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Can Nurture Groups Support the Reintegration of Children with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) Back into Mainstream Classrooms?

Abstract

A feeling of safety and security has been proven to improve pupil focus and attainment in Early Years settings. For a child with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), achieving that feeling is more complicated, due to them seeing threat in even the safest of environments. Many children with PDA will have attended a Nurture Group for a short while but this cannot be a permanent arrangement, due to educational restraints, be they financial or logistical. This study will explore the role of Nurture Groups in reintegrating children who suffer from PDA, back into a mainstream classroom. The rationale behind the research is to ascertain what nurture principles can be transferred to a mainstream environment, to support returning pupils and explore how a child's environment affects their ability to deal with the anxiety caused by PDA. Research will be conducted in a primary school of 430 pupils, in a socially and financially deprived area of the West Midlands, with the help of a focus group made up of three Early Years teachers and four support staff. Three Reception children, who currently attend the Nurture Group, will also be asked to participate in the research, giving their views on what would make reintegration better for them. Following a study of previous journal articles, websites, and other resources, to ascertain what ideas already exist, evidence to support this study will be collected via focus group discussions, pupil conversations, learning journey scrapbooks and drawings, giving a mosaic like approach to the research. The study will be conducted considering ethical concerns around

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confidentiality, anonymity, freedom of expression and transparency. Feedback will be of a qualitative nature, due to the responses being personal and unique to every participant involved.

Literature review

According to University of Edinburgh (2024), a literature review demonstrates the writer's knowledge and understanding of academic literature on their chosen topic, whilst also critically evaluating the findings. This study will investigate the role of a Nurture room in re-integrating a child with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) into a mainstream class. The rationale behind this research is to provide clarity and understanding of how a child's environment can affect their ability to deal with anxiety and the fight, flight, freeze response, often associated with PDA. Also, how the principles of a Nurture room can be transferred to a mainstream classroom, assisting children in re-integrating successfully.

According to Leaf Complex Care (n.d.), PDA is a neurodevelopmental difference affecting an individual's ability to comply with everyday demands, causing them excessive anxiety. Sufferers of PDA also exhibit a high need for control, alongside an absence of flexibility and adaptability strategies. As per Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (1943), after having their physiological needs met, a child's next requirement is safety and security, which when achieved, lessens their anxiety levels. Delahooke (2019) states that children with PDA often have hypersensitive neuroception, causing them to mistakenly see threat in any situation. Ehrlich (2022) agrees, comparing this reaction to

that of a child who has experienced trauma, except a child with PDA will react due to the way their brain perceives the loss of choice, freedom, and equality. In practice, PDA affects a child's ability to feel safe, so they struggle to focus on learning. Breckenbrough (2019) state in their policy documents that it is unreasonable to expect a student to achieve academic success, until they feel safe and secure in their environment.

Casey (2021) says a strict, behavioural approach such as that used in many mainstream classrooms did not work with her child, due to their difficulties with interoception and alexithymia, in addition to hypersensitive neuroception as mentioned earlier. These conditions can cause either a delayed or non-existent ability to recognise one's physical or emotional state and also trouble recognising and describing emotions. The time delay in recognising how they feel means a child with PDA will not immediately see the cause-and-effect connection between their behaviour and the resulting consequence. In practice, this can appear as a deliberate act of defiance or lack of remorse. Casey's findings are, however, the findings of one parent and from the comments on her post, it is apparent that other parents do not consider her views applicable to their child. Leaf Complex Care (n.d.) recommend an approach based on choice rather than limitation, together with negotiation and collaboration between practitioners and children. Whatever methods employed, the unique child approach needs to be kept in mind, with focus given to providing equal opportunity and not discriminating against those who display challenging behaviours (Department for Education 2023).

Brede et al (2016), found that parents of previously excluded children had negative views of the schools involved, with staff failing to understand their children's complex needs. This left pupils anxious and dissatisfied with schools and staff. Inadequate training, lack of experience or financial restrictions may have prevented the necessary staff and resources being put in place. Symes and Humphrey (2011) state that often TAs are deployed to run Nurture Groups, without having received appropriate training, causing them to feel unsupported and unprepared to deal with issues such as PDA and ASD behaviours. Evidence also states that pupils who have a TA may underperform academically and receive less attention from their teachers. This can cause them to feel isolated from their peer group. In the school where Brede et al (2016) performed their research, a Hub was created specifically to accommodate children with complex needs and it was found that with changes to the physical environment, and supportive staff building strong relationships with pupils, the children began to thrive and access learning opportunities they had never managed previously. Whilst a Hub or Nurture room seems like the answer to dealing with challenging children, in many settings it can become an easy option for removing children from class, with no steps taken to later re-integrate them, meaning they miss valuable learning opportunities. Warin and Hibbin (2016) discuss a case where existing Nurture attendees were rushed back into mainstream classes, in order to accommodate an especially difficult cohort of Reception children. Sloan et al (2016) recommends a child should spend between two and four terms in a Nurture room, for maximum impact. Both Gov. Wales (2010) and Brede et al (2016) discuss the need for a whole school approach to nurture, emphasising the importance of nurture principles being shared and adopted by all staff in the setting.

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According to Smith (2019), whilst children gave mostly positive feedback of their experience in Nurture groups, following re-integration, they reported that outside the group they still had difficulties interacting with peers, especially on the playground. It seems the social skills they learned in Nurture did not transfer to other areas. However, this study was carried out on a small sample group of six children and is therefore not indicative of a complete failure in the transfer of Nurture principles.

In conclusion, most feedback on Nurture Groups is positive, showing that when applied consistently, nurture values and principles are beneficial to children.

Methodological Considerations

For this study, it is intended research will be conducted via a focus group made up of three Early Years teachers and four Teaching Assistants, one of whom is acting as temporary Nurture Lead. According to John Hopkins University (n.d.), focus groups are beneficial as they allow participants to expand on each other's comments, meaning innovative ideas may be generated, that may not materialise in individual interviews. All participants are employed at a mainstream Primary School of 430 pupils, in a socially and economically poor area of the West Midlands. Save the Children (n.d.) suggest that thirty three percent of children living in poverty, fall behind with their education, meaning schools and nurseries need to strive to make provision the best it can be, to keep families bringing their children to school. The focus group will be asked their views on what successful reintegration looks like, then more specifically asked to consider reintegration of a child with PDA. The group discussion will be audio recorded for later

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analysis. Due to the speed and amount of conversation involved, it was decided audio recording would be best, as the facilitator could not take accurate handwritten notes of such volume. There is no need to take a visual recording, as participants' voices are familiar to the researcher. All intended adult participants will be approached via email in advance, to ascertain their willingness to participate.

In addition, the views of three Reception children on what would make reintegration easier for them, will be collected via drawings, discussion notes and the use of learning journey scrapbooks, subject to parental consent being obtained and the children themselves showing willingness to take part. Children are pupils of the above-named school and currently attend the Nurture Group within said organisation, with a view to being reintegrated into class before entering Year 1. Purposive sampling has been chosen, due to the potential adult candidates being Early Years specialists, having current experience of planning for SEN children and currently looking to reintegrate three Nurture Group children back into class for the summer term. Campbell et al (2020) state that purposive sampling aims to better match the chosen sample to the aims and objectives behind the research question. This improves the trustworthiness of the results and data collected. The decision to use the chosen sample groups was also made as the school in question has a consistently poor attendance record and a high percentage of SEN children, who find it difficult to access mainstream learning. According to DfE (2020), twenty two percent of teachers felt they were unable to meet the needs of SEN children. Therefore, it is hoped any insight into what makes life better for them and their teachers can potentially be implemented into future school

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development plans and policies to ensure a better outcome for all involved. This idea is supported by Hart (1992), who states that if research is conducted into anything that

directly impacts children and young people, such research should be conducted **with them**.

Focus Group

The decision to assemble a staff focus group was made to create a more informal, relaxed atmosphere, where staff are likely to feel at ease discussing and comparing their views with the researcher and each other, as mentioned by Mora (2023), who says the atmosphere should be non-threatening to parties involved. Consideration was given to individual teacher interviews, but apart from being too time-consuming, it was thought the formal nature of an interview may unnerve staff and make them more guarded in their responses. In addition, it may be hard to schedule appointment times, due to differing class routines. Whilst it could still be difficult to get everyone in one place, at one time, for a focus session (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2020), this seems a more achievable arrangement. According to Leung and Savithiri (2009), a focus group is a group of participants guided through a facilitated discussion. Depending on the research question, the facilitator can either guide the group back to the focus topic or run with the natural direction of the group's discussion. As recommended by Ochieng et al (2017), based on the research objective, consideration has been given to the focus group's questions. Participants will be given a broad question for initial discussion, asking what reintegration means to them, followed by a more targeted question, focusing specifically on reintegration for a child with PDA. Open-ended questions will be used

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throughout, to encourage a detailed response, giving the group a chance to share their views and experiences. Opportunity will also be given for participants to discuss any barriers they consider to be stopping them delivering successful reintegration strategies.

ates (2021) suggests making the meeting venue welcoming, by providing background music on entrance, snacks, and notetaking resources. This should help them feel comfortable and alleviate any stress felt. Bates (2021) also emphasises the importance of the facilitator controlling their own non-verbal actions, so as not to sway the conversation, regardless of how strongly they feel on a subject. These strategies will be adopted in this research study as good practice, as the researcher comes from a Nurture background and has her own opinions on the level of inclusivity and acceptance shown by some mainstream staff.

Information collected will be of a qualitative nature, given that the sample size is small and would not provide much accuracy in quantitative form. Whilst quantitative feedback could be constructed, it would be basic, such as the percentage of participants who held a certain view. However, as this study is only small scale and aimed at promoting the importance of wellbeing through provision of a nurturing environment, the writer feels quantitative data is not as important as promoting inclusivity and acceptance through qualitative feedback.

Discussion, drawings and learning journeys

Regarding obtaining children's views, the researcher notes that the children involved are of varying abilities and have their own preferred communication styles. Therefore, the

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decision to offer a choice of speaking, drawing, or cutting and sticking seemed appropriate. The children will divulge more of their thoughts if they are doing so in a style of their choice and enjoying the process. Referring to previous research, it has

been observed that children are more engaged when given a choice of how to carry out activities, and when the said activity is carried out in a fun way, for example on the floor, with an adult present (Howard, 2002; Howard & McInnes, 2013). It is therefore envisaged by the researcher that children will be invited to the carpet area and asked to think or talk about their favourite aspects of Nurture Group and which, if any of those things, they would like to see in their future environment. Equal consideration will be given to aspects they dislike. Resources for scrapbooking, drawing or voice recording will be available in the area, so children can choose their preferred method. If voice recording is chosen, this will ensure the researcher can give the child their full attention when speaking, rather than taking notes, which makes the activity seem work-like and distracts from the conversation. According to NSCC (n.d.), it is important to remember that all children have a right not to take part in activities and practitioners should be attuned to the child's body language, looking out for any sign that they are uncomfortable or unwilling to participate, such as irritability, toileting accidents or becoming visibly upset. Kids Minds Matter (2021) states that children complaining of tummy ache is common when they are stressed. This is because of chemicals released in the body due to the fight or flight response.

Whilst this is, at present, a small-scale study, carried out in one establishment, it is hoped that future, wider research can be carried out in different schools, to enable more comparisons to be made. Additionally, the indicators of successful reintegration can be

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specific to each child, rather than generalised and it may therefore be interesting to repeat this study in future years, with alternative cohorts, having more diverse needs. Alternatively, it could be interesting to repeat this research with the same children, every time they change year group. Learning Hub (n.d.) states that longitudinal studies can

increase the value of findings, due to each layer of study building on what is already known about the participants. It could also help identify how earlier life experiences affect later outcomes in the participants' lives.

In terms of triangulation, it was originally thought that views should be sought from staff, children, and parents, to give a more informed response to the research question. Parents' views would have been obtained via a questionnaire, asking for their input as a parent of a child with PDA. After careful consideration and discussion in tutorial sessions, however, it was thought that without a previously confirmed diagnosis, or discussion with the SENCo, parents may be alarmed at the suggestion that their child has PDA. For this reason, parental involvement was abandoned. Whilst using only staff and children as sources of research, the children's evidence will be gained using three different methods, which already gives a broad, mosaic-like approach to the study. Turner (2016) considers that every research method has weaknesses or bias and that it is therefore common for researchers to collect data in a variety of ways. The children's evidence, together with the findings of the focus group analysis, can be pieced together giving a bigger picture, invalidating the need for three source triangulations. Clark and Moss (2011) suggest that the mosaic approach is more suitable for research with young children, as it allows the researcher to be creative when developing activities, tailoring them to suit their research objective and to suit the attention span

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expected from the child. Brain Balance (2024) expects four-year olds to hold attention for between eight and twelve minutes, meaning that activities should be short, achievable, and enjoyable. A criticism of the mosaic approach is that it is not very scientific. However, when following theories of a holistic approach to children's learning, such as those of Piaget (1896 – 1980) and Vygotsky (1896 – 1934), the

mosaic approach offers an insight into children's lived experiences, assisting practitioners in getting to know the child better. According to PACEY (2016), children's skills are developed by building on their previous experiences and they are active learners, needing to explore the world around them, experimenting with their ideas and experiencing things in their own way. Reference to the holistic approach is also made in the EYFS Framework (Department for Education 2023) which mentions the unique child approach and the importance of positive relationships. Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015), mentions the importance of practitioners acknowledging children's prior learning, offering them challenge to move forward.

Ethical Considerations

Adults

Adult teaching staff chosen as a purposive sample will initially be approached via email, to ascertain their willingness to participate in this study. Separate emails will be sent enabling participants to reply without fear of being judged on their response by other

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candidates. Proposed participants will be asked to reply by a given date and if no response is received, they will be presumed to be unwilling to take part.

To demonstrate openness and transparency, a detailed description of the research question will be provided, together with an explanation of the rationale. According to BERA (2018), researchers should ensure that all potential participants understand as

fully as possible what is involved in the study, plus be informed how the information provided will be used, shared, and stored. It will be made clear that the focus group session will be audio recorded for ease of analysis by the researcher, with all participants having the right to listen to the recording at any time. As per the Data Protection Act (1998) and the General Data Protection Regulation (2018), the audio recording will be stored in a locked cabinet on school premises, with access granted by the researcher only. When reporting back any findings from the study, participants will not be named, and pseudonyms will be used.

Children

Written consent will be obtained from the parents of the children involved. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as anyone under 18. As these children are four or five years old, they are considered too young to consent themselves. An outline of the research objective and the rationale will be

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provided, together with a description of the activities to be offered to the children. Parents will be informed they can withdraw consent at any point before, during or after the research period. Article 10 of the Human Rights Act (1998) states that everyone is entitled to freedom of expression, and to receive and impart information. Consideration will be given to those children whose parents do not live together and consent requested from all parties with parental responsibility. If a parent gives consent but the child does not want to participate, they will not be forced and may withdraw from the

activity. If the consent form is not returned by the given date, it will be presumed parents do not want their child to be involved.

As per the Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992), it is considered children have reached rung four of the ladder when they become active participants in any ethical research project likely to affect them. Children will be told of the proposed research by the researcher, who will explain appropriately to their level of understanding. They will be given a choice to withdraw at any time. The researcher will always monitor the children's involvement, checking for signs of distress or discomfort, such as being visibly upset, becoming withdrawn or complaining of stomachache, which may be due to the fight or flight response (Kids Minds Matter 2021). In the case of a parent not consenting but the child wishing to take part, and giving assent, it is considered the activities proposed could be undertaken with no harm or negative effect caused. The UNCRC (1989) states that the best interests of the child are of paramount importance. Similarly, the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2021), states that if a research activity is similar to normal curriculum activities and prevents no significant risk, the consent of a senior member of staff should be deemed adequate. However, their work would not be

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considered when analysing the results of the research study and their views would not be discussed or included in any final report. When reporting the findings of this study, participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Researcher

As stated by the British Educational Research Association (2018), the researcher is jointly responsible for their own wellbeing and safety, alongside their employer or sponsor, whilst carrying out research. As per guideline eleven, the researcher will approach the Headteacher of the school where research will take place, checking any guidelines relating to research, and ensuring these are followed. Transparency will be practiced throughout the research study, with all relevant information shared fully with participants and their parents/carers. GDPR (2018) and Data Protection Act (1998) guidelines will be followed, as mentioned above, to protect the anonymity and identity of everyone involved. The researcher will follow University of Wales Trinity St. David research guidelines, considering their policy of honesty and transparency. The researcher will reference all sources of information used in this study, to prevent plagiarism of other people's work.

University

During the entire research period, the researcher will abide by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice (2022), which asks that

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research is conducted with honesty, rigour, transparency, care and respect, and accountability. Honesty and transparency will be demonstrated in the detailed information provided to all participants, regarding the research question and the rationale behind it. Clear details will be provided to all participants, parents, and carers, as to what is expected of them and how the findings will be stored and disseminated. Care and respect will be shown by how participants are treated during the research

project, for example being made to feel comfortable when attending the focus group discussion. Also, the researcher will show care by monitoring children for any signs of distress caused by the research process.

Before feeding back the findings of the study, the researcher will critically analyse findings, contributing to the development of practice and building of knowledge. The researcher will be accountable for accurate feedback, without harm to any participants, via breach of confidentiality or any other method. Any findings that may contribute to the improvement of practice will be fed back to the necessary parties.

As this study involves and affects young children, the researcher will seek ethical approval from the University, prior to commencing any research and ensure that a valid DBS disclosure is provided to the establishment where the research takes place, to ensure safeguarding of children is met.

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To comply with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the GDPR (2018), any data collected will be stored in a locked cabinet on the school premises, with access granted by the researcher only. The researcher will ensure that the data is not used for any other purpose, other than that for which it was originally intended.

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