunement principles. Prior research (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017; Schore, 2001) does not reflect on those endeavours that educational staff must exert when focusing on children and young people. In this current study, teaching staff explained that applying attunement was something they actively had to practice and that for them this action was not produced naturally.

Conclusions, recommendations and limitations

This study has adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach to discover a deeper understanding of how staff in a special school setting understand the nurture approach and attunement and how training in attunement impacts their practice. The study presented the views of a limited sample size of educational staff, which may have resulted in sampling bias, due to the small number of staff that were willing to participate and due to the researcher's own personal choice. Little research

exists on the application of the attunement principles and prior research has mostly been carried out in functioning nurture groups (Cubbedu & MacKay, 2017; Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022a; Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022b). Participants in this study were informed about the nurture approach and given training in attunement by the researcher, but they did not undergo the specific training offered by the Nurture Group Network. How this new input really affected the participants cannot be measured completely. There are no comparable studies that investigate this detail.

The study was undertaken in a special school setting that accommodates children and young people with SEND in every classroom. Variables that mark interventions of the nurture approach in special school settings are yet to be fully researched.

A key limitation of this study was the participants' limited understanding of social, emotional and mental health difficulties. As a result, it is unclear whether they will continue applying the new insights in the future or how this setting might develop.

New approaches can only be successfully implemented with the support of the senior leadership team. In this particular setting no whole-school approach was evident, which may limit the long-term impact of any individual efforts.

However, the overall positive impact of the inputs suggests that introducing alternative approaches and theories to educational staff is worthwhile. The themes identified in the analysis highlight the potential for these topics to be explored and implemented in other educational settings.

The number of studies on the nurture approach has been growing over time. Nevertheless, there is little research that examines the impact of the attunement principles on educational staff and no research at all that explores the direct impact of the attunement principles on children and young people with SEND. There has been no research on the effectiveness of applying the attunement principles as a whole-school approach. This area needs further consideration.

This current research recommends more in-depth investigations for special school settings, particularly in relation to the fifth principle of nurture (Lucas, Insley & Buckland, 2006) that "all behaviour is communication", which is closely connected to the fourth nurture principle that "language is a vital means of communication". Both emphasise the role of language, speech and interactive behaviour in expressing needs and emotions and in building meaningful relationships. Educational settings must offer room for communication and interactions, as these conditions enable staff to respond meaningfully to children's social and emotional cues. While verbal communication is typically dominant in staff practice (Bani, 2011), the given training in attunement encouraged teaching staff to reduce verbalisation and adopt a more receptive, observant stance. This shift increased the intentional use of non-verbal communication, thereby supporting more attuned interactions.

Such attunement enhances staff sensitivity to children's cues and contributes to the development of secure relationships (Cloran, Rivard & Bennett, 2022a).

These findings indicate that trained staff are more observant, more present and less oppressive with words. Future studies should therefore focus on encouraging staff to reduce verbalisation, providing a clearer and more practical approach to implementing the concept of attunement. The current study found that strategies for becoming more attuned to children and young people with SEND are achievable but require deliberate effort from staff, in contrast to the effortless use of speech that comes naturally. Future research should consider both the significant impact of words on children and young people with SEND and the possible challenges they face with speech and language (Bani, 2011). Studies should also explore communication approaches that demand staff maintain attentiveness, good memory and an attuned stance. Future researchers should focus on attuned communication. An implication of the current study is that attuned communication seemed to be a "difficulty" for educational staff in this context, but when applied, it improved pupil-educational staff interactions and attachment. Staff would be advised to begin by understanding "behaviour as communication" (Lucas, Insley &

Buckland, 2006) because "behaviour is a reflection of needs rather than a need in itself" (Cowne et al., 2019; p. 11). It is especially a "serve and return" (Center on the Developing Child, 2023) that does not necessarily rely on spoken words.

The results of this research indicate that opportunities to reflect on one's own practice and to exchange opinions on existing conditions, approaches and work procedures help educational staff to review operations and patterns of behaviour. The findings demonstrate that inputs about the nurture approach and attunement impact educational staff on a personal and professional level. Findings show that staff took an overall positive view of the approach and imply that the nurture approach is a worthy approach for special school settings. This single study adds to the body of research in the field of SEND and more precisely to the field of nurture (Boxall, 2002), while also demonstrating that the application of the nurture approach and the attunement principles is feasible internationally. The adaptation of the Attunement Profile (Appendix 4) for special needs settings may represent a key stage in developing a pathway that integrates the nurture approach and the attunement principles in the field of SEND. Future research should consider the inclusion of practical training to support effective implementation of the attunement principles. The study indicates that staff without pedagogical training may apply the attunement principles inappropriately, highlighting the need for ongoing professional training. Further research can build on this study to strengthen practice-based understanding of the attunement principles within nurture-informed settings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1:
Focus group 1 schedule

Appendix 2:
Focus group 2 schedule

Appendix 3:
Questionnaire to training sessions

Appendix 4:
Adapted self-evaluation sheet: Attunement Profile

Appendix 1: First focus group discussion schedule

1. In job descriptions in the special needs field it is sometimes demanded to have the ability to be attuned to the children and young people with SEND and SEMH difficulties. How do you understand this ability to be attuned?
2. "Attunement is how you feel in other people's feelings and even going beyond that resonance. You actually understand what's going on in the other person's mental world. You develop mindsight to see inside subjective experience" (Dr Dan Siegel).

   How can we realise this attunement in pupils with disabilities and those who are non-verbal?
3. A mother is attuned to the needs of her newly born baby. The baby feels safe, seen and understood. Any relationship that enables safety, emotional stability and understanding will create strong attachment. Which needs do you recognise in your pupils? What do you do to make your pupils feel safe and understood?
4. I believe that anyone can thrive in the long term if their needs are cared for! How would you describe the perfect setting and the perfect attitude of staff that make such a thriving possible?
5. Verbal communication does not always take place from behalf of our pupils. Can you describe their behaviour and can you describe your reaction to that behaviour? How can we adapt our behaviour to that of our pupils?
6. Attunement is something that is demanded, but can it be trained or is it a gift to deeply understand someone else without the use of words? I would like to ask a miracle question after De Shazer: if we woke up tomorrow and were able to really know our students and foresaw their emotions and difficulties, what would be different in our classroom? How would we know that a miracle had happened?

Reserve questions

Do those children and young people who do not show any feelings, have feelings? What can we do to make them show us their inner worlds and their tormentations?

What is your approach in your work and why have you chosen it? How does it help you in your work or your personal qualities?

Appendix 2: Second focus group discussion schedule

1. In the training sessions you were introduced to the nurture approach and the attunement principles. Have you tried to apply the information? Please illustrate your example. How would you describe the effect you noticed in the children and young people when applying the information? Please illustrate your example.
2. How has the training impacted on your practice? Possible examples were given here.
3. Most of you said that you would want to tell colleagues about the input from the training sessions. What effect would such informing have?
4. The attunement principles were introduced to you as a strategy with clear steps that support you in being more attuned to the children and young people with special needs. Please share the experience you had with the given steps.
5. What was helpful for you with these steps?
6. What would you need in order to better apply these steps?
7. In the first focus discussion we discussed the topic of attunement. How have you developed professionally following the training in attunement and nurture?
8. How do you think it would be possible to create more occasions to apply the steps of attunement in your work with children and young people with special needs?
9. On a scale from 1 to 10, in your opinion how important is it to include these principles in the school policy?

Appendix 3: Questionnaire to training sessions

Thank you for answering these questions in your own words. Your answers are individual. There is no right or wrong answer.

1. The learning goals from the training sessions were to get to know the nurture approach, to understand the meaning of psychological security, attunement and the attunement principles. How do you feel about having learned about these topics?
2. How would you describe the training in your own words?
3. In what way did it make you think about your practice and your qualities?
4. Can you describe the feelings and the perceptions about yourself and your work that came to the foreground due to the training? Were they positive or rather negative and why?
5. What did you learn about yourself through this training and why is this important concerning your work?
6. What could be the impact of applying the nurture principles and more precisely the attunement principles in your practice?
7. Was anything mentioned in the training that you find impossible to realise? Please illustrate and explain why.
8. What are you willing to apply from the training in your work concerning children and young people with SEND?
9. What could you absorb from the training in general?
10. Is there something that was mentioned in the training that you would like to tell colleagues? Please illustrate.

Appendix 4: Adapted self-evaluation sheet: Attunement Profile

(Education Scotland, 2020; Miller, 2023)

Core principle		
Under-principle	Self-assessment	Comments / examples
Being attentive • Noticing verbal and non-verbal cues • Maintaining eye contact • Smiling • Nodding • Turning toward the child • Thinking aloud about feelings/actions • Expressing joy • Using warm tone		
Encouraging and responding • Returning eye contact • Smiling • Nodding • Being playful and engaged • Repeating the child's words • Verbalising observed actions		
Developing interactions • Responding with language or body • Checking understanding • Waiting for reactions • Offering short turn-taking exchanges • Cooperating • Engaging in back-and-forth interaction		
Guiding and supporting • Providing flexible scaffolding • Setting limits calmly • Building on responses • Offering help when needed • Giving understandable choices • Suggesting actionable steps		

Introducing the nurture approach to a high-needs, rural Canadian school: a case study

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Abstract

In the UK, the nurture approach (NA) is recognised as a tenable school-based intervention for children with social, emotional and mental health issues (Ofsted, 2011), with over 5,000 schools in the UK engaging this approach (nurtureuk, 2023). In Canada, where every province legislates its own education curriculum, there is no such equivalent currently being applied. Canada also faces resource disparities between urban and rural schools, and a long-standing history of marginalising Indigenous learners. To shed light on how the NA might be applied in a rural school where the majority of learners are Indigenous this case study implemented a bespoke training programme at a small primary school in rural western Canada. On four professional growth days spread over the course of a year, 20 educators were introduced to NA theory and evidence, along with typical application methods, resources and tools (ie, the Boxall Profile®). To capture educator perceptions of the NA, data was collected via online surveys and focus groups. Analysis shows that educators were enthusiastic about what the NA could bring to their professional practice, school and students, especially those who identify as Indigenous. However, having also identified several systemic barriers, educators were less confident in the application of the NA without committed resources and training. Implications about how the NA may offer a complementary framework, especially for Indigenous learners, are discussed.

Introduction

Developed as an early intervention for learners with social, emotional and mental health issues (SEMH) issues (Bennathan & Boxall, 2012), the nurture approach (NA) is grounded in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Emphasising the importance of trusting and caring relationships for children, the NA provides a bridge for children at risk of educational failure or exclusion by offering a structured environment with a balance of learning, affection and discipline (Jones et al., 2025; Scott & Lee, 2009). Typically, the NA is applied in the 'classic' format where a small group of learners (8-12) are placed with a trained teacher and educational assistant in a classroom within a mainstream school. In this nurture group format children's socio-emotional development and readiness is prioritised over their academics as educators focus on building relationships through daily dialogue and activities. The scope of the NA can extend to include different needs and sorts of provision (MacKay, 2015) including whole-school

application (Ruby, 2018; Syrnyk, 2012). In their definition of a "nurturing school" Lucas (1999) describes how a nurturing ethos may be applied to the whole-school, resulting in a more adaptive and holistic schooling experience. The NA may be most effective when it is adhered to as a whole-school model of intervention and embedded as part of school ethos (Ruby, 2018), using the curriculum in a manner that targets wellbeing and making efforts to involve the wider community. Models of intervention that "wrap-around" the whole school are most effective for promoting social-emotional development and learning (Haight et al., 2023).

How differences in implementation may impact the efficacy of the NA has been questioned (Fraser-Smith & Henry, 2016). Recent research from Canada provides a detailed description of the "implementation fidelity" of two classic nurture groups finding that such interventions, while costly, were representative of the NA in terms of practice and principles (Cloran et al., 2022a). Existing studies on the NA's overall effectiveness indicate positive impacts that include improvements in emotional wellbeing, social competence, self-regulation and academic performance (Cloran et al., 2022b; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Doyle, 2020; Gerrard, 2006; Luke et al., 2014). Research has shown that the NA helps children to form trusting relationships and respond more appropriately to social situations (Boxall, 2002; Sanders, 2007). Studies report improvements to be largely due to the secure attachments formed with educators (Colley, 2017) that seem to be facilitated by the attunement or responsive and attentive engagement of educators (Cloran et al., 2022a; Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017; Schore, 2001). As the foundational aim of the NA is to address the unmet attachment needs of learners, attunement is a pivotal skill. Requiring both empathy and self-awareness on the part of the educator, attunement is based on the principle that relational reciprocity is required for healthy attachments and can be described by specific actions (Trevarthen & Aitken, 1994; Kennedy et al., 2011). In their observational study comparing teachers in nurture groups and mainstream classrooms, Cubeddu and MacKay (2017) found that the nurture teachers demonstrated superior caregiver sensitivity because they used attunement principles significantly more often. Cloran et al. (2022b) found similar results showing attunement to be one of the core skills and practices of educators applying the NA.

The socioemotional needs of students and rural Canadian schools

In Canada there is a significant gap in evidence-based frameworks designed to support the SEMH needs of students. The limited research available suggests that rural students are at greater risk of experiencing barriers to mental health support (Lee et al., 2009; Lee, 2023) and often lack evidence-based care within these school systems (Blackstock et al., 2018; Waddell et al., 2014). While the importance of addressing SEMH needs is widely recognised, there remains a lack of structured interventions, especially in rural settings where resources are scarce. This gap reflects broader systemic inequalities in access to health services, educational resources and community support networks in rural areas. There is no oversight between provinces or indeed school divisions in terms of the types or efficacy of resources schools employ to the needs of their students with SEMH. A recent Canadian study implementing nurture groups in Montreal likened them to what may be found in large, urban hospital child-psychiatry day programmes (Cloran et al., 2022). Rural schools frequently serve as the primary entry point for addressing students' mental health needs, yet teachers often feel ill-equipped to meet these demands (Lee et al., 2009; Lee, 2023). Teachers in these settings express a strong desire for more training and support to address the socioemotional needs of students, but there is limited data on how these needs are perceived and managed in rural environments (Sullivan et al., 2018).

While there is growing recognition of the importance of socioemotional development in fostering academic success and overall wellbeing, evidence-based frameworks to support these needs remain scarce, particularly in rural and high-needs communities (Maximova et al., 2023). Rural classrooms face distinct and multifaceted challenges such as limited access to resources, professional isolation and socioeconomic factors (Goodpaster et al., 2012; Reid et al., 2010). Teachers in rural settings often juggle multiple roles, teaching several subjects across different grade levels due to staff shortages (Stagg Peterson et al., 2018). Despite these challenges,

rural communities often demonstrate resilience and a strong sense of community as teachers frequently highlight the supportive nature of rural environments, where close-knit relationships between educators, students and families foster a sense of belonging (Goodpaster et al., 2012).

Schools in rural and high-need areas, particularly those serving Indigenous communities, often lack the necessary resources and capacity to effectively address educational disparities. Indigenous students are more likely to report feelings of alienation and disconnection from their educational experiences, which can further contribute to mental health issues and disengagement. Pressured to conform to mainstream norms, these students often feel disconnected from their education, which suppresses their identities and contributes to lower graduation rates (Harper & Thompson, 2025; Stagg Peterson et al., 2018). Indigenous youth from low-income households often struggle academically due to a lack of critical resources and support from both their homes and communities (Brown & Fraehlich, 2012; Preston et al., 2012). Without sufficient support educators struggle to meet the needs of Indigenous learners, leaving many students at a disadvantage (Malott, 2007; Rocchetta, 2019). This lack of resources exacerbates the achievement gap and hinders efforts to foster environments that promote educational equity (Harper & Thompson, 2025; Malott, 2007). Indigenous students in rural Canada face compounded socioemotional difficulties due to the legacy of residential schools, systemic racism and economic disparities (Harper & Thompson, 2025; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The educational system's Eurocentric curriculum often excludes Indigenous knowledge, contributing to cultural disconnection and lower academic engagement (Bagshaw et al., 2022; Battiste & Henderson, 2009).

As a result of these compounding obstacles, Indigenous students experience lower graduation rates compared to their non-Indigenous peers, with only 63 per cent graduating, versus 91 per cent of non-Indigenous students (Statistics Canada, 2023). Addressing these disparities requires culturally relevant frameworks that incorporate Indigenous perspectives, languages and holistic learning approaches (Toulouse, 2016). To address these issues, there have been calls for changes in education programmes to recognise these unique challenges that Indigenous students face (St. Denis, 2007). Indigenous education in Canada is increasingly shifting away from its historical focus on assimilation, pushing instead for inclusion and cultural recognition. Culturally responsive pedagogy that emphasises Indigenous ways of knowing and community involvement has been shown to improve socioemotional outcomes and academic performance (Stagg Peterson et al., 2018).

The case study

While the NA has been extensively studied and implemented in other countries, particularly England and Scotland, there is a notable absence of research exploring its application elsewhere. And despite the growing recognition of the need for evidence-based interventions in rural settings, no studies to date have examined the introduction of the NA in rural Canada. Moreover, there is a lack of research focused on how the NA could align with the needs of Indigenous students, who are disproportionately affected by historical trauma, systemic racism and socioeconomic disparities. The absence of culturally relevant frameworks within Canadian education systems has been a persistent issue and the potential for the NA to provide not only emotional and behavioral support but also a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment remains unexplored. The fundamental values of the NA, which emphasise relational safety, emotional wellbeing and community, may align with Canadian Indigenous views of holistic education, which often focus on interconnectedness, relationships and healing. This could present an opportunity to explore how nurture could be tailored to Indigenous contexts, potentially fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment. Additionally, while existing literature highlights the positive effects of nurture on student outcomes, such as improved social skills, emotional regulation and academic performance, there is little research examining its impact on educators. By focusing on the whole-school approach, this case study seeks to understand how it may serve students through educators.

Through teacher perceptions and surveys, this exploratory case study aims to provide insights into the main question of: What is the impact of introducing the nurture approach (NA) to a rural and high-needs Canadian school? Sub-questions

to this main question include: 1) How might the NA be received as a whole-school approach? 2) How might the NA impact the wellbeing of educators? 3) What benefits and challenges might the NA present to these educators? By its nature this case study also provides a detailed overview of a bespoke training programme applied and designed to meet the needs of this school. By using a mixed-methods approach this research intends to offer a foundation for future implementation studies and potential policy changes that support the integration of the NA into Canadian educational practices, particularly in underserved and Indigenous communities.

Method

Participants

This case study took place at a small (n < 125) kindergarten to grade 5 at Blackfew school (a pseudonym) located in rural western Canada, where the majority of families identify as Indigenous (92 per cent). Participants were a mix of teachers (12) and educational assistants (EAs) (8). All teachers had undergraduate degrees and three had graduate degrees. All EAs had high school diplomas with only two having further college-level training. The majority of educators identified as women (18, with two males) and white (15) or Indigenous (7) with an average age of 42.5 years (age range was 24-58). On average, educators had 12.6 years (from a range of under one to 27 years) of working experience in schools. About half (10) of the educators reported being relatively new to Blackfew school (two years or less) while the average tenure of the group was 4.1 years (from a range of less than one year to 13 years).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's institutional Research Ethics Board (St Mary's University) and all Canadian standards of ethical protocol were followed as per the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022). All educators elected to participate and provided their informed consent. Educators knew that they could leave at any point during the study and that their de-identified responses would be reported in aggregate for the purpose of this study.

Procedure

Training was delivered and data collected over four Professional Growth (PG) days. The first PG day, held in September, involved two 1.5 hour-long sessions that addressed 1) major contributors to healthy child development with an emphasis on attachment theory, styles and evidence, and 2) children with social, emotional mental health issues and the impact on learning and development. The second PG day, held in October, focused on 1) the NA and involved a 1.5 hour-long session that described the theoretical and foundational aspects of the NA, 2) a 1.5 hour-long session exploring what the NA looks like in practice with emphasis on the principles of attunement, with specific examples and 3) a one-hour long Boxall Profile® training session. The third PG session (February) was similar in content to the second in that it 1) 30 minutes were spent reviewing the theoretical and foundational aspects of the NA, 2) one hour again exploring what the NA looked like in practice, reviewing attunement, 3) one hour was dedicated to reviewing the application of the Boxall Profile®, and finally 4) a one-hour-long question and answer period. The fourth and final PG session in May involved an hour-long recap on the NA and Boxall Profile® and a two-hour-long session describing emotional coaching, how it complements the NA and how it can be used. Participants were informed before each PG day that data would be collected before and after the PG days and that their participation in the data collection was voluntary. They provided informed consent at each point of participation.

Materials

Since mixed methods approaches are known to generate deeper understanding when conducting original research (Greene, 2007) a combination of quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

Surveys

On every PG day, participating educators were asked to complete an online survey via Qualtrics© that consisted of an informed consent form, demographic questions, as well as bespoke Likert statement questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Bespoke surveys were intended to gauge educator's

perceived degree comprehension for key concepts shared and discussed over PG days. These related to knowledge of early child development, their understanding of the pillars of the nurture approach (NA) and the impact PG day content made on them (see **Tables 1–3**).

Focus groups

Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to examining how individuals make sense of their experiences, environments and relationships. It enables in-depth exploration of meaning, context and complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In an effort to understand the key themes that resonated with participating educators, at the end of all four PG days educators were invited to participate in focus group discussions. In groups of up to 10 (yielding one to two groups per PG day) educators engaged in semi-structured group discussion on a relevant topic, moderated by the researcher who promoted discussion by asking open questions based on the main research question and that touched on content relevant to each of the four PG days (Appendix 1). The researcher encouraged educators to articulate, justify and assert their needs and interests in their school and its students, while also allowing flexibility to explore or clarify responses. Prior to each focus group participants were reminded of the anticipated duration (20 to 60 minutes), assured in person and in writing that their participation was voluntary and confidential to the group. Following the transcription of all focus group data (conducted by a professional service) analysis was conducted by a research assistant familiar with the project to reduce the potential for bias.

As the dataset comprised participants' accounts of both personal and school-wide experiences, thematic analysis provided an appropriate and flexible framework for identifying patterns of meaning and capturing the nuanced, layered realities described by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method offered practical insights into the educational environment while allowing for the identification of recurring themes across a diverse set of experiences. Thematic analysis also aligned with the case study design, which required a method that allowed for both rich description and cross-participant comparisons. Its flexibility, accessibility and capacity to produce a detailed yet organised account of a complex dataset made it especially effective for examining individual voices while drawing broader insights relevant to the school as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Moreover, by using an inductive approach, themes were closely tied to participants' lived experiences rather than predefined categories, ensuring that the findings emerged directly from the data itself, an approach that complements case study research.

Analysis was conducted using direct transcripts from all four focus groups. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps as the framework of the analysis: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. During analysis, transcripts were read multiple times for familiarisation and initial codes were generated manually from the data without applying a pre-existing theoretical framework. These codes were then organised into potential themes, guided by recurring patterns and their prevalence across the dataset. The research assistant and researcher collaboratively reviewed and refined these themes through discussion, ensuring coherence and consistency. Thematic analysis provided a rigorous yet flexible method for exploring educator perceptions, capturing key insights into the challenges faced by the students and the school, as well as the continuous changes experienced in implementing the NA within a rural, high-needs context.

Training

Calls have been made for school systems to adopt more evidence-based student support models and resources (Hagermoser Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2018). However, doing so requires that these initiatives are aligned with the ethos of the school and that school administrators and educators are provided with adequate training (Forman et al., 2009). When nurture is implemented as a whole-school approach Warin (2017) identified two critical factors: 1) committed school leadership and 2) comprehensive training and support for all school educators. The principal (headteacher) of Blackfew school was enthusiastic about introducing a framework to the school that complemented schools needs and focused on attachment and child development. Blackfew had

also started undertaking its own Indigenisation process two years earlier by integrating the Circle of Courage © (Brendtro et al., 2013) into its everyday routines and practices. This Indigenous model of positive learning recognises that healthy development requires that children have opportunities for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Taken together the researcher and principal worked together to devise a procedure that embraced an introduction to whole-school NA while complementing the ethos of the school.

The result was four professional growth (PG) training days designed by the lead researcher and principal, delivered by the researcher (a developmental psychologist) and a UK-expat teacher trained and experienced (10 years) in the nurture approach. Sessions were designed to build on each other, starting with: 1) furthering educator knowledge of the typical and atypical psychosocial development of children with a focus on the role of attachment and probabilistic outcomes for at-risk children, 2) introducing educators to the nurture approach and training them in the fundamentals of its principles and application, including the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan, 2018), and 3) providing educators with additional supports to cope with the emotionally taxing aspects of their work.

Results

Surveys

Table 1. Survey data collected from educators (n = 21) at the start of PG day 1

Questions	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "strongly agree"
1. I understand the key factors behind healthy early psychological development.	4 (0.93)	28.57
2. I know a lot about attachment theory.	3.19 (1.18)	14.29
3. I have a strong understanding of the issues and outcomes that can result when children's early psychological development was troubled.	3.95 (0.90)	23.81
4. I am confident in managing learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.	3.76 (0.75)	14.29
5. I am familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.	3.25 (1.51)	28.57
6. I am good at regulating my own emotions.	4.14 (0.64)	23.81
7. It is important that I model adaptive behaviour in the classroom.	4.7 (0.56)	71.43
8. Transitions during the school day are important times for challenging students.	4.48 (0.91)	71.43
9. Student behaviour is a form of communication.	4.86 (0.47)	90.48
10. I am considerate of the language I use when communicating with my students.	4.76 (0.53)	80.95
11. My classroom acts as a safe space for students, especially those with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.	4.52 (0.96)	71.43
12. Children's learning is based on their developmental status, not their age.	4.76 (0.53)	80.95

Table 2. Survey data collected from educators (n = 21) at the end of PG day 1

Questions	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"
1. Today's session has improved my understanding of the factors that contribute to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues in students.	4.36 (1.39)	75.25
2. Today's session has demonstrated the importance of good SEMH for student wellbeing and learning.	4.36 (1.39)	75.25
3. I want to continue to learn more about SEMH.	4.71 (1.03)	80.70

Table 3. Survey data collected from educators over PG days 2-4

Questions	PG day 2 (n = 14)		PG day 3 (n = 10)		PG day 4 (n = 20)	
	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"
1. Today's session has improved my understanding of the factors that contribute to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues in students.	4.36 (1.45)	78.57	4.5 (0.53)	50	4.84* (0.37)	80.00
	*1: exact wording used on day 4: "These PD sessions have helped me to understand the reasons behind challenging student behaviour."					
2. Today's session has demonstrated the importance of good SEMH for student wellbeing and learning.	4.36 (1.45)	78.57	4.89 (0.33)	80	4.79* (0.42)	75.00
	*2: exact wording used on day 4: "My understanding of the factors that contribute to SEMH issues in students has improved over the past year."					
3. I understand what the nurture approach is.	4.50 (1.09)	71.43	4.7 (0.48)	70	4.84 (0.37)	80.00
4. I understand how the nurture approach works.	4.36 (1.08)	57.14	4.5 (0.52)	60	4.68 (0.48)	65.00
5. I understand how to apply some of key techniques of the nurture approach	4.29 (0.83)	42.86	4.7 (0.48)	70	4.68 (0.48)	65.00
6. I understand how to apply the Boxall Profile®.	4.29 (0.91)	50.00	4.4 (0.52)	40	4.11 (0.81)	35.00
7. The Boxall Profile® will be useful for me to better meet the needs of my students.	4.36 (1.15)	64.29	4.7 (0.67)	70	4.11 (0.99)	45.00
8. I am excited to apply the Boxall Profile® to my students.	4.36 (1.15)	64.29	4.5 (0.71)	60	4.16 (0.90)	45.00
9. I am excited to apply the nurture approach in my classroom.	4.57 (1.09)	78.57	4.7 (0.67)	80	4.89 (0.32)	85.00
10. I think the nurture approach would be a good fit for our school.	4.71 (1.07)	92.86	5 (0)	100	5.00 (0.00)	95.00
11. I want to continue to learn more about SEMH.	4.71 (1.07)	92.86	5 (0)	100	4.84 (0.37)	80.00
12. I want to continue to learn more about the nurture approach.	4.71 (1.07)	92.86	5 (0)	100	4.84 (0.37)	80.00

Before the first PG session, educators' survey responses to questions about their degree of knowledge about the content to be covered that day (see **table 1**) indicated they felt fairly confident in classroom management and confident in managing their own emotions. Educators also expressed strong support for the tenets of the NA before being exposed to them. Follow-up questions at the end of PG day one showed that educators were receptive to engaging with the content and desired further knowledge (see **table 2**). Survey results from PG days two to four (see **table 3**) suggest that educators perceived progress in terms of their understanding of SEMH and the NA, along with application of the NA in general. While educators appeared consistently enthusiastic about the NA there was more variability in their understanding and application of the Boxall Profile®. Educators were trained in the Boxall Profile® over PG days two, three and four, however given that there was no one staff member fully versed with this measure on site following training, it is possible their confidence with this standardised technical assessment may have floundered somewhat without consistent scaffolding. Overall, educators strongly believed that the NA would be a good fit for their school and expressed a continued desire to learn more about their students' needs and the NA.

Focus groups

Given the volume of qualitative data gleaned from the four focus groups, results here were collapsed to address the project's sub-questions (see **Figure 1**). Excerpts of participant responses can be found in Appendix 2.

1) How might the nurture approach be received as a whole-school approach?

Advocacy and support

During the group discussions, educators highlighted the importance of advocating for the school. They emphasised that this advocacy should take two forms: 1) addressing the challenges the school faces, and 2) showcasing the positive developments. Educators noted that advocacy initiatives within the community positively transformed the school's image. They stated that through the principal's efforts, the community began seeing the school in a new light.

Routine

Participants observed that consistency and maintaining a routine play a significant role benefiting both students and the school as a whole. They noted that although the pandemic introduced

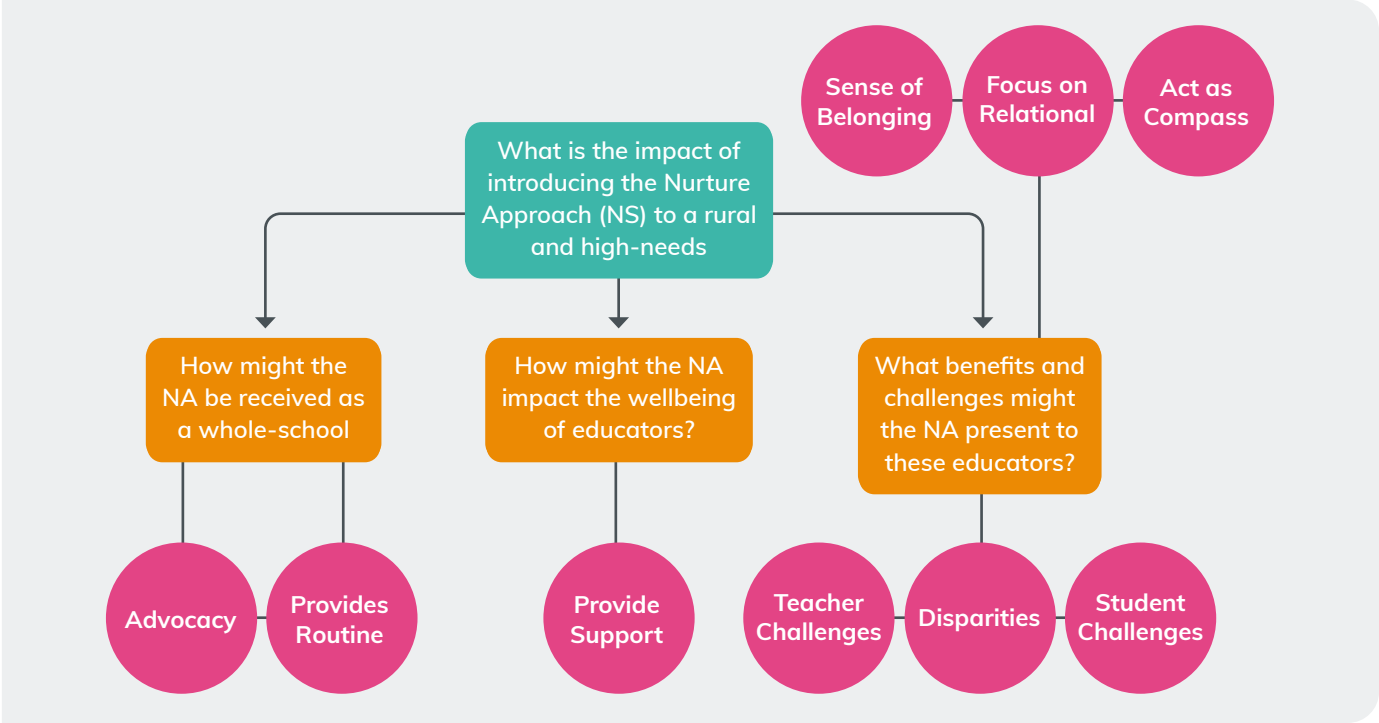

Figure 1. Thematic map from focus group data

many challenges here, there was a broader pattern of disruptions inherent to the school. Many participants declared a need for a "mundane routine." Another area where participants identified a need for consistency was in having the same teacher over multiple years. Lack of substitute teachers was also discussed as a deterrent to consistency.

2) How might the nurture approach impact the wellbeing of educators?

Teacher support

Educators expressed the need for support for their mental health and wellbeing. One specific idea that emerged was the need for "venues" to connect and communicate with one another. They highlighted the lack of time allocated for collaboration and the importance of creating "safe and open" spaces for teachers to debrief, learn and strategise together. Participants expressed a hope that training such as that received through this research would help them as a team. They also expressed the desire to learn for continued training especially related to development and disorders.

3) What benefits and challenges might the nurture approach present?

Freedom to focus on things other than academics

Educators expressed that the NA validated their belief that it was acceptable to deviate from traditional educational expectations because of the unique needs of their students. They discussed feeling pressured to assess students or maintain academic standards, and how the NA empowered them to prioritise what they considered important (eg building relationships and teaching life skills). Educators talked about the freedom the NA gave them to target individual students' developmental needs. Participants felt that trying to keep up with the curriculum just meant many of their students would fall behind. The feeling of "not feeling guilty" and having the "freedom" to spend time with students and focus on things that arise as important for each student resonated. Educators saw the NA as a means to help build better connections with students as its practices (shared meals, small groups, emphasis on social-emotional activities) motivated them. Educators shared that this framework could relieve some of the pressure of conforming to conventional standards and give them the freedom to engage in meaningful activities that foster emotional connections and holistic development.

Sense of belonging and recognition

Educators' responses showcased the importance they placed on creating an environment where students feel recognised, valued and supported. They expressed that this sense of belonging is crucial for the students' emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. They also recognised that the NA aligns well with this view, highlighting both community-building and personal growth for the students. Educators found value in integrating nurturing activities throughout the school day as this helped students form friendships and leave the school in a positive, regulated state. The importance of integrating cultural elements into the school environment to foster a sense of belonging was also emphasised. Educators highlighted that in their school, incorporating Indigenous practices was essential and noted that the NA echoed a vital aspect of Indigenous culture: the sense of family. They explained that the NA approach mapped well to the Circle of Courage© model (Brendtro et al., 2013) currently in place.

Educators also highlighted the latent potential within students, emphasising the importance of support in unlocking their abilities and talents. Acknowledging the challenges faced by the school, educators remained optimistic about the impact of the NA in providing necessary support to uplift the students and highlight their capabilities. Educators also discussed the NA becoming a framework that belongs to all students, where they can be celebrated and where positive role modeling could take place.

Guiding focus and uncovering strengths

Educators shared that the NA and the Boxall Profile® were useful in providing actionable insights, creating a clearer focus and direction in their teaching. They highlighted that in their high-demand classrooms the NA offered clarity that helped prioritise actions for students with multiple challenges. They appreciated knowing where to start with each student, making the process less overwhelming. Educators valued the practical

application of the information gathered through the Boxall Profile®. They emphasised that this helped to identify patterns of behaviour and that having this information would guide their practice and planning. The Boxall Profile® was perceived to be very useful in keeping track of individual and classroom behaviours, for personal use in teaching as well as to showcase to others. The Boxall Profile® was also seen to help identify common strengths and challenges individually and within the group, enhancing classroom management and planning. A specific benefit of the Boxall Profile® identified by educators was gaining a vocabulary that would unite the teachers and staff and better communication skills.

Disparities

Educators believed that one of the school's primary challenges stems from a need to transition from an 'equality-based' to an 'equitable-based' model of funding. The feelings of being unheard and the downfalls of the current model of funding was a shared agreement amongst the group. They highlighted significant challenges arising from a lack of understanding about the unique needs of the school, creating further barriers to support, noting that funding for urban schools far outpaced rural ones and that there was disparity between the school's challenges and the available resources. They expressed concerns that this disparity hindered their ability to provide the best possible education to children and emphasised that while advocacy efforts were underway, there was an immediate need for the community to actively support and take action. Additionally, challenges identified within the school included staff shortages and staff fatigue. Educators discussed how the absence of sufficient staffing not only poses difficulties for other staff but also has a negative impact on the students.

Student-specific challenges

Educators agreed that home life was the biggest challenge the students faced and identified intergenerational trauma as a central component impacting the lives of students and that while parents strived to do their best they were often ill-equipped. This was attributed to a "vicious cycle" of limited resources and inadequate support that adversely affects families. Educators discussed how poverty, addiction and inadequate housing contributed to significant generational trauma in the school population. Further challenges such as student displacement from home were also discussed here as students often experienced "a lot of back and forth" and had to move halfway through the year. The following behaviours in the classroom were identified as manifestations of the challenges students experienced in daily life: defiance, crying, tantrums, aggression. A compounded challenge that was noted included students not acquiring certain skills at home, placing an additional responsibility on the teachers. They felt they had to first focus on basic behaviour and language deficits before they could focus on the academic curriculum. Educators also expressed their concerns regarding absenteeism and the negative impact this has on learning, as well as access to supplementary resources and programmes that are often based on need and attendance. The consequences of absenteeism were seen to be magnified by the fact that students often have to move to another location and enrol in a different school due to their family circumstances. Educators explained that challenges that students in this school face are "multiplicative problems", indicating that the difficulties are deeply interconnected and have a compounding effect.

Teacher challenges

The primary concern shared was that, as educators, they felt unable to effectively cater to the needs of all their students. Educators delved into the emotions of guilt or remorse arising from the perception of "not meeting their [students'] needs" as there were too many things to attend to and a variety of behaviors to address and manage. Concern was expressed for the inability to effectively teach academics due to the high needs of many students. Educators expressed having to play multiple roles beyond being a teacher: "We are a lot of other things before we can actually teach."

A recurring theme that emerged was the prevalence of burnout and feelings of loneliness among the educators. One contributing factor was the lack of opportunities for connection and communication. Given the overwhelming responsibilities they must manage on a daily basis, educators relayed that chances to connect with one another were severely limited. This lack of connection further exacerbated their sense of

isolation and hindered their ability to seek support and camaraderie from their colleagues. The group concurred that participating in this study provided a welcomed opportunity to engage with one another.

Discussion

In addressing the question 'What is the impact of introducing the nurture approach (NA) to a rural and high-needs Canadian school?' data from this case study show that Canadian teachers at a small, primarily Indigenous rural school responded enthusiastically to training and implementation of the NA.

Surveys suggested that educators resonated with the tenants of the NA before and after learning about this framework for intervention. Focus groups held with the school's teachers and support staff shed light on the multifaceted challenges and strengths within the school environment. Key challenges identified included insufficient funding, staff shortages, lack of communication and student-specific difficulties rooted in home life and intergenerational trauma. Despite these obstacles, the school community also recognised several positive aspects, such as the development of compassion and equity among students, mutual support among teachers and the creative, flexible approaches to teaching that accommodate the unique needs of their student population. Furthermore, the importance of routine, advocacy and teacher support emerged as critical areas to meet the diverse needs of its students and staff.

Over the course of the year they spent learning about the NA and the etiology of SEMH in students, educator enthusiasm to learn more about both continued to be high. While it seems that introducing educators to the NA over the course of a series of dedicated professional growth days is possible and desirable, educators were less confident about the application of the NA itself, including the Boxall Profile®. It is clear from survey and focus group data that these educators felt that the NA was a good fit for their school and students, and yet they yearned for more dedicated training to help bolster their own abilities so that they could better support learners. Educators voiced that the NA and Boxall Profile® could provide a structured framework that helps teachers feel more confident and effective in addressing their students' needs. By focusing on actionable, measurable outcomes, educators believed the NA would allow them to create a more supportive and directed learning environment. Currently formal training in the NA is only offered in the UK and at considerable expense. However, this study demonstrates that it has the potential to be adapted and adopted to meet the needs of a unique Canadian population. This is strengthened by the previous research from the province of Quebec, where NA was drawn on to inform Kangaroo Care, a school-based intervention for students with SEMH (Lavoie et al., 2017).

A strength of the NA is the fact that it does not, yet, have strict protocols in terms of its application or implementation. That is, the NA has not been reduced to a specific set of steps or techniques. The fact that it retains a malleability allows it to stretch and grow to meet the needs – social, emotional, cultural or otherwise – of different schools and their communities, like that of Blackfew. As a framework the intention of the NA is similar to clinical programmes in that it aims to improve outcomes for children with exceptional socioemotional and behavioural challenges. It has even been likened to paediatric psychiatric programming (see Cloran et al., 2022a). Clinical programmes are difficult to access and often only accessible to the most severe cases and they often are based on a medical model that keeps patients and clients at arms length. However the NA was designed to be delivered by educators in classrooms. This is especially pertinent to the rural school, which this study shows face additional challenges. Educators perceived the NA fostered a sense of belonging and identity which may serve as a protective factor against the negative impacts of systemic barriers. Perhaps it can be leveraged to implement nurturing, community-driven educational frameworks that address socioemotional needs while reinforcing the strengths of rural schools.

The superpower of the NA is that it is centred on what every good educator sets out to create with students: safe and trusting relationships. Through the many hours spent together in the everyday experience that is school, educators have the ability to form meaningful relationships with pupils that allows them to address their attachment needs. Moreover, as this case student demonstrates, educators desire a way to understand and work with challenging pupils and are highly receptive to

what the NA offers.

This is even more important when considering the primarily Indigenous background of Blackfew school. Systemic failure to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, languages and values into the curriculum contributes to the cultural marginalisation of Indigenous students. The predominantly Eurocentric curriculum in Canadian education has limited Indigenous students' engagement and motivation, making it difficult for them to succeed (Dufresne, 2021). Pressured to conform to mainstream norms, Indigenous students often feel disconnected from their education, which suppresses their identities and contributes to lower graduation rates (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Stagg Peterson et al., 2018, Statistics Canada, 2023).

The construct of 'Indigenisation' has multiple applications and interpretations. As a process it generally describes collaborative efforts to engage with and understand Indigenous values, perspectives and knowledge, weaving these into our everyday practices to "transform spaces, places and hearts" (Wilson, 2018). As Canadian educators contemplate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Final Report (TRC, 2015) efforts are being made to work towards adopting what Ragoonaden calls "culturally responsive pedagogy" (2017). This aims to decolonise curricula by going beyond linear Eurocentric ways of knowing, to recognise the wealth that diversity of experience brings to education. One of the calls to action that resulted from TRC (2015) is to, "develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programmes" (p. 2). Recent research found that more than half of Canadian provinces have responded to the TRC by enacting specific K-12 policies designed to facilitate decolonisation and incorporate Indigenous content in school classrooms (Webb & Pringle, 2022). Research highlights the benefits of creating inclusive learning environments that emphasise a holistic approach (Dufresne, 2021; Toulouse 2016). Holistic education, grounded in the spiritual and cultural identities of Indigenous students, integrates hands-on activities, storytelling and real-life experiences. This contrasts with the compartmentalised Eurocentric frameworks that dominate mainstream education systems (Toulouse, 2016). To foster educational success for Indigenous students, schools must be equipped with the necessary tools and resources to implement culturally relevant and inclusive practices. Without such support, the academic potential of Indigenous students remains constrained and the achievement gap persists (Dufresne, 2021; Malott, 2007).

By promoting a culture of empathy and inclusivity, the NA has the potential to transform school environments. This, however, requires a shift in school culture and substantial investment in training, staffing and resource allocation (Colley, 2009, Syrnyk, 2012). While this case study is certainly only exploratory in nature, it raises important questions about the potential for the NA to be applied 'in-house', especially within rural and marginalised groups. This is specifically interesting when considering the Boxall Profile® – future research may consider its cultural sensitivity as a tool and how it may consider racial trauma. As schools like Blackfew continue to navigate the complex socioemotional needs of their students, the NA could offer a powerful tool for addressing both short and long-term challenges. This study provides a foundation for future studies and potential practical guidance to support the integration of the NA into Canadian educational practices, particularly in underserved and Indigenous communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Focus group questions

Professional growth day 1, September

1. How does the wider community better support this school, its students and teachers?
2. What is teaching in this school like?
3. What are the biggest challenges that students of this school face?
4. How do the early lives of students affect them in the classroom?
5. What do your students need from you as a teacher on a day to day basis?
6. How confident are you in managing difficult behaviour in your classroom?
7. How do you manage the needs of your students'?
8. What questions would you like to have been asked?

Professional growth day 2, October

1. How do you think the NA could benefit your school?
2. What might be the challenges to implementing the NA in your school?
3. What impact is this project having on your whole-school practices?
4. Was there anything we spoke about today that you want to learn more about?

Professional growth day 3, February

1. What impact is the NA having on you?
2. What impact is the NA having on your students, if any?
3. What does applying the NA look like in your day-to-day practice?
4. How do you find using the Boxall Profile®?

Professional growth day 4, May

1. What impact has the NA had on you?
2. What impact has the NA had on the school and students?

3. How might the wider community better support this school, its students and teachers?
4. What is the reality of the NA being an everyday practice in your school?
5. What are the barriers? What needs to happen?
6. What can you do to look after yourself so that you are in sound condition to carry this load for students?
7. What questions would you like to have been asked?

Appendix 2 – Focus group data

To help provide context, herein follows examples of responses from participants who engaged in focus groups. These are organised according to the identified subthemes.

1. How might the nurture approach be received as a whole-school approach?

Advocacy and support

"That's the tricky balance of trying to help people understand the challenges at the school without burying the school at the same time. You know what I mean?"

[A previous principal was very…] "good at asking for money" [and achieved this through] "connections in the community."

"[The school] had a different perception in the community. They were promoting lots of the really cool, exciting things going on."

Routine

"For a lot of students, the school is the only place that they have… a consistent schedule… and they need that. And this is supposed to be their constant… It's hard for us as adults but, like, kids that don't have a regular bedtime, don't brush their teeth, don't have regular mealtimes… they already have such a whirlwind of a day, it'd be nice if, here, we could just have a steady – just steady, simple routine."

"[One] thing that's good about it is, then the student has somebody consistent for three years."

"So maybe even if, you know, they don't have that consistency at home with a parent figure or whatever, at least at school, then it's like the teacher."

"These are the kids that need us here consistently. They need the consistent EAs and teachers, they need it. We rely on it. When you're not there, man does it affect them."

2. How might the nurture approach impact the wellbeing of educators?

Teacher support

"There's just no time built in the day where teachers can talk to each other, can collaborate."

"We never talk. We don't talk."

"We want to find out from you, and we want you to find out from us, you know how we can work better as a team."

"[We] were talking about NVCI training yesterday, and how that really is beneficial… that was five years ago… I think it would be beneficial… doing it frequently."

"Learning about FASD, learning both ADHD, learning about attachment issues, learning about the brain."

3) What benefits and challenges might the nurture approach present?

Freedom to focus on things other than academics

"Sometimes there was, like, pressure. … I don't have a ton of the best evidence for some of these kids come report card time, right, because I spent a lot of time doing this, and we did this, and then we started with that, and then it turned into this, and a little discussion here… but if that's the approach, and then you're kind of not scared to, like, take that freedom and that time to invest into that section of teaching, then it's of benefit to me because sometimes I felt like I had to hide that I took some class time today and talked about this."

"If a student could be able to regulate and show interest and ask questions, and you're piquing

their sense of curiosity just a little if those other curriculum pieces go. But those are the important life skills that you want them to take to middle school and high school and being an adult. I wish that was part of our curriculum."

"Before when it was just, like, no, we have to do this or I'm going to get in trouble, so if you're not going to come with us, then fine, stay back there, but I have to push forward with this. And then... you see so many kids just kind of. ... Left behind."

"And stop feeling guilty for not spending every minute of the day academically... It's emotionally connecting and doing something fun and just building that piece of being silly, and, you know, we're not learning right now, but who cares."

[The NA approach helps you to]

"engage in fun activities with them"

"have breakfast with them."

"slow down" and "do that again."

Sense of belonging and recognition

"And this could be part of their day built in, and they work on some of these types of things, just like the soft exit is where we try to make some friendships and give them a chance to fulfil all of that and then calm down so that they're ready to go outside and leave our building happy instead of leaving our building dysregulated."

"I connected with it [nurture approach] because I'm Metis... Indigenous people always had strong family connections. And it just looked different because their life context was different, and I'm talking about pre-contact and then during contact and then when the country, being Canada, came into play. But because of that interruption of colonisation, all of those behind you, those important pieces... all of those things were what guided the family. ... Those things are the same things that are important to every family, so when we adopted the circle of courage into our school. ... A sense of belonging. We all want to belong. All of those things are important, but it's especially important to this school because of who our students are. So I like what the nurture approach is, but to me, you could also call it the circle of courage."

"In my own students too, like, we talk about so much negative. But, like, there's so much potential in them... so many artists, so many actors, so many... there's so much wonderful potential in them just waiting to be unlocked."

"I've seen what can happen when our students are given the chance to succeed. ... This is just another way that we can give them the support that they need because they are capable. They have so much to give to this community. ... I'm excited to see where this goes."

"Celebrating, never mind tolerating, celebrating every member. And you know, we can't discredit the job we're doing by role modeling that. That is a big learning for these kids."

Guiding focus and uncovering strengths

"You know where you are starting from: it makes it less overwhelming. ... I'm just thinking, okay, he's not safe for himself. He's not safe for others. He's not even engaging in any of the lessons. He's not even respecting boundaries. ... You think, where do I start?... But this makes it more manageable."

"Yeah, and I think that's so valuable because it gives you that starting point where even if you were doing this and it was rushed and it was flawed, you still have a starting point."

"Doing this might help to guide some of those selections that you make on the student profiles, but I think that this gives you more usable information that you can actually take action on."

"If you do the whole class, and you start seeing some common through lines, then you can plan things and organise things in a certain way."

"It would guide your classroom I think. If you had big behavior, you had challenging behaviors in our classroom, you know, you could say, overall, a lot of students or most students, many students in this classroom, struggle with this specific area."

"You could even just, like, make charts and stuff where you're, like, let's track how many times we do this. It brings it to the kids' focus and attention."

"Success builds success, so you have that starting

point. You're seeing those little achievements building to that goal, and then, like, you start to feel like actually what I'm doing is having an impact, right."

"If you charted it somehow and put it in some kind of programme... it would also help identify the strengths of your classes, too."

"You can step back and generalise, this is still – even though it's very specific, you could still step back and say, you know, our students are, you know, whatever. Their strengths are this, and their challenges are this area, which we know, but sometimes it's good just to have – proof."

"Say the student... I'm looking, and, okay, her area of strength is this, her biggest gap from – you know, if you want to look at it that way for prioritising where she's got the biggest gap to be where she should be."

"You can talk to the whole group."

"It gives us common language."

"I felt like it made me a better teacher, and I felt like – you know? I felt heard and I felt like I could actually do something about it or help... and it helps your mental health too."

"Okay, this is what I can – I can pick these certain things, and that's what I'll work on." From the few that I did, like, one that I was able to prepare, it was interesting that there were, like, big leaps forward in some areas and small steps back and other ones, but I like that part of it and it kind of just reinforces that relationship safety, behaviour component, because I think, internally, I can be thinking, "We've got to get these academic levels higher and higher," but then it reminds that I can't do that. [unclear 00:04:51] and I think I've done a pretty good job of, like, trying [unclear 00:04:53] this, the social emotional component, but I'm always learning more. But, yeah, it definitely shows me that, like, that social emotional component for, like, progressing in different areas."

"I feel more confident with the nurture approach... I knew that I can sit in the morning at the table, sit and make toast and them gather around me and, you know, they come and say, "Can I have another toast? Can I have Cheez Whiz?"... I had one little boy come in after the weekend and he was breaking down. I can hear in his voice, he goes, "I had something happened to me on the weekend, I felt like no one cared about me," and he started to cry, and I said, "Well, what happened?" and he told me that he was playing with his cousins and they threw a mattress on him and it almost broke his neck, he said. So, I gave him a hug and I said, "I care about you." He goes, like, "Then, it's just you." ... And, at the end of the day, I found a heart on my desk yesterday from that little one that said no one cared about him, and he said, "Ms. [unclear 00:08:34], you are the best."

Divisions

"We do not receive enough support, and that is because of the funding model that's being used."

[We need a] "different model of funding that takes into account the "needs" of the student population."

"While I know our division is trying to support us, I don't think unless you've worked here, you really get what our needs are. I think we're fairly unique compared to other schools."

"How do you get it across that all our needs are different, and have people understand? You know, you need some kind of data to support that, obviously, but that is not factored into the equation. ... We don't have a chance to get our needs across. We're not able to advocate in a way that is received."

"... divisions in the cities are light years ahead."

[cities have] "... much more resources."

"When it comes back down to action, nobody is willing to do that, and that's what our community needs to do. They need to make it fair for everybody and give everybody a fair chance."

"There are a lot of things and events and stuff that every school is responsible for, but a lot of the other elementary schools have double or triple the staff. So, we have to have that completed the same as them, but they have triple the staff."

[There is a lack of]

"... skilled, experienced guidance teachers."

"... access to substitutes."

"There's some of us that really push through, and there's some that are just not here, and the ones of us that push through. Then we get sick, right?"

"They [students] need the consistent EAs and teachers, they need it. It's – we rely on it. When you're not there, man does it affect them."

Student-specific challenges

"So many of the barriers to kids having success are things that are happening outside of our building, which I don't have a huge [control over]."

"I can't change what goes on at home and, no matter how many things we put in place... if they're still coming to school hungry, if they're still coming to school traumatised, if they're still coming to school with, you know, other things that are out of my control, then things are not going to get better."

"They [Parents] don't have the capabilities."

"So many of our [indigenous] families are separated from their extended families here, because they've moved from communities to come here, so they've lost out on a huge social support system. A lot of, you know, things that would ground them, things that would help them, they're missing here, so they're at a disadvantage here. And, of course, they're struggling. You know, everything is harder here."

"They're scared. They're crying because they're scared. They don't know. They just feel like – they just don't feel like they're safe yet."

[Students are]

"not getting their needs met"

"hungry or tired"

[Struggle with] "... expressing that need."

"If they're not being modelled things, if things are not being modelled for them at home."

"They don't know how to sit and talk to adults when they're eating at the table, or those little things. I think that is a big factor. Yeah, it's not modelled. They're not having those conversations before they come to school."

"We have students coming in who don't speak yet in kindergarten. I think about 95% of the kindergartens this year have some kind of speech issue. And then, it just grows. It just rolls on through."

"There's kids that we have on our class list, we haven't seen them."

"Every year, there's kids that missed, like, months of school."

"With Reading Recovery, it goes with absentees... if a kid is absent a few times, you're gone off the list, new kid comes on. And so that other person's off the list".

"Because sometimes it's that there's work somewhere else, or somebody's sick in the family so they went somewhere, or there's a funeral somewhere so they're gone for a couple of weeks. They may end up moving to the place that they went, or maybe they'll come back in a month or so. ... Because there is a lot of back and forth, too, where kids are here, then they've moved somewhere for half a year... and then they come back."

"Because it's not additive. ... It's not like oh, they have three problems, so that equals three. It's like, no, they have this problem, times this problem, times this problem, and it comes out to 27."

Teacher challenges

"There's some behavior that takes me away from, you know, providing for the whole class, so that's a big challenge. Yeah, trying to, you know, deal, you know, with certain students, and then not having that time for the other students."

"It's difficult because I feel like I'm going to cry, not because I can't handle it, but because I feel like I'm not meeting their needs, you know, the kids?"

"My biggest struggle, my biggest challenge, is not feeling guilty for the kids who are regulated, who

are there to learn, who could do this all day long, and they're getting denied opportunity, in my eyes."

"As a teacher, we want – we're trying to actually teach, but before we do, we have to do… everything else."

"We have to caregive."

"I feel like a parent."

"It's really important and it's a benefit that we have the kids in our room for two, three years sometimes because we do get to know them."

"Some of the ones, if they had a new teacher every year, I can't imagine how rough [it is] to reestablish those connections and that trust. Every year, they wouldn't really be starting much learning until like December."

"I'm fun. I'm loving. Like, kids always loved me. They always came to me. You know, they trusted me… but here, it's – they're not. Maybe because I'm new. Who knows?… I just feel like I'm having a hard time, you know, making that connection, and having them trust me and come to me. … I find that so difficult – not making that connection."

"I actually am loving this right now. I feel like we don't do this enough. I'm going to cry. I feel like we don't have a chance to express this. This week, I had a student disclose – and I had told our admin, and then I went back to work. And there's nothing there – like I'm still dealing with that. Can't sleep. And this student has been looked after, but look at me, and I've been a mess all week. And there's nothing like – okay, so I just found out a bunch of terrible things about one of my kids, students, and nobody's checked in with me. Nobody. I haven't told anybody because I feel like I shouldn't, and there's nothing. I am hurting. I don't even know how that student is right now."

"I don't think people are letting that out… I haven't felt like I've been able to."

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.

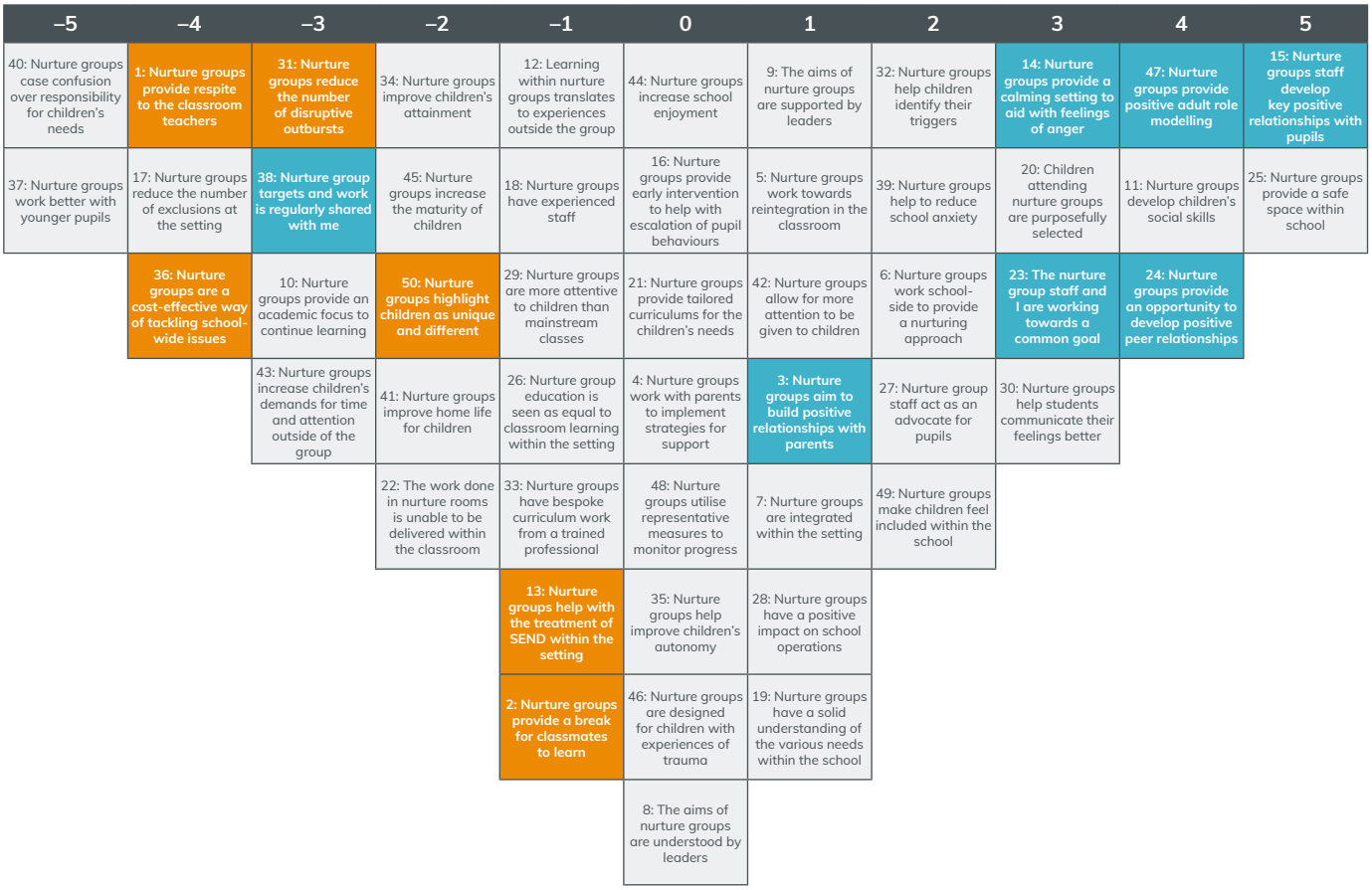

Figure 2. Factor visualisation for Factor 2

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	

"An exploration of trauma-informed practice in Irish primary schools: experiences from teachers, principals and educational psychologists

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, trauma-informed practice has integrated into education systems via efforts to provide early intervention and to mitigate against the effects of childhood trauma and adversity. This research explores the potential role of nurture as a structured approach to trauma-informed practice in primary school settings. Insights were gathered from key personnel in the education system. Twelve participants were recruited which included four teachers, four principals and four educational psychologists. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using multi-perspective interpretative phenomenological analysis. In the absence of a top-down framework for trauma-informed practice in education, the findings highlight the crucial role that nurture can play in supporting children affected by trauma, positioning it as a viable and meaningful approach to trauma-informed practice in schools.

Introduction

This paper explores the role of trauma-informed practice in primary school settings, with particular attention to the growing implementation of nurture and its alignment with trauma-informed principles. This research was conducted across primary schools in Ireland. Recent global events, including war, the Covid-19 pandemic and the rising prevalence of childhood mental health issues, have compelled schools in Ireland and internationally to adapt and respond to increasing levels of childhood trauma and adversity. While trauma-informed practice has gained significant international attention, its application within the Irish educational context is still emerging. Despite growing interest in trauma-informed practice, there is a notable lack of research in Irish schools (Delaney, 2020; Hickey, 2020). This study was therefore motivated by the need to explore trauma-informed practice within Irish primary schools.

Literature review

Childhood is a critical period for learning and development (Sydnor et al., 2025). However, some children are exposed to adverse or potentially traumatic experiences, which may increase the risk of a range of negative outcomes. Since the

seminal study by Felitti et al. (1998) highlighted the association between cumulative exposure to adverse childhood experiences and poorer outcomes in adulthood, there has been increased public awareness of the potential long-term impacts of childhood adversity. While this cross-sectional study identified significant associations with outcomes such as chronic disease, mental illness and adverse social outcomes (eg incarceration, unemployment and substance misuse), it did not imply that such outcomes are inevitable. Despite methodological criticisms, the study prompted further research emphasising the widespread prevalence of childhood adversity across gender, age, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Hughes et al., 2017; Merrick et al., 2018). Subsequent longitudinal and quasi-experimental research has strengthened this evidence base, demonstrating that childhood maltreatment increases the risk of later mental health difficulties, including depression and anxiety (Baldwin et al., 2023; Li et al., 2016).

While definitions vary, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7) defined trauma as an "event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing." Although prevalence estimates suggest that approximately 60 per cent of children experience at least one adverse childhood experience (Madigan et al., 2023), exposure to adversity does not necessarily result in trauma. Rather, adverse childhood experiences are best understood as risk factors that may increase vulnerability to trauma and other negative outcomes. In response to growing recognition of these risks, international efforts over the past two decades have increasingly focused on developing systems that are "trauma-informed" (Lang et al., 2015).

Trauma-informed practice

There is growing recognition of the levels of childhood trauma and adversity experienced by children. In response, early intervention has been increasingly prioritised across many public service sectors, including education (Thomas et al., 2019). Initially pioneered in the United States by Harris and Fallot (2001) and later further developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), trauma-informed practice is a model of care and guiding framework designed to support individuals impacted by trauma. SAMHSA, an agency within the United States Department of Health and Human Services, has played a leading role in defining and promoting trauma-informed practice internationally. In 2014, SAMHSA published a comprehensive framework outlining the definitions, underlying principles, assumptions and implementation guidance for trauma-informed practice.

Within this framework, trauma-informed practice is grounded in four key assumptions, commonly referred to as the '4 Rs': It 'realises' the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths to recovery, it 'recognises' the signs of trauma, it 'responds' by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices to actively 'resist re-traumatisation'. Moreover, trauma-informed practice is centred on the six core principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment and respect for diversity (SAMHSA, 2014). According to Harris and Fallot (2001) and SAMHSA (2014), developing a trauma-informed approach requires integration of trauma-informed principles into multiple levels of the organisation including governance and leadership, policy, the physical environment, engagement and involvement, cross sector collaboration, screening and assessment, training and workforce development, progress monitoring and quality assurance, financing and evaluation. Although SAMHSA emphasises that its guidance document is not a prescribed checklist, it offers structured guidance for organisations, including schools, to support the effective implementation of trauma-informed practice.

A multi-tiered whole-school approach to trauma-informed practice is recommended (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016; NCTSN, 2017; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). A multi-tiered approach is grounded in early identification of risk, varied levels of intervention support designed to teach skills and prevent more serious problems, and includes ongoing data-driven evaluation of progress and response (Chafouleas et al., 2016). This approach allows the integration of trauma-informed practice

across a continuum of support. For example, tier 1 is a universal approach that focuses on preventative measures for all students, ranging from whole-school training, trauma screening, or classroom training for students. Tier 2, or targeted support, is aimed at students who are at risk and may benefit from specialised psychoeducational group interventions. For tier 3, the students with the highest level of need are identified and provided with individualised support, typically delivered by educational psychologists or specific school staff (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016).

While literature is still emerging, there has been promising evidence for how implementing trauma-informed practice in schools addresses the needs of students impacted by trauma. Research has observed improvements in staff awareness of trauma (Dorado et al., 2016; McConnico et al., 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Sweetman, 2022), academic performance (Dorado et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2015; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021), emotional regulation (Dorado et al., 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016), relationship building (Dorado et al., 2016; Wilson-Ching & Berger, 2023), fewer behavioural problems (Dorado et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2015; Sweetman, 2022), and reduced trauma-related symptoms, eg adjustment, affect regulation, intrusions, attachment, disassociation, guardedness and shutting down (Crosby et al., 2015; Dorado et al., 2016).

Despite these findings, the lack of clearly defined concrete guidelines impact the successful implementation of trauma-informed practice in schools (Baker et al., 2016; Carter & Blanch, 2019; Maynard et al., 2019). Although frameworks like the SAMHSA principles offer general guidance, they require schools to adapt these principles to their unique contexts. This lack of clear operationalisation makes it difficult for teachers to translate training into daily practice, leaving many unsure of the specific steps needed to create a truly trauma-informed school environment. Consequently, the lack of clear definitions, inconsistent terminology and variability in implementation pose significant challenges evaluating the effectiveness of trauma-informed practice in education (Avery et al., 2020; Berger, 2019; Cohen & Barron, 2021; Maynard et al., 2019). As such, school-based interventions such as nurture have emerged in the context of trauma-informed practice.

Nurture

Nurture is a key school-based intervention aligned with trauma-informed principles. Developed by Marjorie Boxall in 1969, nurture was developed to address the rising social, emotional and behavioural needs of children in schools as a result of deprived healthy nurturance in early life (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). Nurture is underpinned by attachment theory, which highlights the importance of secure attachments as a protective factor in the social and emotional development in children (Bowlby, 2008, Linsell et al., 2019). As such, nurture aim to support the development of secure attachments with Nurture practitioners or teachers within a supportive, home-like environment.

The implementation of nurture in schools is guided by six key principles which are outlined in **table 1**. In a typical nurture group, there are between six and 12 students, facilitated by two staff members called nurture practitioners who have completed nurture training (nurtureuk, 2019). Students are screened and selected to attend nurture groups using the Boxall Profile® assessment measure which assesses their social, emotional and behavioural needs (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998).

Table 1. Six Principles of Nurture *(Lucas, Insley, & Buckland, 2006)*

Principle 1	Children's learning is understood developmentally
Principle 2	The classroom offers a safe base
Principle 3	The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing
Principle 4	Language is a vital means of communication
Principle 5	All behaviour is communication
Principle 6	The importance of transitions in children's lives

Nurture is growing in popularity, with research describing promising outcomes related to improved social and emotional skills (Cloran et

al., 2022; Cooper & Whitebread 2007; Hughes & Schlosser, 2014; Kearney, 2005; Jones et al., 2025; Macpherson & Phillips, 2021; Lyons, 2017; Sanders, 2007; Sloan et al., 2016; Sloan et al., 2020), school attendance (Sanders, 2007; Sloan et al. 2016), school attainment (Reynolds et al., 2009; Sanders, 2007; Seth-Smith et al., 2010), as well as improved parent-child relationships (Ofsted, 2011; Pyle, 2015) and whole-school ethos (Binnie & Allen 2008; Cooper et al., 2001). Jones et al. (2025) conducted a narrative synthesis of qualitative studies examining the effectiveness of nurture groups and found that much of the existing evidence relies on outcomes measured using the diagnostic section of the Boxall Profile®. This reliance highlights the promising but methodologically limited nature of the evidence base and underscores the need for stronger methodological designs when evaluating the effectiveness of nurture interventions.

The success of nurture groups has prompted the development of broader nurturing approaches. Nurture has evolved from targeted interventions designed to support a small number of children through nurture groups to whole-school nurturing approaches (Kearney & Nowek, 2019). In 2009, a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE) proposed that nurture should be embedded as a universal approach to address the wider needs of the pupil population (HMIE, 2009). Subsequently, Education Scotland published a national framework for nurturing approaches, providing guidance on the implementation and self-evaluation of whole-school nurturing practice (Education Scotland, 2017). According to Education Scotland, a nurturing approach places a strong emphasis on the school environment and on balancing care and challenge, incorporating attunement, warmth and connection alongside structure, high expectations and a focus on achievement and attainment (Education Scotland, 2017, p. 13). Emerging evidence has demonstrated promising support for the implementation of whole-school nurturing approaches in schools (Nolan, 2021; 2023).

Nurture as an approach to trauma-informed practice

While nurture was not explicitly designed as part of a trauma-informed approach, it shares many key components with trauma-informed practice and can be offered as part of a whole-school approach to trauma-informed practice. Both nurture and trauma-informed practice share the importance of early intervention, an understanding of the underlying reasons of behaviour, the importance of prioritising relationships and a recognition that poor outcomes can be mitigated with the appropriate supports (Education Scotland, 2018, Nolan et al., 2021). **Table 2** provides an overview of how the principles of nurture (Lucas, Insley, & Buckland, 2006) align with the assumptions of trauma-informed practice as defined by SAMHSA (2014), making nurture a suitable component of a whole-school approach to trauma-informed practice.

Educational policy context

In recent years, trauma-informed practice has been embedded in educational policies across parts of the United Kingdom, with nurture explicitly referenced as a key approach within these frameworks. In Scotland, nurture appears in the national frameworks such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government, 2014), *Applying nurture as a Whole-School Approach* (Education Scotland, 2016), *Included, Engaged and Involved, Part 2* (Scottish Government, 2011) and *Better Relationships, Better Learning and Better Behaviour* (Scottish Government, 2013). The Department of Education in Northern Ireland currently funds 62 primary schools through the Nurture in Education Programme, providing both financial and professional support for nurture group provision. The Department of Education's document *Nurture Group Provision – Guidance for Schools* (Department of Education, 2024) outlines the framework for the funding, implementation and operation of nurture in primary school settings, explicitly endorsing the nurture in education programme as a "trauma-informed and strengths-based model".

In Ireland, nurture has gained significant traction but without an equivalent policy foundation. The largest structured initiative has been the Educate Together Nurture Schools Programme (2020-2023), funded by Salesforce and Rethink Ireland. Of note, Educate Together schools are state-funded, multi-denominational, co-educational schools in Ireland. There are 97 Educate Together primary schools in total (Educate Together, 2025). The Educate Together Nurture Schools Programme involved training teachers to become nurture practitioners

Table 2. Mapping nurture and the Six Principles of Nurture (Lucas, Insley, & Buckland, 2006) to SAMHSA's 4Rs of trauma-informed practice *(SAMHSA, 2014)*

SAMHSA's 4Rs	Nurture principles	Application to nurture
1. **Realise:** Realise the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery.	**Nurture principle 1**: Children's learning is understood developmentally	• Nurture is founded on the understanding that early experiences shape social, emotional and cognitive development. • Nurture acknowledges that many children struggle due to disruptions in attachment or trauma. • Nurture realises that many children require structured, attachment-based environments to thrive.
2. **Recognise:** Recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff and others involved with the system.	**Nurture principle 5:** All behaviour is communication **Nurture principle 6:** The importance of transitions in children's lives	• The Boxall Profile® is used to screen and assess social, emotional and behavioural development. This ensures that teachers can recognise the impact of trauma on behaviour. • The Boxall Profile® supports teachers to interpret student behaviour as communication, rather than viewing students as defiant.
3. **Respond:** Respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices.	**Nurture principle 2**: The classroom offers a safe base **Nurture principle 3:** The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing	• Nurture is utilised as a response to student trauma by facilitating safe, predictable environments that replicate the home. • Nurture practitioners act as attachment figures who model positive interactions and co-relational strategies, helping students to develop these skills.
4. **Resist re-traumatisation:** Resist re-traumatisation of children, as well as the adults who care for them.	**Nurture principle 4:** Language is a vital means of communication	• Nurture actively resists re-traumatisation by avoiding punitive approaches and instead fostering acceptance, emotional safety and predictable routines. There is an emphasis on helping children to develop trusting relationships and promote positive relationships rather than reinforcing cycles of distress.

and delivered nurture to 2,250 students, across 25 Educate Together schools. An evaluation of the programme reported improvements in attendance, self-confidence, literacy and numeracy, teacher-student relationships and teacher capacity to support students with socio-emotional and behavioural needs (Educate Together, 2023). The findings also highlighted the benefit of rolling out nurture across the Educate Together school network in the future should adequate resources become available (Educate Together, 2023).

Despite its growing popularity in Irish classrooms, the Department of Education and Youth provides no formal guidance or support for nurture. The Department of Education and Youth references nurture briefly in the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2019), which recognises nurture as appropriate support for students with additional and/or complex needs.

Nurture is becoming increasingly common in Irish schools, especially within schools included in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme, which supports schools in disadvantaged communities (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Schools included in this programme receive additional funding and resources such as reduced teacher-student ratio, enhanced access to a school meals programme, access to Home School Community Liaison services, access to the school completion programme, targeted literacy and numeracy support, and increased time allocation from the National Educational Psychological Service. Research suggests that students in DEIS schools are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, belong to minority groups and face challenges such as homelessness, food poverty, trauma and the effects of drug use in their communities (Devine et al., 2024). Without guidance from the Department of Education and

Youth, schools have been compelled to adapt their school funding and resources to facilitate nurture. Nurturing Schools Ireland and Nurture International are currently the only two known providers of nurture training in Ireland. While the exact number of schools that have accessed these services is unknown, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Irish schools have self-funded nurture training through these providers. The financial costs associated with such training mean that only schools with sufficient financial resources are able to implement nurture in their schools, eg DEIS schools, leading to significant inequities in access to nurture provision across Irish schools.

Methodology

Sampling and recruitment

The study used purposeful sampling, whereby four primary schools adopting trauma-informed practice were recruited. For the purposes of this research, primary schools adopting trauma-informed practice included:

1) a primary school that has completed professional development related to trauma-informed practice;

AND a school that has an established nurture group. This includes;

2a) schools enrolled in the Educate Together Nurture Schools Programme

OR

2b) schools that independently set up their own nurture group.

Participants and school demographics

A total of 12 participants were recruited for the study, forming triads from four different primary school settings. Educational psychologists in this study were employed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) as part of the Department of Education and Youth. These schools varied in size, status, context and geographical location. Each triad consisted of a teacher, a principal and an educational psychologist from each school, totalling four teachers, four principals and four educational psychologists. Each participant was assigned an anonymised alphanumeric code. The letter component denoted the participant's professional role (P = Principal, T = Teacher, N = NEPS psychologist), while the numerical component indicated the school from which they were recruited, ranging from School 1 to School 4. For example, the principal from the first school was coded as P1. A summary of participant and school demographics is provided in **Tables 3 and 4**.

Ethical approval

The study was granted ethical approval from Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). Further ethical approval was sought from the NEPS Research Ethics Committee (NREC) as the study included NEPS personnel as participants. Given the sensitive nature of the study, precautions were taken to protect participants from distress. In some instances, talking about the lived experiences of supporting children through trauma may result in secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020; Diehm et al., 2019; Hydon et al., 2015). As such, a distress and disclosure protocol was developed

Table 3. School demographic information

School	Status	Description	School ethos	2023/2024 enrolment numbers	Training received
School 1	DEIS Rural	Co-educational national school	Catholic	113	• Nurturing Schools Ireland • RP Connect – Restorative Practices
School 2	DEIS Band 1	Co-educational senior national school	Catholic	151	• Nurturing Schools Ireland • TINT Education – Trauma-informed practice
School 3	DEIS Band 1	Co-educational senior national school	Catholic	166	• Nurturing Schools Ireland • TINT Education – Trauma-informed practice
School 4	Non-DEIS	Co-educational national school	Educate Together	203	• Nurturing Schools Ireland • TINT Education – Trauma-informed practice

Table 4. Participant demographic information

Participant code	Gender	Current role	Number of years' experience in current role
School 1			
P1	Female	Principal	6 years
T1	Female	Mainstream class teacher	20 years
N1	Female	Educational psychologist	15 years
School 2			
P2	Male	Principal	20 years
T2	Female	Nurture teacher	2 years
N2	Male	Educational psychologist	5 years
School 3			
P3	Female	Principal	15 years
T3	Female	Mainstream class teacher	7 years
N3	Female	Educational psychologist	14 years
School 4			
P4	Female	Deputy/Acting principal	6 years
T4	Female	Mainstream class teacher/ nurture teacher	2 years
N4	Female	Educational psychologist	19 years

through adaptation of Dempsey et al. (2016). It aimed to safeguard participants from experiencing emotional distress and to respond appropriately if a participant disclosed sensitive or personal information during the course of the interview.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews between April 2024 and January 2025, developed using the five-step approach by Kallio et al. (2016). Interviews were offered face-to-face in their school setting or via the online platform, Microsoft Teams to suit the participants' preferences and availability. Four interviews were carried out in person in the school setting and eight were carried out online on Microsoft Teams. The duration of the semi-structured interviews ranged between 30 and 65 minutes. Each interview was recorded using an audio recording device and then transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were then uploaded to NVIVO 12, a qualitative data management programme. The data were analysed in line with the principles of multi-perspective interpretative phenomenological analysis research (Larkin et al., 2019; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011). **Table 5** provides an overview of each step.

Table 5. Summary of data analysis process

Steps	Data analysis process
1.	**Reading and re-reading:** This step served to familiarise and immerse the researcher into the data. The researcher also listened to the audio recording of each interview.
2.	**Exploratory note taking:** This step involved recording initial reactions to the transcript by creating descriptive, linguistic and conceptual notes. Descriptive notes summarised the explicit meaning of what the participant said; linguistic notes described the specific use of language used by the participant, and conceptual notes took the form of questions to consider different and potential meanings (Smith et al., 2009).
3.	**Formulating experiential statements:** This step involved creating concise statements of what emerged as important in the exploratory notes associated with the corresponding portion of the transcript. Statements were grounded in the data while also showcasing the conceptual meaning of the text (Smith & Nizza, 2022).
4.	**Finding connections and clustering experiential statements into personal experiential themes (PETs):** This step was carried out by printing the list of experiential themes and cutting them into pieces of paper so each experiential statement was on a separate piece of paper. They were laid out on a large surface allowing the researcher to cluster the statements that were similar or connected in some way. Once complete, this step was repeated on NVIVO where each experiential statement was organised by their participant code and PET number using the node function, eg N1_Theme1 represented the first PET from the NEPS psychologist assigned to school 1.
5.	**Naming the personal experiential themes and organising them in a table:** Once experiential statements were clustered into groups they were organised into a table and named as PETs.

6.	**Repeat stages 2-5 for each transcript**
7.	**Working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes across cases:** This step involved cross-case analysis of each participant group (teachers, principals and NEPS psychologists) where similar PETs were grouped together to form group experiential themes (GETs). Thus, each participant group had a distinct set of GETs relevant to their experiences.
8.	**Across-group analysis**: In line with the principles of multi-perspective IPA research (Larkin et al., 2019; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), an additional step was included in which the researcher created three overarching themes with subsequent subthemes based on GETs from each participant group. This process involved identifying convergences and divergences across each set of participant group GETs.

Results

As this research is drawn from a section of the first author's doctoral thesis, two themes relevant to the present study are discussed: (1) Tailoring trauma-informed approaches to individual school needs and (2) Striving for trauma-informed practice within challenging systemic conditions. Theme 2 has two subthemes: (1) Failure to recognise trauma and (2) Resource Limitations.

Regardless of school context, participants recounted the significant role of nurture as an effective approach to trauma-informed practice within their schools. This was most clearly articulated by T2, who described nurture as the "fastest working intervention I've seen in 20 years". To ensure its efficacy, teachers and principals emphasised the importance of tailoring nurture to their individual school contexts. However, participants also reported a notable lack of systemic acknowledgement of trauma, which was further compounded by limited resources.

Tailoring trauma-informed approaches to individual school needs

Familiarity with the wider school context was an important factor in adopting trauma-informed practice. This theme emerged most strongly in DEIS settings, where intergenerational trauma was greater. Principals reported having a deep-rooted understanding of the trauma experienced within their communities. Both principals from DEIS schools referenced student trauma related to family suicide, community violence, addiction, parental separation, homelessness and children witnessing violence. As P3 noted, "we would be in one of the most disadvantaged places in Ireland... it's a very difficult place, trauma has always been a feature of this community."

Consequently, there was a clear commitment among schools to align trauma-informed practice with their individual contexts. As P2 explained, "everyone's school context is different, so everything that works there might not work here, and similarly, what works here might not work there." This recognition informed P2's approach in setting up a new nurture group, prompting them to visit several schools with established nurture provision. Observing different nurture rooms across diverse school contexts was essential in enabling them to tailor the model to the needs of his own school.

Principals in the study demonstrated a strong commitment to adopting trauma-informed practice in response to urgent needs within their schools. They were required to take a proactive approach in adapting existing resources to meet these needs. This involved actions such as reorganising staff to support nurture provision, facilitating shared teaching practices and whole-school nurture approaches, sourcing specialised professional development for staff, revising school policies to reflect trauma-informed practice principles and allocating school funding to trauma-informed initiatives. As P3 explained, "If I was waiting for the Department of Education and Youth to say yes, you can have a nurture room... I'd be waiting."

Striving for trauma-informed practice in challenging systemic conditions

Failure to recognise trauma

An overarching theme reflected by participants was the lack of acknowledgement of trauma at a systemic level, a concern that was consistent across all school contexts. Principals in DEIS settings, in particular, noted a significant lack of departmental recognition of the extent of trauma within their communities. This was most eloquently illustrated by P2 noting that;

One of the requests that we have is that they

[Department of Education and Youth] acknowledge that certain communities around the country have a greater sense of disadvantage and as a result, have a bigger, trauma piece to do….It was very frustrating hearing X [Minister of the Department of Education and Youth] saying that there are disadvantaged children in every school. Yes, of course there is, but there are X [school population] really disadvantaged children in this school.

This frustration was also reflected in the DEIS programme, which aims to provide better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion. Principals from DEIS school settings noted that the current DEIS model was insufficient in meeting the needs of schools. For example, P1 stated that; "I'm in a DEIS school for 27 years and they're throwing money at something and they're not seeing it. We're not breaking the cycle…. The system is, it's almost, it's terrible to say this, but it's almost set up to fail."

This lack of acknowledgement was also reflected in school policies such as the Whole School Evaluation process which is a department initiative to evaluate the effectiveness of each school's self-evaluation process. The school self-evaluation process encourages schools to identify and improve areas for development which takes account of their own school context. However, T4 noted that while these initiatives were appreciated, their aim to prioritise trauma-informed practice was rejected with the view to prioritise specific subjects instead; "We had a Whole School Evaluation and they said we had to focus on Irish, so we're focusing on Irish, but it was meant to be trauma-informed practice".

There was also an appreciation of the level of responsibility schools and their staff must hold in relation to trauma that is not acknowledged at a systemic level. According to N2, schools are now expected to be "all things to all people". He reflected on how schools are silently carrying the weight of addressing trauma in schools, often without acknowledgment or additional resources. He highlighted how schools adapt their staff allocation to facilitate full-time nurture groups, they take on home responsibilities such as washing students' uniforms, and they are now expected to schedule counselling sessions for students under the new Department of Education and Youth's student counselling initiative. N4 further emphasised the lack of systemic recognition for teacher wellbeing and adequate support for the emotional impact of trauma. She noted that compassion fatigue among school staff is frequent but often overlooked as a priority in attempts to address trauma in schools.

Resource limitations

Alongside this systemic gap, participants identified the lack of resources to adopt trauma-informed practice and nurture as a further subtheme. All schools in this study reallocated staff such as their special education teachers to facilitate nurture groups either on a full-time or part-time basis. Recognising this situation is less than ideal, schools had to alter their terminology for policy makers to justify having a nurture practitioner as an additional special education teaching resource. For example, T2 stated that "if the inspector was to arrive to the door, we would say this is resource and try and justify it in another way".

Further to this, schools wished for greater opportunities and funding for specialised professional development on trauma. There was a consensus from all participants that professional development was essential to embed trauma-informed practice into school culture. However, schools grappled to source funding for professional development noting that without DEIS funding, it is not possible. T1 described neighbouring schools without DEIS status struggling to fund professional development training.

They're fundraising to keep on the lights and the heating, we are too. But we also have the funding that it is available to us to use for certain things… If schools don't have that available to them, they just don't have it. And without the training, you're at nothing.

The lack of resources also extended to support from educational psychologists. Participants expressed the significant limitations of the National Educational Psychological Service in supporting students impacted by trauma. While schools valued the role of educational psychologists, their allocated time was significantly limited which in turn impacted their level of support to schools. T1 reported that "our psychologist is very supportive. But she's swamped… like that we only have so

many days of [allocated] support, there's only so much we can do". In the absence of such support and resources, schools must adapt existing structures, often limiting their capacity to provide comprehensive, trauma-informed practice for students affected by trauma.

Discussion

Nurture as a structured approach to trauma-informed practice

The findings of this research indicate that school teams view nurture as a valuable and structured approach to trauma-informed practice in schools, however, they report insufficient resources to adequately support its implementation. Although nurture is not explicitly designed as a trauma-informed approach, it inherently incorporates principles of trauma-informed practice that place emphasis on early intervention, understanding and recognising behaviours associated with trauma and fostering relationships to mitigate adverse childhood experiences (Education Scotland, 2018). **Table 2** presents further detail on how the core principles underpinning nurture align with trauma-informed practice.

In this study, there was an overwhelming recognition that nurture was essential to meet the needs of the students, with principals prioritising their funding for staff professional development, nurture group resources, as well as reallocating staff from positions such as special education teaching to facilitate full-time and part-time nurture groups. In some cases, the perceived effectiveness of the nurture group also extended to whole-class practices, highlighting its popularity in primary school settings. In areas of greater social disadvantage such as DEIS schools, participants recognised nurture as a critical component in their school context. Throughout the literature, nurture groups have shown promising outcomes for students facing social, emotional and behavioural challenges (Hughes & Schlosser, 2014; Sloan et al., 2020); however, evidence of effectiveness is not consistently demonstrated across studies and further methodologically rigorous research is required (Jones et al., 2025). In the vein of trauma-informed practice, nurture recognises that without secure attachments, children's abilities to soothe themselves, regulate their emotions and form relationships are significantly impacted resulting in a myriad of challenges (Linsell et al., 2019). As such, nurture recognises that children without secure attachments are not regulated to engage with academic learning (Binnie & Allen, 2008; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; MacKay et al., 2010; Reynolds et al., 2009; Sanders, 2007). Therefore, each school in this study advocated for greater systemic support from the Department of Education and Youth to recognise the effectiveness of nurture in meeting the social and emotional needs of students.

Presently, schools in Ireland are establishing nurture groups without formal guidance from the Department of Education and Youth. Findings from this study indicate that participating schools identified a clear need for greater support for students who experience adversity. Within this context, nurture emerged as a potential whole-school, trauma-informed approach through which such needs might be addressed. While it may be advantageous to introduce trauma-informed practice in its optimal form, as outlined by the SAMHSA framework (2014), it is critical to acknowledge that nurture has already established itself as a viable trauma-informed approach within the Irish educational system. To implement nurture effectively, schools will require substantial resources and a thoughtful reallocation of existing resources. One principal articulated that the request to the Department of Education and Youth is not to "re-invent the wheel", but rather for the provision of support for an initiative that is already operational and has demonstrated efficacy. Consequently, this study points to the broader application of nurture as an approach to trauma-informed practice and advocates for education systems internationally to do the same.

Educational policy

The findings of this study raise the question whether nurture could be embedded in educational policy both in Ireland and internationally, as a structured approach to trauma-informed practice. Given the considerable ambiguity and variation in how trauma-informed practice is currently interpreted and implemented across education systems worldwide (Baker et al., 2016; Carter & Blanch, 2019; Maynard et al., 2019), nurture offers a framework that schools could potentially adopt with consistency and fidelity. Embedding nurture within educational policy at both national and

international levels would help ensure that trauma-informed principles are applied effectively across diverse school contexts, reducing inconsistencies that arise from broad interpretation.

Limitations and future research

The aim of this research was to explore the use of nurture as an approach to trauma-informed practice in primary school settings. While it included key personnel involved in the education system, such as teachers, principals and educational psychologists, it did not incorporate the perspectives of other important stakeholders, including children, parents and other school staff, eg home school liaison officers, special education teachers or special needs assistants. Further research including these key perspectives would provide greater insight into the adoption of trauma-informed practice in primary school settings.

Conclusion

This research explored the use of nurture as an approach to trauma-informed practice in primary school settings. The study highlighted how the core principles of nurture align with trauma-informed practice and found strong support from schools for its effectiveness. Based on these findings, this study advocates for educational policy internationally to formally recognise nurture as a structured approach to trauma-informed practice.

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Book Reviews

Beyond the Boxall Profile® (Revised 2024): Strategies and resources for professionals working with children (ages 4-11)

Authors: Wendy Roden and Claire Wilson

Publisher: nurtureuk

Year of Publication: 2024

ISBN: (Paperback) 978-1-7385520-0-9

Reviewer: John Belardini

The authors of this book present a practical and accessible toolkit designed primarily for educators and practitioners seeking to implement targeted interventions and enhance classroom teaching through the use of the Boxall Profile®. The resource offers pragmatic materials to support pedagogical practices, approaches and reflective thinking related to nurture-based education.

Although the book is specifically aimed at practitioners working with children aged 4-11, it offers a wealth of rich and pertinent resources that address a broad spectrum of needs. As such, it holds significant value for practitioners supporting children and young people across all age groups, providing materials that can be selectively drawn upon to meet diverse contextual demands.

The introductory section provides a concise and comprehensive overview of nurture as an educational approach. It explicates the Six Principles of Nurture, which underpin the philosophy and functioning of nurture groups, and situates nurture as a structured, evidence-informed practice.

Furthermore, the chapter introduces the Graduated Approach to Nurture, highlighting the central role of the Boxall Profile® in supporting learners across all tiers of the nurture continuum. This framework is succinctly captured by the guiding maxim “so no child falls through the cracks”, a phrase that partly epitomises nurtureuk’s work and positionality.

Part 2 establishes the foundations of the Boxall Profile®, outlining its historical development, its operationalisation and addressing a series of commonly asked questions about its application. Importantly, this section offers detailed guidance on how to administer, score and interpret the Boxall Profile® manually for those not using the digital platform, which otherwise automates most of these processes. No aspect is overlooked; the clear instructions and illustrative examples provide a step-by-step guide to support practitioners. A practical scoring system is also included, aiding in formulating intervention plans and identifying appropriate next steps.

The subsequent section of the book focuses on the Developmental Strands (A-J) within the Boxall Profile®, which are organised into two primary clusters: Organisation of Experience (Strands A-E) and Internalisation of Controls (Strands F-J). Each strand assesses key aspects of a child’s cognitive, social and emotional development, with particular attention to how these domains influence their capacity to learn and engage effectively within a classroom context.

Consistent with the book’s reflective tone, practitioners are encouraged to critically examine their own assumptions and engage in meaningful self-reflection through the wide range of strategies provided for consideration. These reflections are underscored by the inherent connectedness between the two main clusters, emphasising that emotional and cognitive development should not be viewed in isolation but as interdependent aspects of a child’s overall development. The text also

thoughtfully signposts readers to further suggested readings, extending opportunities for deeper learning and professional growth.

As with the previous section, the next part of the book focuses on the Diagnostic Profile, which is designed to measure and assess pupils' challenging behaviours that may inhibit or interfere with their ability to succeed socially and academically within the school environment.

The Diagnostic Profile is organised into three main clusters: Self-Limiting Features, Undeveloped Behaviour and Unsupported Development, corresponding to subclusters Q to R, S to U, and V to Z. This structured approach enables practitioners to identify specific behavioural patterns, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the underlying needs of individual pupils. These insights form a critical foundation for designing targeted intervention strategies aimed at fostering more adaptive behaviours and improving both social and academic outcomes. Both this section and its predecessor implicitly promote and advocate for adopting restorative approaches and practices, encouraging practitioners to engage with behaviour through a relational and reparative lens.

As a practising SENCo within a setting that operates a hybrid nurture group, I found the most valuable aspect of this book to be the ready-to-use appendices, which are referenced throughout the preceding sections. These practical resources include materials to support a wide range of developmental and behavioural needs, such as gross and fine motor skills, sensory processing, mindfulness, outdoor play, transitions, social skills, snack time routines and social communication and interaction, among others.

The book is both reflective and, more importantly, highly practical in nature. The targeted strategies linked to each subcluster are particularly insightful and offered a sense of renewed clarity and purpose in my practice. For practitioners who are currently engaged with, or have previously received, training from nurtureuk, regardless of experience level, this book is a valuable and supportive resource.

Love and Nurture in the Early Years

Authors: Aaron Bradbury and Tamsin Grimmer
Publisher: Sage
Year of Publication: 2024
ISBN: (Paperback) 9781529670974

Reviewer: Rebecca Hawkes

This book provides a comprehensive resource that early years professionals can use to navigate the complexities and nuances that make up early childhood development. The central thesis posits that integrating "professional love" into pedagogical practice promotes the value and importance of incorporating love into the nurturing of an individual child's holistic development.

The authors, both experts in child development, assert that by prioritising a nurturing ethos, practitioners enable children to cultivate the virtues of curiosity, kindness and creativity and to foster loving and nurturing dispositions of their own. However, they make it clear that this book is a resource for anyone involved in the nurture and development of young children.

The book is written in an accessible way so the reader can develop a comprehensive understanding of love and nurture in early years regardless of their experience or qualifications, making it an ideal companion for parents and carers alike. A unique feature of the text is the inclusion of authentic children's illustrations. These serve as a poignant visual metaphor for the authors' argument that development is an iterative, non-linear process rather than a pursuit of perfection.

The book comprises eight chapters, each highlighting the importance of love in nurture in various elements of early years practice. As outlined in the introduction, each chapter provides clear aims on what can be expected within and a definition of key terms used. An overview of the chapter follows, with a subsequent thorough and rich discussion into its core topic as well as supportive case study examples and an opportunity for reflective practice exercises, allowing for praxis.

Each chapter explores a unique and important approach to finding and creating a place for love and nurture in child development. They can be used as an accessible tool in their own right, but together the chapters create an inclusive picture of what early years love and nurture could look like and how they are in fact crucial to promote the most positive developmental outcomes for young children.

Chapter 1 covers the science behind epigenetics and child development, providing the reader with a clear rationale and theoretical understanding of the scientific evidence supporting the importance of promoting love and nurture as a positive tool to support child development. As is the case throughout the book, the concepts and principles explored within this chapter have been informed by experience and research. Building upon concepts such as attachment theory and the importance of positive relationships being present in early childhood development, the authors explore how a loving and nurturing environment can positively shape brain development.

Chapter 2 covers what love and care look like in relation to early years practice. Here the authors consider theories such as Bronfenbrenner's systems theory and examine the child within their broader societal context. The authors consider that development is a product of reciprocal relationships across all levels of the child's environment, while offering necessary caveats regarding the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma.

Chapter 3 looks at how early years professionals can empower young children to develop and discover their own agency and sense of self. It considers how children perceive the world and themselves within it at various stages, stating that modelling loving and nurturing behaviours and encouraging these dispositions in children

can provide a firm and positive foundation for their development. Compassionate practice can encourage children to develop empathy, and in turn promote their development into mindful, empathetic adults. The authors say that practitioners should endeavour to provide a safe and nurturing environment modelling these behaviours and allowing children to explore these thoughts and feelings for themselves to garner a comprehensive understanding of this.

Chapter 4 looks at "love languages" and acknowledges that all people are unique individuals who might all have slightly differing dispositions/expectations when giving or receiving love and nurture between one another. Understanding this is crucial for early years practitioners to provide the most appropriate environment for the children in their care to explore their development. This chapter highlights the different forms of love languages and explains how to use nurturing touch in line with safeguarding procedures within a setting environment.

Chapter 5 explores relationships outside the setting environment, and how it is important not only to foster a loving and positive relationship with the children, but also with their primary home caregivers as well. Throughout the book references are made to how important positive relationships are to child development and this chapter focuses on how to support parents, families and caregivers with providing a culture of nurture within all areas of the child's life.

Chapter 6 is almost an extension of chapter 5 where the authors consider how to build relational practice both within, and externally to, a setting. It focuses on how fostering positive relationships provide the building blocks for positive emotional development, that all behaviour is communication, and how a loving and nurturing environment can better equip and prepare children to belong as part of society, as well as finding their own sense of self. It touches on the Six Principles of Nurture and how, even if nurture groups are not specifically present within a setting, the ideology can be used regardless.

Chapter 7 focuses more on the environment itself, and what should be present to ensure positive holistic development in young children. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework mandates that settings should provide a safe and nurturing environment for the young children in their care, and in this chapter, there is a brief overview of what this might entail. Providing a guide for practitioners and carers alike to explore the meaning of concepts like "safe", "emotionally enabling" and "inclusive", and how these might be practically applied to the environment they are building for the children in their care.

The final chapter provides a recap and summary of the book and suggests further reading and resources for practitioners to develop and nurture their own loving pedagogy and practice.

In an era where the early years sector is often viewed through the reductive lens of "school readiness" or economic utility, Bradbury and Grimmer offer a vital corrective. They remind the reader that the practitioner's primary objective is to facilitate the growth of the individual child within a safe affective environment. This book is an essential resource for those seeking to embed a loving pedagogy into their professional identity, ensuring that nurture remains at the heart of early childhood education.

About nurtureuk

nurtureuk is the national charity dedicated to using nurturing approaches to improve children and young people's life chances. We give education professionals the proven tools, training and support they need to implement nurture in schools and remove barriers to learning. We also work with policy makers to make nurture a cornerstone of education in the UK.

Nurture gets to the heart of a child's challenges and supports children and young people to build connections and resilience. It is a highly effective way of supporting improved behaviour and increased attendance in schools, leading to better attainment and reduced exclusions.

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