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The facilitators and barriers to implementing Emotion Coaching following whole-school training in mainstream primary schools

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ABSTRACT

Initial research into the use of Emotion Coaching (EC) in educational settings has suggested that it can support social and emotional development, and promote positive relationships and behaviour. This research used a sequential mixed-methods design to examine the factors which impact on the implementation of EC. The views of 40 staff across six mainstream primary schools in the UK who had undertaken whole-school training in EC were examined via an online questionnaire. Follow-up semi-structured interviews with 13 staff from two of those schools were analysed using thematic analysis. Key facilitators to implementation included quality training, a school ethos where wellbeing was central, and an actively engaged senior leadership team. Key barriers to implementation were the pressure faced by school staff due to time constraints and curriculum demands. Implications for senior leaders in schools, educational psychologists (EPs), and policymakers are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Emotion Coaching; emotions; behaviour; training; implementation

Introduction

Research has identified that diagnosable mental health problems have increased from affecting one in ten children and young people (Green et al., 2005) to one in eight (NHS Digital, 2018). Although caution needs to be exercised when considering issues around prevalence due to the difficulties associated with defining and measuring concepts, for example, 'mental health' and 'wellbeing' (Furedi, 2017; Morrow & Mayell, 2009), few would argue against the need for a focus upon the prevention of difficulties rather than treating problems (DHSC, 2018; Gunnell et al., 2018). The value of schools and other educational providers in promoting mental health and wellbeing and preventing difficulties has been recognised in recent years (DCSF, 2007; DfE, 2018). Several large-scale reviews have highlighted the efficacy of targeting social and emotional skills to prevent mental health difficulties and enhance wellbeing (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). The current research explored one whole-school approach to enhancing social and emotional skills and promoting wellbeing, known as Emotion Coaching (EC).

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Figure 1. Styles of responding to emotions.

What is Emotion Coaching?

EC is both a technique and a philosophical approach to emotions (Gus et al., 2015) which was identified in the 1990s from the work of Gottman and Katz, among others, in their work around parenting practices in the US (Gottman et al., 1996). EC comprises two key elements: empathy, and guidance (Rose et al., 2015). Four different ‘styles’ of approaches to emotions have been identified based on the varying levels of empathy and guidance apparent in one’s responses to emotions, and these are outlined in [Figure 1](#)

By studying parents with an emotion coaching style, Gottman et al. (1996) identified five specific steps that adults who coach emotions use with children:

- (1) Becoming aware of the child’s emotion
- (2) Recognising emotional moments as opportunities for intimacy and teaching
- (3) Listening empathetically and validating the child’s feelings
- (4) Help the child find words to label the emotion she/he is having and
- (5) Set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem at hand.

EC signals a move away from more traditional behaviourist approaches which are based on the premise that behaviour can be controlled and modified via the reinforcement techniques of reward and sanction (Skinner, 1968). Instead, with coaching, there is an acknowledgement of the complexity of children’s behaviour and a focus on internal factors, rather than external control (Rose et al., 2015).

It is posited that EC has a positive influence on neurobiological and physiological development by helping to create the nurturing environments and supportive relationships which children and young people need for healthy development (Gus et al., 2015). It is largely informed by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011). Research has highlighted a variety of positive outcomes for children linked to regular emotion coaching by parents. This includes more effective regulation of physiological emotional arousal (vagal tone; Gottman et al., 1996), better social skills (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004), improved emotional knowledge (Havighurst et al., 2010), and fewer teacher-reported behaviour problems (Havighurst et al., 2013).

Emotion Coaching in UK schools

Following the successful application of EC principles to parental interventions (for example, Havighurst et al., 2010), Katz et al. (2012) called for more research which explored the application of EC by other 'emotion socialisation agents' (p. 421) such as teachers. Schools have become increasingly central to efforts to promote social and emotional learning and prevent mental health difficulties (Humphrey et al., 2013) and several large-scale reviews have demonstrated the efficacy of targeting social and emotional skills to enhance well-being (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). As EC is posited to improve social and emotional skills 'in the moment', rather than via a formal intervention programme, it addresses concerns that teaching children about emotions through formal learning programmes is ineffective and potentially harmful (Craig, 2007).

In the UK, evidence of the application of EC philosophies and practices by educational professionals has started to emerge. Rose et al. (2015) piloted the use of EC across several primary and secondary schools over a two-year period. The findings of their mixed-methods study with 127 participants provided the initial evidence that EC was a promising approach in educational contexts, with most staff reporting EC had impacted positively on their practice. The impact of EC was also explored in a specialist provision for primary-aged children with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs (Gus et al., 2017). Data were gathered from a variety of stakeholders in the school community including school leaders, staff, pupils, and parents who were all generally positive about EC. As a result of EC implementation within the specialist provision, there was a significant decrease in the number of times pupils were being restrained. Pupils also identified that they felt able to return to their classwork quicker following periods of dysregulation.

The implementation of Emotion Coaching

Whilst the research reported so far has suggested that EC is a promising approach with credibility amongst educational professionals, the published evidence-base has almost exclusively focused on assessing the outcomes of EC. However, it is argued that in complex organisations like schools, examining how an intervention or programme is implemented is as important as measuring outcomes (Kilerby & Dunsmuir, 2018). As Blase et al. (2012) highlight, information about 'what works' is important, but this is only part of the equation as it does not tell one how to implement programmes successfully to improve outcomes.

To address this issue, the Education Endowment Foundation (2019) has led a focus on implementation of interventions in educational research. They have produced detailed guidance and online training about implementation. They also require all evaluations which they commission to not only be subject to an outcome evaluation but also an 'implementation and process evaluation' which they define as:

The generation and analysis of data to examine how an intervention is put into practice, how it operates to achieve its intended outcomes, and the factors that influence these processes (Humphrey et al., 2016, p. 6).

This also acknowledges that an effective implementation is required before outcomes of an approach can be examined because, without a sufficient level of implementation, one

cannot be confident that the outcomes measured are attributable to the intervention in question.

Three other key areas of research, which can help to consider the implementation of EC further, informed this research. Firstly, training transfer refers to the degree to which trainees effectively apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in a training context to the task (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Research in this area has highlighted the factors which impact on the level of training transfer in a bid to understand how to make training more effective. Key domains identified include trainee characteristics, training design and the work environment. A second relevant area of research is implementation science, which focusses on exploring and explaining how health and psychological interventions work in real-world contexts. This research considers how to maximise the impact of interventions with a focus on how to develop competency amongst trainees, leadership qualities and organisational adaptations necessary for effective implementation. Finally, research exploring effective continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers was drawn upon to help understand what CPD practices may have contributed to the successful implementation of EC in schools and what may have been ineffective.

Aims of the present study

The current research aimed to examine staff perceptions regarding the EC approach and its implementation using the pragmatic paradigm as the guiding epistemological framework. The pragmatic paradigm refers to a worldview that focuses on ‘what works’ as judged by the impact or consequences of a particular activity or approach, rather than what might be considered objectively ‘true’ (Weaver, 2018). Pragmatic inquiry is concerned with evaluating and transforming features of real-world psychological, social, and educational phenomena (Weaver, 2018) and therefore fits well with the aims of this research. Over 30 Local authority (LA) educational psychology services (EPSs) have received training in EC (Emotion Coaching UK, 2019) and many of these services are delivering training to schools in their area. Developing an understanding of the experiences and views of staff involved in the implementation of EC is therefore significant for EPs to help inform future training and implementation support for schools. A better understanding and more effective implementation of EC will also enable valid evaluations of outcomes of the approach in the future. By drawing on the literature previously outlined, the following research questions were identified:

- (1) To what extent and in what ways is EC considered useful to school staff?
- (2) What factors are perceived by school staff to be facilitators and barriers to the effective implementation of EC in their schools?

Method

A sequential mixed-methods design was adopted for this research. Phase 1 involved the completion of an online questionnaire (Appendix 1 – for full questionnaire see, Romney, 2020) which examined staff views about how useful EC was to their practice and the facilitators and barriers to implementation. Phase 2 involved a more detailed examination of staff views via semi-structured interviews, offering staff the opportunity to elaborate on

their responses given in the online questionnaire. Ethical approval was granted by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee (reference: Z6364106/2019/03/14).

Participants

Purposive-criterion sampling was employed and all nine of the mainstream primary schools who had undertaken whole-school EC training within one LA were invited to participate in this research. Two-thirds of the schools that were invited opted to take part in Phase 1 which provided access to 40 members of staff from across the six schools. All the schools had received their training at different times and therefore the timeframes between completing the training and taking part in the research also varied, ranging from one term to three terms. [Table 1](#) outlines more information about the participants from Phase 1.

During Phase 2, 13 staff from across two schools took part in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The three schools with questionnaire response rates of less than 20% were not invited to take part in Phase 2 as it was considered that the responses that had been provided were less likely to be representative of the staff across the whole school. One school declined to take part. Two schools remained (known as School 1 and School 4 in the study) and both participated in Phase 2. Staff who participated in both phases were drawn from a wide range of roles as outlined in [Table 1](#). Importantly during Phase 2, the headteachers from each school participated.

Data collection tools

Phase 1

The online questionnaire ([Appendix 1](#)) was constructed using Qualtrics software. Its development was informed by the training transfer literature (Blume et al., 2010; Grossman & Salas, 2011) as well as guidelines for questionnaire construction from Foddy (1993). It contained both closed and open questions which focused upon participant views about the extent to which EC had been adopted in their school and the extent to which EC was useful. The questionnaire was piloted with five staff from two schools separate to the main study to ensure that the questions were clear, and the response options were appropriate.

Table 1. Information about schools and staff participating in phase one.

| School | Number of responses | Response rate (%) | Role(s) within the school | | | |
|--------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------|---------|--------------|
| | | | SLT | SENCo | Teacher | Support role |
| 1 | 13 | 37 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 7 |
| 2 | 7 | 18 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 3 |
| 3 | 7 | 70 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 4 | 6 | 24 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5 | 4 | 13 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 6 | 3 | 18 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |

SLT = Senior Leadership Team members; SENCo = Special Educational Needs Coordinators.

Phase 2

Two versions of interview schedules were used: one with headteachers and one with staff from all other roles in the schools. As noted, interview questions and prompts were informed by the results from the questionnaire data. The questions covered general views about EC, how the training had impacted on attitudes and practice, what had helped staff to begin using EC, and what had prevented them from using EC. Each interview was piloted with staff from different schools in equivalent roles.

Procedure

Phase 1

Following agreement to participate from the headteachers of each school, brief information and a link to the online questionnaire were forwarded to the headteacher and circulated to staff. This information made it clear that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Upon clicking the link, participants were directed to a more detailed information sheet and consent form before completing the questionnaire.

Phase 2

Once the headteachers from two schools agreed to participate in the second phase of the research, an information sheet about the research was forwarded to the headteacher to circulate to staff. Due to the practicalities of arranging dates and times for the interviews, where several staff would need to be released from their routine roles, the headteachers co-ordinated the interview timetable for those taking part. In each school, the interviews took place over the course of one day. Interviews lasted between 15 and 38 minutes.

Data analysis

The numerical questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and the open-ended responses were analysed thematically. Interviews were first transcribed and then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step approach to thematic analysis (TA). Data were analysed inductively or 'bottom-up' and then deductively in relation to main themes relating to each research question. Separate thematic analyses were carried out for each school before the most prominent themes across both schools were identified and merged to create one thematic map for each research question.

Findings

RQ1. To what extent, and in what ways is EC considered useful to school staff?

On the questionnaire, over 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'EC is a useful approach for professionals to use with children' (see, [Figure 2](#))

Eighty-two percent of respondents recognised at least daily opportunities to use EC, indicating the relevance of EC to their practice. Apart from two participants who indicated they were 'not sure', all participants (95%) perceived that EC had been implemented to some extent in their schools following the training and that it continued to be in use.

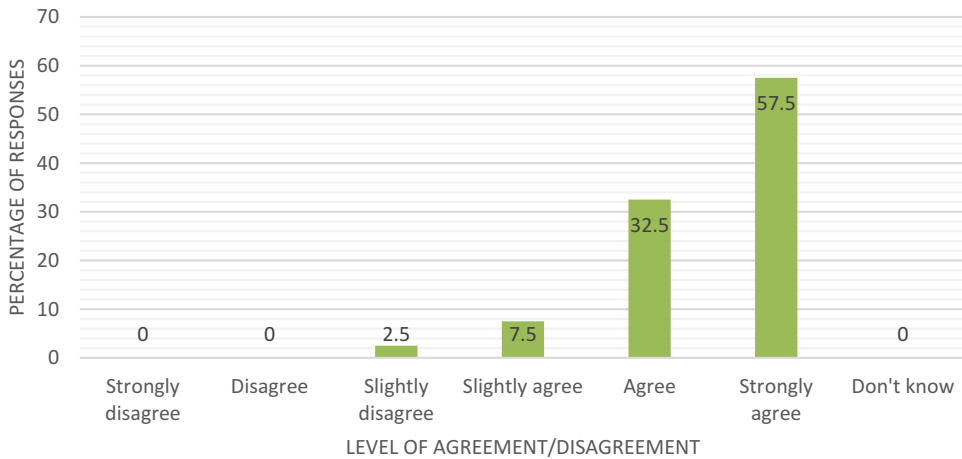


Figure 2. Graph of results to questionnaire item 'EC is a useful approach for professionals to use with children'.

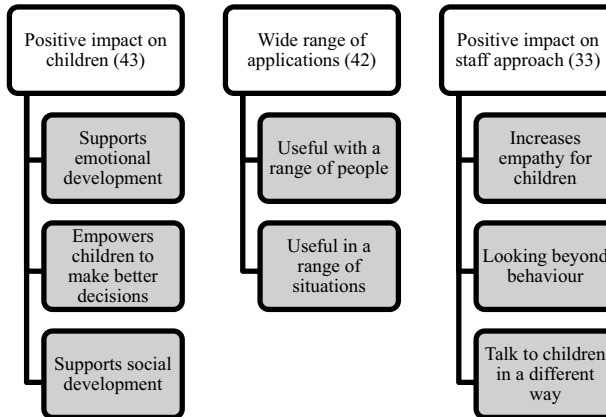


Figure 3. Thematic map of key themes and subthemes across both case study schools in relation to RQ1.

However, there was recognition that practice was not consistent across the school with most respondents reporting that 'some staff use EC and others do not' (53%).

Thematic analyses of interview data identified a range of ways in which EC is considered useful to school staff (Figure 3).

The numbers in brackets show the frequency of each theme. In the interests of space, details of themes not directly addressing the outlined research questions and more minor or nuanced themes and subthemes are not discussed. More information on all themes which emerged in the analyses can be found in Romney (2020).

Theme 1a: positive impact on children

Staff considered that EC helped children to develop acceptance, awareness and regulation of emotions and this was captured in the subtheme 'supports emotional

development'. This included developing awareness of both helpful and unhelpful emotions and developing strategies with children to manage their emotions, such as breathing exercises. Staff also considered that there were less emotional 'outbursts' and they liked that '... it allows children to actually understand and name emotions that they are feeling' (P1, School 4).

The subtheme 'empowers children to make better decisions' refers to comments about the way in which using EC helps children to develop skills to regulate their own behaviour rather than just telling children what to do or using negative consequences which are viewed as ineffective:

"I think it's very helpful, particularly for those children who perhaps would not have seen where they've gone wrong previously where they've just had sanctions put in place and there's been no, almost no explanation as to why. You know, they see that they've done something 'naughty' ... but actually this helps them understand what's behind it" (P5, School 4)

Theme 2a: wide range of applications

Over the course of the interviews, staff shared many examples of how and when they had used EC. They spoke most often about when they had used EC in response to a difficult situation with a child and also talked about using EC in a preventative way with children such as allocating times for 'check-ins' when children could talk to staff about how they were feeling. One common area in which staff applied EC was in response to social difficulties with peers on the playground. They recognised the challenge that unstructured time posed for children and the impact of emotional dysregulation when children came back to the classroom. One staff member reflected that EC can be useful in any situation:

I think sometimes [other staff] are looking for the huge behaviour to use [EC] on when actually ... it can be used if they have fallen out with their sister, if they've got a cut on their hand, if they've got a scrape on their knee ... that 'I understand how you feel approach' works all the time (P5, School 4)

As well as applying EC with children, several participants also used it effectively with other staff. One reported:

I use it with staff ... it's great with staff ... and a lot of it is just sit back and let them offload without saying 'don't be daft', 'that's not important' (P7, School 4)

Theme 3a: positive impact on staff approach

This theme relates to the ways in which staff consider that EC helps them to think about and approach children differently. Receiving the training and implementing EC had been transformational for some with one staff member reporting that it had had a massive impact on her. Another person reported feeling touched and quite emotional during the training as she got to grips with how important emotions are in our lives. Many staff felt that EC helped them to see things from children's point of view, increasing their empathy, and helped reduce dismissive and disapproving thoughts and reactions:

Yeah I think before you may take the approach, 'look it's okay' you know, not brush over it but you would be a little bit - 'come on, this is fine', ... and now you just take a step back and

think about what could be going on here ... I think you take a little bit more empathy don't you towards a situation (P3, School 4)

The subtheme 'looking beyond behaviour' builds on the idea of increased empathy to some extent because it involves considering what emotions might be causing a child to act in a certain way. One staff member talked about how this had helped her to construe children differently:

... I've got children in my class now that are quite difficult, but I don't find them difficult really because I just see beyond what they're presenting to you on the surface (P4, School 4)

This shift in thinking had helped to reduce this staff member's own stress and dysregulation in challenging situations.

RQ2. What factors are perceived by school staff to be the facilitators and barriers to the effective implementation of Emotion Coaching in their schools?

Data from the open questions on the questionnaire primarily addressed this research question. As all of the themes identified in relation to the questionnaire were also identified in the thematic analyses of the interview data, these are presented together in Figure 4.

Theme 1b: nature of the school environment

The school environment appeared to be a key factor negatively affecting the implementation of EC. Twelve out of 13 staff made reference to how the 'pressures on staff' acted as a barrier to using EC. Staff talked about time constraints and the demanding nature of the job:

You get so much thrown at you all of the time ... we get so many different things coming in all the time, this new scheme, that new scheme (P5, School 1)

There seemed to be added pressure due to statutory tests too:

With the wealth of everything you know, you have the training and then everything else and I suppose from a year 6, we've got the Year 6 SATs and all the extra Year 6 stuff going on as well (P3, School 1)

Several staff mentioned needing to emotion coach children after lunchtime whilst also needing to get the rest of the class settled or off to assembly and that this balance was difficult. There was also recognition amongst some staff that feeling pressured could

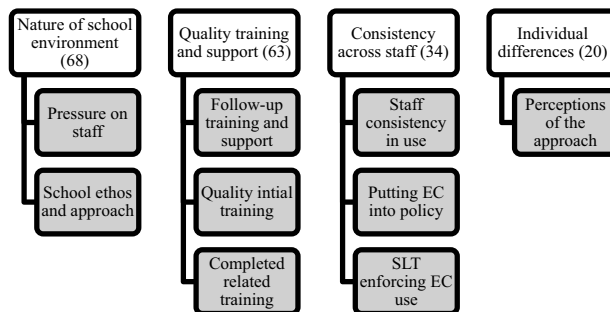


Figure 4. Thematic map of key themes and subthemes in relation to RQ2.

sometimes lead to them becoming dysregulated themselves and impact on their ability to emotion coach others:

If I'm sitting there stressed because I haven't got the time, or I've struggled to find a room ... it, it's just not conducive to the thing we are trying to do is it? (P1, School 4)

There were two members of staff who felt that using EC was a wise use of time in the short-term, as they felt that it can help save time in the long run:

It's that longer term isn't it ... it is all about time, I get that, but sometimes perhaps those five minutes would have dealt with the situation and it's not impacting then on something else (P5, School 4)

The 'school ethos and approach' was identified as an important facilitator for the implementation of EC and staff in both schools felt that EC fitted with the child-centred ethos in their schools where wellbeing was prioritised. Several staff members reflected on these points, and it seemed as though there was a clear acceptance of the EC premise that emotions matter to learning:

... they are not going to be able to learn if they are not able to understand their emotions, so we see it as really, really important and if they are in a state of anxiety, fight or flight there are going to be ongoing issues (P6, School 1)

Theme 2b: quality training and support

The first subtheme, which staff referred to most frequently, was 'follow-up training and support'. This subtheme was discussed mainly as a facilitator to implementation and captures comments from staff about refresher training sessions and formal and informal support systems within the school. One school had formally revisited EC as part of their staff meetings and staff felt that further refresher sessions would be helpful. Sharing practice with other staff and seeing EC being modelled, especially by the SLT, were also suggested as helpful.

The second subtheme was about the 'quality initial training' that staff had received, and they highlighted aspects of the training that were valuable. For example, several participants felt that learning about the theories underpinning EC was beneficial:

I think having that background knowledge of why it's so important to do and how their brains work etc. is vital (P2, School 1)

Others referred to the example scripts for the steps of EC:

I think it just gave you more confidence really because you looked at the script things and it gave you more of an idea of how you can implement it (P4, School 1)

The final subtheme, 'completed related training', captures comments from several staff where they linked the EC approach with other training that they had completed. This included attachment theory and emotional regulation training.

Theme 3b: consistency across staff

The first subtheme 'staff consistency in use' reflects the view that it is beneficial for all staff to use EC as a lack of consistency would cause problems:

... if you were one person in a school and you were trying to implement it and everyone else was a bit like 'what are you doing?' 'I just don't know that you would see an impact really ... (P4, School 4)

Lunchtime supervisors were identified as a particular staff group where consistency is difficult to achieve as they are not always able to attend staff training and may find implementing EC in the context of a busy playground difficult. Training for new staff members was also seen as a barrier to staff consistency as staff were not sure how to access training for individual new starters.

In one school, it was felt that consistency was supported by the use of lanyards with the steps of EC printed on the back. This meant that they could refer to them when needed to help promote consistent language. In one school, the SLT had explicitly incorporated EC into the school's behaviour and relationships policy and reflected on the implementation of EC in the school's Ofsted self-evaluation form. The SLT also actively committed staff to using the approach and monitored its use which was seen as helpful by another staff member:

(Head Teacher) is very good ... he always puts these things to us and makes sure we do it (P3, School 4)

These organisational and leadership factors seemed to have supported more comprehensive implementation of EC in School 4.

Theme 4b: individual differences between staff

The key subtheme within this theme related to how staff 'perceptions of the EC approach' influenced their use of EC. In some cases, positive perceptions of the benefits of the approach led to increased use. These views were informed by experiences where EC had been used and was deemed to have been an effective strategy. However, even among staff who had used EC successfully, there were perceptions that there were some children for whom EC does not 'work' or who are less receptive to the approach. This was thought to be due to difficult backgrounds or specific needs, such as those described as having ADHD. It was noted by the researcher that all explanations for ineffectual use of EC were attributed to characteristics of the child or the approach itself, rather than how staff had used EC and their skill or levels of experience.

Discussion

This research sought to explore staff views about the impact of EC and the facilitators and barriers to its implementation. The findings suggest that EC is valued by primary school staff and that they perceive a range of benefits. The findings have also contributed towards an understanding of the facilitators and barriers to implementing EC from the point of view of a range of staff, including head teachers. Overall, despite some of the identified barriers to implementing EC, staff from a wide range of roles across multiple schools were implementing EC regularly. EPs have an important role in providing quality training and implementation support for those trained in EC.

Implications for practice

Staff views about Emotion Coaching

One part of understanding implementation better is understanding how ‘attractive’ an intervention is to stakeholders, that is, school staff (EEF, 2019). The perceived utility of training has been identified as one of the most influential factors for training transfer (Grossman & Salas, 2011) and Cordingley et al. (2015) conclude that CPD activities must have relevance to teachers’ day-to-day experiences. Data from both phases of the research demonstrated that the majority of staff viewed EC as a useful approach with a wide range of applications in both their professional and personal lives. This is in line with previous research which has explored staff views about EC (for example, Krawczyk, 2017; Rose et al., 2015) and this research therefore adds to evidence that EC is an attractive intervention to many staff in a range of mainstream primary schools.

In terms of the perceived benefits to using EC, the findings suggest that staff believed the approach supported emotional development. Several studies have previously highlighted the benefits EC has on children’s emotional competence in the context of parents (for example, Gottman et al., 1996; Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004) and professionals (for example, Gus et al., 2017) and this research adds further detail to this body of evidence. The subtheme ‘empowers children to make better decisions’ showed that staff felt that EC differed from more traditional behaviourist approaches because instead of a focus on outward behaviour, children were supported to understand emotions that impacted on their behaviour and develop skills to regulate their emotions and behaviour. This point should not be underestimated since so much of what happens in classroom settings focuses on directing behaviour rather than supporting a child in how to regulate their own behaviour.

EC is proposed to not only support the wellbeing of children but also adults and this has been shown in previous research. Rose et al. (2015) found that by using EC, adults found difficult situations less stressful, with a positive impact on their wellbeing. In the context of an SEMH school, Gus et al. (2017) reported reduced staff absence as an indication of reduced staff stress. Parallels between these previous findings and the current research can be drawn with reflections that having a better understanding of what is driving a child’s behaviour helps staff to not take situations with children personally.

Facilitators

In line with previous training transfer research which has consistently indicated that training design can have a significant impact on training application (Blume et al., 2010), staff viewed the high quality of the initial training they received as something which facilitated their use of EC. One useful aspect of the training, identified in the findings, was including the theory behind EC and this is in line with Cordingley et al.’s (2015) review that understanding the rationale underpinning the practices being advocated in training was important. Other useful aspects included EPs modelling EC, the use of example scripts of the steps of EC and ample opportunity to practice. This research has

pinpointed elements of the training which trainees have found useful, and EPs and other professionals training schools in EC could include these aspects in their training.

The importance of leadership for school reforms is well documented (for example, Fixsen et al., 2013). In one of the schools which had successfully implemented EC as a whole-school approach, the use of EC was included on the SLT's monitoring schedules alongside more traditional curriculum subjects and this meant the head teacher was able to accurately assess the extent to which staff used the approach. The head teacher in this school also felt that you had to communicate the expectation that staff would use EC and support them to develop their practice. He stated that you had to 'get tough' with staff who chose not to use the approach. This research has made a distinctive contribution to understanding of the implementation of EC from the perspective of head teachers in schools and provided examples of how SLT's can facilitate the implementation of EC.

Related to the school's leadership, the ethos of the school and general approach was viewed as a facilitating factor in both study schools. Previous research has found that aspects of the workplace environment are important factors for training transfer (for example, Ford et al., 2018) and effective implementation (for example, Kelly, 2012). Characteristics of the schools that were identified included being child-centred, having unconditional positive regard for children, and understanding that learning could not happen unless children felt regulated and safe. Both schools believed that they generally prioritised wellbeing above all else. Interestingly though, despite the wellbeing ethos being quite central to staff in both schools, including the SLT, there was still evidence of a conflict between dealing with emotional issues and covering academic content.

Barriers

One recurring theme in the analysis was the pressure school staff faced and this was viewed as a significant barrier to implementing EC. Time constraints made it difficult to use the steps of EC to respond to children and the high level of demand from the curriculum created tensions between academic learning and wellbeing, even where wellbeing was central to the school ethos as mentioned above. However, this view was not universal. Others suggested that although it took more time in the short term, one could save time in the long run by addressing children's issues effectively early on. However, time constraints have also been identified as a barrier to using EC by staff in previous research (Gilbert, 2017; Krawczyk, 2017) suggesting that the pressures school staff face is an important area of concern that needs to be addressed. The findings of this research have highlighted the particular challenges faced by those who teach Year 6 due to the additional pressure of completing SATs in this year.

One factor related to staff perceptions which impacted negatively on the implementation of EC was the idea that there were some children for whom EC does not work. Staff members assumed that this was due to the child or the approach itself, rather than reflecting upon the way they had used EC. While it is certainly the case that all children are not going to respond to the EC approach in the same way, there are a number of reasons as to why this may be, including the emotional state and level of skill of the practitioner. For example, some children will need an adult to actively co-regulate with them, but if adults do not understand this, children may be given time alone to calm down and regulate by themselves before they have fully developed the skills to do this. Assumptions

that more fixed characteristics of the child are the only explanation for ineffectual use of EC prevents staff considering alternative explanations and finding ways to overcome the difficulties they have implementing the approach with certain children. This finding has implications for EPs and suggests that follow-up sessions after initial training may be beneficial. A meta-analysis (Joyce & Showers, 2002) of research on training and coaching, found that despite high-quality training, it was only when staff were also coached that they were able to change their practice. Follow-up coaching or group reflection sessions would enable staff to identify challenges they face, problem-solve and develop their skills with the support of those who have knowledge and experience of the approach.

Staff suggested that it was difficult to train and support lunchtime supervisors to use EC. However, staff felt that lunchtime was a time when children were the most likely to experience difficulties and benefit the most from EC. This issue has not been highlighted in previous research. Given that children may really benefit from EC during unstructured times and consistency across staff was recognised as a facilitator, EPs should consider promoting training for lunchtime supervisors in their discussions with SLTs.

Strengths, limitations and future research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. One key limitation was that due to the sampling method used some of the schools and participants who took part may have had a positive disposition to EC. Efforts were made to recruit schools that might have had a more neutral perspective and experience by emphasising that the only pre-requisite to taking part was that the school had received whole school training and that, for individual staff, they had attended the training: it did not matter whether EC was still in use or not. Nevertheless, the approach to recruitment could have led to positivity about EC which is not representative of other schools. Another limitation was around the use of online questionnaires which seemed to contribute towards a low response rate in some schools due the limited personal accountability for its completion.

A strength of this research is that the findings at both stages were informed by multiple perspectives of staff in various roles. Importantly, and distinctive to this research, this included the views of headteachers during the second phase of the study. This helped to develop an understanding of organisational factors associated with implementation which previous research has highlighted as important.

This research has focused on the perceived value and facilitators and barriers to using EC. Future research could examine other aspects of implementation, such as what the approach looks like on a day-to-day basis and on a whole-school level. It could also address questions such as how sustainable EC is over time. This research also provides further justification for a large-scale evaluation of the outcomes of the approach.

Conclusion

By drawing on past literature on implementation science, training transfer, and effective CPD, this paper has addressed questions related to the impact and implementation of EC. Since EC has begun to be applied in educational settings, research, including the present study, has suggested that the approach is attractive to staff in schools and that they perceive a range of benefits. These benefits extend beyond children and young people to

others in the school community. A range of facilitators and barriers to its implementation has been highlighted which has implications for how EPs train and support schools with EC. Training should be underpinned by theory and this should be explicitly shared with trainees. The skills involved in EC should be modelled for trainees and there should be opportunities for them to practise these skills during the training session so that they feel prepared to start using what they have learnt following their training. When negotiating the time required for training, EPs should bear these factors in mind and ensure that there is enough time for each of these aspects in the training sessions.

The findings also suggest that it may be beneficial for EPs to be involved with supporting and coaching trained staff in schools following initial training and during the early stages of implementation. This would enable staff to identify challenges they face, problem-solve, and develop their skills with the support of those who have knowledge and experience of the approach.

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Appendix 1 – Questions/statements included in the online questionnaire (Romney, 2020)

Questions/statements 3 – 12 required participants to respond, as appropriate, by:

- Selecting from multiple choice answers, or
- Selecting from 5 point Likert Scale (Strongly agree – Strongly disagree with additional option of ‘Don’t know’), or
- Recording answer in narrative form (questions 10-12)

- (1) Which school do you work at?
- (2) What is your job role?
- (3) To what extent do you feel the training helped you to understand the principles which explain *why* Emotion Coaching works?
- (4) Following your training, how prepared did you feel to begin implementing Emotion Coaching?
- (5) How relevant or not relevant do you feel Emotion Coaching is to each area of the following roles when engaging with children?
- (6) Whether you take them or not, how often do you feel there are opportunities for you to use Emotion Coaching in your practice?
- (7) Emotion Coaching is a useful approach for professionals to use with children
- (8) Emotion Coaching is a useful approach for parents to use with their children
- (9) Which of the following statements best reflects the current level of engagement with Emotion Coaching in your school?
- (10) What factors helped you to implement Emotion Coaching?
- (11) What factors made it difficult to implement Emotion Coaching?
- (12) What further training or support do you feel would be helpful in order to help you develop your Emotion Coaching practice further?