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# Evaluating the SKILLS (Support for KIds in Learning and Language Strategies) Online Programme for School Support Staff

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**ABSTRACT:** *SKILLS (Support for KIds in Learning and Language Strategies) is a five-week web-based programme introducing positive behavioural principles to strengthen Teaching Assistant (TA)-pupil relationships, increase praise and develop children's language. This feasibility trial examined the likelihood of engaging TAs into completing the online programme and obtained participant feedback from which to make further developments. A demographic questionnaire and the Teacher Strengths and Difficulties (TSDQ) were administered at baseline. The Teaching Stress Inventory (TSI) and a measure of Sense of competence (PSOC) were administered pre and post intervention to explore any TA benefits. A feedback questionnaire gathered participants' responses to the newly developed programme and explored engagement and any problems encountered with accessing the resource. Exploratory measures administered pre- and post-intervention showed a significant increase in the TAs sense of competence and efficacy, and their use of strategies to prompt children's language. The sample was adequate for a feasibility study however, a larger sample is needed to determine programme effectiveness. The sixteen participants responded positively, describing SKILLS as being beneficial to their professional development. The SKILLS online programme has the potential to improve children's experience of school and their long-term academic outcomes through improving staff training. The programme is founded upon evidence-based positive behavioural principles, therefore, can be applied to Educational Psychology, professional development and education practice. School support staff work with some of the most vulnerable and challenged pupils but face limited training. This study addresses this lack of professional learning opportunities with the development and evaluation of a novel and easily accessible programme that can improve child and TA outcomes. This feasibility study is important to further develop this much-needed resource based on stakeholder feedback.*

***Key words****: Positive behaviour principles, professional learning, Tas, teaching assistants, training.*

## 1. Introduction

Growing numbers of children in mainstream schools receive support from a range of staff to address their additional learning needs and ensure that they achieve positive outcomes (Alborz et al., 2009; Skipp et al., 2019). This was already a problem pre-COVID, but the number of children now entering school without the school readiness skills needed to engage successfully with education has increased (Bercow, 2024). Without additional support, many of these children face lifelong challenges, including poor academic attainment, mental health difficulties and unemployment (Colman et al., 2009; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Reef et al., 2009). There has been an increase in the number of support staff employed within the UK education system,

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particularly with children in their early school years (Atici, 2007; DfE, 2018). An increase of 48% since 1995 (Estyn, 2007; Giangreco et al., 2014), has resulted in Teaching Assistants (TAs) now representing a quarter of the workforce within mainstream schools (Hancock et al., 2002; Webster et al., 2013). In Wales this is largely due to i) implementation of the statutory Foundation Phase National curriculum, that promotes learning through play for children aged 3-7 with an adult to child ratio of 1:8 in classrooms and ii) the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004; 2015). There have been similar developments in England with the establishment of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (Westminster Government, 2014).

The majority of TAs support children with Special Educational Need (SEN) statements (Butt & Lance, 2005; Russell et al., 2005) and are deployed to various roles within the classroom (Fraser & Meadows, 2008, Sharples et al., 2015; Skipp et al., 2019). A review of head teachers' opinions of TA responsibilities reports their increasing involvement in teaching numeracy and literacy skills (Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997; Webster et al., 2010), and in supporting children with behavioural or emotional problems (Abbott et al., 2011; Hancock et al., 2002; Clarke, 2020). Many of these activities were previously undertaken by teachers, and some TAs may be less well-equipped for these responsibilities (Bach et al., 2006; Estyn, 2007). TAs have varied backgrounds and experience (Butt & Lance, 2005) and are often recruited based on personal qualities and previous work experience in the absence of recognised professional qualifications (Hancock et al., 2002; Balshaw, 2018). Although skills developed through personal and parenting experience are valuable, school support staff must feel professionally competent to manage the problems of the children that they support (Groom & Rose, 2005).

High levels of staff self-efficacy and sense of competence are positively related to pupil performance (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Radford et al., 2015). However, there is widespread concern that career development and training opportunities for TAs are scarce (Russell et al., 2005; Alborz et al. 2009; Obee et al., 2023), and there is a need for training for these increasing responsibilities (Butt & Lance, 2005). Training ensures a highly skilled workforce (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1990), and staff who feel valued and competent are more likely to remain in post and have fewer absences due to stress and illness, providing consistency for children (Takala, 2007). Behaviour management is one of the main areas in which support staff require additional training (Gerschel, 2005; Groom & Rose, 2005; Clarke, 2020), second only to time constraints as a strong predictor of increased stress and burnout among school staff (Hastings & Bham, 2003; Kokkinos, 2007).

### *1.1. Classroom Behaviour Management*

A lot of staff time is spent dealing with problem behaviour in the classroom, with up to one in five primary-aged children presenting with behaviour that requires additional management strategies (British Medical Association, 2013; Nye et al., 2016). Minor infractions, talking out of turn, inattention and disruptions are the greatest stressors, due to their frequent and persistent nature (Arbuckle & Little, 2004). Continuous problem behaviour has school-wide detrimental effects, causing stress for both staff and pupils (Luiselli et al., 2005; Stephenson et al., 2000) and interrupting learning (Emmer & Stough, 2001; Mundy et al., 2017). The behaviour of disruptive children impacts negatively on the academic engagement of others (Kaplan et al., 2002) and contributes to lower staff competence and self-efficacy (De Simone et al., 2016; Verešová & Malá, 2012). Such feelings influence staff-pupil relationships, with "difficult to teach" children being at risk of unfavourable treatment (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Shapiro, 1993) and receiving less support and positive feedback than other pupils (Amold et al.; 1999; Nash et al., 2016). Other children in the class can be aware of the negative attention received by those children, resulting in their being unpopular with peers, causing further longer-term social problems (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008).

Behaviour management training such as the Incredible Years (IY) Teacher Classroom Management (TCM) programme can address these problems (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). The IY series for parents, children and teachers are evidence-based programmes that introduce social learning theory behaviour change methods, such as modelling and rewarding desirable behaviours to promote children's social and emotional development and language competencies (Webster-Stratton, 2001). A large body of evidence supports the effectiveness of the IY-TCM and child programmes in improving teacher and nursery staff relationships with children, reducing negative child behaviour and improving children's nursery or classroom engagement (Hutchings et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2013). A randomised controlled trial (RCT)

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reported significant reductions in negative teacher and child behaviour following the TCM programme, delivered over five monthly full-day group sessions (Hutchings et al. 2013). Pupil's on-task engagement also improved significantly. Bywater and colleagues (2011) observed similar improvements in both nursery staff and child behaviour, and significant reductions in work stress and increased staff skills in reducing problematic child behaviour.

*1.2 Application of Positive Parenting Principles in Schools*

O'Brien (1998) points out that although teachers receive classroom management training, TAs could be better placed to address problems as they often spend more time with and have closer relationships with children with challenging behaviour and/or additional learning needs and a greater understanding of their needs. This is particularly the case for those working with children on a 1:1 basis (Butt & Lance, 2005; Clarke, 2020). Most children receiving 1:1 support view TAs as nurturers (Fraser & Meadows, 2008), suggesting that parent training principles are both pertinent and easily implemented by 1:1 support staff, particularly with three to seven-year-old Foundation Phase/Early Years aged children.

Primary prevention is most effective, as unresolved early-onset behaviour problems predict poor long-term outcomes (Allen & Smith, 2009; Boyle & Offord, 1990; Poulou, 2015). Furthermore, children with special educational needs are at increased risk of developing behavioural difficulties due to the challenges they face in learning socially appropriate behaviour. Improving the skills of early years support staff could enable them to reduce problem incidence rather than be primarily dealing with recurring problems (Shapiro, 1993; Skipp et al., 2019). Developing children's social and emotional competencies during their early school years is likely to produce long-term benefits (Hutchings & Lane, 2005; Webster-Stratton, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011), preventing the development of increasingly problematic behaviour that becomes entrenched and harder to change over time (Renk, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Given the high adult-child ratio of 1:8 during the foundation phase and the amount of time that TAs spend with some children, TAs are ideally placed to notice and reinforce desirable behaviour with praise (Eames et al., 2009; Hutchings, 2013; Kazdin, 1997). They are also more likely to have daily contact with parents that can foster positive home/school relationships (Groom, 2006), also something that contributes to children having better school outcomes (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010; Kingston et al. 2013). Language skills are also strong predictors of academic attainment (Hoff, 2013; Walker et al., 1994), and Early Years TAs have ample opportunities to promote children's language during play and reading activities through descriptive commenting (Hutchings, 2013), verbal labelling and encouraging reflection (Webster-Stratton, 1999).

Many parenting and classroom management programmes have content that supports the three key Early Years learning areas, Personal and Social Development; Language, Literacy and Communication and Knowledge and Understanding of the World (Welsh Assembly Government, 2015; DfE, 2021). Training in the content of such programmes, based upon behavioural principles, can therefore be incorporated into school schedules without too many demands on staff time, which along with expense (Joyce & Showers, 2002), is a barrier to the provision of face-to-face training for school staff (Scott et al., 2001).

*1.3. Online Parenting Programmes*

Technology can limit expense and make training more accessible, removing the need to attend off-site courses (Wanzare & da Costa, 2000). An increasing number of web-based parenting programmes, based on behavioural principles, are demonstrating effectiveness (Taylor et al., 2008; Nowak & Heinrichs, 2008; Sanders et al., 2012; Hutchings et al., 2018). However, there are few online programmes for school staff, despite their flexibility and potential to be cost effective (Wanzare & da Costa, 2000).

The COPING (COnfident Parent INternet Guide) parent online programme is a web-based universal parenting resource for parents of children aged 3-8 (Owen et al., 2017; Owen & Hutchings, 2017; Hutchings et al., 2018) that teaches core social learning theory principles drawn from "The Little Parent Handbook" (Hutchings, 2013). Parents read the content of each chapter, watch video examples of positive parenting, answer questions based on the videos, complete multiple-choice quizzes and practice the strategies with their children. The programme was successful in encouraging positive parental practices, and behavioural observation showed significant increases in praise (Hutchings et al., 2018). Feedback on the need for increased training for school support staff, prompted the development of the SKILLS (Support for KIds in Learning and Language Strategies) web-based programme. This involved adapting content from the COPING

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parent programme and increasing its relevance to school-based support staff, by the inclusion of classroom-based videotaped materials and additional content on praise, teaching new skills and promoting language, comprehension and expression.

### *1.4. Aims and Objectives*

The aim of this feasibility trial was to develop and evaluate the online SKILLS programme to see whether it was possible to recruit and engage TAs to complete the five-week programme. Additional objectives were to obtain feedback on any technical problems and to gather participant's suggestions for modification. Exploratory measures examined possible observed changes in TA behaviour, and their sense of competence.

## 2. Method

### *2.1. Recruitment*

Flyers were distributed at a conference for head teachers organised by the Welsh Government funded North Wales School Effectiveness & Improvement Service (GwE), that agreed to assist with recruitment. The researcher held a workshop at the event to introduce the programme; which was attended by representatives from eight schools. Upon the recommendation of an appointed challenge adviser for GwE, the researcher also contacted head teachers of a further ten schools directly. Schools were asked whether they would be willing to allow staff one hour a week of their contracted time to complete the online programme, and to gauge interest among staff members. Arrangements were then made to visit interested staff members to discuss the project further and outline what would be expected of schools if they agreed to take part.

### *2.2. Participants*

The sample of 16 TAs was drawn from six different schools in North West Wales, UK. Participants were deemed eligible if they worked for at least some of their time on a one-to-one basis with a child aged between three and seven years. Respondents were excluded from the study if they did not work with the same child for at least some time each week, or if agreement could not be made for them to be released from contractual duties for one hour a week to complete the programme.

### *2.3. Materials*

The programme consists of didactic information, video examples illustrating the strategies being used within a classroom, and quizzes to test content knowledge at the end of each chapter which include;

Chapter 1 – Strengthening relationships

This presents effective ways to build positive relationships with children and forms the foundation for the programme. The focus is on spending quality time with children during child-led play by taking an interest in their thoughts and ideas.

Chapter 2 – Praising positive child behaviour

This covers effective ways of increasing positive behaviour, including being specific, giving children full attention and being close to them whilst praising. Participants are again reminded to follow children's leads to build their confidence.

Chapter 3 – How to give effective instructions

This discusses common mistakes in giving instructions, such as giving too many at a time or using negative commands and provides guidance on how to give more effective instructions.

Chapter 4 – Teaching new behaviours

This presents a clear rationale for why problem behaviour must be replaced with more functional alternative behaviour and introduces strategies to teach new behaviour.

Chapter 5 –Promoting language skills

This reinforces the underlying theme of developing children's language by discussing imitating, shaping and prompting as strategies to do this.

The content was delivered via Moodlecloud, a free online learning platform. Individual participant log-in details allowed the researcher to access participant usage information, including videos watched and the number of chapters and quizzes completed.

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### 2.4. Research Design

A repeated measures design was employed, with behavioural observations and questionnaires completed at baseline and immediately after the five-week intervention. The online programme was completed in the interim.

### 2.5. Measures

#### 2.5.1. Programme Evaluation Questionnaire

A feedback questionnaire was developed to gather participants' responses to the programme, their engagement and any problems encountered with accessing the programme. Twenty questions covered all five SKILLS content chapters. Questions were rated using a five-point LIKERT scale ranging from 0 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Statements included 'The contents of the chapter has increased the amount of child-led play I engage in with the child'; '...has helped me recognise the best way to teach certain tasks' and 'The strategies addressed are easy to implement in the classroom'.

Additional open-ended questions obtained views about more specific aspects of the relevance and usefulness of the overall programme. Examples include 'Which chapter did you find most/least useful?', and 'How could the programme be improved to help you more?'.

#### 2.5.2. Sample Characteristic Measures

Demographic questionnaire:

Brief demographic data were collected at baseline on the gender, age and first language of the participant TA and the child, the level of TA qualification and their work experience in the role. Information was gathered on whether the child was receiving 1:1 support as a result of a SEN statement or due to a school decision.

#### 2.5.3. Screener of Child Behaviour

The Teacher Strengths and Difficulties (TSDQ); (Goodman, 1997) is a 25-item behavioural screening inventory with five subscales, four are problem-focused; hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems and conduct problems and one is a pro-social scale. The four problem sub-scales sum to a total problem score. Items are scored on a three-point Likert scale. Strengths are identified as a result of high scores on the pro-social scale, whereas difficulties are reflected by high scores on the individual problem subscales and the summation of scores on the remaining four problem sub-scales. A score of >17 is considered to be the cut-point for the total scale score, which indicates significant difficulties. The original three-band categorisation was used, and only administered at baseline as a screener for conduct problems. The SDQ displays good internal consistency for all subscales (mean Cronbach's alpha = 0.73) (Goodman, 2001).

#### 2.5.4. Exploratory Measures

Measure of work stress The Teaching Stress Inventory (TSI): (Fimian, 1984)

The TSI is a 20-item questionnaire measuring self-reported levels of stress on a five-point scale. Slight adaptions were made to the wording of the standardised version to make it more applicable to classroom assistants ('Teacher' was changed to' Teaching assistant'). Stressors are scored into subscales; workload, student misbehaviour, professional recognition, time and resources, poor colleague relations.

Measure of sense of competence Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC) scale (Johnston & Mash, 1989)

The PSOC is a 17-item questionnaire, assessing general parenting sense of self-esteem. An adapted version, with references to 'parent' changed to 'teaching assistant' was used to measure participants' perceived competence as a TA. Responses are rated on a six-point Likert scale with high scores indicating greater sense of competence and self-esteem. The PSOC demonstrates good reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .70 for the efficacy subscale, and internal reliability for total scores ranging from .46 and .82 (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978; Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009).

#### 2.5.5. PAPER (Prompting language, Asking Questions, Praise and encouragement, Expanding, Repeating) Behavioural Observation

The PAPER (Prompting language, Asking questions, Praise and encouragement, Expanding, Repeating) direct observation coding scheme was developed to give an objective account of TA behaviour during a 15-

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minute reading activity. A coding manual was developed based on a subset of categories from the Dyadic Parent Child Interaction Coding System specifically selected to capture TA behaviours outlined in the programme (Bessmer, 1998; Eyberg & Robinson, 1981). These were as follows;

Prompting language - Any labelling of objects, people, body parts, colours and numbers whilst holding the child's attention were coded (e.g. 'There are 1,2,3 kittens').

Asking questions - Any comment expressed in question form, both open ended and closed was recorded (e.g.'What do you like about that story?' 'Do you like that story?').

Praise and encouragement – Any verbalisation or non-verbal gesture, such as a 'high five' expressing favourable judgment on the child's activity were recorded. Both labelled and unlabelled praise were coded together for the purpose of the study (e.g. Good job!).

Expanding – Any incidence of the TA prompting the child to relate the story to the child's own experience or feelings were coded (e.g. Has that ever happened to you?).

Reflecting – Any occurrence of repeating what the child said using similar words to re-state facts or re-iterate meaning were recorded (e.g. No you're right, she's not being kind).

Two books were chosen from the colourful Usborne Farmyard Tales series, for children aged between three and six years. The series has characters hiding in the illustrations for children to find, making them ideal for engaging children in discussion.

Researchers were trained prior to undertaking observations, by double coding videos of parent-child interactions in accordance with the PAPER coding manual guidelines, until an inter-rater reliability criterion of 80% was reached during training. Subsequently, an excellent rate of agreement was reached during live observations (ICC = .996).

The frequency of each TA behaviour was recorded on the coding sheet in five-minute segments. Coding was continuous for a period of up to 15 minutes.

### *2.6. Procedure*

#### *2.6.1. Baseline Data Collection*

Prior to baseline visits, written consent was obtained from parents of children who would be taking part in the TA-child observation. Subsequently TAs read a detailed information sheet and after having any questions answered by the researcher, were asked to sign the consent form. Participants then completed baseline questionnaires after being informed that they could leave out any question(s) that they did not wish to answer.

For the PAPER observation each TA-child dyad was observed for a maximum of 15 minutes. The primary coder live-coded all visits (n=32), with another trained researcher live-coding 62% of baseline visits (n=10), and 25% of visits at follow-up (n = 4) for reliability purposes (ICC = .996). Once baseline measures were completed, the TA was given an individual log-in code, comprehensive instructions and a brief demonstration of how to access the first chapter of the intervention. Participants were instructed to access only one chapter per week to allow adequate time to practice the programme strategies with the child that they were supporting. Participants received weekly emails acknowledging the completion of the previous chapter and informing them that the next chapter was available. If participants had not logged in, a polite email was sent to ask whether they were experiencing difficulties. The process was repeated five times, until each chapter had been completed. Arrangements were then made to conduct follow-up visits.

#### *2.6.2. Follow-Up Data Collection*

Once participants had accessed all five chapters, they were asked to repeat the baseline questionnaires and the observation. Additionally, the evaluation questionnaire was administered to gather feedback about the programme. Participants also received a debrief form outlining the study objectives, a copy of 'The Little Parent Handbook' as a thank you and a certificate of completion for their professional development portfolios. The children received a storybook.

#### *2.6.3. Analysis Strategy*

Paired t-tests compared baseline and follow-up means on all measures. Data were pro-rated prior to analysis, which involved removing any cases with three or more missing values. One PSOC response and three TSI responses were removed.

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## 3. Results

### *3.1. Sample Characteristics*

The sixteen TAs (15 female and 1 male), had a mean age of 39 (SD 10.16). Fifty per cent of the respondents (n=8) had a further education qualification, for instance A-level or equivalent (e.g. NVQ Level 3), with a further 25% (n=4) having completed an undergraduate degree. The first language of 15 TAs was English (94%), with one stating Polish as her first language. The sample had an average of 6.21 years (SD = 13.61) work experience as a TA.

The sixteen children (5 female, 11 male) involved in the study had a mean age of 65.69 months (SD = 13.61), of whom nine (56%) were receiving 1:1 support as a result of a statement of educational needs; three following a diagnosis of ASD, three were non-verbal, one child had additional communication needs due to global developmental delay, and two were statemented because of challenging behaviour. The remaining seven children were receiving additional support following a school decision to address concerns about language and literacy skills, and disruptive behaviour in class. Seven children (44%) scored above the TSDQ total difficulties cut-off point (≥17) at baseline, suggesting significant behaviour problems at school. English was the first language of all 16 (100%) children. (see Table 1.)

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics at baseline.

| **Demographics** | | |
|---|---|---|
| TA Age -*Years M (SD)* | 38.00 | (10.16) |
| TA Gender- *Female: n (%)* | 15.00 | (93) |
| Child Age- *Months M (SD)* | 65.69 | (13.61) |
| Child Gender- *Male: n (%)* | 11 | (69) |
| Work experience- *Years M (SD)* | 6.21 | (3.59) |
| Further education - *A-level or equivalent (%)* | 12 | (75) |
| SEN Statement: *n (%)* | 9 | (56) |
| TSDQ Total Difficulties score - *M (SD)* | 13.92 | (7.14) |

### *3.2. Attrition*

One TA (6%) failed to complete the programme. Fifteen (94%) completed written post-course measures, however three participants (19%) were unable to provide follow-up observations due to TA-child dyad illness absences.

### *3.3. Evaluation Feedback*

Twelve TAs (75%) completed the post-course questionnaire, giving a high rate of positive feedback (72%), (See Table 2). This included reporting that the programme had helped them to strengthen their relationship with the target child, increased their use of praise and helped them give instructions more effectively.

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**Table 2.** Participant responses on the programme evaluation questionnaire.

| | Agreed/ strongly agreed (%) | Agree *(n)* | Strongly agree *(n)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Helped me build a positive relationship with the child I am currently supporting | 83% | 5 | 5 |
| Increased the amount of child-led play I engage in with the child I am currently supporting | 50% | 4 | 2 |
| Has increased my use of positive commenting and praise | 83% | 7 | 3 |
| Has helped me become better at giving clearer instructions | 66% | 3 | 5 |
| Has helped me give out fewer instructions to the child I am currently supporting | 83% | 5 | 5 |
| Has reduced the frequency I repeat the same instructions to the child I am currently supporting | 83% | 8 | 2 |
| Has reduced the amount of time spent negotiating with the child I am currently supporting | 75% | 7 | 2 |
| Has helped me model positive behaviour to the child I am currently supporting | 42% | 4 | 1 |
| Has helped me recognise the best way to teach certain tasks | 75% | 7 | 2 |
| Has helped me break down tasks into goals the child will find achievable | 75% | 5 | 4 |
| Has taught me useful strategies to help develop language skills | 58% | 3 | 4 |
| Has increased my confidence to help the child I'm supporting to identify feelings by labelling and describing | 75% | 7 | 2 |
| The strategies addressed in the programme are easy to implement in the classroom | 58% | 4 | 3 |
| The examples shown in the video clips are useful | 91% | 6 | 5 |
| I found the behaviour management training programme useful | 91% | 7 | 4 |
| It would be useful to have a Welsh language version of the programme | 58% | 5 | 2 |
| Overall percentage positive responses | 72% | 87 | 51 |

Participants were also asked for any other comments about the programme.

Four TAs (25%) felt that the programme would be most beneficial to new teaching assistants.

*"I would have found the programme really useful when I was younger, with less experience"*

*"The training would be really useful for new staff as part of an induction"*

Two TAs (12.5%) stated it would have been beneficial to have someone else at the school taking part in the programme at the same time.

*"It would have been nice to be able to discuss the training and what I was doing with someone else"*

Six (38%) participants felt that the content of the videos could be made more relevant to children with additional needs.

*"The children in the videos don't have communication problems, it would be nice to see more videos of children with special needs"*

*"The child I work with doesn't interact with me the way the children in the videos do, so I can't relate to them very well"*

Fifty-eight per cent of the TAs thought a Welsh language version of the programme would be useful.

### *3.4. Findings From Exploratory Measures (See Table 3)*

Preparation of observational data

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The total times for the reading activity varied. Some TAs were not observed for the full 15-minute period as observations ended early due to child non-compliance. Length of baseline observations were as follows; 5min - 1(6%), 10min- 4(25%), full 15min- 11(69%); Follow-up: lost – 3(19%), 5min- 2(12%), 10min- 1(6%), 15min- 10(63%). There was no significant difference between mean baseline and follow-up observation durations. Due to variation in observation times results were analysed using the total frequencies for each behaviour category for the first five minutes of observations.

### *3.5. Paper Observation*

Paired t –tests compared baseline and follow-up means. A significant increase was observed in the frequency of prompting language (p = .035; *d*=0.82), showing a large effect size. Non-significant increases occurred in all but one of the categories, with mean scores changing in the predicted direction, with small-medium effect sizes observed on all (see Table 3). A non-significant reduction was observed for question asking which was not predicted (*d*=0.35).

**Table 3.** Mean scores of exploratory measures at baseline and follow-up.

| | **BL** | | **FU** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **M** | **SD** | **M** | **SD** | **p value** | **Effect size*(d)*** |
| PAPER Observation | | | | | | |
| Prompting language | 1.23 | 1.92 | 3.77 | 3.92 | .035* | 0.82 |
| Asking questions | 13.50 | 8.13 | 11.00 | 5.90 | .188 | 0.35 |
| Praise and encouragement | 4.85 | 5.63 | 6.38 | 6.67 | .183 | 0.25 |
| Expanding | 1.08 | 2.21 | 1.77 | 3.08 | .401 | 0.25 |
| Repeating | 1.92 | 2.14 | 3.15 | 3.31 | .158 | 0.44 |
| PSOC | | | | | | |
| Total score | 50.80 | 8.52 | 57.93 | 6.18 | .004* | 0.95 |
| Efficacy | 22.80 | 3.30 | 39.33 | 2.66 | .000* | 5.51 |
| TSI | | | | | | |
| Total score | 25.00 | 15.58 | 24.39 | 10.28 | .412 | 0.04 |
| Workload | 2.92 | 2.18 | 2.54 | 1.85 | .710 | 0.15 |
| Student misbehaviour | 5.92 | 4.64 | 6.15 | 4.50 | .854 | 0.05 |
| Recognition | 4.00 | 2.16 | 3.84 | 2.27 | .693 | 0.07 |
| Colleague relations | 3.54 | 2.18 | 3.07 | 1.75 | .273 | 0.23 |

### *3.6. Total Stress Inventory (Tsi)*

Pro-rated datasets from 13 participants were used in the final analysis. Relatively low levels of stress were reported at baseline, nevertheless non-significant reductions were observed in four of the five subscales.

### *3.7. Sense of Competence (PSOC)*

Pro-rated datasets from 15 participants were used in final analysis.

Significant increases were observed on the efficacy subscale (p <.001), and total score (*p* = .004) with a large effect size observed overall (*d*= 0.95).

## 4. Discussion

This was a small feasibility study of the newly developed SKILLS (Support for Kids with Learning and Language Strategies) online programme, which aimed to examine whether TAs could be recruited and engaged in the use of positive behaviour strategies. Encouraging feedback and high retention rates supported the prediction that TAs would complete the online training programme and find it beneficial. Participants were predominantly female, with work experience ranging from 4 months to 11 years. Fifteen TAs (94%) completed all five chapters of the programme. One did not log on at all, later informing the researcher that he had changed his mind about taking part due to lack of time as he was contracted to part-time hours. Consistent with Hancock et al. (2004), the majority of children (56%) were in receipt of a SEN statement following a diagnosis of ASD or language and communication delays. Contrary to reviewed literature (Bach et al., 2006), most of the TA sample were fairly well educated with 75 per cent of the participants having at least A-level or

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equivalent qualifications. The project aimed to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the online delivery of the training programme, which overall was rated highly. Participants reported no problems with the system and felt that the ability to log into the programme at a time of their own convenience made it easy to fit into the working week. Although high attrition has been identified as a limitation of online programmes (Wantland et al., 2004), the 15 participants who started the SKILLS programme completed all five chapters. Participating schools had agreed during recruitment to allocate time from the participant's contracted hours to complete the programme and this possibly contributed to the high retention rate. Weekly email reminders praised participants for completing each chapter and informed them that the next was available which could have contributed to the high completion rate. Praise and positive feedback from coaches is an important predictor of the success of group-led training programmes, as are reflective statements (Eames et al., 2009). A possible limitation of this web-based programme is that participants did not have access to support from others. More sophisticated online programmes include access to chat rooms or online forums, which could be effective in providing support and facilitating group discussions (Wanzare & da Costa, 2000). Two TAs, both the only ones in their school participating in the programme reflected that they would have found the opportunity to discuss topics with others useful, and this could be a consideration for future programmes since most primary schools now have several TAs. All participants reported that they found the programme useful, particularly the video vignettes. However, those supporting children with language delays and ASD felt that it would be useful to have more examples of children with additional needs, to increase programme relevance for them. The majority of TAs reported that the programme had helped them to strengthen their relationship with the child they supported, which is an encouraging outcome. The programme was felt to be of particular benefit to new staff, with feedback suggesting that it would be beneficial as part of induction. The completion certificates were well received, and, with the programme content, appeared to be a sufficient incentive to participation. Exploratory measures demonstrated a significant increase in self-efficacy and sense of competence, supporting Bywater et al., (2011) who showed that increasing nursery staff skills through brief interventions can contribute to increased confidence. Although baseline stress levels were low, non-significant reductions were seen in four of the five Teaching Stress Inventory (TSI) subscales. The PAPER observation showed that seven of the thirteen TAs increased their frequency of praising at follow-up. Unlike the results of the COPING Parent trial (Owen et al., 2017) this was not significant; however, the sample size in the present study was considerably smaller. Eighty-three per cent of the TAs reported that the programme had encouraged them to praise more, suggesting an increased awareness of the importance of praising. It could be argued that the reading activity chosen for the observation was not the ideal measure as, in the majority of cases, the TA was reading to the child giving limited opportunity for praise. A more child-led activity such as colouring or completing a jigsaw could be considered for future studies to provide more opportunities for dialogue than occurring during reading particularly given the inclusion of non-verbal children. Further consideration needs to be given to observations of children with language delay, with possible adaptions made to the coding procedure to include physical responses such as holding the child's hand to point at objects while naming, increased eye contact or mirroring and reinforcing any vocal attempts. The intervention described the benefits of open-ended questions in promoting language and encouraged TAs to do so when reading to hold the children's attention (Webster-Stratton, 1999). Closed questions on the other hand can discourage children (Hutchings, 2013), and the programme suggested that these were kept to a minimum. An overall non-significant reduction was observed in questions; however, they were not coded separately for open-ended and closed questions, demonstrating a failure in the chosen measure. A significant increase was observed in language prompting, which included labelling objects, feelings, colours and numbers. The programme was therefore effective in encouraging TAs to wrap children in language, an important component of academic success (Walker et al., 1994). This strategy also develops children's social and emotional competence (Webster-Stratton, 2001; Hutchings, 2013). Any incident of expanding beyond the contents of the book was also coded, based on evidence that relating the story to real life can foster a child's enjoyment of books (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Repeating what the child has said can also be effective in communicating the TAs interest in the child, empowering their confidence (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). A non-significant increase in expanding was observed in six of the 13 participants, and repeating in five of the 13, but these small changes need to be observed in the context of the impossibility of expanding and repeating children's responses for non-verbal children (25%).

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### *4.1. Strengths and Limitations*

Due to time constraints between recruitment and the timeframe of intervention (an MSc project), the sample was small. Although this was sufficient for a feasibility study, a larger sample is needed to evaluate outcomes with the inclusion of a control group to determine programme effectiveness. This would also allow the researcher to remain blind and eliminate possible researcher bias. Using observation as an exploratory measure provided an accurate account of the quality of TA-child interactions use of the behavioural strategies taught in the programme. However, there were limitations with regards to the coding of asking questions, as the differentiation between closed and open-ended questions was not made and is an important distinction with the need to reduce closed questions in increase open-ended questions being an important programme principle. The need to distinguish between components within the observational categories could also be said for praise, which, given the benefits of more specific feedback in encouraging the repetition of behaviour, could have been coded as labelled and unlabelled praise to clarify whether the increase in praise was associated with specific labelled praise. The reading activity could be considered less than ideal for examining increased praise, given that four children were non-verbal and that most of the TAs were reading the book to the child. This could also be a contributing factor to the observation not lasting the whole 15 minutes in the majority of cases, as these TA had reached the end of the book before this time.

### *4.2. Future directions*

Taking participant feedback into account, the content of video vignettes could be made more relevant to staff supporting children with additional challenges, by ensuring that video examples represent children with a range of disabilities including ASD and/or communication difficulties. An interactive element, either in the form of contact with other participants or through the provision of additional tutoring, could be introduced to the programme to replicate the collaborative approach and peer support of traditional group-led programmes. Given the evidence for effectiveness of parenting programmes with similar content a programme that TAs and parents could complete together may be effective in establishing long-term behaviour changes. This could be trialled by combining the COPING parents and SKILLS programmes. Although not identified by participants, an end of programme summary chapter might also be helpful to bring together all of the strategies outlined in the programme and reinforce content recall without adding significantly to programme length.

## 5. Conclusion

The programme was positively evaluated by those who completed it and their feedback provides suggestions to further develop the programme prior to a larger scale trial. It was successful in increasing staff sense of competence and efficacy among TAs, school support staff who work with some of the most vulnerable and challenged pupils and for whom training opportunities are limited. The SKILLS online programme has the potential to improve children's experience of school and their long-term academic outcomes (Takala, 2007). Although not significant, positive improvements were observed on all categories of the behavioural observation measure. The small-medium effect sizes indicate promising benefits of the programme.

### *5.1. Key messages*

- An online training programme based upon a social learning theory founded parent programme is effective in engaging TAs to increase their use of positive behaviour strategies.
- The programme was well received by the TAs who took part and described it as being helpful to their professional development.
- Expanding the toolkit of TA skills can contribute to increasing their sense of competence and reducing work stress.
- Further research is needed with a larger sample to establish whether the programme can yield significant short- and longer-term improvements in both TA and child behaviour

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