

Classroom behaviour management strategies in response to problematic behaviours of primary school children with special educational needs: Views of special educational needs coordinators

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Abstract

Children identified with special educational needs (SEN) and behavioural difficulties present extra challenges to educators and require additional supports in school. This paper presents views from special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) on various strategies used by educators to support children identified with SEN and problematic behaviours. The data come from telephone interviews with six SENCOs from the UK's South West Peninsula. The SENCOs were invited to participate because their school was participating in a cluster-randomised trial of a teacher classroom management course (Incredible Years). Using thematic analysis to analyse the data, this paper illustrates strategies deemed by SENCOs to be successful in the support of children identified with SEN. The management strategies generated by participating SENCOs were then mapped onto those taught as part of the classroom management course for comparison. Findings indicate that strategies from the training programme appear to be appropriate for children identified with both SEN and behavioural difficulties.

Keywords: special educational needs, conduct disorder, Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management programme, behaviour management, special educational needs coordinators, qualitative interviews

Introduction

The Salamanca Statement marked the beginning of an international movement towards inclusion of children identified with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 1994). Children might struggle at school because of learning/academic needs, social difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, or frequently combinations of these, and responsibility for their inclusion falls to special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and class teachers. Patterns of problematic behaviours, such as noncompliance and aggression, are negatively correlated with children's academic performance (DiLalla, Marcus, & Wright-Phillips, 2004). Similarly, these behaviours are correlated with stressed teacher-pupil relationships and poorer peer interactions (McMahon, Wells, & Kotler, 2006). A comparison of pre-teen children identified with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) to children who showed similar patterns of behaviour at an early age but were not diagnosed with ASC shows that those with the diagnosis had poorer social communication skills and were reported to have more difficulties controlling their tempers (Russell et al., 2012). Longitudinal data following children from school entry at about five-years-old through to age 19 found that those with early identified co-morbid academic and behavioural difficulties were at significantly increased risk of lower reading and mathematics achievement, dropout from secondary school before completion, and use of mental health services (Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, & Ialongo, 2013). Longer-term outcomes include higher likelihoods of being arrested by the police and convicted in court (Collishaw, Maughan, Goodman, & Pickles, 2004). Children identified with SEN, particularly if their needs involve an emotional and behavioural component are a vulnerable group at risk of poor outcomes, whose inclusion is a

challenge to mainstream schools. We aimed to explore the strategies used by SENCos to support and include these children.

Studies suggest that there are many children with SEN: data from the Millennium Cohort Study (Parsons & Platt, 2013) indicate that 13% of children in the UK aged seven years are identified by either a parent or teacher as having SEN, with an additional 4% receiving a Statement of Needs. Almost half of those children identified with SEN present with at least two different types, including speech, language and communication, learning difficulties, and emotional-behavioural difficulties (Parsons & Platt, 2013). The community-based British Child and Adolescent Mental Health survey identified psychiatric disorders among 10% of school-age children: nearly 6% with a conduct disorder, nearly 4% with an emotional disorder, 1.5% with a hyperkinetic disorder (e.g., attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD), and 1% with ASC (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005). Furthermore, 52% of children with conduct disorders, 35% of children with emotional disorders, and 71% of children with hyperkinetic disorders were identified with SEN, which indicates the close relationship between poor mental health and difficulties in coping at school.

Collishaw et al. (2004) illustrated significant increases in conduct problems for both boys and girls in the UK between 1974 and 1999. The developmental trajectory of children with SEN differs from their peers who do not struggle at school. Between the ages of three to seven years, children identified with SEN experience increased peer problems, hyperactivity, and emotional difficulties in contrast to children's typical trajectories, which tend to show decreases in peer problems and hyperactivity over this same period (Fauth, Parsons, & Platt, 2014). While all children tend to experience increases in emotional problems across these early school

years, children identified with SEN have the double disadvantage of starting with higher levels of emotional problems at age three and experiencing more rapid escalation of these problems (Fauth et al., 2014). Children identified with SEN have been found to experience a cumulative risk effect, whereby with each additional risk factor to which they are exposed the chances of later developing behavioural difficulties is heightened exponentially (Oldfield, Humphrey, & Hebron, 2015). They are, therefore, a highly vulnerable group and intervention at school may be an important determinant of this trajectory.

The Supporting Teachers and childRen in School (STARS) Study is testing the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IY TCM) Programme in 80 primary schools across the South West Peninsula as a public mental health intervention (Ford et al., 2012). A recent systematic review of classroom management programmes concluded that the IY TCM Programme was one of only two that had been studied more than once, and of the two it had the more robust evidence-based (Whear et al., 2013). Based on childhood aggression theory (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1990), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1974), the IY TCM Programme aims to improve teachers' use of positive and proactive management strategies to benefit children's social, emotional, and behavioural development (Webster-Stratton, 2001). Although preliminary studies have been encouraging, there are very few trials that have examined the effects of implementing the IY TCM programme on teachers and their pupils (Baker-Henningham, Scott, Jones, & Walker, 2012; Hutchings, Martin-Forbes, Daley, & Williams, 2013; McGilloway et al., 2010). Qualitative evidence from teachers who have implemented IY TCM strategies suggests that the implementation of these positive classroom behaviour management strategies is more difficult with

children identified with SEN in mainstream classrooms (McGilloway et al., 2010).

None of the IY TCM studies has examined possible moderator effects among the subgroup of children identified with SEN. Therefore, the question arises of whether the strategies are appropriate for working with children identified with SEN who also demonstrate problematic behaviours.

Classroom teachers do not operate in isolation; they are a part of the larger school environment. Head Teachers have a duty for ensuring academic provision to the whole school, and school SENCOs have a duty to oversee SEN provision for all children identified as having additional needs. The SENCO's responsibilities extend to the provision of training opportunities and guidance to class teachers on the ways to best support their pupils' development (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015). Because of the intertwined nature of educators' responsibilities and relationships, the process evaluation that parallels the STARS Study includes focus groups and interviews with the teachers on the IY TCM course, Head Teachers, and SENCOs, among others (Ford et al., 2012; Hansford et al., 2015).

The current paper presents findings from interviews with school SENCOs on the various behaviour management strategies used by educators when supporting children with SEN who also have behavioural needs. These strategies are then compared with IY TCM content to examine the acceptability and appropriateness of the IY TCM Programme for educators working with children identified with SEN. Given their leadership role in schools to oversee services to children with identified SEN, the SENCOs are well-placed to provide insight on both their own classroom management experiences as well as on behaviour management strategies encouraged school-wide for other teachers to use when supporting this subgroup of children whose needs are particularly complex. The aim of this study is therefore to answer

the questions: 1) What classroom behaviour management strategies do SENCOs find to be successful when working with children identified with SEN who also have behavioural difficulties, and 2) Are the SENCO-generated strategies compatible with the IY TCM content such that the course could be considered acceptable and appropriate for educators who support this subgroup of children?

Methods

This study is nested within a large, multi-year cluster randomised controlled trial testing the IY TCM Programme. Thus, all 15 SENCOs from the STARS Study's Cohort 2 intervention schools were invited to participate via email. This email contained an information letter to introduce them to the first author (a doctoral student who previously worked as a special education teacher) and to provide an overview of the study. SENCOs who agreed to participate received electronic copies of the topic guide, allowing them the opportunity to preview the questions prior to the interview.

The main interview questions were ordered to begin with more general questions before moving on to specific probes, as recommended by Barbour (2014). Although the interview questions touched on the SENCOs' views of IY TCM strategies and the appropriateness of those strategies to the support of children identified with SEN, the main focus of the interview was on generating a range of strategies that the SENCOs have used and observed as being successful. These strategies were then mapped on to those included in the IY TCM Programme to examine acceptability and appropriateness, as has been done before when transporting the IY TCM Programme to new populations (Baker-Henningham, 2011).

The first author conducted the interviews by telephone, which are typically shorter than in-person interviews and often follow a semi-structured format (Barbour, 2014). These are beneficial characteristics when, as in this case, researchers are

seeking involvement of busy professionals whose schedules might change due to unforeseen and last-minute situations. Interviews lasted a maximum of 30 minutes.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the interviewer for subsequent analysis. Participating SENCOs were asked to provide verbal consent at the start of the interview following a standard operating procedure approved by the University of Exeter Medical School ethics board. All participants were clearly informed that they had the right to withdraw their personal data from the study at any time and without consequence. Participants were asked again at the end of the interview whether they still consented to their data being included in the research study. No participants withdrew consent after having agreed to and completed their interview. Throughout the process of recruiting and interviewing the SENCOs, it was stressed that any and all data would be kept confidential, stored securely, and that all findings would be reported anonymously.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the data in two ways: 1) theoretically driven by the research questions, and 2) inductively by identifying emergent themes from the data. Transcripts were read and re-read during the first round of coding to identify all of the possible concepts that could emerge from the data. Then, initial codes were grouped into clusters of analogous concepts based on their similarities. Finally, these clusters were abstracted once more based on how they related to each other, providing a broader picture of the SENCOs' approaches to behaviour management.

Findings

Six SENCOs from South West England participated in this study. The SENCOs were all experienced teachers with a mean average of 24 years teaching (range: 14 – 32 years). Furthermore, the participants had served as their school

SENCo for a mean average of 7 years (range: 2 – 15 years). Of those SENCos who were invited to participate but did not interview, three agreed to participate but were unreachable despite multiple attempts, one declined to participate due to time-constraints, and five never responded to researchers' invitations.

The subsequent findings first cover the types of problematic behaviours described by the SENCos before exploring the SENCos' approaches to classroom behaviour management and finally examining how those strategies compare to IY TCM content.

Three types of problematic behaviours

Speaking with these SENCos identified three different types of problematic behaviours among children with SEN: 1) noncompliance, 2) avoidance, and 3) aggression. Individual children might demonstrate one or more types of problematic behaviour. The SENCos explained that when these behaviours were present among children identified with SEN, the behaviours could be more severe in both frequency and intensity than among other children.

For example, one SENCo describes the case of a child in Year 4 identified with combined ASC and ADHD. This child demonstrates noncompliant behaviour regularly in the classroom:

‘When he makes his mind up that he’s not going to do something, no matter how much you try to coax or cajole or whatever, it’s very, very difficult to win, to turn the situation around... If he perceives that the task that’s being set in the class [is something] that he’s done before, for example in his old school where he came from, then there’s no way you can change his mind.’ (SENCo 1)

Described by the SENCo as ‘higher functioning’, this child clings quite stubbornly to his decisions, and his aversion to directing attention to familiar tasks is partially explained by the SENCo as being amplified given the child’s diagnoses of both ASC and ADHD.

Another behaviour described by SENCos involves children avoiding unfavourable activities or situations by removing themselves from an area without permission or even against instruction. In this following example, one SENCo describes a child identified with SEN who has displayed such problematic behaviours since he first entered school in Reception:

‘Basically, he’s what we sort of term here a “runner and hider”. So, basically if something doesn’t go his way, he will run out of the room and hide in the cloakroom, or he will go under a table.’ (SENCo 3)

This type of behaviour may closely resemble noncompliance, as avoidant behaviour includes ignoring or refusing to comply with directions. However, avoidance adds an additional component of physically moving away from the adverse activity or person.

Children disrupt their own learning as well as that of their classmates when engaged in noncompliant or avoidant behaviours in school. However, some children also act in aggressive ways, towards themselves or others. As might be expected, such violence in the classroom raises concerns about the safety of all involved:

‘[Most] of the children here, if they have a high level of need, they will kick off in a big way...that will lead the teacher to getting the class out of the classroom...leaving the child in there wrecking the classroom...we wouldn’t do anything without a member of the Senior Leadership there, and we work in a team, because these children will

escalate and act out in very, very violent manners. So, we have to ensure that they're safe and the class is safe as well.' (SENCo 2)

This point about ensuring the safety of the child acting out, as well as other children and adults in the room, is central when dealing with aggressive behaviours. The examples of children acting aggressively often involved escalation of the violent behaviour when adults intervened, indicating that emotionally charged situations such as these frequently became worse before resolving.

When behaviours escalate, the increased risk threatening anyone near the outburst presents an additional challenge. The following example is of a six-year-old boy identified with ASC, whose aggressive behaviours illustrate such a crescendo:

'[He] would spit and hit and bite and kick. As that happened, the person who was working with him would try and remove him from that situation, and then he would just escalate and become more and more anxious, and he would throw chairs and smash a window, and he would just become more and more troubled. Then, he would have to be restrained, and then he really, really hated that. So, that just made it worse, but we had to do that to keep other people safe.' (SENCo 4)

Thus, we see how initial aggressive behaviours are problematic for teachers, but the increased violence that might occur when trying to intervene with children who are acting aggressively may prove even more concerning. As situations deteriorate, emotions heighten for all involved.

The frustration of not knowing how to de-escalate dangerous behaviours, of dealing with problematic behaviours that endure through academic years and despite significant attempts to mediate the situation, and of trying to engage children in their learning while supporting their various educational needs can be great. These

educators supporting children identified with SEN and behavioural needs alluded to the importance of determining what lies at the root of the problematic behaviours to successfully respond to them.

Approach to classroom behaviour management: SENCos first seek to determine a cause

The SENCos interviewed in this study highlighted the importance they placed on understanding the reason for children's problematic behaviours; that is, before the implementation of any specific strategy, they first sought to determine an underlying cause. Through observing children and assessing their behaviours, these educators work within a team of teachers, school leaders, parents, and other professionals to target the root of the problem through selecting and implementing appropriate management strategies based on each individual situation.

One SENCo describes adapting a tool from the educational psychologist to create a 'Barrier to Learning' checklist as a way of standardising the observation/assessment process:

'If it's low level disruption I would go into class and observe, and I've sort of developed this... "Barrier to Learning" [checklist]... I've done it five minute blocks throughout class, so I can actually look at different behaviours they are exhibiting every five minutes. I observe them for about an hour, or part of the lesson, and look at their active engagement in learning and also if they are exhibiting any behaviour like fidgeting, talking to others, looking around, being distracted, and [I] look at that over a period of a whole lesson. It's actually been very interesting in that some children can't manage the input, some children can't manage working on their own. So, you can identify key points of

the lesson and put in place some kind of strategy the teacher could use, and then monitor that and see if it works.’ (SENCo 2)

Using this fixed-interval sampling strategy is incredibly time-consuming, but it provides the SENCo with a wealth of information about how specific children interact within the class. Such in-depth knowledge provides a clearer understanding of children’s special educational and behavioural needs, allowing adults to tailor their strategies.

Given the considerable effort by these educators to determine *why* children were behaving in such ways before then developing strategies to reduce/stop the behaviour, it seems worthwhile to ponder whether such attention is necessary. One SENCo referenced Bloom’s taxonomy of thinking (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) to explain the importance of understanding how educators differentiate their approaches based on children’s various SEN:

‘[We need] to see if the child was performing at the lower order thinking, or middle order thinking, or higher order thinking, because that’s quite a useful thing to know...[for example] we’ve got one child who’s gifted and talented, but he’s working off the scale as far as behaviour goes. So, that makes a big difference as far as the intervention goes. Whereas, if you’ve got lower order thinking skills being exhibited, and [the child is] acting off the scale, then a different type of intervention will be needed. So, it’s actually sort of paring away what might be causing the problem, and the approaches we use have got to match what the child needs.’ (SENCo 2)

The core issue to address, from this perspective, is not necessarily any of the previously described observed behaviours. Rather, these SENCos suggest that the

focus needs to be on the underlying cause of any observable behaviours, which could be related to children's special educational needs as well as to other factors, including home life, as one SENCo sums it all up:

‘We've found that the more we look at it, the more you've got to pick apart what's actually at the root of it all.’ (SEnCo 2)

These SENCos advocate for a classroom behaviour management approach that incorporates first observing problematic behaviours and then assessing the situation to identify a cause, before selecting and implementing any of the following types of behaviour management strategies.

Approach to classroom behaviour management: SENCos' strategies

When discussing strategies for managing children's behaviour in school, the SENCos collectively describe a multi-level structure of support that primarily focuses on using a positive approach. The strategies discussed in the interviews and explained in this section encompass school-wide systems, individual classroom techniques, as well as the use of extra supports for those children whose needs are greater than most.

Positive praise and rewards

In describing school-wide behaviour systems, the SENCos acknowledge that children do not operate isolated in their classrooms while in school. Instead, they interact with children from other classrooms, older and younger year groups, and they transition to new teachers with each academic year. As such, school-wide consistency is key. Having common strategies in place allows for even very young children as well as those who require extra supports to understand the acceptable boundaries and adopt behavioural norms. SENCos are well placed to advise other teachers and school leaders to implement positive strategies:

‘Well, the way that I view it is that we try to have a positive behaviour approach, both in my classroom and that is what I try to encourage throughout the school when I am advising people. So, I try to put lots of reward systems in place to try and reward good behaviour, and then only sanction poor behaviour when it really is a last resort.’ (SENCo 3)

The SENCos also addressed the use of positive praise as both incentive and reward for children. Praise may be used often in the classroom, but it may also be worked into the whole school environment, as one SENCo describes:

‘I do talk a lot about positive praise and finding a way to hook into a child’s interest, and also the other point is having a lot of teachers who use key adults in the school to show good work. So, it’s actually giving teachers license, if you like, for [acknowledging] “Oh, well, that child’s really, really concentrated well on that and...that’s been a really good piece of work”, so they will send children to me for time out of the classroom—planned movement—and also to get additional praise from a key adult. And likewise, children will go to our head teacher or our deputy head. That’s very much in our ethos in school.’

(SENCo 1)

Children are in contact with a variety of adults working in schools, and as such there are reasons beyond establishing a nurturing environment for making sure all staff are well-equipped to similarly respond to behaviours. In situations where children have additional educational and behavioural needs, it is important for any adults who might come into contact with those children to know how to appropriately respond. Take, for instance, the SENCo who is working on communicating with all school adults any additional behavioural needs some children might have:

‘We’re trying at the moment to create a register of children who need specific strategies, because, of course, children on the playground are different to children who are in the classroom.’ (SENCo 2)

Schools may also address supporting the social, emotional, and behavioural needs of children identified with SEN through training staff on inset days:

‘Most of the staff are trained in dealing with [autism spectrum]-type social communication issues and identifying how we need to be very literal and visual with children who have these issues. And that is sort of extended to most children, because most of the children in our school [have a] very high level of need, and there is a very high impact of social deprivation entering school from [their home] environments.’ (SENCo 2)

Here we see how strategies that are meant to support children with very specific social communication difficulties can be uniformly applied for the benefit of all children, regardless of SEN status. Although the strategies highlighted above are all positive, one SENCo also addresses a negative management strategy that she would not allow to occur on a school-wide level:

‘We do have systems in the school for sort of managing behaviour, but what I personally do not like and won’t allow to happen is children with poor behaviour being sent to other people’s classrooms or to younger year groups, because I feel that that is so detrimental to people’s self-esteem that that is more destructive than helpful.’ (SENCo 3)

Thus, there are a number of ways that schools can collectively and positively address behaviour management strategies for all of the children, regardless of any additional educational or behavioural challenges.

Clear structure and communication

The overall message received with regards to classroom management strategies was that it, like the whole school approach, should focus on creating and sustaining ‘a positive, nurturing, caring environment’ (SENCo 6). The SENCos provide a number of ways that teachers may achieve this goal, including communicating clearly, utilizing visual aids and rewards, and developing positive relationships. The following strategies reinforce the previous point that all children can benefit from these positive and proactive strategies, although educators might be more aware of the increased need to implement these techniques when supporting children identified with additional difficulties.

‘I always have a very clear structure for [the children with SEN] when they come in, because some of them, you know, will run out and not want to partake. So, I always have a very clear plan, written up, visual, numbered, and the [children]—as we work through it—can see what the beginning is, and I go through very clearly what’s expected and what we’re learning, and then the children will take it in turns to tick off when we’ve finished something. So, we can see where we are going, and they know when it’s coming to an end.’ (SENCo 6)

Here, we see that part of providing clear boundaries for children, particularly those identified with SEN, involves the use of visual props. Children who have difficulties attending to their lessons, need additional reinforcement, or have more severe

behavioural concerns all may benefit from the use of visual aids. Sometimes class teachers independently implement such strategies:

‘We also have systems that we can have for individuals in classes, like smiley face charts, and that will be done by the class teacher.’ (SENCo 2)

Otherwise, SENCos might be the ones to make these visual tools or advise teachers to try them with students who are struggling in the classroom:

‘I also support staff in producing resources for specific children, so like visual timetables—that sort of thing.’ (SENCo 6)

Of course, there are many other rewarding aspects of engaging fully in the lessons, including the relationships that children establish with their teachers and peers.

Developing positive relationships and integrating all children, particularly the ones with SEN and behavioural needs, is also important for behaviour management.

Positive relationships

Positive relationships might not come easily to some children identified with SEN who struggle to communicate or otherwise act in a socially acceptable manner. In these situations, teachers need to make the extra effort to establish that positive rapport:

‘In my experience, the strength of the relationship that’s built up between a class teacher and pupil is paramount... You can see those teachers who actually find a way forward with a child—they find some positive link working on positive agendas. If they manage to establish that [positive relationship] with a child...that’s really important.’ (SENCo 1)

Thus, the idea is that a strong relationship based on respect and trust between a class teacher and each child allows for even those vulnerable children to feel safe and experience success in the classroom. Additionally important, particularly when supporting children identified with SEN who struggle behaviourally, is the demeanour of the class teacher in emotionally charged situations:

‘Maintaining the voice level at a very, very low level—the calmness of talking even when you are giving directions and giving expectations of how you would like the child to behave—it’s all done at a very, very calm, low level. Because, you know, if you get a situation where your voice goes up and you let that child know that...the teacher is getting stressed, then ooh, that child can hook into that and that can actually cause a response that can be quite a manipulative response, and therefore the child might, you know, draw on that or milk that situation. But you know the very successful teachers with regards to behaviour management are those who have a very, very calm delivery with lots of discrete messages, very subtle ways of engaging the child.’

(SENCo 1)

However, it is not solely the class teacher who needs to keep a calm disposition. Many children with SEN who have behavioural needs work closely with other professionals during school, and teaching assistants might be assigned to support specific children. One SENCo explains how the calm temperament of a new teaching assistant resulted in immediate change for one young boy diagnosed with ASC:

‘His [new] one-to-one, she has a different personality. So, she’s very, very calm, and she keeps a distance from this little boy, and she talks very clearly and precisely and concisely. She gives him space, because

he's got some sensory needs as well, and she's just very serene. And he made a comment earlier this week, which was, "What can I do to wind you up?" Obviously, he'd done just that with his other TAs, and he's got a result from that. Whereas, she is very, very hard [to wind up], she doesn't show her anxiety level at all. So, yeah, his comment was what can I do to wind you up, and she said, "Nothing. You can't do anything to wind me up. We're here together, and we're going to work a way through this." And it's working really well.' (SENCo 4)

This example demonstrates the crucial role of establishing a connection between adult and child in the context of the classroom and demonstrates how children get their emotional cues from the adults. The staff believed that the boy in the last example had been able to emotionally control others through his outbursts, which increased the anxiety in the class teacher and teaching assistant. However, the new teaching assistant communicates through her actions, speech, and demeanour that she can remain calm even if he cannot. She also acknowledges the sensory needs unique to his ASC by adapting her interactions with him accordingly.

Emotional support and training

Still yet, teachers recognise that some children require even more individualised support for their emotional and behavioural development. Children with such heightened levels of need may require emotional support and training as well as alternative academic tasks. These children might even need to receive this support outside of the classroom or with the help of a teaching assistant working one-on-one with them.

The SENCos often referred to challenges facing children identified with SEN and behavioural needs, particularly with regards to understanding and regulating their

feelings. We have already seen how emotionally charged these situations may be for any adults involved. Consequently, it is not surprising that children are similarly impacted. A major difference to note is that children, and particularly those children identified with SEN, might know neither how to comprehend and express their feelings nor how to regain a sense of emotional equilibrium. As one SENCo explains:

‘We also had to then give him strategies to be able to begin to understand his anger and also strategies for him to be able to regulate that anger.’ (SENCo 5)

The goal of this emotional regulation training is to help children become aware of their emotions so that they can assert more self-control over their actions in fraught situations. One SENCo explains:

‘So, for him to be able to understand the feelings that he gets before he becomes violent. He’s a very clever little boy, so he understands his feelings, he can put a name to those feelings now, and he can say, “I’m starting to feel really, really anxious. My fists are getting clenched. I can feel myself getting cross. I need to go and—”, and then he’ll go off and do something different.’ (SENCo 4)

SENCos might also refer children with increased levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties to outside professionals who will come into the school to work with the children one-to-one:

‘We also have a lot of learning mentors, therapists that work in school...and we can refer for learning mentors to work with children over a period of time in anger management—in controlling reactions in different situations. We also have [the option of referring to an] art therapist, drama therapist, we’ve got counsellors who work on specific

referrals [and] we work very closely with CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services], who do a very similar job if the need is more permanent.’ (SENCo 2)

Getting to the point where children can identify and regulate their emotions takes time and practice. Until that time, it is often on the adults in the school to carefully monitor children’s emotions and step in to act before outbursts occur.

Alternative tasks and redirection

Another method used to prevent outbursts or redirect children is to assign an alternative task to engage the target child. One SENCo describes working with a class teacher to provide an alternative task to a child diagnosed with ASC, who is extremely noncompliant in specific classroom-based situations:

‘What we have done is we’ve created a folder of activities, which are very carefully chosen, to promote independent learning, and if it is that he’s refused to do something, from the classwork, he then has a choice to have a look at the tasks that are set in this other folder, and I would say that since he’s been with us, he’s actually completed ooh, more than 75% of the tasks set there, as a quick guesstimate.’ (SENCo 1)

This SENCo explains the rationale behind offering such an option:

‘So, you know, it’s actually giving him an alternative task to do when you know that you’re not going to win with the other one. It’s not a resolution to the fact that he’s digging his heels in and he’s getting his own way with not doing the task that’s set, but he’s very rigid in his thinking... So, it’s just been about alternative means of actually engaging him in learning so that actually he’s doing something rather

than going off on his own agenda, and you know, that's been fairly successful, but he's quite an extreme case.' (SENCo 1)

Thus, there is a certain practicality associated when working with children identified with SEN who have complex needs. SENCos and teachers recognise that they might need to make compromises as they work to support children's emotional and behavioural development. By creating meaningful alternative tasks, they can divert situations that might otherwise escalate into outbursts. Alternative tasks provide children with either added structure or controlled choices, which can be tailored by the SENCos and teachers to align to core lessons that the children need to learn.

Separation and restraint to ensure safety

Sometimes, despite preventative measures, situations intensify to dangerous levels, and management strategies must prioritise the safety and de-escalation of aggressive outbursts. To accomplish both of these goals, school staff may find themselves physically intervening by either restraining children who are acting violently or removing children to another space. Of course, schools only want to use such methods as a last resort and in situations where safety is endangered:

'The whole point is verbal de-escalation as much as possible, and then we taught very simple physical interventions when they are physically acting out.' (SENCo 2)

Certainly, these aggressive scenarios are on the severe end of the spectrum of problematic behaviours in school, but it is also the case that for some children such intense episodes are not infrequent. One SENCo describes the case of a child identified with SEN whose aggressive outbursts present a particular challenge for those working closely with him:

‘We’ve got a particular, quite extreme case of a child that we’ve initially had to be restraining on a virtually daily basis. We also had to then give him strategies to be able to begin to understand his anger and also strategies for him to be able to regulate that anger, and also we had to put into place literally, I mean physically, a space for him to be able to go to so that all of these things could be managed, and he can be supported.’ (SENCo 5)

Responding to such extreme behaviour, which endangers everyone, including the upset child, other children in the class, and the intervening school staff, must be planned to ensure appropriate safety measures are taken. Additionally, schools must continuously evaluate how situations evolve over time and with intervention, modifying their practices accordingly:

‘The space has been a moving space, if you like, and you know, initially of course it would be away from the classroom. So, very initially it would be into the head teacher’s office or into...a nurture class area that I work in. So, it was into either of those spaces, and then as we were beginning to try and de-escalate things, we were able to create a space just beside his classroom and also, within that, a particular place for him to be able to go to within his own classroom as well.’ (SENCo 5)

Thus, we see that the purpose of removing the child acting violently is not to serve as a punishment for the aggressive behaviour. Rather, it is meant as a safety measure for all involved and to provide a change in environment to allow the child to calm down. The intention on the part of the school staff is to try and keep the child as close to his class as possible:

‘As he’s been able and the staff are all feeling more confident and able and the sort of kicking off, if you like, is not so extreme, and we’re not so worried about the other children as well—because that’s a big issue with behavioural problems, is you have to be able to consider the other children in the classroom as well—and staff...we’ve been able to get [the space set aside for this child] closer to the classroom...the idea was that yes, to move it so that it is as close to everything that the rest of his peers are doing.’ (SENCo 5)

Teaching assistants as targeted support

Among the variety of strategies offered by the SENCos interviewed here, the SENCos made particular note to discuss the central role of teaching assistants (TAs) in supporting children identified with SEN who have special behavioural needs. SENCos assign TAs to work with children identified with SEN, and the TAs may be there to support a child in class, during unstructured playtime, before school, and during transitions:

‘So, we have had to employ an extra member of staff to support that child, and that member of staff makes a safe area for him. She guides him in play times and in school in the morning. She is always there for him. We are trying to wean her off of him a little bit, but she always makes sure that she checks in on him at the start of each session. So, even if it’s just a look over to him and a thumbs up to say, you know, “I’m here if you need me” and he can look back and respond. But, she’s made a safe space for him and again worked hard on trying to talk through his emotions and being able to get him to self-regulate.’ (SENCo 4)

TAs are assigned to work with children with a variety of issues and thus must be familiar with the different types of needs children may have (i.e., behavioural, emotional, speech and language), how those needs interact with each other, and which needs have been determined to lie at the root of any observable problems, so that they can appropriately target their support. Such responsibilities speak to requiring considerable training and experience in special needs, and it is clear that the SENCOs, who arrange for some of the TA training, hold TAs in high regard:

‘I’ve got a teaching assistant who is trained in the Alpha Training, which is the emotional literacy support system. So, she has got a lot of experience because she, prior to doing that training, has always done one-to-one teaching assistant work with children with behaviour problems. So, she has also got a range of skills that she has picked up through that... So, she’s a really important resource to us.’ (SENCO 4)

When implementing behaviour management strategies with children identified with SEN and special behavioural needs, TAs play a central role at all stages (assessment, intervention, evaluation) and are in the unique position of developing close bonds with the children they are assigned to support.

SENCO strategies in relation to IY TCM strategies

The strategies listed by the SENCOs have been mapped alongside the strategies included on the IY TCM training programme for comparison (see Figure 1). This method has been used before in determining whether IY TCM content would be acceptable and appropriate when transported to different cultural contexts (Baker-Henningham, 2011). Strategies elicited from the SENCOs aligned with all six content areas from the IY TCM Programme, with many concentrating under the IY TCM area of ‘building positive relationships with children’, which is the foundation of the IY

TCM approach. One strategy mentioned by participating SENCOs that did not easily map onto the IY TCM strategies involved those extreme situations during which children severely and aggressively acted out, leading educators in the interest of safety to intervene by physically restraining the child. This strategy was implemented not as a consequence but as a measure of security for all given the gravity of the aggressive outburst. Thus, it is not included in those strategies aimed at decreasing inappropriate behaviours. While intentional use of TAs was included under the ‘building positive relationships with children’ strategy because the SENCOs described the positive relationships that the TAs built up with children, it should also be noted that the presence of additional adults in the classroom or school is not a given in all contexts, and reliance on these extra members of staff could be seen as a separate strategy altogether. In these ways, the IY TCM strategies appear to be consistent with the strategies generated from the SENCOs. Where the SENCOs’ strategies did not map on to the IY TCM content (physical intervention, additional adults) these strategies can be seen as an addendum to ensure everyone’s safety and to respond to children whose needs are particularly complex, rather than as being incompatible with the fundamental positive principles guiding IY TCM.

Discussion

The experiences and views of the participating SENCOs in this study indicate that supporting children identified with SEN who also have behavioural needs requires the use of positive, proactive, and clear behaviour management strategies delivered consistently within the context of a nurturing relationship. The SENCOs described dealing with essentially the same types of problematic behaviours among children identified with SEN as those without (e.g., noncompliance, avoidance, aggression). However, the complex needs of these children identified with SEN often

meant that the behaviours presented in ways that were perceived to be more disruptive or which persisted across time. The SENCOs discussed the need for clear communication (e.g., literal, visual) and constant attention to the teacher-child relationship to support children's self-esteem, which could be particularly vulnerable due to their identified SEN.

Children spend substantial time in school, and comparisons are made between attachment theory's original caregiver-child focus (Bowlby, 1974) and the importance of a positive teacher-child relationship (Murray & Greenberg, 2006; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). Children with poorer relationships to their teachers are more likely to present with mental health issues (Lang, Marlow, Goodman, Meltzer, & Ford, 2013; Murray & Murray, 2004). This is of particular concern for children identified with SEN, because research suggests that the global attachment orientation of children identified with learning disabilities is less likely to be classified as secure than that of their peers without identified learning disabilities (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004). According to a review of educators' perceptions, teachers serve as a more critical influence for children identified with SEN than for children without identified SEN (Armstrong, 2014). Yet, teachers report feeling unprepared for inclusion settings after completing their initial teacher education, and classroom behaviour management tops their list of areas in which additional support/instruction is required (Winter, 2006). Armstrong (2014) also shows that professional development opportunities can positively influence teachers' perceptions of children identified with SEN. Given the international movement towards inclusion of children with all types of identified SEN in mainstream schools (Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2014; UNESCO, 1994), school- or teacher-based interventions might support the prevention of problems as children enter adolescence. Providing professional

development in classroom behaviour management is thought to transition teachers from a discipline-oriented approach to one that emphasises positive behaviours and proactive strategies, which subsequently might improve children's well-being and academic outcomes. Indeed, influencing teachers' management strategies towards positive techniques results in fewer school suspensions and higher academic engagement (Burke, Oats, Ringle, Fichtner, & DelGaudio, 2011).

The comparison of the strategies identified by the SENCOs to those taught on the IY TCM training course suggests that the IY TCM strategies would be acceptable and appropriate for working with these multifaceted children. However, the SENCOs explained that with the heightened severity and complexity of needs presented by children identified with both SEN and behavioural difficulties, there are times when safety must take precedence and their strategies have more to do with de-escalating a dangerous situation than with preventing misbehaviour or delivering a consequence. Furthermore, for these children on the more severe end of the spectrum, additional funding is often needed to hire TAs to work as one-to-one aides. While TAs are able to implement any of the behaviour management strategies, the assignment of a TA to a given child could be viewed as a strategy in its own right. Of course, provision for additional key adults is not part of the IY TCM model, which seeks to address the strategies of the class teacher (not reallocate resources that schools may or may not have). In this way, the IY TCM Programme appears generally appropriate for educators supporting children identified with SEN who have behavioural needs even though there may yet be situations where individual cases require alternative responses, such as equipping educators to respond to extreme cases of physical aggression or on how to collaborate with a TA. These complex situations might be rarer than incidences of noncompliance or avoidance, but such exceptional outbursts

are concerning to SENCOs in making sure their schools remain safe, nurturing environments for all children.

One strength of this study is that it is the first to explicitly examine the appropriateness of the IY TCM programme for children identified with SEN and who have behavioural difficulties. While other studies have focused on the effectiveness of IY TCM among both clinical populations (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2004) and mainstream classrooms (Baker-Henningham et al., 2012; Hutchings et al., 2013; Reinke et al., 2014), no study has yet focused on the appropriateness of the IY TCM Programme for children identified with SEN. A limitation of this study is that its qualitative design does not allow for any conclusions to be made about the effectiveness of the IY TCM Programme for children identified with SEN in mainstream schools. While the relatively small sample size might raise questions about data saturation, empirical research suggests that when the aim is to describe common behaviours/beliefs, a sample of 12 is sufficient for saturation, and overarching themes emerge from samples as small as six (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Given that UK educational policy allows for special provisions for children identified with SEN in school, future research is needed to determine exactly what constitutes ‘treatment-as-usual’ for these children as well as any effects of the IY TCM programme strategies on children identified with SEN who also have behavioural difficulties.

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Figure caption

Figure 1. SENCOs' classroom behaviour management strategies compared to IY
TCM content.