



Teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Incredible Years[®] Teacher Classroom Management programme on their practice and on the social and emotional development of their pupils

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Background. The Incredible Years[®] (IY) Teacher Classroom Management (TCM) programme may be an effective way to reduce teacher stress levels, improve child behaviour, and promote positive socio-emotional development. However, few studies have considered what teachers think of the course and how it might work.

Aims. In this paper, we examine teachers' perceptions of the impact of the TCM programme and how it might work in the classroom.

Sample(s). Forty-four UK primary school teachers who attended the TCM programme as part of the STARS trial (Ford *et al.*, 2018, *Psychol. Med.*, 49, 828).

Methods. Focus groups and interviews were held with teachers two months after completing the TCM programme. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, *Qual. Res. Psychol.*, 3, 77) was employed to explore the subsequent data.

Results. Three main themes were identified: impact on the teacher; on children; and on parent-teacher relationships. Impact on the teacher included a positive change in their ethos. Teachers reported being more able to see things from the child's perspective; placing a greater focus on building positive relationships; thinking before responding; feeling calmer, more confident, and in control; and employing strategies to create positive interactions with children. Teachers felt this had had a positive impact on their pupils' development and relationships with parents. Feedback on whether or not TCM was effective in tackling particularly challenging behaviour was more mixed.

Conclusions. Our findings suggest that teachers experience the TCM programme as beneficial. This is discussed alongside other qualitative and quantitative studies in this field.

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Kate Allen and Lorraine Hansford are to be regarded as joint first author since their contributions are deemed equal.

Disruptive classroom behaviour is extremely common (Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, & Conway, 2014), and many teachers feel inadequately trained to deal with it, which can have a negative impact not only on the classroom environment, but also teachers' self-efficacy, stress, and burnout levels (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers in the United Kingdom report higher levels of sustained psychological distress than the general population (Titheradge *et al.*, 2019). Complaints of high workload and ever competing demands may contribute to the reasons why around four out of ten teachers leave the profession less than a year after qualification (Weale, 2015). Training that supports teachers to manage challenging behaviour in the classroom may help to combat teacher stress and burnout levels as well as promote improved socio-emotional regulation and positive behaviour among children, creating a more positive classroom environment where children are better able to learn (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

The Incredible Years[®] (IY) Teacher Classroom Management (TCM) course is part of a suite of three programmes aiming to reduce childhood behaviour problems (Webster-Stratton, Reinke, Herman, & Newcomer, 2011). It is underpinned by empirically based theories including Patterson's hypotheses about the maintenance of disruptive and aggressive behaviour by socially reinforced coercive cycles of adult-child interaction (Patterson, 1982), Bandura's ideas about modelling and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and Piaget's developmental theories (Piaget & Inhelder, 1962). TCM is highly manualized with clear criteria for training, supervision, and fidelity, but allows 'adaptation with fidelity' in that group leaders can select from a range of techniques to deliver the prescribed curriculum in the manner most acceptable to their context (Webster-Stratton *et al.*, 2011). TCM's explicit goals are to: enhance teacher classroom management skills and improve teacher-student relationships, assist teachers to develop effective proactive behaviour plans, encourage teachers to adopt and promote emotional regulation skills, and encourage teachers to strengthen positive teacher-parent relationships. This is accomplished through goal-setting, reflective learning, video-modelling, and role play, with cognitive and emotional self-regulation training. Teachers are encouraged to practise novel strategies between sessions and to discuss their experiences.

The TCM programme has been applied effectively in a number of countries in parallel with the parent programme and/or child programme (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001, 2004; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008) or additional coaching for teachers (Baker-Henningham & Walker, 2009). A number of these trials conducted independent and blind observations of teacher classroom behaviour, which demonstrated that teachers who attended the TCM training applied more positive and fewer negative behaviour management strategies and provided clearer instructions to their pupils post-training (Hickey *et al.*, 2017; Hutchings, Martin-Forbes, Daley, & Williams, 2013; Marlow *et al.*, 2015; Martin, 2009; Murray, Rabiner, Kuhn, Pan, & Sabet, 2018). Recent larger cluster trials and a meta-analysis suggest TCM is an effective child mental health intervention that may be particularly effective for children who are already struggling, but did not show any change in the use of teacher management strategies or well-being (Ford *et al.*, 2018; Hickey *et al.*, 2017; Murray *et al.*, 2018; Nye, 2017).

Examining teachers' experiences of TCM is important for successful implementation and may help reveal potential mechanisms of change. Few studies have considered teachers' views of the TCM programme thus far. One study involved in-depth interviews with 15 teachers (Baker-Henningham & Walker, 2009), where TCM was augmented by coaching and changed considerably to fit the context. Another involved interviews with 11 teachers after they attended the course and six-one year later (McGilloway *et al.*, 2010), and further study interviewed 21 teachers (Hutchings *et al.*, 2007). A recent meta-

ethnography of these studies reported teachers identified numerous benefits of the course including an increased focus on positive behaviours and use of positive strategies, feeling more in control and less stressed, and an increased focus on, and understanding of, children's individual needs (Nye, 2017). Teachers suggested that the course benefitted the children in relation to their social and emotional skills, and that they experienced fewer behavioural problems in the classroom (Nye, 2017).

The Supporting Teachers And childRen in Schools (STARS) trial was a large cluster randomized controlled trial of TCM on primary school children's mental health and behaviour, and teachers' mental health in the United Kingdom (Ford et al., 2018). The current study reports on findings from the process evaluation concerned with teachers' perceptions of impact (Hansford et al., 2015). In the STARS trial, 80 primary schools in the South West of England were invited to send one teacher on the TCM course. Schools randomized to the intervention arm ($n = 40$) sent their teacher on a TCM course in their first year of involvement in the study, whilst schools randomized to the control arm ($n = 40$) sent their teacher on the course one year later.

The aims of the current paper are to explore: (1) teachers' views on whether or not the TCM programme had any impact on themselves and (2) teachers' views on whether or not the TCM programme had any impact on the children or their parents.

Materials and methods

Participants and data collection

The current study involves focus groups and interviews with teachers who attended the first five TCM courses run as part of the STARS study. Teachers who attended the final TCM course were not invited to take part as data saturation had occurred. Focus groups were held two months after their course finished. Teachers who were unable to attend the focus group were invited to take part in an individual telephone interview. All focus groups and interviews were conducted by a trained researcher and were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Each focus group lasted approximately one and a half hours and started with participants setting ground rules covering areas such as confidentiality, turn-taking, and respecting differing opinions. Each focus group was run by a researcher-facilitator working on the STARS trial and, where possible, these were researchers the teachers had not had regular contact with previously.

Individual telephone interviews lasted approximately half an hour and started with the researcher explaining that anything discussed would remain confidential. Where possible, the researcher conducting the interview has not had regular contact with the interviewee.

The same topic guides were used for focus groups and interviews and explored how teachers' experiences and views of the TCM course such as how the course was run, positive and negative aspects of the course, and whether or not they had discussed the TCM strategies with colleagues. In the case of the focus groups, it was hoped the topic guide would prompt discussion among teachers to encourage more nuanced reflections and allow teachers to discuss and respond to each other's thoughts and opinions. Topic guides are available on request from the authors.

The TCM programme was delivered to teachers in groups of up to 12 and involved six whole-day sessions spread across six months during the school term (October–April). Sessions were held away from school premises, and schools were provided with a contribution towards supply cover. Each course was facilitated by two group leaders

trained in the delivery of TCM who had facilitated at least two courses prior to the start of the trial. They were supervised in their delivery of the TCM programme after each session by a member of the IY development team.

This paper focuses on teachers' perceptions of the perceived impact of TCM. Another paper (in progress) will report on teachers' views on barriers/facilitators to implementation and the acceptability of the course.

Analysis

Audio recordings of both the focus groups and interviews were transcribed for analysis. These transcriptions were read and re-read by a team of researchers (LH, AP, KA and OM) who conducted the analysis using QSR International's Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. Analysis began after the first set of focus groups were completed and continued until data saturation had been reached. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to explore the interview and focus group data, using a coding framework developed by the team that was informed by the research questions but also allowed for more inductive analysis whereby emergent themes could be identified as the analysis progressed. Framework analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2008) was used to manage the data and to aid systematic analysis including the description and summary of key themes, patterns, and links in the data. During regular team meetings, key themes emerging from the analysis were identified, refined, and agreed. Other methods adopted during these meetings to ensure rigour included the recording of analytical discussions and checks for thematic saturation and coding consistency.

Results

A total of 47 teachers attended the first five TCM groups run as part of the STARS trial, 31 of these teachers took part in a focus group, 13 were interviewed separately, and three were unable to take part in either a focus group or interview. Table 1 provides an overview of teacher characteristics; characteristics were similar for those who attended a focus group and those who were interviewed.

Our analysis revealed a number of different themes and subthemes as summarized in Table 2.

Impact on teachers' practice

Change of mindset

Many teachers reported that attending the TCM course had made a significant impact on their teaching practice and some teachers described this not only as the adoption of new strategies, but a major shift in their ethos or approach:

My whole mindset has changed. Everything I've learnt at uni, it's not gone out the window but I think my mindset and my practice and the way I deliver and my lessons and my behaviour management has completely changed because of the things we've discussed, the way I've learnt from others here . . .

In one example, a newly qualified teacher talked about how they were able to deal with the difficult behaviour of a new child who had been expelled from previous schools as a

Table 1. Teacher focus groups/interviews participant characteristics

Participant characteristics	Focus group (n = 31)	Interview (n = 13)
Number female (%)	24 (77)	10 (77)
Average age (SD)	34.6 (10.3)	30.3 (6.3)
Number in full-time employment (%)	29 (94)	13 (100)
Number teaching KS1 (%)	20 (65)	4 (31)
Number teaching KS2 (%)	11 (35)	9 (69)
Mean proportion of SEN children in teacher's class (SD)	22.0 (13.2)	24.7 (13.5) ^a
Number who had full-time classroom support (%)	19 (61)	7 (54)
Mean length of time teaching (SD)	6.8 (5.9)	6.2 (6.3)
Number in leadership roles (%)	3 (10)	0 (0)
Number of newly qualified teachers (%)	1 (3)	1 (8)
Number whose initial qualification was a PGCE (%)	15 (48)	4 (31)
Number whose initial qualification was other (%)	14 (45)	8 (62)
Average TCM sessions attended (SD)	5.6 (0.7)	5.4 (0.9)
Number of teachers that completed less than half of sessions (%)	0 (0)	1 (8)

Notes. KS1 = Key Stage 1; KS2 = Key Stage 2; PGCE = Postgraduate Certificate in Education; SD = Standard Deviation; SEN = Special Educational Needs; TCM = Teacher Classroom Management.

^aOne teacher did not provide information about the percentage of children with SEN.

Table 2. Summary of the main themes that emerged in relation to each area of enquiry

Category	Theme
Impact on teachers' practice	Change of 'mindset'
	A child's eye view
	Building relationships
	Thinking before responding
	Positivity
	Feeling calmer, more confident, and in control
Impact on children	Creating a positive cycle through role modelling
	Changes in behaviour: children becoming ready to learn
	Promoting independence and taking responsibility
	Impact on children with behavioural needs
Impact on parent-teacher relationships	Raising self-esteem
	Improving two-way communication between teacher and parents
	Collaborating with parents to promote positive behaviour

result of the course, and how as a result their behaviour management skills had been admired by an observing Educational Psychologist.

A child's eye view

Teachers discussed how the course had made them think about things from a child's point of view; how the child might be feeling and subsequently behaving. They reported the course reminded them that children were at the core of their job, something that can easily be forgotten amidst the daily demands on their time;

It just gets lost in the level standards, targets, no time, leadership, and everything else that you're doing, you forget that your job is those 30 children, you have to nurture them for a year, help them to grow academically, social, emotionally, everything else. And actually you know whether a sheet is filled in with their targets or not isn't as important as what that child's just gone through on their way into school in the morning.

Teachers observed that they developed a deeper understanding of the child's point of view and that this greater empathy prompted them to make changes, for example, in the way in which they spoke to children, how they delivered instructions or the systems they used, for example, reward/punishment systems:

Having to role play... you really thought about what a child would be hearing... you might think that you are being really clear and that child should interpret whatever you said the way you said it, but in actual fact they misinterpreted it entirely. So rather than getting cross because they're not doing it as you asked them to, it might purely [be] because they didn't understand what you asked them to do.

Teachers also described a more general impact on their practice such as being more empathetic, more patient, or not taking children's behaviour personally. Several teachers spoke about their increased awareness of the separation between their own state of mind and that of the child's, 'thinking about the child the whole time rather than how I'm feeling'.

Teachers reported TCM reminded them how the recognition of children's social and emotional needs is a prerequisite for the creation of a positive learning environment:

It's made me realise again that... we teach people, they are little people and they're going through difficult things just like we are and actually sometimes as a teacher it doesn't matter how their writing is coming along and how this that and the other, that they might just actually need you in another way... Because they can't learn can they? If they're in a poor place emotionally... they're not in a place to learn so it's so important.

Building relationships

Teachers are encouraged to nurture positive relationships with children as one of the foundations of the TCM approach and teachers discussed various strategies they had introduced to do so more proactively. Examples included making time to greet children individually as they come into class in the morning and ask about their evening or weekend, chatting to them about themselves at lunchtime rather than talking about school, introducing a 'compliments circle', and trying to make the class feel like 'family':

I found that in one of the vignettes we saw it was about greeting them in the morning. Some of my children are just sort of shoved into the playground... so I just make sure that I am making a real conscious effort to say 'morning', 'you alright?', 'you ok today?' So I tend to say the same thing about 30 times but I think they all really like that. So I do try and do that every day.

Teachers talked about deliberately strengthening relationships and about seeing a positive impact of those changing relationships on behaviour and learning. Teachers also talked about recognizing that relationship building was two-way and that there was a benefit to being more open and allowing children to get to know them better:

I think personally unintentionally I was becoming a bit aloof from my children and there was a bit of a distance between us so from all that I sort of changed the way I approached it all and I

spent more time trying to build positive relationships with them by play... I'm also giving away some of my things I get up to as well just to get them to know a bit more about me.

I have had a couple of challenging children, and over the course of the year taking on board some of the pointers from this course, the relationships have developed a lot, there is a lot more trust, they want to work for me now.

Thinking before responding

Some teachers reported that combining a strategic approach based on theory with an awareness of the child's viewpoint had resulted in them responding differently to situations in the classroom. Teachers observed that this not only affected their planning, but also responses 'in the moment'; taking time to step back from a situation, think about why it may be happening and then make a choice about what to do, rather than immediately reacting:

You've got to think about why they're doing it and still going through the same things rather than jumping down their throats because they've done something little, actually making sure you're thinking 'Well what should I be doing?'

In another example, a teacher described how this approach enabled them to pay more attention to all children in the class, not just the more vocal ones.

Positivity

Teachers commonly reported that they became more positive in their practice in the classroom; they judged this to be one of the most important changes they experienced. Teachers reflected that when they were more positive, it changed the atmosphere in the classroom. One teacher described how the whole class had become 'a much more positive place', and teachers commonly noticed a shift in the classroom environment.

Teachers discussed becoming aware of how subtle changes in the way they instruct or respond to children can have an impact, both in terms of the children's well-being and their motivation:

It's a nicer environment to be in and it's made me think now just about exactly what I say and how that comes across... just to make sure that they are phrased in a positive way and that I'm not always picking up on the negatives and that I am praising them when they're doing things that they should be and that's really helped. I feel happier and I think they do as well.

It definitely has more impact and it leads to you know a happier classroom, the kids' self-confidence is up, they are more willing to do things and try really hard

Several teachers reported that the way this positive approach had helped to prevent negative behaviour and promote a positive learning environment had been noticed by other colleagues:

The Head wants me to do a staff meeting based on this so that I can bring some of the strategies in. Because she's been in and she's seen it and she's said the class has changed and it's a really, really lovely class to come into.

Teachers discussed how it had started to 'just become second nature' to approach their class with a positive attitude and as a result feel more in control.

Feeling calmer, more confident, and in control

One of the main aspects of the TCM programme is the provision of multiple strategies that teachers can use and adapt to their classroom. Teachers reported that being able to deal with children's behaviour proactively and having a 'toolkit' to dip in to as they need it led to them feeling calmer:

I'm not so stressed out anymore, things like behaviour it has helped me in that way that I kind of don't let it get me down when things have not quite worked out... I'll look at it and try something different, rather than beating myself up about it.

Some teachers also discussed how the TCM course had built or restored their confidence in their own behaviour management skills:

I think if our head said 'Is there anyone...prepared to now coordinate...some sort of behaviour support', before I would have said no but now I would say 'Yes go on then let's look at that' because I feel like I have got the confidence to do that.

One teacher gave an example of finding it difficult to deal with a child who was constantly calling out in class, but was unconvinced that the punitive measures their colleagues had suggested were the right strategy:

It's made me kind of have confidence to listen to my colleagues but also think 'I think you're wrong'...and before as quite a new teacher I've always thought 'Oh maybe they know because they've been teaching for 25 years so they probably know better than me'...and actually sometimes having the confidence to go 'I'm going to do it my way actually' and trying it.

Creating a positive cycle through role modelling

Teachers reported that changes in their own behaviour in the classroom led to changes in children's behaviour and in the well-being of both teachers and children:

When you are looking and spending time and you are really listening to them and being really positive I've found as a person it must made me better at my job, calmer, happier and the children wanted to please and not be that person who is in time out.

In simple terms, teachers reflected that having a happier teacher seemed to result in a happier class. Teachers reflected that the group leaders' validation of their expertise and encouragement to share their skills resulted in them feeling more confident and boosting their sense of self-efficacy, and in turn changes in their own behaviour in class created a cycle of positive reinforcement; as they became calmer and more confident, they saw the children's behaviour changing in a similar way. Some teachers noted that this role modelling technique also worked when they were more open about mistakes or challenges with the children. This helped to reduce teacher stress but also helped children learn about emotional self-regulation and resilience:

So just being myself and just letting them see who I am, that I make mistakes, that I can have a laugh, that I'm not always on their case you know. . . I think that has really helped the class.

Impact on children

Changes in behaviour: children becoming ready to learn

As well as changes in behaviour, teachers also noticed changes within culture of the classroom. Some teachers talked about how addressing children's social and emotional needs created a climate in which children were ready to learn:

I have noticed that the one boy . . . I didn't think I was getting anywhere with him and its only been in the last month where his behaviour has changed completely. He is producing an awful lot more work. . . we have a home schooling book where parents are getting involved, and there has been a notable change in his attitude to school and also in the amount of work he is doing.

Again, teachers noted how shifting the attention they give to those who are behaving well had also helped children to focus on their work:

I have noticed in my class, that those children that mess around and don't do very much work or whatever, are actually now producing an awful lot more work because they want the attention and I have withdrawn the attention from them which was 'why haven't you got that done yet, you are always in trouble' and I have given it to these other ones who 'if I want the attention then I need to do the work to get the attention as well'. . . It seems so obvious but that kind of turnaround has been really nice to see.

Promoting independence and taking responsibility

Some teachers gave examples of ways in which specific TCM strategies had helped children become more independent:

For one child that came in really struggling . . . I gave him the 'acts of responsibility' idea. So his responsibility is to always give out the whiteboard pens, and spot the good behaviour in other children, and it worked a dream and he is such a different child now.

It's given the children the power to look around and think 'Oh I know what to do to do this myself', and it's trying to train that little bit of independent thinking and it's been beneficial to the children.

Impact on children with behavioural needs

Teachers gave mixed feedback about the effectiveness of TCM strategies with children with particularly challenging behaviour. Some teachers believed using TCM techniques within the classroom complemented the individual support some children were receiving outside the classroom:

You might have children in your class that have THRIVE so they are going out for their individual kind of emotional kind of time but then it's about how we support them in class. . .it's about how you can make their day with you kind of happy and stress free and I think that's kind of where this has been most supportive.

Some teachers gave examples of individual children with behavioural needs for whom they had been able to successfully implement specific TCM techniques or formulate an individual behaviour plan as part of the course:

I use a lot of the modelling with him. . . we use like the 'I can' statements and the photos of him doing things. . . making it really clear simple steps for each thing, because when he first started 'right go and put your things away' it was like a ten minute wandering around. . . he found instructions very difficult so when we said 'oh, you can, say to yourself 'I can put my coat up'. . . he goes off and hangs it up. So we have used a lot of the 'making it about him' so that he gets that the instruction is for him.

However, others reported instances where the strategies had not been effective for children with more challenging behaviour:

One girl who came in January I was able to apply a lot of what we have been doing here and I think we kept a lid on her behaviour all the way through to March when it went off. But keeping a lid on it is not what you want to do is it, you want to deal with it rather than just keep a lid on it. But I think if she had been there right from the beginning it might have been a different thing, rather than coming in half way through.

When we started I had a really difficult child, he's now gone to a special school for behaviour. . . . But it did make me realise from when I was talking to everyone at the start when he was my focus child, that everything I was trying, I could then say when he did eventually leave that I did try everything, so I didn't sort of give up I tried, literally everything and all the ideas that I got from [the course] I tried.

Although teachers reported reasons why these TCM strategies were not ultimately effective, these examples tie in with the feedback from teachers described earlier who suggested that TCM did not always impact sufficiently on the children exhibiting the most challenging behaviour for their continued attendance in mainstream school.

Raising self-esteem

Earlier, we described how teachers noticed that increases in their own levels of confidence and self-efficacy were reflected in the children. Another strategy which teachers noted improved children's self-esteem was increased communication with parents, in particular reporting positive behaviour:

Another thing we have used is the 'wow slips' and the 'happy grams' to parents all in their contact diaries, just to say so and so worked really hard today. . . just by saying we are really proud and sharing that with the parents the child is then ten foot tall, that's all they need, they can go away feeling happy and confident.

Again, teachers noticed that they could use this approach to benefit every child in the class rather than a smaller number demanding their attention.

Impact on parent-teacher relationships

Developing better relationships with parents is advocated by the TCM approach, and teachers mentioned various ways in which they had consciously tried to do this such as greeting parents at the door, going to see them in the playground to pass on positive messages about what their child has done, setting up a home-school book, sending positive letters, and making phone calls.

Improving two-way communication between teacher and parents

Some teachers talked about how these efforts to develop better relationships had resulted in parents perceiving the teachers differently and prompted more positive responses and more discussion:

I have noticed that there has been a much more positive parental response. Because when they see you now they feel they can actually talk to you more rather than just listening to a litany of things that little Johnny has done wrong today.

Parents have said they're thrilled to have good news rather than always having to be told about maybe not so good choices in the classroom.

One teacher described how this positive effect had been recognized more widely within the school, and that the whole school was now working towards sending more positive messages to parents, dealing with negatives in a more 'gentle' way and generally encouraging parents to participate more actively in school life.

Collaborating with parents to promote positive behaviour

Some teachers had been approached by parents to help them try and tackle difficult behaviour at home using some of the strategies they had adopted in the classroom. One teacher gave an example of advising a parent to focus on positive instead of negative behaviours:

[The child's mother]'s like 'I'm always telling him to stop' and I'm like 'Yes but you're telling him what he shouldn't be doing so you're making him do it more. . . instead of doing that tell him the positive, what you do want to see and not what you don't want to see all the time because actually he just wants attention, he's just doing the wrong things'.

For some teachers working cooperatively with parents to address behavioural issues had the added benefit of not only helping parents but also introducing consistency across home and school, which served to reinforce the behaviour changes at school.

Discussion

Teachers reported a number of ways in which the TCM programme had positively impacted themselves, their pupils, and their relationships with parents. The benefits for teachers included feeling better able to deal with difficult behaviour, improved relationships with the children, feeling more positive, calmer and more confident in their abilities, and creating positive cycles of behaviour. Teachers believed the strategies and ethos they had implemented had made the children readier to learn, more independent and willing to take on responsibilities, and had raised their self-esteem. Teachers also reported that parents perceived them more positively and were more willing to approach and work with them to help tackle behaviour problems.

The predominantly positive discussions within the focus groups and interviews echo previous qualitative studies (Baker-Henningham & Walker, 2009; Hutchings *et al.*, 2007; McGilloy *et al.*, 2010) and teachers' reports on the positive impact this has had on the children in the classroom compare well to quantitative studies published elsewhere. In

our main trial, we detected sustained improvements in children's classroom behaviour and concentration and also found transient improvements in prosocial behaviour and mental health (Ford *et al.*, 2018). The fact that some of these improvements were not maintained at follow-up, when the children would have graduated to a new class with a new class teacher, may be explained because the subsequent teacher was not TCM trained. It would be interesting to see whether these positive impacts could be maintained using a whole-school approach to TCM involving teaching and playground assistants as well as all teachers.

It is interesting to note that teachers' perceptions of the impact of the TCM course were almost entirely positive, with the only negative comments being around the impact TCM had on children with special educational needs. Whilst there were a number of positive comments about the TCM strategies working well with children whose behaviour was particularly challenging, some teachers reported the strategies failed to fully support these children. The strategies promoted by TCM are those that Special Educational Needs Coordinators report as being the most useful strategies for targeting children with behavioural problems (Nye *et al.*, 2016), and interestingly, the quantitative analysis suggested those with poor mental health initially derived the greatest benefit (Ford *et al.*, 2018). However, this does not mean all children are able to cope with the demands of the mainstream school environment (Parker *et al.*, 2016). The TCM programme is designed to support children with severely challenging behaviour (Webster-Stratton, 2016), but for this group, TCM would run alongside concurrent work with parents and directly with the child themselves. Furthermore, it could be that in order to have a clear positive impact on children with the most challenging behavioural needs, the whole school or at least all the staff working within that class and/or with that particular child need to be trained in TCM and working with the same strategies. In the STARS trial, only one teacher per school attended the TCM programme, and when multiple staff are working with the same child, it may be difficult to ensure staff are consistent in their strategies and approach.

Teachers reported that the wider school environment impacted on their ability to implement changes in their classroom. Some teachers reported difficulties deploying strategies effectively within their classrooms if teaching assistants did not agree or use the same approach (Ford *et al.*, 2019). Others expressed concerns about adopting strategies that may differ from the prevailing culture in their school in relation to behaviour management, or felt constrained by a lack of senior management support. A consistent whole-school approach to TCM that involves all staff may be more successful, particularly as a recent trial of two evidence-based approaches to children's behavioural management suggested that organizational level factors were the strongest predictors of teachers' stress and job satisfaction (Ouellette *et al.*, 2017). The challenge of implementing this whole-school approach, however, should not be underestimated, particularly without the added benefits of government backing (see Hutchings & Williams, 2017), free training, and funded supply cover. Whilst the current paper attempted to understand how TCM may work, future work should explore factors that might impact on the implementation of TCM in the UK school culture.

Focusing teachers attention and praise to encourage desired behaviour is one of the cornerstones of the TCM programme (Webster-Stratton *et al.*, 2011) and relates to Patterson's theories about coercive and virtuous cycles of interactions. Our findings that teachers believed they were now more positive within the classroom replicate those of other qualitative studies where teachers have also reported this to be one of the perceived impacts/benefits for teachers (Baker-Henningham & Walker, 2009; Hutchings *et al.*,

2007; McGilloway *et al.*, 2010). Observational findings in the STARS trial also demonstrated greater use of positive strategies after attendance at the TCM course (Ford *et al.*, 2019). In another trial, when teachers were more positive, this was associated with changes in the atmosphere of the classroom and increased compliance among pupils (Murray *et al.*, 2018).

Teachers' reports of feeling calmer, more confident, and in control are particularly interesting given they were not mirrored by improved scores on the Everyday Feelings Questionnaire (EFQ), the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Ford *et al.*, 2019). Other quantitative studies have failed to consider whether or not TCM impacts teachers' well-being in this way. It may be that these measures are failing to pick up the benefits teachers experience as a result of the TCM programme, or as one participant commented, that improvements experienced within the classroom were undermined by other stressful changes within primary education, such as major changes in the curriculum and assessment structures (Alexander, 2012; Roberts, 2018). Interestingly, we detected improved self-efficacy in relation to teachers' perception of their ability to manage their classroom in our small, uncontrolled feasibility study (Marlow *et al.*, 2015), which may be a chance finding, or because we used longer versions of the same questionnaires that perhaps were more sensitive to change. The short versions were included in the main trial to minimize the reporting burden on teachers. Equally, it could be that we should instead be focusing on measuring changes in the teacher–child relationship or using a measure of school climate. Murray's study in North Carolina assessed and reported change in the classroom climate, whilst the children were taught by a teacher who had attended TCM, but as schools had classrooms assigned to both intervention and control, any impact on school climate could not be assessed (Murray *et al.*, 2018).

Strengths and limitations

The present study adds to limited literature that explores teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and experience of the TCM programme and adds a number of new insights into the benefits of the TCM course from teachers' perspectives. It has a number of strengths; it is the largest study of its kind and includes teachers from both Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) in contrast to earlier studies that only focused on younger children. The participating teachers ranged from newly qualified to very experienced and were selected from schools across the South West of England. The study was conducted using robust, reproducible methodology, and a published protocol (Hansford *et al.*, 2015).

Although every effort was made to ensure that the teacher focus groups and interviews were conducted by a researcher the teachers had not had regular contact with, the STARS research team consisted of seven people, so focus group leaders may have been known by the teachers who participated in the qualitative aspect of the study. This could have led to information bias if teachers felt inhibited in reporting negative results (Kitzinger, 1995). Given that feedback was consistent across focus groups and interviews with over 40 teachers, we are confident we minimized any potential impact of the times when one of the researchers was known to one of the attendees. The study did not allow for any comparison between KS1 and KS2 teachers, and it could be that there is a difference of perceived impact in relation to these two groups. Future research should explore whether this is the case. The study was limited to a relatively small geographical area, and the views expressed may not generalize to teachers working in other areas. It is the first to report the experience of teachers from England, yet the similarities with Welsh, Irish, and Jamaican

teachers' reports are striking (Baker-Henningham & Walker, 2009; Hutchings *et al.*, 2007; McGilloway *et al.*, 2010). Future research should consider exploring views of other teachers from different geographical locations, particularly those working with more ethnically diverse populations.

Implications for policy and practice

The fact that teachers in the current study reported that the TCM course had impacted themselves, the children, and parents in a positive way suggests that the Incredible Years[®] TCM programme is acceptable and feasible in the UK context. This is useful knowledge for policy makers, local educational authorities, and school senior management teams. Our findings suggest that TCM should not be expected to support children with the most severe behavioural problems in isolation from other interventions, and that a whole-school approach should be explored.

Conclusion

Teachers reported that attending the course provided them with strategies that impacted positively on their teaching practice, although they may still require additional support for children with the most severe problems. The TCM programme shows promise as a universal child mental health intervention and should be investigated further as a whole-school programme.

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