Exploring School Staff Views on the Use of Emotion Coaching in Special Schools That Support Children and Young People with Learning Difficulties

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Overview

This thesis portfolio is presented in three sections. Firstly, a narrative literature review outlines and critically discusses current research and policy in relation to supporting the emotional wellbeing and behaviour of children and young people (CYP) with learning difficulties (LD) and associated special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in schools. This review particularly focuses on research that investigates the use of Emotion Coaching (EC), a whole-school wellbeing approach, in relation to this context. Secondly, the empirical chapter presents the current research which investigated school staff views on the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD through the Reflexive Thematic Analysis of semi-structured interviews. Finally, the reflective chapter provides a reflexive account of the researcher's engagement with the research process. This includes reflections on their philosophical positioning, research design, methodology, and data analysis decisions, alongside implications for practice and their plans for the dissemination of this research.

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List of Acronyms

AAS: Attachment-Aware Schools

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AP: Alternative Provision

BERA: British Educational Research Association

BESD: Behavioural, Emotional, and Social Difficulties

BPS: British Psychological Society

CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

CASEL: The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease of 2019

CPD: Continuing Professional Development

CR: Critical Realism

CYP: Children and Young People

DCSF: Department for Children, Schools, and Families

DfE: Department for Education

DfH: Department for Health

EC: Emotion Coaching

EEF: Education Endowment Foundation

EHCP: Education Health and Care Plan

ELSA: Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

EP: Educational Psychologist

EST: Ecological Systems Theory

HCPC: Health and Care Professions Council

HLTA: Higher Level Teaching Assistant

ICO: Information Commissioner's Office

IPA: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IWM: Internal Working Model

LA: Local Authority

LD: Learning Difficulties

MECE: Model of Emotion Coaching Engagement

MLD: Moderate Learning Difficulties

NICE: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

PECS: Picture Exchange Communication System

PMLD: Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties

RCT: Randomised Control Trial

RTA: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SCERTS: Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support.

SDQ: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

SEAL: Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

SEL: Social and Emotional Learning

SEMH: Social, Emotional, and Mental Health

SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SENDCoP: Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice

SLCN: Speech, Language, and Communication Needs

SLD: Severe Learning Difficulties

SLT: Senior Leadership Team

SpLD: Specific Learning Disability

TA: Teaching Assistant

TEP: Trainee Educational Psychologist

UEA: University of East Anglia

UK: United Kingdom

US: United States of America

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Chapter One: Literature Review

There are increasing concerns about the emotional wellbeing of children and young people (CYP) globally and within the United Kingdom (UK) (Billington et al., 2022; Clarke et al., 2021). In 2023, one in five CYP aged 8-25 had a “probable mental health disorder” (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). This can negatively impact their academic, social, and emotional outcomes that can persist into adulthood (Clarke et al., 2021; Clarke & Lovewell, 2021). Therefore, increasing interest and prioritisation has been placed on supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP within UK educational research, policy, and practice (McLaughlin, 2008).

CYP with learning difficulties (LD) are at a greater risk of experiencing mental health difficulties (National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2016; Emerson & Hatton, 2007) and CYP with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) are up to five times more likely to be excluded from school (National Statistics, 2023). Identifying and supporting the emotional wellbeing needs of CYP with LD can be difficult due to a lack of awareness and research evidence and the misattribution of mental health difficulties to LDs or “challenging behaviour” (Mental Health Foundation, 2016; BOND, 2022). Additionally, school-based emotional wellbeing support for CYP with LD is under investigated in special schools (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for further research to guide evidence-based, emotional wellbeing and behaviour support in schools that is tailored to pupils’ individual needs (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Emotion Coaching (EC) (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1997) is a promising relational, whole-school approach evidenced to support pupils’ wellbeing and behaviour through attuned and empathetically responsive adult-child interactions within mainstream schools and

social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) special schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Gus et al., 2017). However, little is known about EC use and its impact in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Throughout this review, the terms “emotional wellbeing” and “learning difficulties” will be used in favour of “mental health” and “learning disabilities” to reflect educational discourse (Frederickson, Dunsmuir & Baxter, 2009; Rees, 2024). This review will offer a critical commentary on emotional wellbeing support literature and its relation to LD, special schools, and EC. Initially, this review will outline the UK-based emotional wellbeing/behaviour context and legislation that underpins current wellbeing research and practice. Then, literature that explores the conceptualisation of emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation, alongside associated psychological theories will be critically reviewed. The evidence base for school-based wellbeing support will then be overviewed, followed by an explanation of current LD and SEND conceptualisations and wellbeing-supporting practice in this field. Finally, a review of current EC literature in relation to EC use in mainstream and SEMH special schools is presented alongside suggestions for future research and practice to contextualise the current research.

Literature Review Methodology

Literature reviews provide a critical understanding of the existing research within a particular topic/area (Jahan et al., 2016). Systematic reviews use a specific methodological strategy to review all relevant studies based on pre-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria to answer pre-determined research questions (Cipriani & Geddes, 2003; Wright et al., 2007). On the other hand, narrative literature reviews link together studies from various topics to identify connections and support the

development of hypotheses and research questions (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Due to the broad nature of the school-based emotional wellbeing and LD literature, a narrative literature review approach was chosen to identify connections/themes between research topics, methodology, and findings to support the identification of literature gaps (Lucas et al., 2007). A narrative review was deemed more appropriate for this research, as it aligns with the overall qualitative methodology of this research and the majority of literature in this area (Bae, 2014). This facilitated the development of a rationale and research question to expand evidence-based knowledge within the field (Snyder, 2019). A systematic literature review was not chosen due to the absence of pre-determined research questions, the exploratory aim of the review, and the breadth of the literature, which could not be appropriately explored within an exhaustive literature search (Sukhera, 2022; Peters et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

Literature was sought from databases, such as APA PSYCHInfo, ERIC, and the British Education Index via Web of Science, and a UEA library search, powered by EBSCO host. A general review of the literature surrounding the legislative and historical context, theories of emotional regulation, LD/SEND and emotional wellbeing, and school wellbeing support was completed to provide a comprehensive background to the study. A narrative review of EC literature was completed using search terms, such as “emotion coaching”, and “emotion coaching and learning difficulties or special needs” to assess a wide scope of the literature. Inclusion parameters for this were set to only include peer-reviewed research, published in English that adopted the Gottman and DeClaire (1997) EC philosophies and procedures. Manual searches, such as snowballing (using the citations and

references from other papers to identify additional relevant research (Wohlin, 2014) and Google Scholar, were conducted. Grey literature, such as unpublished theses and Local Authority (LA) projects, were also included and acknowledged to provide sufficient depth to the review.

Contextual and Legislative Background of Emotional Wellbeing and Behaviour Literature.

Conceptualisation of Emotional Wellbeing

There is a lack of clarity within the definition and conceptualisation of children's wellbeing within the literature (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). Terms such as "mental health", "emotional wellbeing", "emotional literacy", and "social competence" are often used interchangeably to describe aspects of children's emotional and social development (Barblett & Maloney, 2010; Weare & Gray, 2003). This could confound research, assessment, and support (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020). Research has highlighted that mental health/mental illness and wellbeing are related but conceptually distinct (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2016). *Emotional wellbeing* is defined as "an overall positive state of emotions, self-esteem, and resilience that leads to self-actualisation, self-efficacy, and health-promoting behaviours" (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020, p.108). Whereas *mental health* is defined as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, learn and work well, and contribute to their community" (World Health Organisation, 2022). Within educational discourse, the terms, "emotional and social competence" and "emotional wellbeing" are preferred, as they are non-medicalised, overcome potential stigmatisation, and have positive implications for systemic school support (Frederickson, Dunsmuir & Baxter, 2009; Weare & Gray, 2003). Therefore, this

review uses terms, such as “emotional wellbeing” to align with educational discourse. However, the overlap and contribution of literature associated with “mental health” is acknowledged.

Historical Context and Shifting Practice

Historically, education was viewed as a process of information transmission that required compliance and emotional control (Parker & Levinson, 2018). Dominant behaviourist views, e.g., operant conditioning (Skinner, 1938) within education, separated behavioural responses from emotional processes and perceived “challenging behaviour” as being learned and under conscious control (Wright, 2009; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). These views left a legacy within UK policy and practice that led to the continued use of school-based behaviour management strategies, such as punitive approaches and sanctions and rewards that do not address underlying emotions and are disproportionately applied for CYP with SEND (Parker & Levinson, 2018; Gus, 2017; DfE, 2025a). These views imply that behaviour difficulties reflect “within child” characteristics rather than being influenced by CYPs’ situation and context. This can place the onus on CYP to change to fit school systems, rather than the systems adapting to meet their needs (Grimaldi, 2012). These practices can negatively impact CYP’s mental health and behaviour and can contribute to their risk of school exclusion (Jones et al., 2024; Stanbridge & Mercer, 2022).

Advancements in neuroscience and shifts towards positive psychology applications have supported an increased understanding of the connections between emotional wellbeing/regulation, behaviour, and cognition and learning (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021; Billington et al., 2022). For example, “challenging behaviour” is

beginning to be viewed as an emotional reaction to stress and a means of communicating a need for support (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020; Jones et al., 2024). This has influenced the prioritisation of relational and whole-school approaches, such as EC, that support pupils' wellbeing, emotional regulation, and behaviour (Jones et al., 2024; Rainer, Le, & Abdinasir, 2023; Hibbin, 2024). It has also highlighted the need for approaches to be tailored/responsive to CYPs' needs (Rainer, Le, & Abdinasir, 2023). However, further contextual research is required to understand how schools can optimally use and adapt these approaches.

Current UK Wellbeing and Behaviour Context

Concerns about CYPs' emotional wellbeing have led to the increasing prioritisation of early intervention and mental health promotion (Solmi et al., 2021). Within the UK, overall child happiness has decreased over the last ten years (The Children's Society, 2023), and CYP have particularly low wellbeing in relation to their life as a whole and school (The Children's Society, 2024). In 2023, 20.3% of CYP aged 8-16 had a "probable mental health disorder" (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). The increase in child wellbeing difficulties could reflect changes in diagnostic practice, reduced stigma, and increased support seeking (Gunnell et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2021). However, they could also be attributed to increased bullying, social media and screen time, COVID-19, and the cost-of-living crisis (Clarke et al., 2021; O'Reilly et al., 2018a; Lucas et al., 2023). This can negatively impact CYPs' lifelong development and outcomes (Schlack et al., 2021).

There are also concerns about CYPs' behaviour at school. In a series of evaluations of pupil behaviour in Scotland, school staff perceived that both low-level disruptive behaviour and serious disruptive behaviour have increased between 2016

and 2023 (Scottish Government, 2023). This was attributed to societal challenges and a lack of support for CYP with SEND (Scottish Government, 2023), which can negatively impact children's learning and wellbeing (DfE, 2024e). In England, the 2023 - 2024 exclusion data show that suspensions and school exclusions continue to increase, with 954,952 pupils being suspended and 10,885 pupils being permanently excluded from school (Department for Education, 2025c). The most common reason for this was reportedly due to "persistent disruptive behaviour" (DfE, 2025c). School exclusion can have a long-term impact on CYPs' health and wellbeing outcomes (Obsuth et al., 2024). Therefore, this must be addressed at an ecosystemic and early intervention level.

There is a stark difference in the number of school exclusions associated with pupil behaviour across the different countries of the UK (McCluskey et al., 2019). For example, in comparison to England, the number of school exclusions has dramatically decreased in Scotland since 2003. In 2022 - 2023, 11,675 CYP were temporarily excluded, and one student was permanently excluded from school (Scottish Government, 2025). These disparities remained substantial when variations in the national school populations were taken into account and have been attributed to differences within the governing legislation and the local context (McCluskey et al., 2019). This highlights the need for urgent intervention, reform, and collaboration on a national level to support CYP outcomes.

CYP with LDs are more likely to experience mental health difficulties (36%) than children who do not have LDs (8%) (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). This can impact their wellbeing, social inclusion, and lifelong opportunities (Bradshaw & Mayhew, 2005). School exclusion/suspension rates and the use of behaviour management

approaches are also disproportionately higher for CYP with SEND across England and Scotland (Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023; Scottish Government, 2025; DfE, 2025c). For example, 50% of CYP who have been excluded from school have mental health difficulties, and 80% have SEND (Weale, 2017). This can result in unmet needs and social isolation, which can impact CYPs' learning progress and mental health (Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023). Alongside funding cuts, these systemic challenges have placed substantial strain on schools and professional services, e.g., Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) (Holding et al., 2022; Hulme, 2017). This highlights the need for urgent intervention at an eco-systemic level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and highlights the potential role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in offering systemic support to facilitate pupils' emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and learning outcomes (Hulme, 2017; Williams et al., 2016).

UK Legislative Context

UK-based legislation and guidance is increasingly prioritising children's emotional wellbeing and promoting the rights and needs of children with SEND. This reflects a shift towards supporting emotionally responsive practice that is supportive of pupils' individual needs. Key legislation associated with CYPs wellbeing and SEND will be discussed in the following section and throughout this review.

Legislative Support for Children and Young People with Learning Difficulties and SEND. The Children and Families Act (2014) and SEND Code of Practice (SENDCoP) (DfE & DfH, 2015) place a statutory duty on professionals to meet the needs of CYP with SEND. Within this, SEMH needs replaced Behaviour, Emotional, and Social Difficulties (BESD), and the association between mental health needs and behaviour was evidenced for the first time. This likely increased

professional commitment to identifying and supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP with SEND in schools (Brown & Carr, 2019), and began to address key national issues, such as the disproportionately high school exclusion rate and risk of emotionally based school non-attendance of CYP with LD and SEMH needs (Graham et al., 2019; Casoli-Reardon et al., 2012).

This legislation has been criticised for over-medicalising child behaviour, acting reactively, and lacking specific recommendations on approaches for support (Brown & Carr, 2019; Allan & Youdell, 2017). Therefore, future research should describe how the wellbeing of CYP with LD and SEND can be supported in schools. More recently, the SEND and Alternative Provision Plan (AP) (DfE, 2023a) outlines the government's continued commitment to ensuring that CYP with SEND and LD receive timely and appropriate support that is adapted and responsive to their needs to facilitate their wellbeing and learning. However, the impact of this legislation on CYPs' wellbeing and behaviour outcomes needs to be investigated.

Additionally, The Equality Act (2010) provides legal protection from discrimination and ensures that "reasonable adjustments" are afforded to support the inclusion of people with "protected characteristics", e.g., disability. This includes learning difficulties, mental health conditions, autism, and speech, language, and communication difficulties (Stobbs, 2022). Guidance suggests that schools should be aware of their duties in supporting CYPs' mental health under the Equality Act (2010) and SENDCoP (2015) (NICE, 2022; Rainer, Le, & Abdinasir, 2023). However, further training for school staff is required to actualise this to improve pupils' outcomes (Rainer, Le, & Abdinasir, 2023).

School-based Mental Health and Wellbeing Legislation and Guidance.

The Transforming CYP's Mental Health Provision: Green Paper (DfH & DfE, 2017) marked a shift towards the Government's prioritisation of supporting CYPs' wellbeing. This legislation identified schools as being best positioned to provide early mental health support through whole-school approaches. However, the paper has been criticised for being reactive and for adopting a medicalised/deficit understanding of mental health (Billington et al., 2022). For example, it recommends that school staff are trained to identify and support children with mental health problems. This could imply that mental health is an individual problem/deficit that schools should cure (Parker & Levinson, 2018), rather than considering systemic influences and community factors to inform support (Billington et al., 2022; Griffin et al., 2022).

Despite criticism for its limited acknowledgement of vulnerable groups (Cox & McDonald, 2020), The Green Paper (DfH & DfE, 2017) outlined support for CYP with SEND, including LDs. For example, it highlighted the need for a graduated intervention response that acknowledges the connections between mental health and SEND. However, it offered limited detail on how schools can specifically achieve this in practice. A review of mainstream and special school policy suggested that schools struggled to adopt this advice and implement whole-school wellbeing approaches (Brown, 2018). This was partially addressed within DfE (2021) guidance, where links to resources to support the implementation of whole-school approaches were provided. However, this highlights the need for further research to explore schools' experiences of using whole-school wellbeing approaches, e.g., EC across a range of settings, to inform support and successful outcomes.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (DfE, 2025b) is currently being reviewed within Parliament. This aims to strengthen the role of schools in safeguarding, remove barriers to opportunity in schools, and create a safer, high-quality education system for every child. However, this legislation also does not appear to highlight specific approaches and resources that schools can use to implement relational, whole-school approaches. Therefore, the impact and implementation of this legislation will need to be evaluated in future research to assess its influence on supporting CYPs' wellbeing.

In contrast, legislation and government guidance in Scotland has paved the way for supporting CYP wellbeing in schools through relational and whole-school approaches. As part of the 'Getting it Right for Every Child' initiative, promoting CYP wellbeing is prioritised through services adopting a strengths-based, inclusive, and individually tailored approach that involves understanding wellbeing holistically, using key wellbeing indicators, systemic considerations, and collaborative working (Scottish Government, 2022). Health and wellbeing are also a key part of the Scottish 'Curriculum for Excellence', which is organised around child-centred outcome statements in relation to core aspects of wellbeing across CYP development (Education Scotland, 2017). This aims to support curriculum planning to ensure positive wellbeing experiences through fostering a safe, relational, and caring environment for the whole-school community (Thornburn & Dey, 2017).

The Scottish Mental Health in Schools Working Group also published a framework for promoting a whole-school approach for supporting CYPs' mental health and wellbeing in schools (Scottish Government, 2021). This framework acknowledges the role of the whole-school community in supporting wellbeing and

provides guidance for schools on developing, embedding, and auditing whole-school wellbeing policy and practice. This includes creating an ethos that promotes respectful relationships and children's rights, targeted wellbeing support, the prioritisation of wellbeing initiatives by leaders, working with parents and the community, and developing an effective curriculum. In contrast to current legislation in England, practical application guidance and an implementation framework/tool are provided (Scottish Government, 2021).

Research that investigated the use of whole-school nurture approaches within schools and EP services in Scotland found that whole-school relational/nurture approaches are widely used across Scotland, to create safer and happier school environments, to support CYP's learning, wellbeing, and the inclusion of CYP with a "profile of needs" (Kearney & Nowek, 2019). The findings also revealed that schools often use the resources provided by Education Scotland to evaluate and support the impact of their whole-school wellbeing practice (Kearney & Nowek, 2019). Further research is required to evaluate the impact and use of the updated whole-school framework resources. However, this suggests that the resources and policies developed in Scotland have practical applicability that could be used to support the implementation of whole-school, relational practice across other areas of the UK, such as England, where this area of legislation and practice is less developed.

School-based Behaviour Support Legislation and Guidance. The Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools Guidance (DfE, 2018) encouraged schools to embed a whole-school wellbeing culture through routines, behaviour expectations, and consequence systems. However, it encouraged behaviourist behaviour management strategies, which can negatively impact pupils' motivation and

engagement at school (Payne, 2015). This legislation also did not consider the overlap between mental health, SEND, and behaviour systems (Norwich, 2022).

The Behaviour in Schools Guidance (DfE, 2022) addressed concerns about behaviourist practice by recommending that schools create a whole-school culture of positive behaviour, e.g., through developing positive staff-student relationships, modelling positive behaviour, and universal and targeted wellbeing interventions. This aligns with EC philosophies (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). Within this guidance, increased focus was also placed on supporting children with SEND. For example, the guidance advised taking a graduated approach and making "reasonable adjustments", e.g., relaxed uniform policies to support CYP with SEND. This informed the School Suspension and Permanent Exclusion Statutory Guidance (DfE, 2023b), which aims to provide pupils with SEND greater protection from unjust exclusion/suspension.

Recent Behaviour in Schools Guidance in England (DfE, 2024e), advocates for creating a safe and supportive environment and whole-school culture for supporting behaviour. This guidance highlights that behaviour approaches should proactively and flexibly meet the needs of CYP with SEND, e.g., through reasonable adjustments in line with the Equality Act (2010) and the Children and Families Act (2014). However, there remains a strong focus on sanctions and rewards. Current behaviour guidance highlights the need for further school-staff training on how SEND can influence behaviour and recognises the need for external professional support, e.g., from EPs, to guide effective policy implementation (DfE, 2024e).

A cross-national study of school exclusions across the UK illustrated that the disparities in school exclusion rates between England and Scotland likely reflected

differences within national guidance and local factors that shape school-based behaviour policy and practice (McCluskey et al., 2019). For example, it was highlighted that the Scottish exclusion guidance; ‘Included, Engaged and Involved Part Two’ (2017) clearly emphasises the associations between school exclusion and poorer lifelong outcomes and is embedded within a national strategy of early intervention, individualised understanding, and whole-school relational wellbeing practice promotion (McCluskey et al., 2019; Scottish Government, 2017). School staff also perceived that the legislative shift towards implementing relational, whole-school approaches supported CYP behaviour in Scottish schools (Scottish Government, 2023). Conversely, it was suggested that the more punitive and behaviourist focus within English behaviour and exclusion legislation contributed to the higher exclusion rate. (McCluskey et al., 2019).

However, careful contextual considerations must be made when updating policy. For example, school staff perceive that behaviour incidents in Scottish schools have increased due to a perceived lack of consequences and school exclusion rates are higher for CYP with SEND (Scottish Government, 2023 DfE, 2025c). Therefore, an appropriate balance of approaches must be sought, and additional considerations should be made when supporting CYP with SEND. Nevertheless, these findings highlight the influence of the legislative landscape in shaping school-based wellbeing and behaviour support and emphasise the need for further development of English policy to reflect advancements in research and practice in other parts of the UK.

Schools currently refer to the Use of Reasonable Force Guidance (DfE, 2013b) when using restrictive practices to “manage” behaviour in schools. Research

conducted by the DfE (2024b), outlines the UK Government's commitment to reducing the use of "reasonable force" and "restraint" in special schools and alternative provision (AP). This research interviewed 45 special schools and APs and found that all settings used aspects of restrictive practice within their school policies, behaviour support plans, and practice to manage pupils' behaviour when deemed necessary, e.g., to ensure CYPs' safety. Staff viewed that the wording of the current guidance (DfE, 2013b) can lead to frequent and unwarranted use of "reasonable force" when supporting pupils with LD and insufficient staff training (DfE, 2024b). This could put CYP at risk of injury and can lead to experiences of trauma, anxiety, and sleeping difficulties (The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2019). Staff highlighted the need for strategies to support prevention and de-escalation, e.g., that support pupils' emotional recognition, and self-regulation and foster positive staff-pupil relationships. However, research highlights that there is a lack of evidence on the types of interventions that can minimise the use of physical restraint in these settings (DfE, 2024b).

Recently, a government consultation to develop guidance on the use of "reasonable force and restrictive interventions in schools" (DfE, 2025a) has acknowledged the disproportionate use of restrictive interventions to manage the behaviour of CYP with SEND and recognised that the behaviour of CYP with SEND is likely to be a "communication of need", e.g., resulting from pain, sensory overload, or anxiety. Subsequently, the guidance calls for schools to be proactive in providing inclusive and supportive environments for CYP with SEND, e.g., by minimising triggers and by working with pupils, parents, and professionals (DfE, 2025a). This aims to develop de-escalation strategies and effective ways for CYP to communicate their needs (DfE, 2025a). This proposed guidance highlights a positive shift in

supporting the needs and behaviour of CYP with LD systemically and relationally. However, future research will need to investigate the implementation of this guidance in schools and identify strategies that can support pupils' wellbeing and behaviour to reduce the need and use of restrictive practices when working with CYP with LD and SEND.

Section Summary

The rising wellbeing concerns and increased vulnerability of some children, e.g., CYP with LD (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023; Emerson & Hatton, 2007), has created a greater national focus on promoting CYPs' wellbeing through whole-school approaches that acknowledge individuals' needs (Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023; DfH & DfE, 2017). However, there is little guidance in England on how schools can facilitate this in practice and nationally, specific approaches, such as EC, are rarely specified in SEND and wellbeing legislation (Allan & Youdell, 2017). This highlights the need for further SEND-specific research and legislative reform to facilitate effective support, training, and pupil outcomes (Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023).

Emotional Wellbeing, Social and Emotional Competencies, and Emotional Regulation.

What Are Emotions?

Ongoing theoretical debate over the conceptualisation of emotions has led to difficulties within definition and study (Suri & Gross, 2022; Crivelli & Fridlund, 2019). However, emotions are broadly defined as affective (positive/negative) physiological reactions elicited by specific social or intrapersonal contexts/events that yield associated behavioural responses (Gross, 2015). Historically, six core emotions

were identified through cross-cultural research on facial expressions (Ekman, 1992). However, it is now understood that there is a wider variety in how emotions are combined and expressed (Keltner et al., 2019). Emotions facilitate survival through the engagement of adaptive behaviours (Johnston & Olson, 2015) and coordinated behavioural responses within relationships and social interactions (Keltner et al., 2019). This has implications for learning, social interactions, and wellbeing (Tyng, 2017; Marinetti et al., 2011). Therefore, research is increasingly investigating how to support children's emotional needs to yield positive behavioural, academic, and wellbeing outcomes (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016).

Emotional Wellbeing

Despite a growing level of interest, there is a lack of good-quality research on understanding and promoting the emotional wellbeing of CYP (Coverdale & Long, 2015). This could be because there is a lack of consensus on the definition of emotional wellbeing (Park et al., 2023). A concept analysis of literature exploring the emotional wellbeing of youth, defined emotional wellbeing as "an overall positive state of emotions, self-esteem, and resilience that leads to self-actualisation, self-efficacy, and health-promoting behaviours" (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020, p.108). This definition encompasses overall feelings of positive emotions, such as happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and the ability to respond to one's own emotions and recover in the face of challenges.

Emotional wellbeing has positive outcomes for CYP, such as improved abilities to manage emotions, experience of nurturing and meaningful relationships, and opportunities to explore, play, and learn, which lays the foundation for lifelong positive development and mental health (Education Endowment Foundation (EEF),

2024). Emotional wellbeing is also associated with higher academic achievements, improved school attendance, and fewer school dropouts (Public Health England, 2014; Lindorff, 2020).

There is a wealth of research that supports the association between supporting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and CYPs' emotional wellbeing (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020; Weare & Gray, 2003; Rees, 2010). In applying Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and the Bioecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), emotional wellbeing development for CYP with LD can be understood as being shaped by the interactions of their individual characteristics within a variety of embedded and reciprocally influencing ecosystemic systems (Rees, 2024). For example, CYPs' emotional wellbeing development and outcomes are shaped by the interactions/relationships within their immediate environment (microsystem), e.g., with their peers, school staff, and family and the connections between individuals and aspects of their immediate environment (mesosystem), e.g., home-school relationships. CYPs' wellbeing development is also influenced by broader environmental factors (exosystem), e.g., access to services, and wider cultural attitudes (macrosystem), such as curriculum/testing demands (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hutchings, 2015; Rees, 2024). Additionally, CYPs' development is shaped by the influences of proximal processes, such as time, individual differences, and context (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). This highlights the importance of schools in promoting a wellbeing-supportive environment that fosters positive relationships between staff, pupils, parents, and peers to facilitate emotional wellbeing (Coverdale & Long, 2015; EEF, 2024). However, this can be challenging within the current political context and education system.

Social and Emotional Competencies and Wellbeing

The five core social-emotional competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making CASEL (2020). These competencies are associated with improved behaviour outcomes, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and academic achievements (O'Connor et al., 2018; Hall & DiPerna, 2017; Buckner et al., 2003; Weare & Gray, 2003). They are also considered to be foundational for positive mental health and inclusion throughout children's lifespans (Barblett & Maloney, 2011; Goodman, 2015). Research that investigated the social and emotional competencies of secondary school students found that social emotional competencies, such as emotional regulation, relationship skills, and planning of schoolwork, were associated with emotional wellbeing (Eriksen & Bru, 2023). This relationship was strongest for emotional regulation, which highlights the importance of developing this skill to achieve positive outcomes (Eriksen & Bru, 2023). Research suggests that CYP with SEND have significantly lower social-emotional competency levels, which puts them at risk of poorer emotional wellbeing outcomes (Ralić & Marković, 2024; NICE; 2022). Educators can play a role in supporting pupils' social and emotional competency development by providing secure and trusting relationships, helping CYP to understand emotions, and engaging them with activities that support their self-regulation and executive functioning (EEF, 2024).

Emotional Regulation

Research has increasingly investigated the importance of emotional regulation for CYPs' wellbeing and positive behaviour outcomes (Balart, Brugue & Perez-Burriel, 2021; EEF, 2024; Somerville et al., 2024a). Emotional regulation is the

ability to appropriately evaluate and modulate emotional and behavioural responses to serve social and personal functions (Thompson, Meyer, Jochem, 2008; Jacob, Thomassin, Morelen, & Suveg, 2011). Emotional regulation abilities are key emotional competencies and are associated with improved learning, social functioning, positive behaviour, and wellbeing (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016; Somerville et al., 2024a). Early interactions/relationships can shape children's holistic brain development (Schore, 2015; Cesario, Johnson & Eisthen, 2020) and can scaffold the development of executive functioning skills, e.g., response inhibition and attention (Mohammed et al., 2022). Executive functioning and communication/language skills are required to adjust emotional and behavioural responses in response to specific circumstances to aid coping and recovery (Cole, Ram & English, 2019; White et al., 2013; Kopp, 1982). However, CYP with LD can have difficulties in these areas, which can impact their emotional regulation development (Lavis Burke & Hastings, 2019).

Theories of Emotional Wellbeing and Emotional Regulation Development

Polyvagal Theory. Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011) provides a biological explanation of emotional regulation processes and their development. Polyvagal Theory posits that humans have evolved to constantly scan their environments for threats (neuroception) (Porges, 1991; Pinna & Edwards, 2020). During significant emotional events, e.g., perceived environmental threat, the body's fight/flight stress response is activated. This heightened state of emotional arousal is typically regulated and returned to a resting state by the vagal nerve (Porges, 2011). This allows CYP to socially engage, learn, and reason (social engagement system) (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). Vagal tone is defined as the ability to appropriately

regulate emotional/stress responses in response to environmental stimuli and return bodily functions to a resting state when individuals feel safe (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015; Porges, 2022). Having a well-developed vagal tone is essential for appropriate emotional/behavioural response regulation and is associated with reduced internalising and externalising behaviour and improvements in cognition and academic success (Gus et al., 2015; Graziano & Derefinko, 2013). It is believed that vagal tone development is influenced by genetics and children's relational and environmental experiences (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). In a systematic review, Rattaz et al. (2022) found that synchronised and sensitive adult-child relationships at times of stress supported children's vagal tone and the development of effective emotional regulation strategies, e.g., self-soothing. Similarly, parental use of EC (characterised by attuned adult-child interactions) improved children's vagal tone and ability to biologically regulate (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996). This illustrates the importance of early relationships, attuned interactions, and CYPs' environments in shaping their emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation development (Rees, 2010).

The Window of Tolerance. The Window of Tolerance (Siegel, 1999) is a theoretical model closely associated with Polyvagal Theory and childhood trauma research (Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt, 2011; Schnackernberg, 2023). It posits that there is an optimal zone of emotional arousal where CYP can tolerate fluctuating emotional events/stressors, maintain a sense of safety and connection, and effectively emotionally regulate (Ogden, 2009; Hershler et al., 2021; Schnackenberg, 2023). Beyond this window of tolerance, CYP can experience emotional states of hyperarousal, e.g., hypervigilance, and hypoarousal, e.g., emotional numbness (Corrigan et al., 2011). This impacts their emotional regulation, as cognitive and

linguistic processing within the neocortex is restricted (Ogden, 2009; Siegel, 2010). Some CYP have a narrower window of tolerance (Herschler, 2021) due to their early experiences and relationships, e.g., childhood trauma and maladaptive attachment relationships (Ogden et al., 2009; Siegel, 2010). This makes accessing emotional regulation strategies and managing distress more difficult (Herschler, 2021). However, CYP can be supported through recognising and naming feelings and emotionally attuned interactions (Dana & Porges, 2018; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006). This aligns with EC and highlights the role of attuned interactions in supporting CYP's emotional regulation and wellbeing development (Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006).

Attachment Theory. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) posits that children have an innate drive to form strong relationships with primary caregivers to ensure their survival. Research has identified variations in the security of attachment relationships that are influenced by the responsiveness of caregiver interactions (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Main & Solomon, 1990; Hamilton, 2000). Experience of attuned and emotionally responsive caregiver interactions in infancy supports the development of emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation skills (Rees, 2010; Schore, 2003). Infants develop emotional understanding and effective coping strategies by observing how their caregivers respond to and manage their emotions, particularly during emotional stress (McLaughlin, 2008). This enables the development of internal working models (IWM) that the world is safe, that caregivers can predictably support them to emotionally regulate, and fosters their self-esteem (Sroufe, 1996; Konieczny & Cierpialkowska, 2022; Bowlby, 1988). This can have a lifelong impact on their emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and development (Rees, 2010).

Attuned relationships influence neural connectivity and the development of bio-psychological regulation mechanisms (Schore, 2003). This facilitates coping strategies, emotional understanding, regulation, and social development that are foundational to emotional wellbeing (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011; Eriksen & Bru, 2023). Conversely, insecure, unattuned interactions can lead to children developing maladaptive coping strategies. This can result in behavioural difficulties (Gerhardt, 2004; Bender et al., 2015) and poor emotional wellbeing (Rees, 2010). CYP with LD are more vulnerable to disruptions within their attachment relationships, e.g., due to differences with communication and the impact of cognitive difficulties on their emotional regulation (Rees, 2024). This may contribute to potential difficulties with their emotional wellbeing and behaviour. Therefore, differences in how attachments are expressed and experienced should be acknowledged and supported (Rees, 2024). Attachment Theory has been criticised for being inconsistently applied (Allen, 2016), blaming caregivers, and for lacking cultural sensitivity (Keller, 2018). However, it remains a significant theory within emotional regulation and emotional wellbeing literature and can be used to guide relational interventions (Rose et al., 2019).

Attachment Theory and Education

The interaction between parental attachment relationships and emotional wellbeing and regulation impacts children's academic performance, social competence, and behavioural outcomes (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Geddes, 2006). This perspective can be criticised for being deterministic, pathologising child-parent relationships, and for not accounting for wider family, societal and genetic influences (Billington et al., 2022; Slater, 2007). Most research has focused on the role of

parents in supporting CYPs' emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation development (Somerville et al., 2024b). However, research has emerged that attuned pupil-teacher attachments/relationships can act as a protective factor and support emotional regulation, behaviour, attention, and emotional wellbeing (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006; Pallini et al., 2019; Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023; Kidger et al., 2010). Research by Somerville et al. (2024b) analysed pupils' self-reports on measures of their wellbeing, emotional regulation, and teacher support and found that teacher support indirectly predicted emotional wellbeing through supporting emotional regulation. Most research in this area is correlational, which limits the understanding of the direction of causation (Pallini et al., 2019). However, these preliminary findings demonstrate consistently large effect sizes (Cornelius-White, 2007) and highlight the importance of supporting positive pupil-teacher relationships to facilitate positive emotional and learning outcomes (Pallini, 2019; Mashburn et al., 2008; Somerville et al., 2024b). This is particularly important for CYP with LD, as they are often more dependent on attuned relationships with key adults to meet their needs and to support their development of coping strategies (Rees, 2024).

Supporting Emotional Wellbeing and Behaviour in Schools

Background

Schools are increasingly being implicated in supporting children's emotional wellbeing, as staff regularly spend time developing relationships with pupils, so they are capable of identifying needs and delivering interventions (O'Reilly et al., 2018a; Barry et al., 2019). A handful of international and UK-based systematic reviews have evaluated research that investigated the impact and effectiveness of emotional wellbeing interventions in schools (Svane, Evans & Carter, 2019; Mackenzie &

Williams, 2018; Cheney et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2021). However, the reviews found mixed results regarding the effectiveness of school-based wellbeing interventions/approaches and highlighted the lack of high-quality research that underpins the evidence-base (Svane et al., 2019; MacKenzie & Williams, 2018; Durlak, Mahoney & Boyle, 2022). This makes it difficult for schools to know which approaches to use, for whom, and how (Durlak, Mahoney & Boyle, 2022). Therefore, there is a need for further research to consider the influence of the environment, context, and systems in a variety of school contexts to support the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Cary & Webb, 2025; Nisar et al., 2024).

Universal Curriculum and Targeted Approaches

Significant interest and investment have been placed into the use of universal curriculum and targeted approaches to support CYP's emotional wellbeing within UK schools (NICE, 2022). Universal Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches, e.g., the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme (DCSF, 2007) focus on improving all children's emotional knowledge, regulation, and social skills through curriculum learning (Clarke et al., 2021). A review of meta-analyses of universal SEL programmes in schools revealed that these interventions significantly improved pupils' SEL competencies, academic achievement, and pro-social behaviours whilst reducing "conduct problems" and emotional distress. SEL interventions have also been found to improve school climates and peer relationships (Cipriano et al., 2023). However, a quasi-experimental study revealed that SEAL had no impact on socio-emotional mental health difficulties, behaviour problems, or pro-social behaviour (Humphrey, Lendrum & Wigelsworth, 2010). These inconsistencies could reflect contextual, or implementation factors (Durlak,

Mahoney & Boyle, 2022). Emerging evidence suggests that universal approaches should focus on developing school climates, have multiple components, and should be embedded within “whole school” approaches (Cipriano et al., 2023; NICE, 2016). However, further research is required to understand the use and effectiveness of universal curricular approaches.

Conversely, targeted interventions are individual/small-group programmes delivered to pupils who are “at risk” of poor socioemotional outcomes (MacKenzie & Williams, 2018). Cheney et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of UK, group-based, targeted intervention literature. They found that nurture groups were effective at improving children’s emotional wellbeing in the short term. However, they reported a lack of methodologically rigorous evaluation research, e.g., poor sampling descriptions that made it difficult to identify who the interventions were effective for. Individual studies have found positive impacts of targeted interventions, e.g., mindfulness interventions improved children’s emotional coping strategies and behavioural control (McGeechan, 2019). However, targeted approaches have been criticised for offering a fragmented approach to wellbeing that fail to offer systemic solutions (Powell & Graham, 2017; Billington et al., 2022).

The mixed results on the effectiveness of curricular and targeted wellbeing support could be because the approaches predominantly place the onus on children to change their behaviour rather than considering how relationships and environments should change to support their wellbeing (Brown & Donnelly, 2022; Craig, 2007). Intervention success also appears to be contingent on how they are used, e.g., they are more successful when embedded within whole-school wellbeing cultures (MacKenzie & Williams, 2018; NICE, 2022). Therefore, further investigation

into the use of wellbeing approaches within relational and whole-school contexts is required to inform effective support.

Relational Approaches

Relational approaches involve school staff adopting an individualised approach and being attuned to pupil's emotions to support their ability to emotionally/behaviourally regulate through positive staff-pupil relationships (Gus et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2024). Research has demonstrated that relational approaches support pupils' emotional/behavioural needs and learning progress (Nolan et al., 2021). However, there is limited literature on how relational approaches and staff-pupil relationships can be fostered and maintained within schools (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015).

Jones et al. (2024) used semi-structured interviews to investigate mainstream school staff views on the advantages/disadvantages of sanction-based vs relational approaches and the barriers and facilitators to adopting relational approaches. Staff felt that relational approaches better supported students' long-term emotional regulation and that relationships could be more effectively tailored to individual needs. Facilitators to relational-practice adoption included whole-school training/ethos, training quality, working together, and feeling supported, e.g., by Senior Leadership. Barriers included changing staff perspectives, CYP resistance, ease of implementation, and scarcity of resources, e.g., time/staff. This addresses gaps within the literature and highlights the need for further post-training coaching to support relational practice adoption (Jones et al., 2024). However, the small sample was limited to mainstream settings and specific approaches, e.g., EC, were not described. Therefore, further research capturing views on specific interventions in

more diverse settings, e.g., special schools is required to identify any potential differences in their use and impact to guide effective practice.

Whole School Approaches

There are growing research and legislative initiatives that promote the use of whole-school, relational approaches (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). This involves all members of a school community creating a wellbeing-promoting culture that is embedded across school policy and practice (Svane et al., 2019). Key features of whole-school approaches include developing a supportive school ethos/environment that promotes respect, values diversity, and fosters relationships/connections, e.g., between pupils, staff, and parents, supportive leadership, and staff development and wellbeing opportunities (Public Health England, 2021; Weare, 2015). These features operate systemically to support CYPs' development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Supporting staff wellbeing and meeting their emotional needs is required within a whole-school framework to enable them to effectively support the emotional wellbeing of CYP (Kidger et al., 2010; Butler et al., 2022). This is particularly important given the current pressures on school staff and the rising concerns about their wellbeing (Brown et al., 2025; Education Support, 2024).

Whole-school wellbeing approaches are effective in supporting children's mental health and acknowledge the importance of systemic, tailored, and environmental support for emotional wellbeing (Stirling & Emery, 2016; Billington, 2022). Evidence suggests that whole-school approaches are more effective at supporting student's wellbeing than targeted interventions alone and are preventative rather than reactive (Nisar et al., 2024; Weare & Nind, 2014). However,

only one in five studies of whole-school approaches include CYP with SEND within their samples (Daley & McCarthy, 2021; Nisar et al., 2024). This limits the understanding of the impact and use of these approaches with CYP with LD. Additionally, schools struggle to embed emotional wellbeing programmes into whole-school practice (Rose et al., 2019; Powell & Graham., 2017). Internationally, only 25% of school-based wellbeing interventions are being implemented at the whole-school level (Svane et al., 2019) and, in the UK, 44% of primary and 56% of secondary schools don't adopt whole-school wellbeing approaches (Brown, 2018). The limited use and sustainability of whole-school approaches could be due to a lack of specific implementation support for schools within policy, resource/funding constraints, the limited evidence-base, and a lack of clarity over which external professionals to access for support (NICE, 2022; Moore et al., 2024; O'Reilly et al., 2018a; Rainer, Le, & Abdinasir, 2023). This impacts their effectiveness (Weare & Nind, 2014). Therefore, there is a need for further investigation into how whole-school approaches are used and facilitated in a range of contexts.

Implementation of School-Based Emotional Wellbeing Interventions

Implementation Science is the study of the process in which evidence-based interventions are put into practice (Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012). Implementation factors, such as intervention adaptations, fidelity, and participant responsiveness (Dulak & DuPre, 2008) can partially explain variation in SEL intervention outcomes and can support/hinder intervention success (Durlak et al., 2011). The extent to which emotional wellbeing approaches have been used in schools has exceeded the pace of implementation research and there is a lack of specific investigation into understanding implementation factors that influence school wellbeing interventions

(Durlak, Mahoney & Boyle, 2022; Domitrovich et al., 2008). Therefore, research should consider context-specific intervention implementation to inform effective practice and guidance (Humphrey et al., 2016).

Research suggests that factors, such as school leadership, staff engagement, intervention characteristics, resources, staff turnaround, and external support influence the sustainability, effectiveness, and implementation of school wellbeing interventions (March et al., 2022). Additionally, intervention adaptations, e.g., adapting language to suit school contexts, are regularly incorporated into wellbeing interventions and impact their success (Humphrey, 2013). Most research in this field has been conducted in mainstream settings. This sustains the research-practice gap in the specialist education field (Leko, Roberts & Pek, 2015). Therefore, further exploration into how wellbeing approaches are used, and adapted, and their influencing factors in a range of education settings is required to guide effective practice and support, e.g., from EPs (Durlak, 2016; Weare & Nind, 2011; Kelly, Woolfson & Boyle, 2017).

Section Summary

The literature reveals that school-based emotional wellbeing support often incorporates universal and targeted approaches that are embedded within whole-school, relational cultures (Clarke et al., 2021). However, mixed outcomes/effectiveness highlight the need for further investigation into implementation factors and the need for external professional support (Svane et al., 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2018b). The majority of school emotional wellbeing support research has been conducted in mainstream settings (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Therefore, future research should investigate the impact and use of emotional

wellbeing approaches in wider educational contexts, such as settings that support children from vulnerable groups, e.g., SEND, chronic illness, autism, and complex LDs (Clarke et al., 2021; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). This will support the effective and appropriate use of these approaches in other educational contexts.

Supporting the Emotional Wellbeing and Behaviour of CYP with Learning Difficulties and SEND

Defining Learning Difficulties and SEND

The SENDCoP (2015) describes CYP as having SEND "if they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her" (DfE & DfH, 2015. p.15). For example, "if they have a significantly greater difficulty in learning... and have a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities" (DfE & DfH, 2015. p.16). Support generally falls under the four areas of need identified in the SENDCoP (2015): Cognition and learning, communication and interaction, SEMH, and sensory and physical. Due to their increased risk of developing mental health difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007) and limited existing literature, this review pays particular attention to emotional and behavioural support for CYP with LD.

"Learning difficulties" is a broad term used in educational contexts, that describes CYP who "learn at a slower pace than their peers, even with appropriate differentiation" (DfE & DfH, 2015, p.97). LD describes an "intellectual or developmental disability that can impact CYPs cognitive functioning, communication, problem-solving, self-regulation, and independence (Rees, 2024, p.12). This definition captures a wide range of needs, such as specific learning difficulties (SpLD) "that affect one or more aspects of learning, e.g., dyslexia"; moderate

learning difficulties (MLD), where CYP “display significant delays in reaching developmental milestones and have difficulty in accessing the curriculum”; severe learning difficulties (SLD), “where students require support in all areas of the curriculum and may have associated difficulties with mobility and communication”; and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), “where children are likely to have severe/complex LDs alongside physical disability or sensory impairments” (DfE & DfH, 2015, p.97-98; EA Special Educational Needs, n.d).

The extent to which LDs impact CYPs’ learning and independence is highly individualised and variable. However, most CYP with severe and complex LDs have an EHCP and are likely to require specialist provision, often in special schools (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020).

UK SEND Context and Models of Disability

The number of CYP with SEND in the UK is increasing and is currently over 1.9 million (Public Accounts Committee, 2025). These pupils are educated in mainstream, special schools, and AP, and 26% have an EHCP (National Statistics, 2024b). Of those children, 351,000 CYP are identified as having LD, and 29% of all CYPs with EHCPs have a primary SEN associated with LD (Mencap, 2024). 26% of CYP who have a primary need associated with LD are educated in mainstream schools (Office for Health and Improvement Disparities, 2025).

The Warnock Report (Department for Education & Science, 1978) marked the start of a shift in the understanding of SEND from a “medical model” to a “social model” (DfE, 2013a). There has been a tendency to adopt a medicalised understanding of LD and SEND, where pupils’ needs are defined by diagnoses and

specialised support has focused on “fixing” children rather than changing their environments to meet their needs (DfE, 2013a; Rolfe, 2019). This can leave children vulnerable to stigmatisation and can deny them the autonomy to construct their own understanding of their experiences/identities (Manago et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016). On the other hand, social models view SEN and LD as socially constructed and emphasise that “impairments” are induced by “disabling aspects of society” that fail to recognise, include, and make adjustments for CYP with SEND (Chappell, Goodley, Lawthom, 2001). However, this view has been criticised for not acknowledging the impact that LDs have on CYPs engagement within society and the environment (Rees, 2024). Overall, an “educational needs model” has dominated educational research and practice. This highlights the need to “teach all children utilising specialist expertise matched to the child’s needs” (DfE, 2013a, p.6).

By adopting a biopsychosocial ecological approach (Engel, 1977; Kranzler et al., 2020), SEND can be understood as the interaction between an individual learner’s needs, e.g., their intellectual impairment, their interactions within their social-environmental context, and psychological factors, e.g., their wellbeing (Frederickson & Cline, 2009; Rees, 2024). This approach aligns with EST and acknowledges the role of individual differences, e.g., learning difficulties, but also enables the application of holistic, systemic, and relational support (Gergen, 2009; Williams et al., 2016; Rees, 2024).

Special Schools

The number of CYP who attend special schools continues to increase with demand for school places exceeding capacity and proposals to provide more places for CYP with complex needs (Shaw, 2017; Public Accounts Committee, 2025). The

Education Act (1996) defines a special school as “a school which is specifically organised to make educational provision for pupils with SEN” (Education Act, 1996, 337(1), p.192). Special schools can be maintained by LAs, non-maintained, or academy schools, and provide specialist provision that is not normally available in mainstream schools/colleges (DfE & DfH, 2015). Special schools create personalised, child-centred educational programmes to meet CYPs’ needs, and the majority of pupils who attend special schools have an EHCP (Merrigan & Senior, 2023; DfE, 2015b).

The organisation and admission policies of UK special schools are complex and regionally variable. State-maintained special schools have many descriptions but generally cater for children with SLD, MLD, or emotional and behavioural difficulties (DfE, 2013a). Special schools can be specialised around one of the broad four areas of need, e.g., cognition and learning and can be further specialised in supporting specific diagnoses, e.g., autism (GOV.UK, 2024; DfE & DfH, 2015). However, some special schools cater for students with a broader range of needs (DfE, 2015), and increasingly generic descriptions of special schools are being used, e.g., “complex needs schools”, to reflect the increasing diversity and complexity of pupils’ needs within special schools (DfE, 2013a). This reflects notions that CYP often have more than one type of SEN (Lindsay, 2016). One LA describes complex needs schools as catering for CYP with significant learning disabilities alongside other needs, e.g., communication or medical needs where LDs are the main barrier to learning and inclusion (Norfolk County Council, 2025). This research focuses on special schools, including complex needs schools that provide specialist support for CYP with LD in line with previous research (Attwood, 2021).

Special schools have unique challenges in supporting CYP with SEND. For example, in ensuring a sufficiently balanced curriculum and inclusion for CYP with PMLD, supporting behaviour, meeting medical needs, and staff retention difficulties (BPS, 2024; DfE, 2013a; Male & Rayner, 2007). The special school sector also faces significant funding and capacity challenges. For example, over 160,000 CYP attend special schools in England, and in 2025, 63% of special schools are “over-capacity”, resulting in difficulties with overcrowding and meeting needs (Collyer Merritt, 2024; Public Accounts Committee, 2025). Nevertheless, it has been argued that special schools are the most appropriate settings for children with SLD, PMLD, and emotional/behavioural difficulties due to the increased specialist expertise of staff, access to resources, and curriculum flexibility (Qu, 2015; Warnock, 2005; Ofsted, 2006; Shaw, 2017). Research suggests that there are no significant differences in the wellbeing of CYP with SEND who attend mainstream and special schools (Crowley et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there has been limited research that explores how specific educational interventions are used within this context to guide implementation guidance (García-Carrión et al., 2018). This should be addressed within future research.

Learning Difficulties and SEND: Emotional Wellbeing and Behaviour

There has been limited research and policy that addresses the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). However, children with SEND are more likely to have mental health difficulties (36%) than children without SEND (6%) (Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2019), and CYP with LD are more than four times more likely to develop mental health problems than average (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019). Similarly, CYP with SEND are up to five times more likely to be

excluded from school due to “persistent challenging behaviour” (National Statistics, 2024a). Persistent mental health difficulties can also meet the definition of SEND, e.g., SEMH needs due to their influence on pupils’ difficulties in learning in relation to their peers (NICE, 2022). A small amount of guidance has focused on supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD, e.g., by encouraging the awareness of changes in the behaviour of CYP with LD that could support the early identification of mental health difficulties and strategies to de-escalate emotional situations (BOND, 2022). However, further research is required to develop this information and tailor it to schools.

In line with the biopsychosocial ecological approach (Engel, 1977; Kranzler et al., 2020), the increased vulnerabilities of CYP with LD are likely the result of an interaction between individual, social-interactive, environmental, and systemic factors (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019). On an individual level, differences with cognitive functioning and communication can make it difficult for CYP with LD to recognise, label, and communicate their emotions and develop relationships required for effective emotional regulation (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019; Fox, Lavery & Chowdhury, 2020). This is supported by research that found that the presence of LDs influenced CYPs’ emotional understanding, emotional regulation strategy development, and behaviour (Pons et al., 2014; Cristofani et al., 2023). This has been associated with cognitive differences, e.g., with working memory and executive functioning (Morra, Parrella & Camba, 2011; Nachshon & Horowitz-Kraus, 2019). Additionally, communication/interaction difficulties between children with LD and their caregivers, e.g., limited eye contact or speech difficulties, may make it more difficult for CYP to develop secure attachment relationships, engage in emotional co-regulation, and could lead to caregivers misunderstanding

their emotional communication attempts (Howe, 2006). This can impact their emotional/behavioural regulation (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Nevertheless, emotional recognition and communication skills can be effectively supported within this population (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019).

On an environmental/systemic level, CYP with LD have an increased vulnerability to the same socio-interactive and environmental mental health risk factors as the general population, e.g., they are more likely to experience poverty, adverse life experiences, and parental mental health difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). CYP with SEND are also more likely to experience stigma, bullying, and difficulties with inclusion (Frederickson & Cline, 2015; Cary & Webb, 2025). CYP with LD are also impacted by systemic/relational misunderstanding of behaviour, e.g., the functions of communication and sensory-seeking behaviour (Durand & Moskowitz 2015; Milton, 2012). In a large-scale report, Lavis, Burke & Hastings, (2019) found that systemic factors influenced the mental health of CYP with LD, such as poor access to specialist services and a lack of staff training in identification/support. They also found that mental health difficulties were often misattributed to LD (“diagnostic overshadowing”), which impacts the appropriateness of support (Jopp & Keys, 2001; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). This highlights the need for tailored wellbeing support across multiple levels and the need for further research and staff training to inform evidence-based intervention use for CYP with LD (Lavis, Burke, & Hastings, 2019).

School-based Emotional Wellbeing and Behaviour Support for CYP with Learning Difficulties and SEND.

Most CYP with SEND, including LDs, are educated in mainstream schools (Mencap, 2024). However, there is limited guidance on emotional wellbeing policy and practice for these students within mainstream settings (Byers et al., 2008). Approaches often focus on cognitive and behavioural training and targeted intervention programmes delivered by specialists (Gus et al., 2017). For example, SENCOs reported that the most effective strategies to support the behaviour of students with SEND are praise/rewards, clear structure and communication, emotional regulation training, separation, physical restraint, and the use of teaching assistants as targeted support (Nye et al., 2016). This highlights a lack of knowledge and use of relational approaches to support CYP with LD and SEND. This is likely due to most research focusing on general school populations, which makes understanding the appropriateness of whole-school, relational wellbeing interventions for CYP with LD difficult to assess (Weymeis, 2017; Attwood, 2021).

In a systematic literature review, Hagarty and Morgan (2020) found limited evidence for the effectiveness of interventions that aimed to support the emotional skills of CYP with LD. This was attributed to a lack of methodological rigour within the field. Nevertheless, research by Morgan et al. (2018) investigated the impact of the SCERTS approach for autistic CYP. They found that environmental and relational school-based adaptations, characterised by the approach, improved autistic children’s adaptive communication, executive functioning, and social skills and decreased “problematic behaviour”. These findings were strengthened by the large-scale sample. However, the approach was not embedded across the school.

Additionally, Hibbin and Warin (2020) used semi-structured interviews with school staff and EPs and case studies to investigate the impact of relational approaches, such as nurture groups and restorative practice, to support students with SEBD. They found that whole-school, relational school environments where staff actively listened, had increased emotional awareness, and modelled positive communication and emotional literacy were key to supporting students' socio-emotional understanding. This could be fostered through staff training, leadership support, and whole-staff commitment (Hibbin & Warin, 2020). This has important implications for future research and the development of effective approaches to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with SEND. However, further research is required to address the impact on CYP with LD and in a wider range of specialist settings.

Emotional Wellbeing Support in Special Schools

Many approaches used in mainstream schools are also appropriate in special schools (Marshall et al., 2017). However, very limited research has investigated how emotional wellbeing can effectively be supported within special schools that support CYP with LD (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury et al., 2020). "Challenging behaviour" causes staff significant stress in special schools (Amstad & Müller, 2020). Within special schools, staff are commonly trained in and use physical restraint to "manage" CYP's behaviour and promote their safety (DfE, 2024b). This can result in injury, reduced emotional wellbeing, and limits children's abilities to communicate their emotions due to damaged relationships and trust in school staff (The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2019; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). Therefore, The Government is committed to reducing the need for restrictive practice by supporting staff to develop alternative strategies to support emotional de-escalation. However,

there is currently limited evidence that identifies appropriate and effective interventions to minimise physical intervention within these settings (DfE, 2024b).

White et al. (2017) found that staff who work in special schools viewed promoting children's wellbeing as a priority and that they were able to flexibly adapt approaches within a whole-school framework to meet student needs. However, the sampled special schools focused on SEMH, and communication and interaction needs. This limits the understanding of how wellbeing approaches are used/adapted for CYP with LD. Unwin, Stenfert Kroese and Blumson, (2018) evaluated the 'Zippy's Friends' emotional literacy intervention in special schools and found that teachers rated improvements in pupils' emotional literacy and emotional recognition. However, this intervention is a manualised approach that focuses on developing CYP's emotional literacy skills through weekly discrete reading sessions. This could result in CYP struggling emotionally for the majority of the school day and limits the understanding of the use of relational whole-school approaches in special schools (Gus et al., 2017).

Nisar et al. (2024) investigated the use of whole-school wellbeing programmes in Welsh mainstream and special schools. They found that many of the interventions adopted by schools had an insufficient evidence base. Whilst the small sample limited the scope for reliable conclusions to be made about the use of whole-school approaches within these settings, they found that the majority of sampled special schools had wellbeing policies in place and used a range of interventions, such as Trauma Informed Schools and restorative approaches. Nisar et al., (2024) highlighted the need for further investigation into what wellbeing approaches are being delivered for pupils with LD and SEND and a robust evaluation of the impact of

whole-school wellbeing approaches in special schools due to differences in how interventions are adapted and used in these settings.

As part of their Doctoral Thesis, Attwood (2021) used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to investigate how staff within a special school sixth form for young people with LD promote student mental health and wellbeing and the barriers and facilitators to providing this support within the setting. Attwood (2021) found that staff used a range of strategies and adapted their practice to effectively meet students' needs at a targeted and whole-school level, for example, by adapting teaching to develop students' emotional awareness/regulation skills, using emotional literacy interventions, validating and normalising emotions, emotional check-ins, and prioritising staff-student relationships. Staff also reported using visual materials to support students' accessibility. Staff identified facilitators to supporting emotional wellbeing in the setting, such as staff commitment, prioritising supporting individual needs, connections with external services, such as EPs for specialist training/advice, and communicating good practice across the school. However, they also highlighted that their students' difficulties with emotional understanding, communication, and reflection, and the lack of research and evidence-based advice on how to support the emotional wellbeing of children with LD within this context, acted as a barrier to successful mental health support and outcomes. This highlights the need for a more contextual, robust evidence-base to support staff in using relational and whole-school emotional wellbeing strategies within special schools for CYP with LD. Due to the case study design, further research should explore wellbeing practice more widely across special schools and across the full school age range (Attwood, 2021).

Section Summary

Literature that explores the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD and SEND demonstrates that these students are at a heightened risk of wellbeing and behavioural difficulties due to a combination of individual, interpersonal, and ecosystemic factors (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, there has been a lack of research that investigates how settings support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD and SEND within mainstream and special schools (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Existing research has demonstrated that pupil-teacher relationships, whole-school approaches, emotional validation/normalisation, and adaptations to meet pupils' needs are important in supporting the emotional wellbeing of these students (Attwood, 2021; White, 2017). However, there is limited research that investigates how specific, relational and whole-school wellbeing approaches, e.g., EC, are used to support CYP with LD. This should be addressed within future research to guide professional support and effective wellbeing practice.

Emotion Coaching

Background of Emotion Coaching

EC is a relational approach aimed at supporting the development of children's emotional regulation, wellbeing, and behaviour through empathetic/attuned interactions and co-regulation with trusted adults (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015). EC fits within a biopsychosocial understanding of emotional wellbeing (Gus et al., 2015) and is grounded in the meta-emotional parenting philosophy that was observed and introduced by Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996). Meta-emotional parenting

philosophy refers to the beliefs that parents hold about their own and their children's emotions (Katz, Maliken, Stettler, 2012). EC research focused on how parents engage with the emotions that underly their children's behaviour (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). This is because parents demonstrating emotional understanding within their interactions with their children is strongly associated with the development of children's self-regulation skills (Wilson, Havighurst & Harley, 2014). Through interviews, Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1997) identified four styles of parenting responses in relation to their child's emotions: emotion coaching, dismissing, disapproving, and laissez-faire. These lie on a continuum between high/low empathy and guidance. EC parenting styles are characterised by responses that are high in empathy (where emotions are accepted and validated) and guidance (where limits are set and solutions are sought) (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). Parents who adopt this style can recognise emotions in themselves and their children, appreciate the function of emotions, and can help their children to understand their emotions (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996). This has been associated with fostering secure attachments, which supports children's emotional regulation development (Chen, Lin & Li, 2012).

Gottman and DeClaire (1997) identified five steps to EC:

1. Being aware of the child's emotions
2. Recognizing the emotion as an opportunity for teaching and intimacy
3. Listening empathetically and validating the child's feelings
4. Helping the child verbally label emotions

5. Setting limits while helping the child problem-solve

By following these steps, adults engage in empathetic communication and model emotional regulation through co-regulation (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). This enables children to recognise and understand their emotions, develops their vagal tone, and improves their ability to self-regulate (Gottman & Declaire, 1997; Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015). The impact of EC on CYPs' emotional development is supported by longitudinal research in the United States. Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996) used meta-emotional interviewing and physiological measures to assess the impact of EC on children's emotional regulation and social competency. Gottman, Katz, and Hooven (1996) found that EC improved children's ability to physiologically regulate their emotional responses, self-soothe, focus their attention, and improved their long-term social competency. This was attributed to improved vagal tone and effective management of parasympathetic nervous system responses (fight/flight/freeze) (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996; Porges, 2011). This research is correlational, so causation cannot be inferred. However, it highlights the potential benefits of adopting EC as an approach to support children's emotional regulation, wellbeing, and behaviour.

Parental Emotion Coaching Research

A large body of international literature has evaluated the impact of parental EC on children's emotional regulation and wellbeing development. A literature review found that EC parenting improves children's emotional competence (expression, awareness, and regulation), peer relations, and psychological adjustment (Katz, Maliken & Stetler, 2012). Parental EC is a protective factor for children exposed to domestic violence, creating improvements in emotional regulation, child-adult

relationships, and decreased depression (Katz et al., 2020). EC can also moderate the impact of family stress (Lobo et al., 2021). Parental EC has also been found to support CYP with eating disorders and oppositional defiant disorder and has potential implications for supporting CYP with anxiety (Aarnio-Peterson et al., 2024; Dunsmore, Booker & Ollendick, 2013; Hurrell, Houwing & Hudson, 2017).

A series of randomised control trials (RCTs) have evaluated EC parenting training and “Tuning into Kids/Teens/Toddlers” (an Australian EC parenting programme developed by Havighurst et al., 2009). Collectively, they found that EC use improves children’s behaviour, including those with conduct and attention difficulties (Havighurst et al., 2015; Wilson, Havighurst & Harley, 2014; Havighurst, Kehoe & Harley, 2015; Chan, Fu & Liu, 2024). However, these results produced varied effect sizes and relied on parental/teacher report methodology, e.g., the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). This could reduce the validity of the findings. Additionally, despite being “gold standard” evidence in the field, RCTs do not help with understanding what parts of the intervention work, for whom, and the influence of context on intervention success (Bickman & Reich, 2015; Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). This could be improved within future research through semi-structured interviews to deeply understand stakeholder perspectives and experiences (Davis et al., 2019).

The impact of parental EC has also been investigated in a lab-based observation study, where maternal EC was observed whilst CYP completed a “challenging drawing task” at age three, which was repeated a year later (Zhu et al., 2025). Findings revealed that maternal EC supported CYPs’ compliance, engagement, and emotional regulation, particularly when coaching positive

emotions. However, further investigation into EC use in “real-world” contexts is required to understand its effectiveness and contextual barriers and facilitators to its use to guide support.

Havighurst (2020) conducted a literature review and found a strong evidence-base for EC parenting programmes, suggesting that they improved CYP’s mental health by supporting parents to scaffold emotional competence development within their interactions. However, the extent to which findings can be transferred to other countries/cultures must be considered. Wu and Hooper (2023) investigated the impact of EC parenting in black communities. They found that EC beliefs/concepts and emotional socialisation contexts differed between black and white communities. For example, black families (particularly fathers) support their children’s self-regulation through attuned interactions but also model suppression and high emotional control to protect their children from societal prejudice/threat. This demonstrates the nuance of EC use and the need for further research to investigate EC use in a variety of contexts.

Emotion Coaching in Education Settings

Following the success of a pilot study (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015), EC has been increasingly researched and used across education settings as a whole school approach and technique to support CYP during “emotional episodes” (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015; Weiler et al., 2025; Gilbert, 2024). A large proportion of UK school-based EC research has been conducted by the founders of “Emotion Coaching UK”. This organisation aims to promote children’s emotional wellbeing and behaviour through EC training and consultancy (Emotion Coaching UK, 2025a). Findings should, therefore, be interpreted tentatively, considering positive reporting

and profitability bias. Nevertheless, EC appears to be a promising relational, whole-school approach to support CYPs' emotional wellbeing and behaviour (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015).

The Impact of Emotion Coaching in Schools and Education Contexts

Emotion Coaching in Schools. The UK school-based EC pilot study (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015) used mixed methods, such as self-developed EC and Exit Questionnaires, focus groups, pupil behaviour incident data, and interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of EC use after one year within schools. Rose, Gilbert and McGuire-Snieckus (2015) found that EC training improved school staff's professional practice and self-regulation by increasing their awareness of effective communication strategies, e.g., positively oriented scripts to support de-escalation. EC use also had a positive behavioural impact on CYP, evidenced by reduced pupil behavioural incidents, exclusions, and a reduction in the use of externally motivating behaviour management techniques, e.g., sanctions and rewards. The authors concluded that EC improved children's emotional competence, regulation, and prosocial behaviour through adopting consistent relational communication. However, this study was limited by the self-report methodology, which could lead to social-desirability bias (Coolican, 2009). Findings were also limited by the small sample size, which lacked specificity and predominantly focused on mainstream primary school settings and a case study of one secondary school. This limited the understanding of potential contextual differences in EC use. Additionally, this study did not explore the use of adaptations to EC procedures to accommodate different developmental stages (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). Research has suggested that some CYP are more receptive to EC than others due to their

“temperament and regulatory abilities” (Katz, Maliken & Stettler, 2012). Therefore, further research is required to understand how the approach is used and adapted to support the emotional wellbeing/behaviour of CYP within a wider range of education settings that support CYP at different developmental stages. Nevertheless, this pilot study offered important insight into the effectiveness of EC in schools.

Emotion Coaching in Youth Mentoring Contexts. The impact of EC within a US youth mentoring programme (11-to-18-year-olds) was explored via a mixed-method research study (Weiler et al., 2025). Youth Mentors completed pre/post-programme questionnaires and attended online focus groups to explore the feasibility, acceptability, appropriateness, and effectiveness of EC in a youth mentoring context. Findings revealed that EC was viewed to be an effective and feasible approach that improved Mentors’ self-efficacy and the quality of their relationships with CYP. Mentors also felt that EC supported CYP to feel heard and improved their self-regulation abilities. Staff described challenges to EC use, such as older CYP being more aware and, therefore, less accepting of EC, a lack of appropriate private spaces to use EC, and the over-use of “EC language” appearing disingenuous. Staff reflected that using EC more flexibly, e.g., deviating from scripts, and understanding that EC principles can be communicated non-verbally, e.g., through body language as well as through speech also supported its use. The use of mixed methods supported a clear and detailed understanding of the impact of EC, e.g., through the use of statistical and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, the influence of discussing their experiences with other Mentors within focus groups may have yielded positivity bias and demand characteristics (Weiler et al., 2025). This research suggests that EC can be used differently depending on the needs of CYP and the context. Therefore, further research should

investigate how implementation environments and contexts influence EC use in a wider variety of settings to support its effectiveness.

Emotion Coaching in Early Years Settings. Research has investigated the use of the “Tuning in to Kids for Kindergarten Teachers” EC intervention in Norwegian Kindergartens (Havighurst et al., 2024). Staff and parents completed follow-up questionnaires, and setting observations were completed following training and EC supervision. Findings revealed that staff engaged in increased EC and decreased emotion dismissing interactions and that training improved kindergarten climates, teacher sensitivity, and behaviour guidance. These findings may have been influenced by disruptions to the intervention and supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic (Havighurst et al., 2024). However, these findings suggest that EC can be effectively used in a range of settings.

Similarly, the impact of an EC-based kindergarten intervention in Turkey was investigated through focus groups and semi-structured interviews with staff and parents using a case-study methodology (Kuru, 2023). This research found that the intervention supports CYPs’ emotional understanding and behavioural regulation, relationships between CYP, parents and staff, and improves staff self-efficacy. Additionally, within an observation study (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024), the use of EC in German pre-schools was found to support pupils’ emotional regulation and was used differently depending on the intensity of their emotional experiences. This illustrates that EC use is adaptive in relation to the context.

Overall, these studies highlight the efficacy of EC in facilitating emotionally supportive environments and practice to benefit CYP in the early years. Findings also demonstrate the value of EC supervision, e.g., with setting leaders and staff in

supporting EC use. Future research should look to investigate the impact of EC in a wider range of contexts within the UK to support the transferability of positive outcomes and practice guidance. This is partially being addressed through a current research proposal that is investigating the use of EC in UK Early Years settings in partnership with the EEF. This research aims to be completed between 2025 and 2028 (Emotion Coaching UK, 2025b).

Attachment-Aware Schools

EC is the dominant whole-school intervention adopted within the Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) initiative. EC training is delivered to staff to support the development of universal, relational, and attachment-based policy and practice in schools alongside targeted interventions, such as nurture groups, attachment-based neuro-education, and specialist support, e.g., from EPs (Rose, McGuire-Snieckus & Gilbert & McInnes, 2019). This approach has been praised for rejecting medical models and for creating respect across school communities (Parker & Levinson, 2018). Rose et al. (2017) thematically analysed staff-reported case studies of students “at risk of exclusion and poor academic attainment” following AAS training. The results revealed that the AAS initiative and EC training improved home-school communication, shared practice, and decreased behavioural incidents. The case study sample included a diverse range of children, e.g., from primary, secondary, and specialist settings and included children with SEND, e.g., autism and ADHD. This is beneficial, as further research that assesses the impact of child temperament characteristics, e.g., impulsivity, on emotional competence, was required (Katz, Maliken & Stettler, 2012). However, staff reporting could reduce the credibility and consistency of findings and only offers the school’s perspective (Rose et al., 2017).

Similarly, Rose et al. (2019) combined and thematically analysed the findings of two pilot studies across 40 schools in two LAs to investigate the effectiveness of AAS in supporting children “at risk” and the impact of the development of whole-school attachment-informed ethos and practice. They used a similar methodology to Rose et al. (2017). However, teachers additionally recorded pupil behaviour (SDQ), academic achievement, and practitioner outcomes via the EC exit questionnaire. They found that following AAS training, teachers reported improved emotional self-regulation and confidence when supporting children and reduced pupil exclusions and behavioural difficulties.

AAS approaches have also been associated with systemic change. For example, Kelly, Watt, and Giddens (2020) found that AAS impacted policy and system development, created safer and more nurturing school environments, improved staff pedagogical development and confidence in dealing with difficult situations. They also found that AAS improved pupils’ emotional and behavioural regulation and supported relationships with parents. Within these studies, understanding the impact of EC alone is confounded by the use of other interventions simultaneously, e.g., Circle of Adults (Rose et al., 2019). This suggests the need for more EC-specific research. Nevertheless, these studies demonstrate that EC can effectively contribute to supporting CYPs’ emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and academic achievement (Rose et al., 2017).

Grey Attachment-Aware Schools Literature

A substantial body of “grey literature” has also investigated the impact of EC in education settings as part of AAS. A two-part evaluation of the Somerset Emotion Coaching Project (Rose et al., 2016; Digby et al., 2017) used mixed methods, e.g.,

self-report questionnaires, case studies, and focus groups with professionals from school and community settings who had received AAS/EC training in one UK region. Rose et al. (2016) found that EC training improved professionals' knowledge of CYP emotional development, meta-emotional philosophies, and support strategies. This created a culture of emotional support/openness and increased awareness/access to external professionals. In part two, Digby et al. (2017) found that EC improved staff wellbeing and pupil self-regulation, wellbeing, and engagement in school.

Similarly, Doonan, Stephens, and Hall (2021) reviewed a large AAS EC project (53 schools, including mainstream primary, secondary, special schools, and a pupil referral unit) in one county. Findings revealed that staff felt that EC would be useful as a whole-school approach and provided a relational alternative to traditional behaviour support. However, time and external pressures were barriers to its use. Whilst not published or peer-reviewed, these results demonstrate the potential benefits of EC training to guide whole-school, relational emotional wellbeing support across a wide range of settings, including special schools. However, further research is required to understand how the EC approach is used and implemented within these settings.

Emotion Coaching Implementation in Schools

The implementation of EC within schools is increasingly being investigated. Within their thesis study (Gilbert, 2018) and subsequent publication, Gilbert (2024) used constructivist grounded theory and semi-structured interviews with the same participants as the UK-pilot study (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). Gilbert (2024) obtained practitioners' perspectives on their experiences of implementing EC training into practice and their personal and professional development post-training.

Findings revealed that EC practice and acceptance evolved through consistent use and was influenced by practitioners' emotional awareness. EC was found to become a natural communication response and could be flexibly adapted to support CYPs' needs. The findings also revealed that EC practitioners' training, e.g., the use of illustrative videos, support from school leadership, and "in-house training", supported the effective and consistent use of EC in these settings. These findings were used to develop the model of EC engagement (MECE) (Accept, Adopt, Adapt, Sustain), which describes the key stages in which practitioners embed EC into practice.

Within their thesis research, Krawczyk (2017) used EC pre/post questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate teacher's perspectives on the appropriateness and impact of whole-school EC training, its impact on job satisfaction, and the barriers/facilitators to EC implementation within a primary school. Staff felt that whole-school EC improved job satisfaction and supported CYP's emotional responses and behaviour, even when inconsistently used. However, barriers to its implementation included perceived prioritisation from management, time pressures, and competing demands.

Similarly, within their thesis research, Smith (2023), used narrative interviews to explore current and previous teachers' experiences of using EC in mainstream secondary schools, its impact on their perceptions of themselves in their roles, and potential implications for EPs. Teachers described their experiences of EC use as "a naturally occurring response" that aligned with their views and practice. Teachers felt that EC supported the development and repair of staff-pupil relationships and understanding of pupil needs. However, they described barriers to its use, such as misalignment with school policies, a lack of whole-school implementation, and

resistance of staff in adopting a new approach. These findings offer an in-depth explanation of the effectiveness of EC use and factors that support and hinder its success within mainstream schools. This has implications for EPs, as they can use this information to support schools to embed EC as a whole-school approach through training and consultation. However, peer-reviewed research is required in a wider range of education settings to explore EC use and impact further.

Romney, Somerville and Baines (2022) used online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate school staff perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to EC implementation in mainstream primary settings. Romney, Somerville and Baines, (2022) found that staff viewed EC as having a positive impact on children's socio-emotional development and felt that it was helpful for a range of students. Staff also felt that EC improved their empathy, encouraging them to "look beyond student behaviour" and supported their emotional communication. Facilitators to EC implementation included high-quality training; EPs modelling steps, providing scripts, and delivering follow-up training/support; consistent use across staff, and SLT prioritising EC throughout the school ethos and practice. Reported barriers to implementation included pressures to balance learning and wellbeing initiatives. Staff also reported incidences where EC "does not work" and where CYP are "less responsive" to EC due to "difficult backgrounds" and specialist needs, such as ADHD. These reports could relate to previous findings regarding CYP temperament and regulatory abilities and their amenability to EC (Katz et al., 2012). Therefore, due to the association between emotional regulation, wellbeing difficulties and LD (Emerson & Hatton, 2007), it is reasonable to highlight the need for further investigation into the impact and use of EC in settings that support CYP with SEND/LD, e.g., special schools that support CYP with LD. This will provide a deeper

explanation for these findings and guide positive implications for LD/SEND policy and practice.

Emotion Coaching with CYP who have SEND

There is a small amount of literature that investigates the effectiveness of adopting an emotion coaching parenting style to support children with SEND during times of emotional distress (Wilson et al., 2013; Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2016). Wilson et al. (2013) used a case-control matched pairs design, whereby children with a clinical diagnosis of autism were matched with children without autism. Their parents completed the meta-emotional interview and questionnaires about their child's socioemotional behaviour. Wilson et al. (2013) found that parental EC had a significant buffering impact on the emotionally driven externalising behaviours experienced by children with autism (but not general externalising behaviour associated with autism). This suggests that EC can be an effective intervention to support autistic children to emotionally and behaviourally regulate. This is likely to improve their emotional wellbeing and ability to engage academically and socially (Kuhlthau et al., 2010). However, this study is limited by a lack of observational data, reliance on parental reports, and is correlational. This prevents the direction of causation from being inferred (Russo, 2011).

Chronis-Tuscano et al. (2016) used case studies and found preliminary evidence to suggest that a parenting intervention that included EC training improved parent-child relationships, emotional regulation, and reduced externalising behaviour in pre-schoolers with ADHD. However, this study adopted a narrative of "treating ADHD" and was limited by a small sample and lack of comparison groups. Overall, these studies highlight the potential positive impact of parental EC in supporting CYP

with SEND. However, the samples were small and limited to specific SEND diagnoses. Therefore, future research is required to understand the impact of EC on children with wider SEND, such as CYP with LD, to inform optimal support.

School-based Emotion Coaching for CYP who have SEND

The majority of school-based EC literature has focused on mainstream settings (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Romney, Somerville & Baines., 2022). A handful of papers have included specialist SEND settings within their samples (Rose et al., 2017; Doonan et al., 2020). However, no in-depth analysis or comparisons were conducted to assess contextual differences in the impact or use of EC within these settings. Therefore, less is known about how EC is used within schools to support CYP with SEND.

As part of their thesis research, Kloes (2015) used pre/post-training surveys, a follow-up questionnaire after one month, and classroom observations to investigate preschool educators' views on how they anticipate that they will use EC within an "inclusive setting" and its influence on supporting inclusion. This setting included "children at risk, children who require special education, and typically developing children" being educated together. Kloes (2015) found that all participating educators used EC after one month, e.g., when validating emotions and talking through problems/solutions and will apply their training in practice, e.g., by making visuals. EC also improved teacher's confidence in supporting SEND inclusion. However, 33% of staff felt that EC was "not the correct response for all children". Educators did not explain why EC use was not appropriate for all children. This requires further investigation to aid future practice.

To date, only one published paper (Gus et al., 2017) has explicitly and deeply investigated the impact of EC use as a whole-school approach within a special school. The authors used a mixed-methods case-study design at a farm-based, primary-aged, special school for pupils with SEMH needs. A variety of stakeholder perspectives were gathered through EC questionnaires, headteacher interviews, pupil academic and behaviour records, and pupil reflections to assess how EC use impacted pupil, parent, and teacher wellbeing. Gus et al. (2017) found that the introduction of EC as a whole-school approach improved pupil-teacher relationships and created a safe environment of communication and trust. This resulted in improvements in children's emotional regulation, emotional literacy, and academic progress, and decreased the use of physical restraint to control behaviour. For staff, EC improved their confidence in supporting pupil's needs by developing their empathy, unity, self-efficacy, and knowledge of support strategies. These findings demonstrate that EC can be effectively used within special schools. However, the interviews were only conducted with the headteacher. This may have resulted in positively biased results and limited the in-depth exploration of the views of the whole school community. This may have contributed to an incomplete understanding of EC use within this context, as other staff members may use EC more often.

Additionally, the case study design also limited the understanding of EC use to special schools that support CYP with SEMH needs. Also, potential contextual differences in EC application resulting from the special school context were not discussed. Therefore, the importance of context when evaluating EC may have been overlooked (Gus et al., 2017). Further research is required to understand contextualised EC use in other specialist settings (Gus et al., 2017). For example, special schools that support CYP with LD, as there may be differences in its impact,

adaptation, and sustainability that can be used to guide effective support for CYP with LD and SEND. Whilst some papers include special schools that support CYP with LD in their samples, e.g., Doonan, Stephens & Hall (2021), EC use within this context has not yet been explicitly and deeply investigated.

Conclusion

CYPs' emotional wellbeing is increasingly being prioritised within educational research, policy, and practice (McLaughlin, 2008). Research has demonstrated the need for relational and whole-school approaches (Clarke et al., 2021). However, schools appear to have difficulty adopting these (Svane et al., 2019), and limited research has investigated how they are used and adapted in a range of settings. Supporting the emotional wellbeing/behaviour of CYP with LD and SEND is important due to their increased risk of developing mental health and behavioural difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2019). However, limited research has addressed how the emotional and behavioural needs of CYP with severe/complex LD can be supported (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020) and how whole-school relational approaches are used within special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021).

EC is a relational, whole-school approach that supports CYP's emotional wellbeing and behaviour (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). However, most literature has focused on mainstream settings (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015), and there has been limited exploration of differences in EC use to support CYP with LD and SEND. Implementation research findings revealed that EC is reported to be less effective for some children due to their "individual characteristics", such as SEND (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). This requires further investigation and

suggests the need for further guidance on EC use/adaptation to meet CYP's needs. Preliminary findings suggest that EC could be an effective strategy to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with SEND (Wilson et al., 2013; Gus et al., 2017). However, very little research has investigated the effectiveness and use of EC in special schools, and research methodology has often been limited to case studies, e.g., in one SEMH special school (Gus et al., 2017). Therefore, further research is required to understand how EC is used and its impact in a wider range of special schools (Gus et al., 2017) to inform effective guidance, support, and EC outcomes within these settings.

Chapter Two: Empirical Paper

Abstract

Previous research highlights the benefits of school-based Emotion Coaching (EC) to support children and young peoples' (CYP) emotional wellbeing, emotional regulation, and behaviour in mainstream schools and SEMH special schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Gus et al., 2017). CYP with learning difficulties (LD) are at an increased risk of developing mental health and behavioural difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Rainer, Le, & Abdinasir, 2019). However, the use of EC to support these CYP has not yet been explicitly and deeply investigated. Therefore, this research explores school staff views on the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD to address this. This research adopted a critical realist perspective within a qualitative research paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were completed in-person and online with nine staff members who use EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Findings revealed that EC becomes embedded in whole-school life and aligns well with the ethos and practice of special schools. EC is felt to benefit pupils' emotional wellbeing and behaviour and supports school staff to develop more emotionally responsive practice in these settings. Staff viewed that EC is routinely adapted to meet the needs of CYP with LD and that its use is impacted by capacity restrictions imposed by a complex interaction of ecosystemic factors. These findings provide insight into how EC is experienced, used, and adapted in these settings to inform advice and support. This has implications for educational psychology practice and future research.

Introduction

Increasing concerns about the emotional wellbeing of CYP has led to the prioritisation of early intervention and acknowledgement of the role of schools in offering systemic and relational support (Clarke et al., 2021; Billington et al., 2022). In 2023, 20.3% of CYP aged 8-16 had a “probable mental health disorder”, and child happiness has decreased over the last ten years (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023; The Children’s Society, 2023). Alongside these growing concerns, CYP with LD are more likely to experience mental health difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007), and CYP with SEND are more likely to be excluded from school due to “challenging behaviour”. Behaviourist behaviour management approaches and “physical interventions” in schools are also disproportionately used for CYP with SEND (Parker & Levinson, 2018; Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023; DfE, 2025a). This highlights the need for greater understanding and guidance on how to support CYP’s emotional wellbeing and behaviour in schools, especially those that specialise in supporting CYP with LD and SEND.

Despite complexities within research and its definition, emotional wellbeing can be defined as “an overall positive emotional state, self-esteem, and resilience that leads to self-actualization, self-efficacy, and health-promoting behaviours” (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020, p.108). Emotional wellbeing is closely associated with social and emotional competencies, emotional regulation, and behaviour (Somerville et al., 2024b; Eriksen & Bru, 2023). Emotional wellbeing can have a lifelong impact on CYP’s outcomes, e.g., anxiety and depression experienced in adulthood, employment outcomes, and academic success (Clarke & Lovewell, 2021). Research has highlighted that the development of emotional wellbeing and

regulation abilities are shaped by experiences of attuned and emotionally responsive interactions and can be supported by educational professionals (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020; Somerville et al., 2024b). This suggests that relational approaches are foundational to emotional wellbeing support in schools.

CYP are described as having SEND “if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her” (DfE & DfH, 2015, p.15). Learning difficulties is a broad term characterised by students “working at a slower pace and requiring differentiation” (DfE & DfH, 2015, p.97). Within the SENDCoP (2015), the LD definition captures a wide range of needs, such as moderate (MLD), severe (SLD), profound and multiple (PMLD) and specific (SpLD) learning difficulties and associated needs, e.g., communication, mobility and sensory processing needs (DfE & DfH, 2015, p.97-98). These children are educated within mainstream and special school settings (Mencap, 2024). However, children with more complex and severe learning difficulties are often educated in special schools (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020).

Despite CYP with LD being at an increased risk of developing mental health difficulties and being excluded from school due to “challenging behaviour” (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019; National Statistics, 2024a), there has been limited research and policy that addresses how to support their emotional wellbeing (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Research suggests that CYP with LD are at an increased risk of developing emotional wellbeing and behaviour difficulties due to an interaction between individual, social-interactive, environmental, and systemic factors (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019). For example, differences in communication and cognitive processing can impact their emotional recognition,

emotional communication, and relationship development (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Additionally, systemic misunderstandings of behaviour and an increased risk of systemic mental health risk factors can further contribute to emotional wellbeing difficulties for this population (Durand & Moskowitz, 2015; Emerson & Hatton, 2007). Therefore, further research investigating how their emotional wellbeing can be supported is required.

The importance of schools in supporting the emotional wellbeing and behaviour of CYP is increasingly being realised in educational research, policy, and practice (DfE, 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2018a; Clarke et al., 2021). Several systematic reviews have investigated the effectiveness of targeted and curricular school-based emotional wellbeing interventions (Svane, Evans & Carter, 2019; Mackenzie & Williams, 2018; Cheney et al., 2014). These reviews yielded mixed findings, which suggests that the effectiveness of these approaches is impacted by how they are used. For example, support is more successful when embedded within whole-school wellbeing cultures (MacKenzie & Williams, 2018). Overall, research suggests that emotional wellbeing and behaviour in schools should be supported through a 'whole-school approach' that embeds universal and targeted interventions within a positive, relational school environment (Clarke et al., 2021).

Relational whole-school approaches are characterised by creating a culture of emotionally attuned, individualised wellbeing support, e.g., through the development of staff-pupil relationships and promoting a wellbeing ethos across the school (Gus et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2024). This supports pupil's emotional wellbeing and regulation (Jones et al.,2024; Somerville et al., 2024b; Billington et al., 2022). However, schools often have difficulty embedding whole-school wellbeing

approaches (Svane et al., 2019). Additionally, there is limited research on the use of these approaches in special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021). Overall, research suggests that wellbeing approaches are used and adapted within special schools for CYP with LD to meet pupils' needs and have unique barriers and facilitators to their use (Attwood, 2021). However, this requires further investigation to guide appropriate support.

Emotion Coaching is a relational, whole-school approach that supports pupils' emotional wellbeing, regulation, and behaviour through the application of four/five steps that facilitate emotionally attuned pupil-adult interactions (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015; Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). EC is based on the meta-emotional parenting philosophy, which suggests that adult responses to emotions that are high in empathy and guidance support CYP to understand and regulate their emotions (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997). These EC principles are informed by Attachment Theory and Polyvagal Theory (Bowlby, 1988; Porges, 2011) and suggest that emotional regulation is achieved through the development of secure attachments and mechanisms to return bodily functions to a resting state following emotional stress and arousal (Chen, Lin & Li, 2012; Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996). EC is now applied in a range of education settings, e.g., schools and youth mentoring programmes, to support CYP's emotional and behavioural outcomes (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Weiler et al., 2025).

EC has been found to be an effective whole-school, relational strategy that supports pupils' emotional regulation, emotional competence, and behaviour in mainstream schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). Research has investigated the impact and implementation of EC in mainstream primary schools

and found that EC use is supported by high-quality training, consistent use, and Senior Leadership prioritisation (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022; Gilbert, 2024). Barriers to EC use included pressures to balance learning initiatives and some children being perceived as “less receptive to the approach” due to “specific needs, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)”, which impacts EC’s effectiveness (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022, p.402).

Conversely, a small amount of research has highlighted that EC can be helpful in supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP with SEND, such as autism and ADHD (Wilson et al., 2013; Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2016). Gus et al. (2017) directly investigated EC use within a special school that supports children with SEMH needs. Gus et al. (2017) found that EC had a positive impact on improving children’s emotional regulation, staff-pupil relationships, and staff confidence, and EC reduced the use of physical restraint. However, this study did not deeply explore the influence of the special school context on EC use. Additionally, the single case-study design may have limited the transferability of knowledge to other special school settings, such as those that support LD due to contextual and population differences (Drisko, 2025). Within this study, school staff completed questionnaires; however, semi-structured interviews were only completed with the headteacher. This may have limited the in-depth understanding of the contextual day-to-day use and impact of EC from the perspectives of the whole school team (Cavanagh et al., 2024). These findings highlight the potential benefits of EC use in special schools. However, further investigation is required to understand its use and impact in other special school settings (Gus et al., 2017).

Rationale and Research Aims

This research seeks to address gaps within EP literature and add to the school-wellbeing support evidence base (Mayer, 2008). CYP with LD are at a greater risk of developing mental health and behavioural difficulties and disproportionately experience the use of behaviourist school-based behaviour management approaches (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; DfE, 2025a; Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2019). If unsupported, these difficulties can lead to poorer lifelong wellbeing and education outcomes (EEF, 2024; The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2019). However, limited research has addressed how the emotional and behavioural needs of CYP with severe/complex LD can be supported (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020).

Research suggests that pupil wellbeing, regulation, and behaviour can be supported through relational, whole-school approaches, such as EC, within mainstream schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Jones et al., 2024). However, little research has explored the impact and how whole-school, relational approaches are used within special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021). This is perceived to be a barrier to school-based mental health support in special schools for LD (Attwood, 2021). Therefore, this research aims to address these gaps by investigating the use of a specific whole-school relational approach within special schools that support CYP with LD to advance knowledge and guide support.

EC has been found to be effective in supporting pupil's emotional regulation, emotional competence, and behaviour in mainstream schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015) and has the potential to support CYP with SEND (Gus et al., 2017; Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2016). Some EC studies include special schools

within their samples, e.g., Doonan, Stephens, and Hall (2020). However, EC use has only been directly and deeply investigated in an “inclusive setting” (where pupils with SEND, pupils who are “at risk”, and typically developing pupils are educated together) and an SEMH special school (Kloes, 2015; Gus et al., 2017). This limits the understanding of potential contextual differences in the use of EC within different special schools. This could have implications for the practical support/advice offered to these settings, the impact of EC, and the ways it is or needs to be adapted. Additionally, the use of EC to support CYP with LD has not yet been explicitly explored. Subsequently, this has limited evidence-based guidance in this context.

Overall, this research aims to explore how EC is viewed, used, and adapted in special schools that support CYP with LD. Through exploring this topic, the research aims to address gaps within the evidence base to guide contextually appropriate support, e.g., from EPs, to improve the wellbeing and behaviour outcomes of CYP with LD.

Research Question

The researcher reflected on key guiding principles for EPs to support the development of an appropriate research question for this study (Mayer, 2008). For example, they considered their personal interest in exploring this area due to their previous experiences in using EC in special schools, the relevance for improving educational wellbeing practice, and its potential contribution to the EC evidence base. Subsequently, the following research question was developed in line with a critical realist philosophy to address the research aims.

Research Question: What are school staff views on the use of Emotion Coaching in special schools that support children and young people with learning difficulties?

Methodology

To ensure quality, the researcher chose a research methodology that appropriately and feasibly addressed the research question and research aims in line with their chosen research paradigm (Mayer, 2008; Brown & Dueñas, 2020). The following section details the philosophical positioning, research design, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations employed within this research.

Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

Ontology and epistemology are related philosophical metatheories that underpin research practice, e.g., methodological choices (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They promote reflection about the concepts and reasoning behind the creation and use of knowledge within research to support conceptual clarity (Brunson et al., 2025).

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality (Prendeville & Kinsella, 2022), e.g., assumptions about “what exists” and what we think we can know through research (Danermark et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.166). Positioning lies on a continuum from realism (single objective reality) to naïve relativism (multiple socially constructed realities) (Willig, 2008). Epistemology describes the nature of knowledge and knowledge production, e.g., “how we think we can study reality” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.166). Epistemological positioning ranges from positivism to constructionism and broadly maps on to the ontological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). (Post)positivism argues that objective knowledge about a single true reality

can be studied through scientific methods (Burr, 2015). However, this position is criticised, as it reduces reality to what can be observed through language and experimentation (epistemic fallacy), does not consider underlying mechanisms, and does not acknowledge alternative interpretations or the need for reflection within research (Danermark et al., 2019; Bhaskar, Danermark & Price, 2017). Conversely, social constructionism suggests that knowledge is a social construction through language, interaction, and social practice (Brunson et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, there are multiple truths to be understood depending on the time, culture, and individual interaction (Gergen, 1999). However, this has been criticised for producing 'surface-level' explanations of data that don't reflect the complexity of social reality (Phillips, 2023).

This research adopted a 'Critical Realism' (CR) (Bhaskar, 1975) positioning in line with the research question and aims. CR is underpinned by three assumptions: Ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgemental rationalism (Pilgrim, 2019). CR holds the view that reality exists independently of how it is described/experienced and can be knowable. However, it acknowledges that our knowledge of reality is imperfect, as our experiences are mediated by language, culture, and context (Brunson et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This view permits that researchers can build useful knowledge of the world whilst recognising the fallibility of the knowledge produced about it (Brunson et al., 2025; Pilgrim, 2019; Stutchbury, 2022). Judgemental rationality poses that some theories have greater "explanatory power" than others, which allows researchers to choose appropriate methods and weigh up competing explanations (Isaksen, 2024; Patel & Pilgrim, 2018). CR has been criticised for having no simple associated methodological frameworks to guide data collection and analysis (Scott, 2010). However, this

flexibility supports researchers to be critically reflective about their methodological choices and the knowledge claims that are made (Brunson et al., 2025).

Adopting CR was deemed appropriate for this research, as it helps to bridge the gap between research and practice within social science and psychology contexts (Brunson et al., 2025). CR values exploring participants' subjective and contextually influenced experiences to generate knowledge about an objective reality and explanations for why a phenomenon occurs (Hauser, 2024; Willis, 2023). Therefore, CR can support the understanding of EC use in special schools and its influencing factors by exploring subjective staff views in line with the research aims.

Research Design

Participants

Staff who worked in special schools that support CYP with LD were recruited through purposive sampling on an "opt-in" basis in a deliberate and focused way (Punch, 2005). Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that the participants selected could provide appropriate and useful information to explore the research question to promote rigour within the research (Campbell et al., 2020).

Participants were recruited via a research poster (Appendix B) being shared via gatekeepers, e.g., headteachers and EC-specific organisations. The research poster outlined the aims of the study, participant involvement, and the researcher's contact details in line with research guidance (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018). The researcher also shared the poster in an online presentation to EC interest groups (Appendix B) and asked EPs to share the poster and for "soft intelligence" of EC use in schools. The poster was also shared on EP

forums, such as EPNET and on the researcher's personal social media accounts, e.g., Facebook. Potential participants expressed their interest in participating in the research by contacting the researcher or by completing a "Participant Interest Form" on Microsoft Forms attached to the poster (Appendix B). Subsequently, a Participant Information Sheet/Consent Form (Appendix C) that detailed the study aims, ethical procedures, e.g., consent, the right to withdraw, and data protection procedures, were shared with participants. Signed copies were returned to the researcher to express the participant's informed consent to participate in the research.

There is considerable variation in the conceptualisation, organisation, and admissions of special schools within the UK. For example, some special schools specialise in supporting one area of SEND identified in the SENDCoP (2015), e.g., cognition and learning (GOV.UK, 2024a). Whereas other special schools are conceptualised as "complex needs schools" to reflect the increasing complexity and overlap of CYP's needs within special schools (DfE, 2013a). Complex needs schools in one Local Authority (LA) are described as supporting CYP where significant LDs present as their main barrier to education and inclusion, but they also may have other SEND, such as communication or medical needs (Norfolk County Council, 2025). To aid the transparency, dependability, and transferability of the research findings (Cena et al., 2024), the inclusion criteria for participation in this research included staff that had been trained in EC and who work in special schools that support CYP with LD. Exclusion criteria included any special schools which did not support CYP with LD. For example, special schools that specifically support SEMH needs, as this has been investigated in previous research (Gus et al., 2017) and specific communication and interaction/schools for autism without LD. This broad

criteria aimed to capture staff views from settings that support CYP with LD alone or alongside other SEND.

Nine staff members across four special schools that support CYP with LD participated in this research. It was felt that this sample was sufficient to provide a rich account of participants' views and appropriately aligned with the exploratory nature of the study (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Special schools were located within three LAs across the UK, and school staff held a range of roles, such as senior leadership, teachers, and teaching assistants. This aligns with the intention to capture a range of staff views and is consistent with the whole-school philosophies of EC (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015). Participant and school demographics are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Professional Role	Gender	School
Behaviour Support Lead and EC Practitioner.	Female	1
Teacher and EC Lead.	Female	2
Teacher (Sixth Form).	Female	3
Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA).	Female	3
Teacher and Senior Mental Health Lead.	Female	3
Behaviour Support Lead and Designated Safeguarding Lead.	Female	1
Teacher and Behaviour Lead.	Male	3
Teacher (Sixth Form).	Female	3
Assistant Headteacher.	Female	4

Table 2

School Characteristics

School	Location	Type of SEND provision	EHCP requirement	Pupil Age-Range	Year of EC Training
1	Northeast England	SLD, MLD, PMLD, and Autism.	All pupils have an EHCP.	2 to 19	2018
2	Southwest England	SLD, MLD, PMLD, and Autism.	All pupils have an EHCP.	3 to 19	2017
3	North England	SLD, MLD, PMLD, SLCN, Autism, and Physical Disability.	All pupils have an EHCP.	2 to 19	2019
4	North England	MLD, SLD, SpLD, SLCN, Sensory Impairment, and Autism.	All pupils have an EHCP.	3 to 16	2018

Qualitative Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methodology is defined as using inductive research methods to explore meaning or to generate theory (Willig, 2013). This aims to provide an understanding of participant's experiences through the application of qualitative methods and acknowledges researcher subjectivity (Willig, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Qualitative methodology can be used to study individuals' perspectives to develop explanations for complex, multi-systemic social phenomena within a particular context to guide practice (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Therefore, qualitative methodology can enhance the contextual understanding of school-based interventions, laying the foundations for evidence-based practice (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Subsequently, this methodology was chosen, as it can appropriately address the research question and aims, e.g., through exploring staff perspectives on EC use in this context via qualitative data collection and analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect staff views on the use of EC within this research. Overall, nine interviews were completed. Interviews were chosen because they facilitate the collection of in-depth information to explain complex social phenomena that are grounded in participants' contextual experiences in line with CR and the research aims (Brönnimann, 2022). The researcher considered a range of methods for data collection, such as focus groups and narrative interviews, when designing this research. Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method for this research, as they facilitate a deep exploration of participants' views by enabling flexible questioning around the desired topic (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). This was preferred over narrative interviews that focus more on exploring participants' stories about their lived experiences (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). However, upon reflection, the use of focus groups could have elevated this research by supporting collaborative discussion to understand pertinent views surrounding EC use in this context and by providing opportunities for in-depth follow-up (Albanesi, 2023).

At the start of the interviews, participants were provided with an overview of the interview aims and procedure, e.g., their right to skip questions and they were

asked if they were happy to continue. Background information-gathering questions regarding their role, date of training, and school setting were then asked. Guiding interview questions (Appendix D) were developed in line with the research aims and were inspired by EC and Implementation Science literature to capture a holistic overview of EC use within special schools that support CYP with LD. These questions were flexibly used to guide discussions around key topic areas without constraining conversational flow. For example, questions were revised, and follow-up questions were asked in light of participant responses. This supported a focus on EC use within this context and a deeper exploration of important ideas (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview questions were designed to incorporate open, clear, and non-leading questions to support high-quality data collection (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Participants were invited to complete interviews online via Microsoft Teams or face-to-face within their workplace (special schools) with the headteacher's permission. Overall, three face-to-face interviews took place in quiet, private rooms to support participants' engagement and anonymity (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Face-to-face interviews are considered to be beneficial, as it is easier to interpret non-verbal communication cues and build rapport, which aids greater depth and detail within the interviews (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2022). However, online interviews were also used to improve convenience and accessibility. For example, staff could complete interviews before and after work, at a time that suited them, and participating schools could be geographically distant (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2022). It is acknowledged that online interviews can be problematic, e.g., if participants have limited access to technology and in ensuring privacy (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2022).

Subsequently, a hybrid and flexible interview approach was used to ensure research quality, equal access, and project feasibility. Upon reflection, the face-to-face interviews were shorter than the online interviews due to practical implications, e.g., working hours and scheduling interviews before the pupils arrived. It was felt that this restricted the depth of the discussions. Therefore, online interviews were encouraged after the third face-to-face interview. Interviews were recorded on an audio-recording device and the Microsoft Teams recording function to aid transcription (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

This research adopted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA is underpinned by the assumptions/values of the qualitative paradigm and sits within several varied approaches to thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). TA describes a group of methods that are used for “developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative data set, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.4). RTA is differentiated from other TA approaches, such as codebook TA, due to its focus on the value of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity within the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA offers practical guidelines within six phases to support reflexive analytical engagement to aid knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA involves data familiarisation, systematic coding, and the development of themes underpinned by a central concept via the researcher’s active engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This requires acknowledgement of how their values, experiences,

and training shape their interpretation and explanation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

Alternative analysis approaches were considered when designing this research, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA seeks to understand participants' interpretation of their lived experiences by analysing individual cases, e.g., how they felt and were impacted (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Whilst IPA could have appropriately explored staff experiences of EC use within a CR orientation, it was felt that RTA would provide explanations beyond describing personal experiences within wider sociocultural contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). This was deemed more useful for this research, as it would lead to clear implications for practice (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012) in line with the research aims.

RTA was chosen as it aligned with the philosophical assumptions, aims, and data collection methods to promote research coherence (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The flexibility of RTA meant that it was compatible with conducting semi-structured interviews and analysing interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA also offers theoretical flexibility. Therefore, it could be usefully applied within the experiential and CR underpinnings of this research (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA provided access to participants' subjective and contextually mediated perceptions of EC use within special schools. This was reflexively interpreted through the researcher's own social-cultural perspectives to produce a compelling and situated understanding of EC use in this context (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Data Analysis Phases

The six phases of RTA were used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher flexibly moved between phases, as RTA is a “recursive and iterative process” (Byrne, 2022, p.1398). A worked example of the application of RTA (Byrne, 2022) was referenced to guide decision-making and promote reflexivity.

Phase One: Familiarisation. Within phase one, the researcher became immersed in the data set and deeply familiar with its content (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Audio data was manually transcribed orthographically/verbatim using the guidance outlined in Clarke & Braun (2013). All spoken words and other verbal utterances/non-speech sounds, such as “erm”, were transcribed to facilitate a high-quality representation of the interviews to support the analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Transcripts were read multiple times to support immersion (Byrne, 2022) and familiarisation notes regarding individual interviews and the whole data set were made (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (Appendix F). Guiding questions, such as “How does the participant make sense of the topic?” supported the researcher’s reflexive engagement and familiarity with the data to support the next phase of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.44).

Phase Two: Coding. The researcher coded data systematically throughout the entire dataset. This involved labelling all sections of text that had potential meaning in relevance to the research question with code labels (brief descriptions of meaning) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher used the comments function on Microsoft Word, allowing codes to be expressed in the side margin and joined to highlighted corresponding extracts of text (Appendix G). Some extracts were tagged with multiple code labels to reflect different meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This

process supported the development of many different codes that captured diverse, singular meanings across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A single-coder approach was adopted in line with good RTA practice, as it was felt that approaches to achieve reliability, e.g., inter-rater coding, did not align with the CR orientation or the subjective values that underpin RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

The researcher adopted a primarily inductive (data-driven) approach to coding and generating meaning whilst acknowledging the influence of their contextual and theoretical perspectives in shaping their analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher produced codes based on the content of the data rather than from a pre-specified theory or conceptual framework (Byrne, 2022). This orientation aligned with the research aim of exploring the views articulated by the participants to understand the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data was coded on semantic and latent levels. For example, surface-level interpretations that described what participants explicitly said, e.g., “EC has reduced behaviour incidents”, were coded alongside hidden meanings and underlying assumptions interpreted by the researcher to produce detailed and meaningful codes in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Coding evolved throughout the process as the researcher became more familiar and considered alternative interpretations of meaning (Byrne, 2022). The researcher reflected that their coding initially may have been too “fine-grained”, resulting in fragmentation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, in a second iteration of coding, codes that captured the same meaning were combined to achieve repetition and clarity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The evolution of coding iterations was tracked

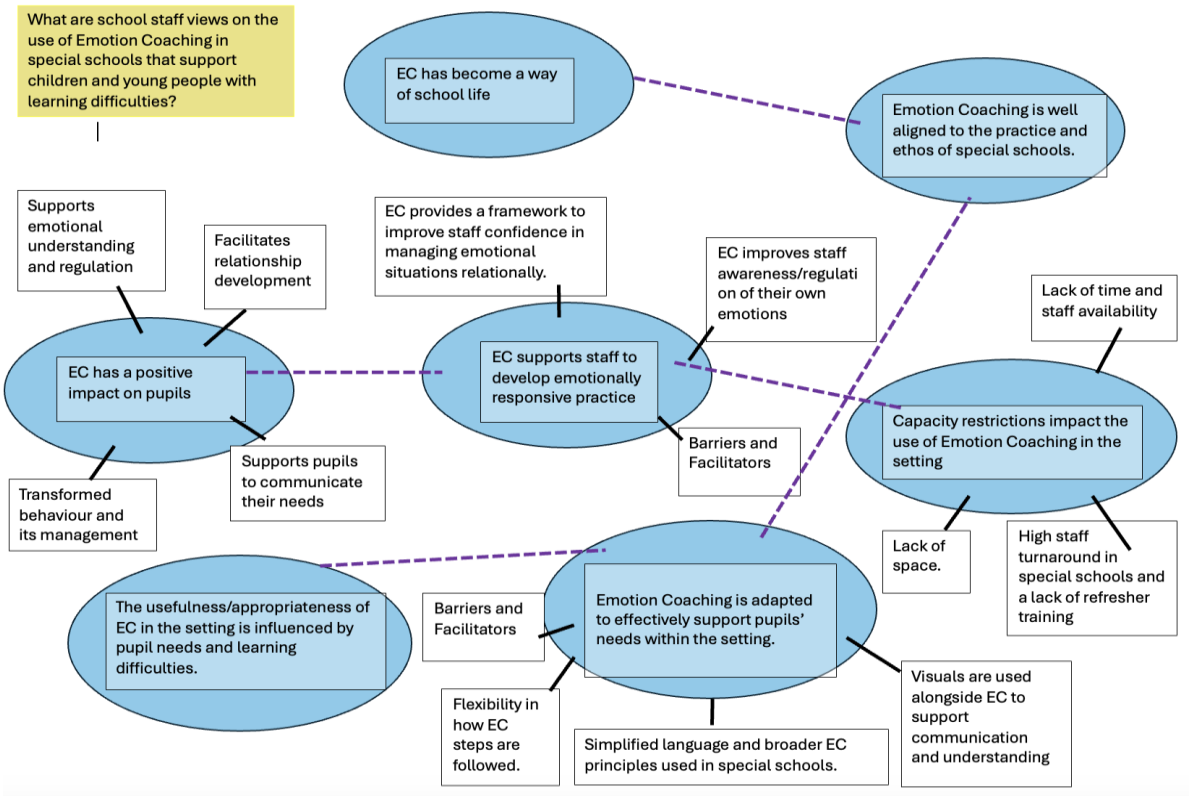
using Microsoft Excel (Appendix G) to aid transparency and to provide a framework for further coding development (Byrne, 2022). Updates to codes were transferred to the original transcript. Overall, three iterations of coding were completed to produce 102 distinct and repeated codes that inferred meaning from the researcher's critical engagement with participant views. The researcher reflected that their previous professional experiences of using EC within a special school influenced their interpretation. For example, they had in-depth contextual knowledge, such as shared experiences of frustration when EC is more difficult during "emotional crisis". This resulted in more reflexive codes and influenced code naming, e.g., the use of contextual language, such as "crisis", to describe student emotional regulation and behaviour.

Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes. Themes were developed by "organising a pattern of shared meaning around a central concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Initially, the researcher printed off the codes from the whole data set and clustered them into piles of shared meaning that expressed something relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (Appendix H). The shift away from digital media at this point supported the researcher to navigate more easily across the whole data set, allowing them to develop themes that had not been considered in the familiarisation and coding phases. This resulted in the development of eight potential themes, such as "Impact on Pupils" and "Barriers and Facilitators" (Appendix H). Each had a number of associated subthemes. It was felt that the "Barriers and Facilitators" grouping reflected more of a "topic summary" than a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, these codes were distributed across other relevant themes, and some were combined into their own theme. Codes within the "Miscellaneous" theme were tentatively isolated, as they did not appear to fit with the

overall pattern of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Following this refinement, seven provisional themes that were meaningful, had boundaries, and overall could tell a story about the data in relation to the research question were represented in a “thematic map” (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (Figure 1). This illustrated the association between potential themes and their relevant subthemes.

Figure 1

Thematic Map to Illustrate the Development of the Initial Themes.



Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes. During phase four, the researcher returned to the original data set to reflect on how the proposed themes "worked" with the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To support this, they developed a table on Microsoft Word where codes were grouped into the candidate themes and matched with extracts from the data that were considered most meaningful to the participants, the theme, and the research question (Appendix H). This ensured that the themes were coherent and meaningful, and had sufficient evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Subsequently, themes such as "EC is well aligned to the practice and ethos of special schools" were combined with "EC has become embedded in whole-school life", as there was considerable overlap and a lack of distinction between the central organising concepts. Similarly, the "adaptations" and

“pupil needs” themes were tentatively combined. The researcher reflected that the emphasis on promoting systemic support rather than focusing on child-deficit narratives within their doctoral training experiences contributed to this decision. This aligned with the research aims to provide useful implications for practice. The researcher then reflected on the themes in relation to the whole data set by re-reading transcripts to ensure that the themes captured the relevant aspects of the data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Following research supervision, the researcher decided to reduce the number of subthemes by assimilating information into overall themes to avoid producing a “fragmented” analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase Five: Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes. Within this phase, the structure of the analysis was mapped to guide the flow of the analysis write-up (Appendix I; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Definitions of each theme that encapsulated the central concepts and potential implications for the research question were developed and revised over time (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (Appendix I). Some theme names were also re-named to be more explanatory to support the reader’s understanding (Byrne, 2022).

Phase Six: Writing the Report. The analysis continued to evolve throughout the write-up process. This aimed to produce a convincing narrative that supported the analytic claims (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Findings were organised into the themes and reported alongside illustrative quotes that provided representation across all participants. The order of themes was chosen to build a coherent narrative of the data (Byrne, 2022). For example, “EC is embedded in whole-school life” was presented first, as this laid contextual foundations for the following themes. The

results and discussion were written together to aid contextualised data analysis in relation to theory and practice (Clarke & Braun 2013; Willig & Rogers., 2017).

Ensuring Quality

Qualitative research prioritises ensuring trustworthiness and rigour to create credible research findings, given its subjective and contextually-dependant nature (Ahmed, 2024). This research adhered to core principles of ensuring trustworthiness and quality within qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), alongside principles of reflexivity and methodological-specific quality criteria for RTA, e.g., Braun & Clarke (2021b). This guided decision-making and ensured rigour within the qualitative analysis (Cena et al., 2024). The measures taken within this research to ensure research quality are discussed below and outlined in Table Three.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of their subjective influence in shaping the research and construction of knowledge and is a "key analytic tool" within RTA (Cena et al., 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The researcher reflected on their philosophical perspectives, experiences, assumptions, and sociocultural influences, and considered how this influenced their research decisions and interpretations (Cena et al., 2024). This process was documented within a continuous reflexive diary log.

The researcher reflected on their position as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) who has had previous experiences working and using EC in a UK special school. This experience shaped their interest in conducting this research to support professional practice and CYP outcomes. It also influenced their development of interview questions, e.g., holding assumptions on what questions may be useful, interesting, and contextually relevant to guide support (Holmes,

2020). Therefore, the researcher's professional experiences positioned them as both inside and outside of the participant group and culture (researchers can hold multiple positions on a continuum) (Holmes, 2020). This allowed them to empathise and interpret responses with enhanced contextual understanding, which influenced their coding and theme development. However, being a Trainee EP offered a more removed perspective and influenced their development of themes and the application of psychological theory.

The researcher also reflected on the influence of their CR philosophical positioning when making decisions (Holmes, 2020). CR influenced the researcher's understanding of what participant views represented and what knowledge claims could be made (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). CR also influenced methodological and data analysis decisions. For example, the alignment between semi-structured interviews, RTA, and CR (Wells & Giacco, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Awareness of these philosophical assumptions aimed to support methodological coherence throughout the study (Cena et al., 2024) to aid transparency and trustworthiness (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Table 3

Measures to Ensure Quality Based on Evaluative Criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Evaluative Criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)	**Measures Taken by the Researcher to Address this Criteria and their Justification.**
Credibility: The extent to which the findings accurately reflect	• Direct quotes from across the participant data were used to demonstrate how the analysis was produced (Levitt et al., 2017).

the participant's experiences (Ahmed, 2024).	• Triangulation of multiple staff perspectives. • Reflexive and deeply interpretive use of RTA minimised the need for triangulated data sources and methods and avoided a "methodological mash-up" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).
Transferability: The potential for the findings to be applied in other contexts (Treharne & Riggs, 2015).	• An in-depth explanation of the research context, participants, and procedures was provided. This enabled readers to evaluate how applicable the findings are to other settings to impact practice (Ahmed, 2024; Cena et al., 2024).
Dependability: The extent to which findings could be reproduced (Ahmed, 2024).	• Detailed documentation about participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures were provided to aid transparency (Cena et al., 2024). • An audit trail that documented the researcher's decisions, analytic processes, and reflexivity (Ahmed, 2024) was included within the appendices, such as coding iterations. This aimed to demonstrate the systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Confirmability: The promotion of objective findings and minimising the influence of researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024). N.B. Researcher subjectivity is a key analytic tool within RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Therefore, notions of "controlling for researcher bias", e.g., inter-rater coding, do not sit well with RTA within the interpretive, qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, measures were taken to illustrate the researcher's reflexive engagement.	• The findings and methodology were reported transparently, and the researcher used reflexive journalling (Treharne & Riggs, 2015; Cena et al., 2024) to illustrate that the results are based on the information gathered rather than from researcher bias (Johnson, Adkins, Chauvin 2020). • The researcher sought supervision from an experienced mentor to explore the influence of their assumptions, clarify their thinking, and consider alternative interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Ahmed, 2024).

Ethical Considerations

This research was granted ethical approval from the UEA School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee on 09/04/2024 (Appendix A). The research was conducted in accordance with "Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research" (BERA, 2018), the British Psychological Society "Code of Human Research Ethics" (BPS, 2021), and the "Standards of Conduct, Performance, and Ethics" (HCPC, 2024). Adherence to ethical procedures was continuously monitored through reflexive supervision with a Research Supervisor and Research Methods

Advisor. Amendments to the original recruitment procedures, e.g., presenting the research poster at EC interest groups, were discussed with and approved by the UEA Ethics Subcommittee.

Participants were sent a “Participant Information Sheet/Consent Form” via email once they had expressed an interest in participating. This detailed the aims and research procedures, data handling procedures, and contact details for the researcher and their supervisor. This further explained participants’ right to withdraw in line with BPS (2021) guidelines. The consent form also explained that participants had no obligation to participate, and that non-participation would not impact their relationship with the researcher or their access to services. This facilitated the maintenance of appropriate professional boundaries due to the dual TEP and researcher role (HCPC, 2024). Informed consent was gained and recorded via participants signing and returning the completed consent form to the researcher (HCPC, 2024; BPS, 2021).

Overall, this research sought to maximise potential benefits for participants and groups affected by the research, e.g., CYP with LD and minimise harm (BPS, 2021). Due to the potentially distressing nature of discussing supporting CYP’s emotional regulation and wellbeing, participant’s responses were closely monitored throughout the interviews. Emotional support from the researcher was available throughout the interviews, alongside empathetic, active listening, and knowledge of UEA and general safeguarding procedures (DfE, 2024d). Safeguarding procedures would be followed if any concerns were disclosed. However, this did not occur within this research. Additionally, participants were provided with a “Debrief Sheet” (Appendix E) that included contact details for the Researcher, Research Supervisor

and Research Ethics Subcommittee in line with BERA (2018) guidelines. The debrief sheet also signposted participants to supporting organisations, e.g., the Red Cross, to manage any potential risks to participants' wellbeing.

Data collected for this research was handled and stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act (2018). Participants were informed of data collection and storage procedures. All personal data that could make participants identifiable, e.g., names and schools, were anonymised in line with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) Anonymisation Code of Practice (2021). Additionally, data was stored securely in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer and University Microsoft One Drive file to maintain participants' privacy, confidentiality, and safety. Principles of social responsibility, privacy, dignity, integrity, and minimising harm were upheld throughout this research to ensure ethical research practice (BPS, 2021).

Analysis and Discussion

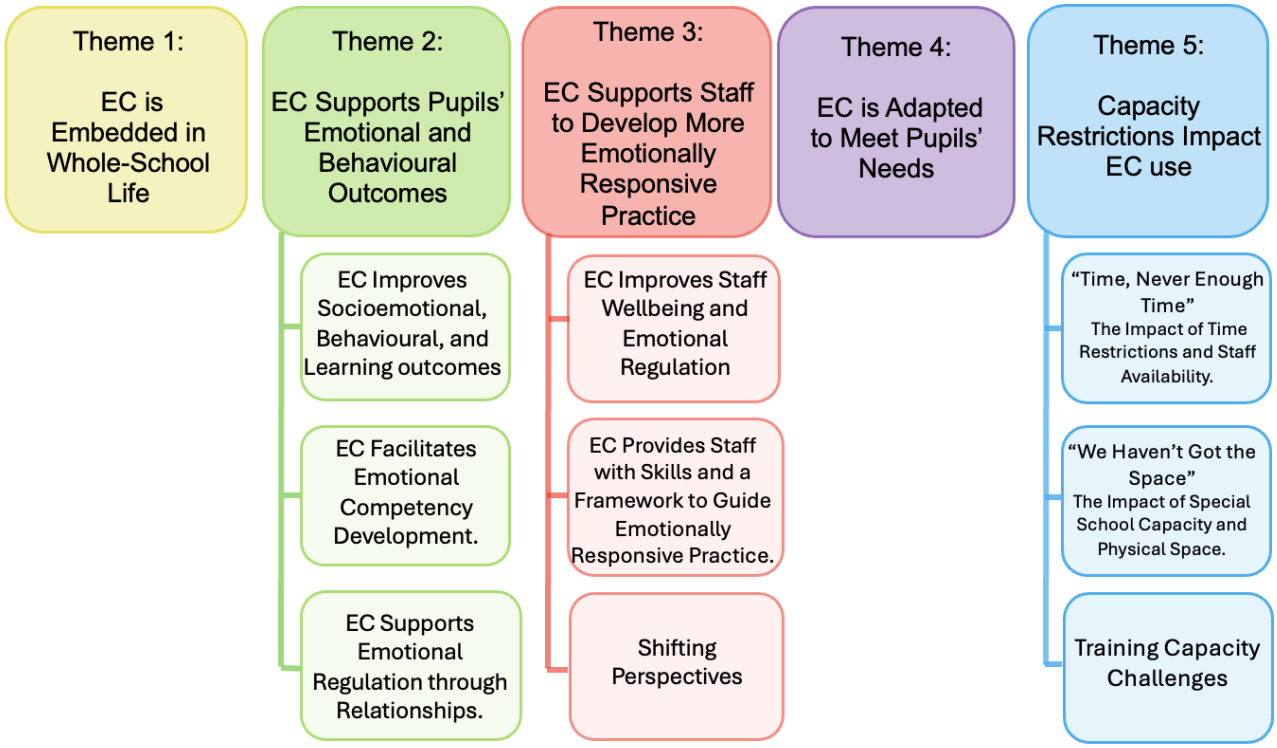
Within this section, the research analysis, which explored school staff views on the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD, will be presented and discussed in relation to psychological theory and literature. Following the RTA of participant semi-structured interview transcripts, the following themes were developed:

1. EC is Embedded in Whole-School Life.
2. EC Supports Pupils' Emotional and Behavioural Outcomes.
3. EC Supports Staff to Develop More Emotionally Responsive Practice.
4. EC is Adapted to Meet Pupils' Needs.
5. Capacity Restrictions Impact EC Use.

Figure 2 presents a thematic map to illustrate the distinct themes and associated subthemes developed from the analysis. Whilst presented separately, the relationships and interconnectedness between the themes of participant views are acknowledged. These themes will be defined and discussed within this section.

Figure 2

Research Themes and Subthemes



Theme One: Emotion Coaching is Embedded in Whole School Life.

Definition: EC becomes embedded within whole-school daily practice in special schools that support CYP with LD. Staff consistently use EC to guide their interactions, language use, school behaviour policies, and strategic goals. This is supported by the prioritisation of EC use by Senior Leadership Teams (SLT), whole-school training, and the alignment between EC values and the special school ethos.

Therefore, following training and with appropriate support, EC becomes a way of life in these settings.

Staff viewed EC as being embedded across multiple aspects of school life and as being integrated within their daily practice in special schools. For example, they explained that EC is used consistently throughout the day and comes naturally to support pupils' wellbeing and behaviour. Staff felt that consistent EC use, its compatibility with existing school wellbeing approaches, and the shared language facilitated by EC scripts supported EC to become embedded within whole-school practice.

> ***Participant 6****: "It [Emotion Coaching] was really, really good, and I think now it's just kind of so embedded that people use it without even realising they're using it."*
>
> ***Participant 1:*** *"So, it [Emotion Coaching] is used across the board cause our children, they're very much peaks and troughs all day. So, it is used consistently throughout the day."*
>
> ***Participant 8:*** *"Emotion Coaching has really been… a really useful tool for us to have in school, erm to keep it consistent as well. So that you know across the team, as we're moving up through the school, we are using the same language, erm, that will that helps embed it."*

These views suggest that following training, EC has become a fundamental, normalised, and ingrained aspect of daily wellbeing practice within special schools that support CYP with LD. Developing and normalising a culture of connectedness, acceptance, and responsiveness to need has been found to support pupils'

wellbeing (Weare, 2015). Research also suggests that EC must be “normalised to be sustained” (Gilbert, 2024). Therefore, it can be inferred that special school staff view EC as a key approach to supporting the wellbeing of CYP with LD that has become embedded within daily school life. This is likely to support the effectiveness and sustainability of the approach. Staff expressed that EC’s compatibility with existing wellbeing approaches, and its ability to support the development of a shared emotional language facilitated the effectiveness and sustained use of EC in these settings. This is supported by previous research that found that EC is complementary to other wellbeing approaches, e.g., Zones of Regulation and restorative conversations (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). EC has also been found to provide a shared language to support aligned communication and supports the development of trusting relationships in mainstream and SEMH special schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Gus et al., 2017). Therefore, these findings suggest that EC can become embedded in special schools that support CYP with LD to create a wellbeing-supportive ethos through similar mechanisms to those found in wider education contexts.

Staff felt that EC was consistently used within their daily interactions with all pupils and had become a natural and generalised way of speaking about emotions alongside a strategy to support emotional regulation.

> ***Participant 2:*** *“There are some people, I would say, who have really, really taken it [Emotion Coaching] on board, and it’s in… you know, it runs through like a golden thread through all of their interactions.”*

> ***Participant 9:*** *“Staff appeared unaware just how much they were using it [Emotion Coaching]. Erm, they thought that it was going to be very rigid, that*

they had to follow all five steps until they realised that actually, they were just using it in their day-to-day conversations."

These views suggest that staff value the flexibility and utility of EC in guiding their interactions with pupils and colleagues beyond a structured conversation or time-limited intervention. There was a sense that staff felt pleasantly surprised by this and that EC was becoming embedded throughout all of their interactions.

This view is supported by previous research that suggests that EC is a "way of being and becoming" and a way of thinking about emotions that guides general interactions and practice in addition to being a specific technique to support pupil's emotional dysregulation and learning (Gus et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2018). This was confirmed by teacher perceptions in mainstream secondary schools that EC is a "naturally occurring response" (Smith, 2023, p.95). Research has suggested that EC use shifts from being a specific behaviour management technique towards being a "natural and preferred communication approach" as EC use becomes more sustained and embedded in school practice (Gilbert, 2024, p.13). This suggests that EC has been embraced by staff in special schools that support CYP with LD and has become embedded in daily practice and interactions. This highlights the effectiveness and sustainability of EC within these settings, as interventions to boost social-emotional skills/competency have a greater long-term impact when integrated into all interactions with children (Weare & Nind, 2014).

School staff expressed that EC is used by the majority of school staff to support the emotional wellbeing of the whole school community (including pupils, parents, and colleagues).

Participant 7: *"I suppose it's just that it [Emotion Coaching] is a school-wide thing that's bought into by everyone. It's not just what one person likes… it's just delivered across the board to everyone."*

Participant 6: *"So, I do think it's, it's a really good way in helping the young students who are, um, in our setting kind of to understand their emotions, but I think it just totally works with anyone like I've seen kind of… I've seen it been done with parents. I've seen it been done, you know, with other members of staff. Like in a roundabout way, and it does work just for everybody."*

Staff also viewed EC use as fundamental in revolutionising school behaviour and wellbeing policies and described that it has been used to drive staff strategic goals to support whole-school wellbeing.

Participant 1: *"We've just re-done our "Behaviour Policy" as the "Readiness to Learn Policy". So, Emotion Coaching, Zones or Regulation, and Sensory Regulation everything, feature highly in that."*

Participant 9: *"Last year, we did make it one of our appraisal targets for staff to show how they were using Emotion Coaching … So, um, it has been, you know… it's written into our schools' strategic goals under wellbeing to improve the wellbeing of school."*

These findings suggest that EC can and has become successfully embedded as a whole-school approach in special schools that support CYP with LD. Whole-school approaches are defined as systemic approaches to supporting wellbeing that involve all members of the school community and influence positive changes across the school system, e.g., through interactions between pupils, teachers, and parents,

the involvement of external services, leadership, and policy development (Quinlan & Hone, 2020). The extent to which EC has become embedded across multiple layers of whole-school practice within these settings aligns with current government initiatives. These initiatives call for schools to commit to addressing whole-school wellbeing within school policy, e.g., safeguarding, behaviour, and improvement plans, to ensure that wellbeing-promoting actions are integrated and sustained in practice (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (OfHID) & DfE, 2023; DfE, 2021).

These findings address gaps within the literature by exploring the use of whole-school relational approaches in special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). The impact of EC use as a whole-school approach on the wellbeing of pupils with LD and the wider school community can be understood through Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, legislative whole-school initiatives at the macrosystem level, e.g., DfE (2021), likely influenced EC training decisions and the development of relational school policies at the exosystem level. In turn, staff felt that EC facilitated improved connections between school and home at the mesosystem level and improved pupil-teacher relationships at the microsystem level. Therefore, pupil's interactions within these systems will likely support their wellbeing, school attendance, and academic outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Goldberg, 2019). Therefore, EC appears to be a promising whole-school approach that can become embedded and sustained in the daily life of special schools that support CYP with LD. This will support positive wellbeing outcomes, add to existing knowledge, and provide positive implications for developing national and school policy and practice within these settings.

Many settings have difficulty embedding whole-school wellbeing approaches (Brown et al., 2025). Staff within the current research described a range of factors that impacted the use of EC within the whole-school life of special schools. This addresses gaps within research that can be used to guide EC implementation support for special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021; Hirschkorn & Geelan, 2008).

The staff viewed that whole-school training and the perceived benefits and applicability of EC for everyone within these settings supported staff commitment and consistent EC use.

> ***Participant 9:*** *"It's very much a whole school approach. Erm, like I say, we've had training for all of our staff, including our Midday Supervisors have had the training as well… It's written into our relational behaviour policy... So yeah, it's definitely part of whole school life."*

It can be inferred that staff viewed that the increased commitment and consistency of EC use facilitated by whole-school training and implementation, supported ECs effectiveness and integration into daily school life. This is supported by previous research that found that whole-school EC training sustained EC practice by fostering whole-school commitment (Gilbert, 2024). Previous research suggests that as many school stakeholders, e.g., staff, SLT, pupils, and parents as possible, should be involved throughout the implementation of whole-school approaches to support "buy-in" and their effectiveness (Cavanagh et al., 2024). Staff expressed that the whole staff team developed a commitment to EC use through whole-school training. This suggests that whole-school EC training should be encouraged and provided to these settings. However, how parents and pupils were included or

informed was not discussed. This could be addressed in future research and training to enhance the effectiveness and adoption of EC into whole-school practice within these settings.

Staff consistently mentioned that the extent to which EC was embedded into whole-school life was influenced by the prioritisation and support of SLT and school management.

> ***Participant 2:*** *"The other Heads of Learning…, our Executive Headteacher, doesn't really understand it [Emotion Coaching], don't really know about it, aren't on board and therefore, I'm stopped in my tracks. The most important thing is for the Senior Leadership to get behind it and to prioritise it."*

> ***Participant 4:*** *"We don't have refresher training on it [Emotion Coaching], so I wouldn't say it's necessarily pushed too much from Leadership."*

These findings illustrate the significant influence that SLT support can have on supporting the use of EC within this context. Whilst some views were positive and expressed that SLT support has facilitated EC use, some staff felt unheard and unsupported in their endeavours to use EC and to train others. Therefore, it can be understood that staff viewed that these barriers prevented EC from being sustained across the whole school and resulted in EC training and initiatives being forgotten. These views are supported by previous research that found that school leadership support was fundamental to the successful implementation and sustainability of EC in mainstream settings (Gilbert, 2024; Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). This is advocated for in government guidance, which suggests that an "SLT that champions efforts to promote mental health and wellbeing is essential to ensure changes are accepted and embedded" (OfHID & DfE, 2023, p.11). Conversely, a lack of SLT

support results in training gaps and inconsistent EC practice (Gilbert, 2024). This highlights that SLT support impacts EC use and the extent to which it is embedded as a whole-school approach in mainstream and specialist settings that support CYP with LD. Therefore, SLT within these contexts should be aware of their influence and demonstrate commitment to supporting EC and be supported to do so to ensure its success and sustainability within these settings.

Staff also viewed that the compatibility between EC values and the ethos and practice of special schools that support CYP with LD supported its use within daily school life. For example, staff reflected on their experiences in mainstream and specialist education and expressed that they viewed special schools as being more proactive and explicit about supporting emotions and using EC than mainstream settings.

> ***Participant 8:*** *"I think, perhaps with it being a special school setting, I think we are, we do give more attention to emotions and Emotion Coaching than would be in a mainstream setting."*
>
> ***Participant 7:*** *"It [Emotion Coaching] leads into our values as well and our ethos of our school. Like we do our very best to erm to support these people with whatever needs they can. You know, we're very caring, very children-focused, we're very student-focused first, and anything that they need at that point is never too much, and I think that Emotion Coaching helps them to understand that "if they're feeling this way, then… maybe you can have a conversation with staff... it's all teaching."*
>
> ***Participant 8:*** *"We're very fortunate in our in our setting that… we have, you know, the value of, of being able to support emotions erm. We don't focus on*

that kind of behaviour side. I think there's a lot of lot of talk in the news about mainstream schools where, erm, you know, erm zero tolerance for behaviour, erm, and obviously behaviour links. Again, that's the behaviour, emotions, it's all linked together anyway. So… we know in this setting that being able to understand emotions and being able to have that opportunity to do it [Emotion Coaching] … we need to allow those young people to work through those moments rather than say, "That's it, you're out."

These findings suggest that staff perceive that the alignment between EC and the values and practice of special schools that support CYP with LD, e.g., in adopting a person-centred and holistic focus on supporting individual pupils' needs, facilitates EC to be embedded within special school life. This is supported by previous research that suggests that alignment between EC and the school ethos, such as child-centred approaches, was a key facilitator of EC implementation in mainstream schools (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). It can be argued that staff perceived special school values, e.g., in supporting inclusion, understanding behaviour as a communication of emotional needs, and adopting person-centred approaches as a particular strength of the setting that supported EC use in this context. This is supported by research that found that staff who work in special schools that support communication and interaction and SEMH needs viewed supporting wellbeing as a key priority (White et al., 2017). This suggests that EC can be successfully embedded in a variety of special school contexts. This will support effective EC use within these settings, as interventions that align with the school's mission are more easily integrated, prioritised, and sustained in school life (Domitrovich et al., 2016).

Theme One Summary

In summary, staff viewed that EC is embedded within whole-school life in special schools that support CYP with LD. This suggests that EC is an effective, evidence-based, relational approach that can be successfully adopted into whole-school practice to support CYP with LD. This addresses gaps in knowledge on how the wellbeing of CYP with LD can be supported through whole-school and relational approaches in special schools (Attwood, 2021; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). This has positive implications for guiding effective wellbeing practice in these settings.

Staff also identified factors that supported EC to become embedded in special schools that support CYP with LD, such as whole-school training, SLT support, consistent practice and alignment with the setting's ethos. These factors align with previous findings in mainstream settings (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). Therefore, this knowledge could be used to provide implementation support and guidance to overcome challenges to the use of specific whole-school approaches within mainstream and specialist settings (Brown, 2018; Svane et al., 2019). Overall, these findings suggest that EC can be effectively embedded and sustained in whole-school practice within special schools that support CYP with LD. This provides insight into EC use in this context and provides avenues for effective wellbeing support for CYP with LD.

Theme Two: EC Supports Pupils' Emotional and Behavioural Outcomes.

Definition: EC use supports pupil's positive emotional, behavioural, and learning development by facilitating their emotional competency and emotional regulation skill development. Staff felt that these positive impacts are facilitated through the

development of trusting staff and peer relationships and through normalising and validating emotions within these settings.

All staff mentioned that EC positively impacts the emotional and behavioural outcomes of pupils who attend special schools that support CYP with LD and associated SEND. For example, they described that EC improved pupils' emotional wellbeing, readiness to learn, and independence. Staff felt that this supported a reduction in distressed behaviour that supported the wellbeing and learning of CYP with LD. Staff attributed this to EC supporting pupils' emotional understanding, emotional self-regulation, and ability to effectively communicate their emotions through the development of trusting relationships and the validation of their emotional experiences. Staff also reflected on how the specialist context and pupils' needs influenced EC use and its effectiveness in these settings. These views are presented within three subthemes to emphasise their distinct yet interconnected nature in supporting pupils' emotional wellbeing and behaviour outcomes.

Subtheme One: EC Improves Socioemotional, Behavioural, and Learning Outcomes

The majority of staff viewed that EC supported the emotional wellbeing of CYP within these settings. For example, they felt that EC supported pupils to develop resilience and experience more settled and functional emotional states in line with definitions of emotional wellbeing (Courtwright, Flynn Makic & Jones, 2020).

> ***Participant 6:*** *"It's [Emotion Coaching] had a massive impact on pupil wellbeing, staff wellbeing, um it's just been huge in our school".*

Participant 1: *"After they have been through all of those steps, they feel a little calmer, a little happier, and we sort of get that from there [Emotion Coaching]".*

These findings illustrated that staff viewed EC as supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP who attend special schools that support LD. This aligns with the aims of EC in supporting pupil's emotional wellbeing, regulation, and behaviour (Gus, Rose & Gilbert, 2015) and suggests that EC can be effectively applied within these contexts to address the growing concerns about CYPs' emotional wellbeing (Solmi et al., 2021). These findings address gaps within the research literature by demonstrating how emotional wellbeing can be supported effectively and the impact of whole-school, relational interventions within special schools that support CYP with LD (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury et al., 2020; Attwood, 2021). Findings also challenge staff views within mainstream EC literature that EC "does not work" for CYP with specialist needs (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022).

EC was found to be an effective way to support pupil wellbeing in special schools that support CYP with LD. This offers practical implications for supporting pupils with LD who are at an increased risk of developing mental health difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019). These findings also address gaps within practical knowledge that are perceived to be a barrier to supporting CYP who attend special schools for LD (Attwood, 2021). Supporting emotional wellbeing lays positive developmental foundations to promote pupils' lifelong emotional regulation skills, their experience of positive relationships, academic achievements, and mental health (EEF, 2024; Public Health England,

2014). Therefore, EC is viewed as an effective way to support the wellbeing and positive long-term outcomes of CYP with LD within these settings.

Staff also felt that EC supported pupils to more effectively express and regulate their emotions, which resulted in fewer incidences of pupils exhibiting behaviours that communicated distress. This was also evidenced by a noticeable reduction in the use of physical intervention/restraint within these settings. It can be viewed that these positive impacts were supported by a shift in behaviour management practice from “behaviourist” to “relational” approaches following the introduction of EC. This is associated with shifts in staff perspectives, which is further discussed in Theme Three.

> ***Participant 7:*** *“As a result of that [Emotion Coaching], we have much less challenging behaviour from that individual because he is able to communicate his feelings, his wants, his needs. Whereas he used to display challenging behaviour daily.”*
>
> ***Participant 1: “****We had quite a high level of behaviours just in general across both sites. And looking back at the data, you see a significant drop in not only the physical interventions but the behaviours when that was introduced.”*
>
> ***Participant 6:*** *“The physical interventions coming down by 70.9% that was like, that was huge. Kind of as soon as it [Emotion Coaching] was introduced, and that came right down, everyone was just like really in awe… Yeah, we kind of moved away from assertive discipline and gone more around the Emotion Coaching way. And for our young people, it's not so much about kind of a corrective action or consequences; it's just more about understanding and helping them to understand why it's happened.”*

These findings suggest that EC plays a significant role in supporting a reduction in pupils' distressed behaviour in special schools that support CYP with LD. This will have positive implications for supporting their inclusion and wellbeing and addresses gaps within school-based behaviour guidance and support for this population (Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023). These views are consistent with research in mainstream settings that found that EC supported a decrease in pupil behaviour incidents, exclusions, and a shift from "high control" behaviour management techniques by supporting pupils' emotional awareness and self-regulation (Rose et al., 2019). This is also supported by research on parental EC use that found that EC can support emotionally driven behaviours for CYP with SEND (Wilson et al., 2013).

These findings illustrate that EC can effectively support positive behavioural outcomes for CYP with LD and associated SEND. This is an important contribution to the literature and has useful implications for supporting the behaviour of CYP with LD and SEND. This finding is particularly impactful, as these pupils are at an increased risk of emotionally driven internalising/externalising behaviours and school exclusion (Herzog et al., 2024; Cristofani et al., 2023; Morgan & Sideridis, 2013; National Statistics, 2024a). Therefore, these findings illustrate that EC can support their emotional, social and academic outcomes (Clarke et al., 2021).

Staff also reflected on notions that EC supported a significant reduction in the use of physical intervention to manage pupil behaviour in these settings. This suggests a radical change from the behaviour management practices commonly used in special schools and has positive implications for practice (DfE, 2024b). These findings are consistent with research that found that EC supported a significant and sustained drop in the use of physical restraint to manage behaviour in

an SEMH special school (Gus et al., 2017). This suggests that EC can offer an alternative to physical intervention to support pupils' behaviour, emotional wellbeing, emotional communication, and relationships with staff within special schools (The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2019; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015).

Government initiatives seek to minimise the use of physical restraint and restrictive practices in special schools and alternative provision through training staff in prevention, regulation, and de-escalation (DfE, 2024b). However, there is limited evidence-based guidance on strategies to achieve this in practice (DfE, 2024b). Therefore, these findings address current research-practice gaps in suggesting that EC can minimise the use of physical restraint and can effectively support "escalated behaviour" in these settings (Hutchings et al., 2013; DfE, 2024b). It can be viewed that these positive impacts were supported by a shift in behaviour management practice from "behaviourist" approaches that have dominated SEND legislation and practice to "relational", emotion-based support following the introduction of EC (Parker & Levinson, 2018; Rainer, Le & Abdinasir, 2023). This is further discussed in Theme Three. Therefore, these findings offer a convincing justification for the use of EC in these settings and offer insight into an alternative and effective approach for supporting the behaviour of CYP with LD.

Additionally, staff felt that EC promoted pupils' readiness to learn by meeting their basic physiological and psychological needs and teaching them strategies to emotionally regulate. Staff referenced psychological theories, such as the "Window of Tolerance" (Siegel, 1999) and "Hierarchy of Needs" (Maslow, 1943), to explain the impact of EC on pupils' learning and engagement.

Participant 9: *"We're very much understanding around Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, so… before they were ready to learn, they need to know that they feel safe and secure, and Emotion Coaching does that. They feel heard, they feel listened to, they feel that they have those respectful relationships which can then move them on to the next step of the hierarchy in order to help them learn."*

Participant 1: *"Our main focus is on "if that child's not regulated and ready to learn, we're not gonna get any learning out of them… You know, they've come in, they're anxious, they're hyper. "Do we need to get him with some of the downregulation?" Just so that they're in that, you know, 'window of tolerance' so that they can effectively learn and effectively communicate with us."*

These views highlight the perceived benefits of EC in supporting CYPs' readiness to learn. Staff seemed confident in their understanding and application of relevant psychological theories to explain the connections between meeting pupils' basic needs, regulation, wellbeing, and learning. For example, many staff explained that EC supported pupils to feel safe and secure and supported their emotional regulation development through positive relationships. This suggests that staff are well-informed on the psychological underpinnings of EC and perceive it to be an effective way of supporting CYPs' learning engagement and outcomes.

The identified improvements in CYPs' readiness to learn are supported by research that suggests that CYP need to feel safe and secure within their relationships at school to facilitate their receptivity to learning and academic performance (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). As suggested by Participant 9, this influence

can be understood through applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). This theory of motivation suggests that physical and psychological needs, e.g., safety, love, and belonging, must be met for CYP to reach their full potential and to support their ability to optimally engage with learning (Neal, 2021).

Pupils' improved readiness to learn following EC can also be further explained through the lens of Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011) and the Window of Tolerance (Siegel, 1999). For example, without feelings of safety, CYP move beyond a tolerable zone of emotional arousal and enter defensive states, e.g., hyperarousal, that restricts their higher cognitive functioning required for learning and social engagement (Neal, 2021; Corrigan, Fisher & Nutt, 2011). Therefore, it can be inferred that EC supports the regulation of these emotional responses by fostering positive relationships and by teaching emotional regulation skills to support pupils' learning, cognition, academic success, and social engagement (Schnackenberg, 2023; Neal, 2021; Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). This view is supported by research that found that EC significantly improved and accelerated academic progress in SEMH special schools due to pupils' enhanced emotional regulation skills, supporting their preparation for learning (Gus et al., 2017). Therefore, EC appears to be an effective strategy to support pupil's ability to engage in learning within special schools that support CYP with LD.

Staff also viewed that EC supported CYP within these settings, particularly post-16 learners, to develop independence skills and the ability to handle their emotions. Staff felt that these skills would support pupils to thrive and functionally navigate adult life.

> ***Participant 8:*** *"I can hear them going through the process of just talking, you know, that emotion coaching themselves in essence. So, for them, I think certainly helps them manage their own emotions within that and actually just to help develop that independence with it. That's a big part of it, especially, certainly post-16, erm because over the years, again, they get supported by the adults around them... it's then taking their responsibility of themselves and if they've got those strategies that we that we help them develop, moving on then again, they can take that forward."*

These findings illustrate that EC can effectively support pupils' independence and develop their agency and ability to manage their own emotions and wellbeing. This is supported by previous research that found that emotional wellbeing is supported in a special school sixth form for CYP with LD through preparing them for adulthood, e.g., by "offering a toolkit of strategies and promoting their sense of agency" (Attwood, 2021, p.83). This suggests that EC can be an appropriate and specific strategy to support CYP with LD within these settings that should be integrated into their support.

These findings align with initiatives that aim to promote YPs independent living, community inclusion, and staying healthy outcomes identified within the Preparing for Adulthood Framework (National Development Team for Inclusion, 2013) and suggest that EC is likely to be a useful and appropriate approach to support post-16 learners with LD. Limited research has investigated the use of EC for post-16 learners in mainstream and specialist education settings. Therefore, these findings have useful implications for guiding evidence-based practice within further education settings and can be used by EPs to support the wellbeing and

independence of CYP with LD. For example, EC could be recommended within statutory advice and should be implemented into further education programmes to support the wellbeing of CYP with LD and associated SEND.

Staff also viewed that EC supported the development of trusting relationships between pupils and staff.

> ***Participant 1: "****The development of the relationships between pupils and staff. We've noticed it [Emotion Coaching] it's aided to build those stronger bonds. Like I said, if those children feel seen, heard, and understood, they then trust you more."*

> ***Participant 3:*** *"Erm, I've found it [Emotion Coaching] a really good way to be able to relate to students, a really good way to be able to have tricky discussions about feelings and emotions with students, and it's also been a good way to build relationships with them."*

This view was shared across the majority of staff interviews and suggests that the development of staff-pupil relationships made a significant contribution to supporting the effectiveness of EC in promoting pupils' emotional and behavioural outcomes within these settings. These views are supported by research that draws on Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) to explain that the development of staff-pupil relationships provides a "secure base" to facilitate CYPs' socio-emotional development, such as their emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006; Somerville et al., 2024b). In line with previous research, e.g., Gus et al. (2017), these findings suggest that EC is an effective approach to support the development of staff-pupil relationships within these settings to facilitate positive emotional and social outcomes for pupils. This finding is particularly important, given

that it can be difficult for CYP with LD to form secure-attachment relationships to support their emotional regulation due to bi-directional communication challenges (Howe, 2006; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). This adds further justification for the appropriateness of EC in supporting the emotional development of CYP with LD and SEND. This addresses the uncertainty of how to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD within research and practice (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Therefore, the use of EC should be advocated to support CYP with LD in specialist and mainstream settings and staff should be supported to use EC to facilitate positive relational and emotional outcomes.

Staff also described that pupils use EC to support each other's emotional wellbeing and regulation which has strengthened the relationships between peers.

> ***Participant 1: "****So, peer-on-peer. It's been lovely to see. So, we've got one little boy, and he'll always go for it, and he'll go to his friends. "I can see you're feeling sad. Would you like a hug?" So just think it's, it's kind of strengthened those peer relationships as well."*

These findings highlight that EC can be used between peers to provide emotional support and to develop friendships in special schools that support CYP with LD. These findings are supported by previous research that found that following the introduction of EC, CYP talk more with each other about their emotions, which supports them to calm down (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). Improved emotional regulation abilities are associated with an increased sense of belonging at school for CYP with LD (Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be inferred that EC has positive implications for supporting CYP with LD in developing a sense of belonging at school. This is important, as CYP with LD often desire to have

sustained positive friendships (Brown et al., 2024). However, fostering and maintaining peer friendships can be difficult for them (Morrison & Burgman, 2009). The development of peer relationships can provide emotional support and information to facilitate wellbeing for CYP with LD (Tipton, Christensen & Blacher, 2013). Therefore, EC appears to be an effective intervention to support pupils in developing peer relationships to aid their emotional wellbeing in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Subtheme Two: EC Facilitates Emotional Competency Development

This subtheme captured the dominant staff views that EC supported the development of pupils' emotional competencies. For example, their emotional understanding, ability to effectively communicate their emotions, e.g., verbally or through using visuals, and their emotional regulation abilities within these settings. This aligns with research that found that EC supported emotional competency development through facilitating emotional awareness, expression, and regulation (Katz, Maliken & Stettler, 2012). Emotional competencies involve recognising and regulating emotions to guide behaviour, relationships, and learning (Jones & Kahn, 2017) and are associated with increased wellbeing and life satisfaction (Rey et al., 2013). Using examples from their experiences, staff described the interconnections between developing emotional competencies and the positive impact of EC, e.g., on pupils' behaviour, wellbeing, relationships, and learning. Therefore, it can be inferred that the improvements in pupils' emotional competency, supported by EC, underpinned the positive emotional and behavioural outcomes observed within these settings. This is supported by findings in mainstream primary schools (Romney,

Somerville & Baines, 2022), suggesting that these findings are also applicable to these specialist settings.

All participants viewed that EC use within these settings supported CYP to better understand their emotions and the emotions of others. For example, staff described that EC supported pupils to increasingly recognise and associate emotions with certain behaviours, language, and bodily sensations and supported their understanding of contextual influences on emotions and behaviour. Overall, it was felt that through developing emotional understanding, EC facilitated pupils' emotional competency and regulation abilities within these settings, which contributed to positive emotional and behavioural outcomes.

Many staff described aspects of EC that they felt contributed to facilitating pupils' emotional understanding, such as labelling, modelling, validating, and normalising emotional experiences as part of the EC procedure.

> ***Participant 5:*** *"We can offer support around helping them to identify what the feeling is, so that then they can, you know, come up with strategies… It [Emotion Coaching] helps them to have labels for the emotions that they are feeling which then helps to develop coping strategies over time."*

> ***Participant 3:*** *"I think them knowing that it's okay to feel these things and its okay to have discussions about it and its okay to, you know, chat to a member of staff about ways that they can help them next time. It's just normalising for them, isn't it? Like these emotions that they're feeling is okay, and you know we are there to support them, so that's been useful."*

> ***Participant 7:*** *"It [Emotion Coaching] allows them to understand their emotions and things and for us to model what it is to feel and have these emotions and that emotions are okay, whatever emotions they are."*

These findings align with EC parenting research that highlights the positive influence of adopting an EC parenting style that promotes emotional acceptance, validation, labelling, and problem-solving to support children's emotional understanding (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996). The current findings, therefore, suggest that EC can effectively support the emotional understanding of CYP with LD and SEND. This aligns with research that found that EC benefits pupils in SEMH special schools by supporting their emotional literacy and understanding, e.g., through labelling and explaining emotions to develop their emotional regulation skills (Gus et al., 2017).

A number of staff in special schools that support CYP with LD described that emotional understanding is particularly difficult for the pupils who attend these settings. This is supported by research that found that the presence of LD's is associated with difficulties with the complex components of emotional understanding (Pons et al., 2014). Some school staff viewed this as making EC use more difficult in these settings. For example, they felt that students who hold a relatively "fixed" emotional understanding are less responsive to EC, e.g., pupils who always say they feel happy.

> ***Participant 2:*** *"I think probably the people it [Emotion Coaching] benefits least are those people, those young people or those adults who just think they're one thing. So, they're just "but I'm always happy." They can't access parts of themselves that feel other things. So those are the people its hardest*

to get through to because you're sort of un-doing all of that learning that they've already had."

Fixed emotional understandings have previously been highlighted as a barrier to the use of relational approaches in special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021). However, the majority of staff in the current research reflected that in supporting CYP's emotional understanding, EC is an effective strategy to support pupils with LD and SEND to overcome perceived barriers to their emotional wellbeing and regulation within these settings.

Participant 6: *"I suppose young people from a mainstream setting; they do have more of an understanding of their own emotions. Whereas, when you have like children from our school, yes, sometimes they don't understand why they're feeling that way or sometimes they don't even understand what, what it is they're feeling, is it anger? Is it excitement? But you know, it gets kind of confusing for them. So, I do think it's [Emotion Coaching], it's a really good way in helping the young students who are, um, in our setting kind of to understand their emotions."*

Many staff viewed that EC in special schools that support CYP with LD supported pupils to effectively communicate and express their emotions, e.g., through language and non-verbal communication methods. Many staff felt that this facilitated pupils' emotional and behavioural regulation. Other staff reflected that EC can be used in a more nuanced way within these settings to meet a wider variety of pupils' needs, e.g., physical needs, to facilitate its positive impact on pupils' emotional and behavioural outcomes. This links to views on EC adaptation that are discussed in Theme Four.

Participant 7: *"A lot of our students struggle to communicate their emotions and how they feel. And coaching them through those emotions allows them to learn techniques from ourselves to regulate their behaviours and their emotions. To figure out things about ways that they can erm communicate them, how, where are they feeling them, how those feelings can make them react in certain situations."*

Participant 6: *"So, we've found, you know, our young people are able to erm kind of talk about how they're feeling more, instead of just like lashing out or throwing a chair or hitting or whatever, erm. They're able to, like, point to how they're feeling, erm, what they think they might need."*

Participant 5: *"Lots of children in this cohort that, you know, suffer with pain, particularly with bowel-related pain, erm, and I think that it is possible to associate that pain with emotion. And so, I think that does sort of make sense sometimes to them, like… "I can tell that you're in pain because you're holding your tummy" … You know, so that you can sort of use it [Emotion Coaching] from a slightly different angle."*

These findings are supported by research that found that EC supports CYP to feel more confident in naming and expressing their emotions (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022) and supports CYP within SEMH special schools to communicate their emotions to staff through speech (Gus et al., 2017). The current findings offer a contextually specific perspective on EC use that encompasses the additional communication and cognitive challenges to emotional expression that are often experienced by CYP with LD (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019). Overall, these findings suggest that EC is an effective approach to support CYP emotional communication

and competency within special schools that support CYP with LD and should be implemented within whole-school practice to support pupil wellbeing, learning, and behaviour outcomes.

Subtheme Three: EC Supports Emotional Regulation Through Relationships

Many participants felt that EC supported pupils to regulate and manage a range of their emotions, for example, in times of distress or overstimulation, e.g., over-excitement due to Christmas. It can be inferred that staff felt that the benefits of EC in supporting pupils' emotional regulation strongly contributed to the improved educational, behaviour and wellbeing outcomes identified within these settings.

Staff reflected that improvements in emotional regulation were particularly helpful in supporting this population of students due to the more frequent occurrences of emotional dysregulation and more "extreme" behaviours experienced in the setting. However, staff described that EC was more difficult to use when CYP are in emotional "crisis". This suggests that EC is most beneficial as a preventative approach to support emotional regulation in these settings.

> ***Participant 3:*** *"A lot of them require a lot of support about managing their emotions and managing their feelings and dealing with situations and being able to stay calm or being able to manage their stress levels around certain things, and the Emotion Coaching has really helped myself and my colleagues to be able to have discussions with students and be able to support them through them."*

> ***Participant 7:*** *"Emotion Coaching is useful most of the time… Its limitations are when students are already in that… when they're in that "crisis point", and*

you know the fight or flight has kicked in. They're not listening or taking anything on board."

Participant 7: *"The type of behaviour that we see as well can be a bit more extreme, and the feelings that these people feel and see are different as well. You know, being "cheesed off" because you forgot to do your homework or your food ingredients… is one thing. But to our students, that could lead to, you know, a whole host of behaviours and things that, that you see. And trying to coach in that moment is difficult."*

These findings are supported by research in SEMH special schools that found that EC improved pupils' emotional regulation by supporting their emotional literacy skill development. For example, pupils reported that staff using EC supported them to "calm down" and "get on with their work and day" (Gus et al., 2017, p.102). This suggests that EC likely facilitates improvements in CYPs' regulation of their stress response systems, e.g., vagal tone within these settings, in line with findings reported by Gottman, Katz and Hooven (1996). These findings suggest that the positive impact of EC in supporting pupils' emotional regulation, e.g., on pupils' wellbeing, relationships, behaviour, and readiness for learning (Gus et al., 2017; Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016) can be transferred to special schools that support CYP with LD. Therefore, EC use should be encouraged and supported in these settings. This is important, as the nature of CYP needs in special schools, e.g., "challenging behaviours", are becoming more severe and complex (DfE, 2013a). Additionally, existing legislation has been criticised for being "reactive" in supporting CYP wellbeing (Parker & Levinson, 2018). These findings illustrate that EC can be used as a pro-active, systemic, and preventative approach to supporting wellbeing

and behaviour within a whole-school culture to support CYP with LD. This aligns with current government guidance (DfE, 2022; DfE, 2021) and offers positive practice implications to support the wellbeing of CYP with LD and SEND.

Staff views that EC use is more difficult when CYP are in “crisis” appear to challenge assumptions that EC is an effective strategy to support CYP regulation “in the moment” (Gilbert, Gus & Rose 2021). However, it is acknowledged that EC does not guarantee effectiveness in all situations and that the need to keep CYP safe can “override” EC use (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). Existing literature suggests that when CYP experience strong emotions, they are often unable to access cognitive resources to support reasoning and pro-social decision-making, and therefore, cannot “control their behaviour” or be ready to learn (Siegel & Bryson, 2012). Often, EC attunement is an effective way to soothe CYP stress responses (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1997). However, these findings suggest that perhaps other strategies to support neural re-connectivity between emotional and cognitive processing, e.g., exercise or mindfulness, may be helpful to use alongside EC within these settings (Siegel & Bryson, 2012).

These findings have implications for supporting EC use in these specialist contexts. For example, previous research suggests that it may be better to wait until CYP have “calmed” before introducing the problem-solving step so that they can engage with rational thinking (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). This appears pertinent to supporting EC use and its associated positive outcomes for CYP with LD and is further discussed in Theme Four. Staff should also reflect on their own emotional state and regulation and how they are using EC to better understand factors that

influence EC effectiveness in these settings (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). This is further discussed in Theme Three.

Staff consistently commented on how EC provided students with opportunities to co-regulate and build relationships with trusted adults to develop their emotional regulation skills. Staff felt that this was a particularly helpful aspect of EC in supporting the emotional wellbeing and regulation of CYP with LD.

> ***Participant 1****: "So, he's built, built up those trusting relationships with them, so we've seen that that's really had a positive impact on him, and he'll now, he'll verbally say how he's feeling and what he needs, and things so we've kind of gone from that co-regulation to now he's moving into that self-regulation."*

> ***Participant 7:*** *"It's good to have someone to co-regulate with. You can't regulate unless you have been shown how to regulate. So, co-regulating, which is what erm Emotion Coaching helps with, helps".*

> ***Participant 5:*** *"I think the ethos and the sort of idea of sharing, co-regulating, you know, sort of sharing in the feeling is useful across PMLD and SLD."*

From these views, it can be inferred that staff felt that ECs' involvement in supporting the development of trusting staff-pupil relationships is fundamental to supporting the emotional wellbeing and regulation of CYP with LD within these settings. This view is supported by research in mainstream schools that found that EC supported CYP's emotional regulation by facilitating emotional communication and understanding within adult-child interactions (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015).

The development of emotional regulation skills through EC can be explained through theories of emotional regulation and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988). For example, improved abilities and strategies to return stress responses to a resting state (associated with vagal tone) are influenced by CYP's relational experiences, e.g., attuned adult-child interactions and co-regulation at times of stress (Porges, 2022; Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996). This supports pupils' emotional regulation system development (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). Therefore, in line with previous research, the current findings suggest that EC supports attuned pupil-teacher interactions and provides a "secure base" within these relationships to support pupils' emotional regulation within this setting (Somerville et al., 2024b; Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). This will likely facilitate positive emotional and behavioural outcomes (Balart, Sadurní Brugué, & Pérez-Burriel, 2021).

These findings are particularly important within the special school context of the current research. For example, CYP with LD often find it more difficult to engage in co-regulation required for emotional regulation development due to differences within cognitive processing and communication, e.g., key adults misunderstanding their emotional communication (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020; Howe, 2006). Therefore, these findings suggest that EC is a useful way of scaffolding these interactions to support co-regulation. This addresses gaps within the literature, as limited research has addressed how emotional wellbeing can effectively be supported within special schools that support children with LD (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury et al., 2020). This has positive implications for developing guidance and practice in supporting emotional wellbeing and behaviour outcomes in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Theme Two Summary

In summary, staff viewed EC as effective in supporting the emotional and behavioural outcomes of CYP who attend special schools that support CYP with LD. For example, EC facilitated improved emotional competencies, such as emotional understanding, emotional communication, and emotional regulation through co-regulation and fostering attuned interactions between pupils and staff. Staff felt that this supported pupils' emotional wellbeing, relationships, readiness to learn, and behaviour and revolutionised attitudes to wellbeing and behaviour management strategies. These findings suggest that EC is effective at supporting CYP with LD within these settings. This challenges staff views within previous research that EC "does not work" for CYP with SEND (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). This has important implications for practice, policy, and wider support for CYP with LD and SEND within special schools and mainstream settings.

Theme Three: EC Supports Staff to Develop More Emotionally Responsive Practice

Definition: Staff viewed that EC use supported the staff team to develop more emotionally responsive and relational practice when working in special schools that support CYP with LD. They felt that this was achieved through EC supporting their own wellbeing and emotional awareness and improving their confidence in supporting pupils through emotional situations by providing a guiding framework. EC use also shifted staff perspectives from behaviourist views to guide more relational practice.

Subtheme One: EC Improves Staff Wellbeing and Emotional Regulation

Staff viewed that EC supported more relational and attuned practice by supporting the overall emotional wellbeing of the staff team.

> ***Participant 1:*** *"You can see… not just the impact this [Emotion Coaching] had for the children, but the impact it's had on staff morale and things."*

These views suggest that staff perceived EC as having a positive impact on staff wellbeing and morale within these settings. These findings align with EC literature, where staff found managing difficult emotional situations less stressful and exhausting following the use of EC, which supported their wellbeing (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). EC also reduced staff stress and increased staff morale in SEMH special schools (Gus et al., 2017).

Staff who work in special schools often experience stress associated with managing behaviour and feeling under-resourced (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Vučinić et al., 2022). Additionally, increased pressure to provide wellbeing support in schools could further add to pressure on staff (Brown et al., 2025). These findings suggest that EC can be an effective way to buffer stress and reduce staff burnout for staff in special schools that support CYP with LD. This will contribute to improved staff wellbeing and a reduction in the high staff turnaround experienced within special schools (Brittle, 2020; Glazzard & Rose, 2019; Garwood et al., 2018). Government guidance on using whole-school approaches suggests that staff should access development opportunities to improve their wellbeing (DfE, 2021). Therefore, these findings suggest that EC can be an effective intervention to support systemic improvements in wellbeing within these settings.

Staff viewed that EC improved their emotional awareness and ability to emotionally regulate, which supported them to engage in more attuned interactions with pupils during emotionally driven situations. Many staff also felt that EC validated and normalised staff collaboration and asking colleagues for help during emotionally challenging situations. They felt that this supported their wellbeing and ability to engage in effective emotionally responsive practice.

> ***Participant 8:*** *"I think the staff team, erm, surely benefit from that training [Emotion Coaching] just to reflect on themselves and, actually, their own emotions and how they can again coach each other and supporting each other with that. You know, at the end of the day, we start with our own emotions; if we are not being able to coach ourselves well enough in that sense, then, then we are not going to be able to support the young people as well as we can do."*

> ***Participant 9:*** *"It's really positive, so one of the key things that you learn through Emotion Coaching is the idea of co-regulation. If an adult is not regulated themselves, they can't help to regulate a child… And we've come now around to this understanding that it is not a sign of weakness to ask for a "change of face". So that idea that actually, if you are not in a place to regulate a child, asking for a bit of support isn't a negative... So, I think it's [Emotion Coaching] had a really positive impact because staff are aware that they can call for help if they need it."*

This is supported by findings within mainstream settings and parenting literature, where EC was found to improve adults' emotional attitudes, emotional awareness, and regulation, which facilitated more attuned support and co-regulation

when coaching CYP emotionally (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1997). This results in more relational, person-centred, and compassionate practice (Gilbert, 2024). Research in SEMH special schools further confirmed this by finding that EC use supported staff to develop more empathetic and considered responses, e.g., understanding the issue rather than simply managing the behaviour (Gus et al., 2017). Therefore, the consistency between previous research and the current findings suggests that EC is a useful approach to support emotionally responsive, relational practice in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Subtheme Two: EC Provides Staff with Skills and a Framework to Guide Emotionally Responsive Practice

Staff viewed that EC supported their confidence in managing emotional situations relationally by providing them with skills and a clear structure to guide their interactions/practice to support pupils' emotional regulation.

> ***Participant 1****: "I think it's been really good for staff as well. So, it's kind of empowered them because it's given them this knowledge and them tools to be able to think "Well actually, yes, this child's becoming dysregulated, but I've got the knowledge and the tool base to be able to support that child and deal with it before it escalates."*

> ***Participant 2:*** *"It [Emotion Coaching] gives you a structure to work within. I think it helps teachers and TAs to feel less adrift. So, if they don't know what to do… well turn your lanyard over, follow those steps."*

Participant 8*: "I think it's a really useful tool erm, alongside obviously lots of my other strategies that, you know, working in a special school, I think you need."*

From these responses, it is understood that staff felt that EC improved their confidence in supporting pupils' wellbeing and behaviour within these settings by providing a step-by-step guide that can be applicable in a range of emotional situations. It can be inferred that staff felt that this empowered them within their professional roles and supported the effectiveness of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. These findings are supported by research in SEMH special schools that found that the introduction of EC supported staff to feel more confident in managing situations where children were emotionally dysregulated or in "crisis", which improved the effectiveness of their support (Gus et al., 2017). This has been associated with an improved sense of professional competency and confidence (Gilbert, 2024).

Staff within the current research suggested that their improved confidence could be because EC provides a framework, scripts, and tools to structure their interactions and support. This is supported by research that found that using EC scripts supported staff to better de-escalate emotional situations in SEMH special schools (Gus et al., 2017) and that EC training provides a "checklist" and "bag of tools" to support staff competency in using EC to support CYP emotionally (Gilbert, 2024). Therefore, staff views in the current research suggest that the positive impact of EC on staff confidence and emotionally responsive practice can also be transferred to special schools that support CYP with LD.

Subtheme Three: Shifting Perspectives

Staff described that EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD is influenced by and influences staff perspectives. For example, staff often mentioned that EC supported a shift from behaviourist to more relational and systemic viewpoints, including the understanding that "behaviour is communication."

> ***Participant 9:*** *"Through Emotion Coaching, you, you do shift from that behaviourist theory to a more humanistic approach, and I think that's what Special Ed does very, very well. There has to be that understanding that all behaviour is communication… What is it that the child is trying to communicate, especially for our children who are non-verbal, that needs to be sort of really key in a staff member's mind."*

> ***Participant 5:*** *"You know, it's really useful to sort of… rather than saying "stop, get down" or "feet on the floor" or whatever, it addresses the reason why they're behaving in that way. Erm, you know the like "behaviour is communication" thing, erm, can really be sort of exemplified through Emotion Coaching … You know that sort of gives you a bit of a framework again to talk around it."*

Staff viewed that EC supports a shift in staff perceptions towards an understanding that CYP behaviour is a way of communicating their needs, e.g., anxiety or frustration from communication difficulties. This has important implications for improving emotionally responsive practice within these settings and in supporting SEND inclusion within policy and practice nationally (Thynne, 2021; Stanbridge & Mercer, 2022). This is supported by previous research that found that EC re-affirmed practitioners' beliefs in the connection between emotions and behaviour for staff who

already aligned with EC philosophies (Gilbert, 2024). Previous research suggests that the language used to describe and understand pupils' emotional and behavioural needs impacts how they are perceived and responded to (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2022). For example, "within-child" explanations of behaviours limit situational and systemic explanations for "why" behaviours are occurring and, therefore, minimise contextual/systemic adaptations to meet pupil needs (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2022).

Additionally, understanding the communicative functions of behaviour facilitates more attuned and empathetic responses to pupils' needs to support pupils' emotional regulation (Thynne, 2021). Understanding behaviour as a communication of need has been highlighted as important in establishing a "shared language" as part of whole-school restorative and wellbeing practice in specialist and mainstream settings (Hibbin & Warin, 2020). Therefore, the current findings suggest that EC can be a powerful way of challenging and shifting staff perceptions towards a more relational and contextual understanding of pupil needs to facilitate more emotionally responsive practice.

Staff felt that more "traditional" staff views and a perceived difficulty in shifting perspectives to an EC philosophy in the early stages of implementation can be a challenge to using EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. However, over time, they felt that staff perspectives started to shift, which revolutionised their practice to be more emotionally responsive.

> ***Participant 1:*** *"We have kind of those, those old school staff that just see behaviour as behaviour. They don't see it in the fact that the two parts of the brain aren't working as one. They just think "oh they're doing it 'cause they*

want to do it. So, kind of focusing more on that new neuroscience side of it has completely changed their perception on it."

Participant 6: *"We've got a quite a large cohort of staff who have been here for, you know, twenty, thirty years. Erm, so for them, kind of changing the way that they deal with young people was quite difficult at first. Um, but I think kind of doing the training, erm and seeing the impact it's had… its, it's just been, yeah, it's been really good… So, I think using kind of the videos and stuff from the Emotion Coaching to see the different styles. I think that worked really well… you can see people kind of realising "oh god, that's what I do" like and like making a conscious effort to change it."*

Whilst traditional staff perspectives could be a challenge to EC use in these settings, staff reflected that this can be overcome through sustained EC use, observable positive impacts, training videos, and increased understanding of the neuroscience and theory that underpin EC. These findings are supported by previous research that found that staff perceptions influence EC use. For example, positive staff perceptions of EC supported its use and encouraged staff to "look beyond behaviour", yet beliefs that EC "does not work" due to children's specialist needs negatively impacted EC use within mainstream primary schools. (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). These findings suggest that staff perceptions have a powerful influence over EC use within schools that support CYP with SEND.

The influence of staff perceptions can be understood through the Model of EC Engagement (MECE) which highlights that staff members' emotional awareness influences their acceptance of EC philosophies and their engagement with the approach (Gilbert, 2024). In line with the current findings, Gilbert (2024) found that

training that presented scientific evidence that highlighted the links between emotions, behaviour, and learning, videos of case scenarios, and observable positive impacts of EC in practice supported staff acceptance and a shift towards the use of EC (Gilbert, 2024). This has implications for future training and the use of EC within these special schools that support CYP with LD.

Theme Three Summary

In summary, staff felt that the use of EC within special schools that support CYP with LD facilitated staff to engage in more emotionally responsive and relational practice to support CYPs' wellbeing and behaviour. This was attributed to EC improving staff members' emotional wellbeing and emotional competency, improving their confidence in managing emotional situations, and shifting their perspectives on emotions and behaviour. These findings suggest that EC can be used to support school staff wellbeing within these settings. This offers a unique perspective on the benefits of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD and can be used to address current staff wellbeing concerns within the current mainstream and specialist education system (Amstad & Muller, 2020; Education Support, 2024). Existing literature also suggests that EC's influence on supporting staff members' emotionally responsive practice can improve pupils' emotional and behavioural outcomes (Gus et al., 2017) (as highlighted in Theme Two). Therefore, these findings make positive and insightful contributions to support the implementation and effectiveness of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Theme Four: EC Is Adapted to Meet Pupil's Needs

Definition: EC use is routinely adapted, e.g., increased flexibility in applying the steps and alternative communication approaches being used alongside to support

the accessibility and effectiveness of EC for CYP with LD. Staff felt that SEND-oriented EC training and opportunities to share practice with colleagues would further develop their skills in adapting EC to better meet pupils' needs within these settings.

From their practice, staff reflected on how EC is used differently and is individually tailored to effectively support pupils' ages, needs, interests, and wellbeing. It is understood that staff viewed that adapting EC and other approaches is part of the nature of their roles in special schools that support CYP with LD and distinguishes their use of EC from typical mainstream applications.

> ***Participant 7****: "If it [Emotion Coaching] wasn't accessible, then it wouldn't work at all. We have to adapt it ourselves, but that is our job, I suppose to be able to do that. When you work in our school, there's such a range of needs, you can't possibly put one blanket adaptation on it. You know, you have to adapt it for every single person."*

> ***Participant 6:*** *"Yeah, so, it all depends again on their cognitive understanding and their level of need and their age, um. Like I say, with, with the older ones… I could say to him, you know "yeah, it makes me really angry, I totally agree with you", like that. But then, obviously, with the little ones, they wouldn't quite get that as much. So, it's kind of like changing your approach… You kind of have to adapt yourself dependent upon the person that you're working with."*

These findings suggest that EC is used differently and is tailored to meet pupil's individual needs within these settings. These views are consistent with findings that whole-school wellbeing approaches are adapted in special schools

(Nisar et al., 2024). This has implications for practice, as special school staff are required to meet increasingly diverse learning needs, e.g., PMLD (DfE, 2013a). EC literature suggests that adults should make their own judgements on when and how to use EC, taking into account CYPs needs, developmental abilities, and context to promote its effectiveness (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021).

In school practice, research has found that adaptations are made to EC by staff utilising their existing professional skills and experiences to meet the specific needs of CYP within their specific education contexts (Gilbert, 2024). Often, it is assumed that school-based interventions will work for everyone, without the need for adaptation. However, there is growing recognition that school-based interventions will be more effective for CYP with SEND if they are adapted to meet their needs (Gilmore, Campbell & Shochet, 2016). Staff within special schools that support CYP with LD in the current study identified that making adaptations is foundational to their role and something that comes naturally due to their specialist training and contextual experiences. These adaptations will likely improve the effectiveness of EC within these settings (Cox et al., 2024). It can also be inferred that the flexibility in the prescription of EC and its contextual adaptability supported its use and impact within special schools that support CYP with LD (Gilbert, 2024).

Implementation Science literature has highlighted the need for further investigation into the contextual use of emotional wellbeing approaches and factors that affect their implementation in schools, e.g., adaptations (Durlak, 2016; Humphrey, 2013). Whilst intentional adaptations to school wellbeing interventions can compromise their fidelity (the intended application by developers), they can promote more positive intervention outcomes due to the increased relevance in

meeting needs within specific contexts (Lendrum, Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2013; Humphrey, 2013). Understanding adaptations is particularly important within special education research to bridge existing gaps within research and practice to support intervention effectiveness and to offer guidance on the use of relational approaches in special schools that support CYP with LD (Leko, Roberts & Pek, 2015; Attwood, 2021).

Government legislation and guidance, such as the Equality Act, (2010), SENDCoP (2015), and School Behaviour and Exclusions Guidance (DfE, 2022; DfE, 2024b) advocate for schools to make "reasonable adjustments" and adaptations to meet the needs of CYP with SEND to support their inclusion. However, within legislation and research, specific recommendations on how to achieve this are rarely mentioned (Allan & Youdell, 2017). The current findings address these gaps within research and policy by highlighting staff views on the adaptations used to support the effectiveness and use of EC in these contexts to support the wellbeing and inclusion of CYP with LD and SEND.

The majority of staff described that EC is adapted to meet the communication needs of CYP with LD within these settings. Staff reflected that typically EC is "language heavy" and abstract language, such as notions of "butterflies in your tummy" can be difficult for CYP with SEND to comprehend.

> ***Participant 5****: "It's not suitable for everybody because it is quite wordy and quite often when children are in crisis or approaching crisis, escalating behaviour, really in this setting and with this cohort, sort of stripping language back is more beneficial. But I think the ethos is still relevant, like sitting in with it and sitting in the feeling and sort of co-regulating."*

Participant 7: *"There might be some people on the autistic spectrum that are quite literal and… they might not necessarily have a feeling, or they might not understand "butterflies in your tummy" because "I don't have butterflies in my tummy."*

Participant 7: *"For some of the other students in our setting is that their lack of verbal communication. You know, it [Emotion Coaching] requires a level of understanding in terms of where you feel these things in your body, how they make you feel, what it was that made you feel that way. Er, whereas some of our students can't communicate that."*

These views suggest that the focus on language when coaching CYP through emotional experiences can impact the accessibility of EC for CYP with LD. These findings are consistent with previous accounts that communication difficulties can be a barrier to using approaches to support pupil's wellbeing in special schools that support CYP with LD (Attwood, 2021). CYP with LD can find developing emotional competency skills challenging due to cognitive and communication differences. For example, sophisticated language skills are required to identify and communicate emotions for effective emotional regulation (Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019; Hancock et al., 2023; Hobson & van den Bedem, 2021). Similarly, CYP with social communication differences can find processing non-literal speech difficult, which can impact their access to therapeutic support (Lampri et al., 2024; Lang et al., 2010). Therefore, CYP within these settings may find accessing typical EC use more difficult, which could limit its effectiveness. To address this, staff described a range of adaptations that are used to reduce communication barriers to EC use within these settings, e.g., minimising language and focusing on non-verbal communication.

> ***Participant 9:*** *"So, in terms of those, the five steps, um not being verbally explicit with them, with our, our children who don't have that communication ability. So, connecting can be as simple as sitting next to a child on the floor, putting your, you know, holding their hand, putting your head against theirs, and just making that physical connection without saying anything."*

A key premise of EC is that through modelling emotional identification and regulation within attuned relationships, CYP learn to express their feelings through speech rather than behaviour (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). However, within special schools that support CYP with LD, staff viewed that the positive impacts of EC identified within Theme Two could be achieved through slight adaptations and a reduced necessity for language to better meet the needs of pupils' within these settings. This challenges staff views that EC sometimes "does not work" for CYP with SEND, e.g., ADHD (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022) and highlights opportunities for systemic change that supports notions of adapting interventions and environments to meet CYP needs (Rolfe, 2019).

The staff made adaptations to the communication approach of EC in these settings that aligned with the literature in this field. For example, simplifying and minimising language during times of distress, as emotional dysregulation compromises language comprehension and expression, limiting CYPs ability to engage (Rubin et al., 2013). Yet substituting speech for non-verbal communication, e.g., through facial expressions and actions in these special schools, appears to maintain EC co-regulation philosophies of promoting warm, emotionally responsive interactions (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). This aligns with research that suggests that a reduced reliance on EC scripts and acknowledgement of non-verbal aspects of

EC, e.g., body language, supported Youth Mentors to use EC in this context (Weiler et al., 2025). Therefore, it be inferred that staff felt that reducing the reliance on language contributed to EC's success within these settings.

Additionally, staff overwhelmingly described how visual resources are used alongside EC to support CYPs' communication, engagement with EC, and its effectiveness in the setting.

> ***Participant 2:*** *"So, for the pre-verbal or for the less verbal ones, erm I'd get out my cards or get out my sheet of emotions and say, "I think you look a little bit worried; which one are you?" and they can point to it."*

> ***Participant 1:*** *"It's been a lot… lot of work and a lot of kind of "how are we going to adapt this, so that it's effective for our children?" and we've found that the visuals are the best way to do it."*

> ***Participant 9:*** *"So visuals, certainly for our non-verbal children. We use Clicker a lot, we use Social Stories a lot, um we use um PECS cards, things like that. So, all of those having the emotions on there and being able to label emotions, whether it's just happy or sad… are really helpful. So yeah, I'd definitely say having that visual element is really key. We used Makaton here as well. So, children who are unable to verbalise, even our verbal children er who are unable to verbalise how they're feeling, they can sign… to show us how they're feeling."*

Many staff showed me the visual communication boards that they had created to support EC use within these settings. It was clear through the interviews that staff were particularly passionate about creatively adapting EC to meet the needs of

pupils with LD. This likely contributed to the success of EC within these settings. The supplementary use of visuals aligns with previous research in special schools and inclusive settings that found that visual supports, such as symbols alongside text, Talking Mats, and pictorial emotion thermometers, are integrated and used alongside wellbeing interventions to support pupils with SEND to access the interventions (Attwood, 2021; Kloes, 2015; Unwin, Stenfert Kroese & Blumson, 2018). Therefore, using visuals and alternative communication approaches alongside EC is viewed as important in supporting the effectiveness of EC within these settings. This is supported by research that found that using visuals, e.g., PECS and core vocabulary boards support CYP with SEND to label and communicate their emotions and regulate the behaviour (Grimes, 2018). This has useful implications for developing practice within these special schools to support the effectiveness and accessibility of EC for CYP with LD.

Many participants viewed that EC use is more fluid in special schools that support CYP with LD to accommodate and support pupils' cognition and learning needs.

> ***Participant 5:*** *"Sometimes it's [Emotion Coaching] something that you can refer back to, but one of the issues with sort of working memory, you know, processing is that it's hard for our students to think back into a time when they felt upset earlier in the day. It doesn't really work effectively because… things need to be repeated and overlearned in order for there to be retention, and really, there seems to be little benefit in encouraging children to revisit a time when they felt really angry or really upset repeatedly."*

> ***Participant 7:*** *"It [Emotion Coaching] requires a certain level of cognitive understanding to be able to do or communication, you know. At some of the points of our students being dysregulated, they might not be able to understand anything more than us being able to say to them, "I can see that you're feeling a little bit… and waiting for them". It just isn't going to work at that time, that's all."*

Often, staff explained that EC requires complex cognitive processing to support reflection and emotional understanding, which is sometimes difficult for students within these settings. These views suggested the need for a more tailored approach to EC use within special schools that support CYP with LD. These findings are consistent with research that identified challenges to supporting the mental health of CYP who attend special schools for LD and associated SEND, such as pupils' difficulties with reflection and understanding emotions (Attwood, 2021). EC, particularly the problem-solving phase, requires CYP to engage in reflection, perceptive-taking, and self-control (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). This may be challenging for CYP with LD due to their associated differences in working memory and executive functioning skills (Morra, Parrella & Camba, 2011; Nachshon & Horowitz-Kraus, 2019). However, staff members' increased awareness and knowledge of their students' needs seemed to facilitate their confidence in adapting EC to better meet the needs of the students within these settings.

Staff shared that they overcame potential cognitive barriers to EC use by using the four EC steps more flexibly and accepting that EC use will be different in special school settings compared to mainstream settings. For example, some steps, such as problem-solving, are often skipped or adapted to meet pupil needs.

Participant 1: *"One of the other issues we have is the problem-solving stage. So obviously, due to our pupils and their abilities, we don't always get all of the stages in, if that makes sense. But it works for us like some we do and some we don't."*

Participant 9: *"No, no, you don't always get to the end, and understanding that is really key, erm. It might be that you er jump straight from connecting and normalising and labelling that… you might not get round to the problem-solving phase, um. They might not be in a state where they can feel like they can problem solve and it's okay for them to go away and then come back and and revisit that".*

Participant 5: *"Yeah, I'm not sure that you'd get through the whole five steps. That would be the other thing that would probably be different in a special setting compared to a mainstream setting… It has to be flexible in this sort of setting because everything is."*

The flexible use of EC steps to support CYPs' cognition and wellbeing needs aligns with the ethos of EC, where the four steps need not be rigidly adhered to in order to be effective (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). Research suggests that steps one and two (recognising, empathising, validating, and labelling) should be prioritised, as attunement to pupils' emotions moderates their stress responses, allowing them to re-engage their social engagement system and "thinking brain" (Van der Kolk, 2015; Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). However, some steps, e.g., problem-solving, can be revisited later or skipped depending on pupils' needs, e.g., to promote their safety and wellbeing in the moment (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). These findings suggest that EC can be used flexibly and adapted to meet the cognitive and communication

needs of CYP with LD within these settings. This has important implications for EC use and designing whole-school, relational approaches to support CYP with SEND.

There was a strong view within staff responses that EC training is "mainstream oriented". Staff who work in special schools that support CYP with LD would like EC training to be more "SEND-specific" to support their adaptations to EC and its effectiveness in supporting CYP with LD within this context.

> ***Participant 1:*** *"So, we found that both emotion coaching and zones of regulation are a little bit more centred to mainstream. So, what we've done is we've kind of tailored it to meet our pathways."*

> ***Participant 4:*** *"I wouldn't know necessarily how it's used with other, other students. Erm, so maybe a bit more understanding or training about how to use it with different students."*

> ***Participant 1:*** *"And I think for us there's not much training out there that is sort of predominantly aimed at SEN. So, any training we do, we've always got to adapt it and even if it was aimed at SEN, depending on your cohort of children, there will always be adaptations needed."*

Throughout participant interviews, there were underlying views that whilst staff valued EC training and found it helpful, training was often not specifically contextually oriented to supporting CYP with LD and SEND. This appeared to place the onus on special school staff to make their own adaptations to EC based on their experiences with limited external professional support and guidance. This could contribute to increased pressure on school staff and could compromise the effectiveness of EC within these settings due to implications for intervention fidelity

and a lack of consistency in its use (Vučinić et al., 2022; Humphrey, 2013). There is a call for further research to explore the effectiveness and implementation of interventions in SEND and wellbeing contexts to produce guidance for staff. For example, training should present evidence of what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, and which parts of interventions can be adapted to ensure their effectiveness and feasibility when implemented in specialist contexts (Humphrey, 2013; Lindsay, 2016). The current findings present suggestions on how EC can be adapted. This could support professionals, e.g., EPs, to adapt their EC training to be more SEND-oriented to support improved outcomes in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Additionally, staff reflected that opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and share ideas on ways to adapt EC supported its use and effectiveness within these settings. However, this needs to be encouraged in EC training and refresher courses to ensure its consistent impact.

> ***Participant 1:*** *“So, there's a lot of support from everywhere, like… a colleague came to me the other day, we were on about doing erm bags for those that maybe aren't at the symbol stage. So, you know, like wooden spoons with the faces on for the emotions. So, she was like, “what about this?” … So, we're in the process of developing that. So, I thought even those kinds of preverbal children that are quite low cognitively would be able to point to a happy or a sad face.”*

> ***Participant 8:*** *“Sharing good practice as well, but then we don’t really have an opportunity to do that… unless it comes on the forefront in terms of training need.”*

This is supported by EC research, which found that opportunities to share experiences and ideas on how to use and adapt EC with colleagues were essential in supporting EC to be embedded in practice (Gilbert, 2024). These findings illustrate that developing a positive wellbeing culture where opportunities to share practice ideas are facilitated supports effective EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD. This is supported by mainstream school EC literature that suggests that opportunities to reflect and share practice should be encouraged to overcome challenges to EC implementation (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). Therefore, opportunities for reflection and idea-sharing should be regularly planned for. This could be further facilitated by professionals, such as EPs, within structured solution-oriented supervision sessions to support school staff when adapting EC in practice (France & Billington, 2020).

Theme Four Summary

In summary, staff explained that EC use is adapted in special schools that support CYP with LD to better meet pupil needs and to promote its effectiveness. Adapting EC within this context appeared to be normalised and necessary to overcome potential barriers to EC use and its effectiveness. This offers an alternative view to notions that EC may “not work” for some CYP with SEND (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022) by emphasising key aspects of EC that can be altered whilst maintaining the integrity of the approach (Humphrey, 2013; Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). These findings highlight positive implications for EC practice, e.g., the use of visuals and flexibly applying the EC steps to promote tailored, environmental changes to meet pupils’ needs in opposition to notions of fixing and fitting children to interventions (Rolfe, 2019). Staff also suggested that opportunities

to share ideas and SEND-oriented EC training would further support their adaptation and use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. Overall, these findings have positive implications for developing training, support, and guidance to facilitate effective EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Theme Five: Capacity Restrictions Impact EC use

Definition: EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD is influenced by capacity restrictions imposed by the ecosystemic context of practice. Staff viewed that limited time to invest in and use EC in daily practice, a lack of physical space to support emotional regulation, and limited capacity to refresh and review training in these settings impacted the use and effectiveness of EC in this special school context.

Subtheme One: "Time, Never Enough Time" – The Impact of Time Restrictions and Staff Availability.

Many staff reflected on how a lack of time to invest in EC initiatives, e.g., due to competing curricular demands and the finite amount of time for staff training and development opportunities, presented as a challenge to EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD. Staff viewed that these pressures are evident across the education system and can impact the use of EC and staff and pupil wellbeing in these settings.

> ***Participant 5:*** *"What facilitates it [Emotion Coaching] would be, I would think, time. You know that that's usually, I'm sure most settings would say that's the resource that, you know, we wish we had more of, and that actually prevents you from doing an effective job."*

Participant 9: *"Staff training time is really difficult, um to get time to do everything and have your curriculum needs met and have all of your statutory requirements met. So, I think um yeah, time is, time is a biggie."*

Participant 7: *"Time for us to be able to have the training, to get out of class to do that sort of stuff."*

Overall, the staff viewed that the limited time to invest in EC training and the capacity to embed EC into daily life impacted the effectiveness of the approach in special schools that support CYP with LD. These findings are consistent with research that found that time constraints and balancing curricular and statutory assessment demands with wellbeing-promoting initiatives acted as a barrier to EC implementation in mainstream primary schools (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022; Krawczyk, 2017). Balancing competing demands and the time commitment for EC undermines its effectiveness and sustainability (Krawczyk, 2017). Research has found that allocating staff training time by temporarily releasing staff from their other duties could overcome these barriers to support the sustainability of school-based emotional wellbeing interventions (March et al., 2022). However, this is challenging within the current education climate.

Within UK legislation and practice, schools are increasingly being directed to support CYPs' mental health through evidence-based interventions (O'Reilly et al., 2018a; DfE, 2018). However, persistent tension between curriculum and academic attainment goals can hamper attempts to improve CYPs' wellbeing (Long et al., 2023). Additionally, reduced capacity within external mental health services, e.g., CAMHS, places further pressure on schools and raises concerns that support is not fully adequate (Brown et al., 2025). These findings suggest that EC can be

effectively used to support wellbeing within special schools that support CYP with LD. However, limited time capacity for staff training and balancing EC curriculum pressures impacts EC use. These issues must be addressed at a systemic and policy level, e.g., through integrating “wellbeing” and “education” initiatives through universal approaches that are responsive to pupils’ needs (Long et al., 2023) to provide greater support for staff and more positive and sustainable wellbeing outcomes for CYP with LD and SEND.

Staff repeatedly expressed that limited time and staff capacity to use EC within their daily interactions with CYP impacts the effectiveness of EC within these settings.

> ***Participant 3****: “Time, never enough time… Lots of students, not enough staff and you’re often jumping. At the end of the day, for example, for myself there was three or four of my students having a tricky time and I was trying to cover it all before they went home… you’re trying to spread your time across a big group of students and there is not always enough staff to do that.”*
>
> ***Participant 7:*** *“Time to deliver the coaching to students as well. You know, whilst you’re in your lesson… It [Emotion coaching] requires a one-to-one time and coaching someone one-to-one is worth it, but it’s quite time intensive. And if you’ve already got a member of staff down for argument’s sake or you’re out in the middle of the community, it’s harder to give the full attention it deserves to get the most out of it.”*
>
> ***Participant 5:*** *“The more you know, education services are cut, the less availability there are of staff, which means that the time isn't always possible to work through things that would take a long time to work through for*

anybody, but with the additional barriers of communication in this context, it's really necessary."

Staff perceived that budget cuts to education services at a local and national level contributed to the time pressures that can compromise the use of EC within these settings. One participant explained that EC involved a significant time commitment, but overall, they felt that it was a worthwhile investment. However, many staff expressed concerns about how time and staffing pressures impacted the effectiveness of EC in these settings and their wellbeing. Research suggests that funding cuts to education, mental-health, and LA services have resulted in schools needing to reduce staffing levels, e.g., pastoral and educational roles and outsource additional support, e.g., from EPs, to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of their pupils (Ofsted, 2020).

From the analysis of staff responses, it can be inferred that these pressures caused considerable concern and stress for staff in these settings. For example, feelings that sometimes their EC use was somewhat inadequate in meeting pupils' needs due to them juggling competing demands and having limited staff available to support. This is supported by previous findings that found that mainstream school staff feel that making time for EC use is difficult, especially when working with CYP with significant needs (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022; Krawczyk, 2017) Additionally, limited time and staff capacity is perceived as a barrier to the use of relational approaches in schools (Jones et al., 2024). The current findings suggest that these challenges could be even greater within special schools that support CYP with LD due to the nature of the specialist context.

Whilst procedures are flexible to account for variations in EC use (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021), capacity demands could negatively impact staff wellbeing and perceptions of the feasibility of EC in special school contexts. Research suggests that balancing EC and pressures from other school demands caused staff to feel stressed and subsequently impacted their ability to co-regulate and use EC effectively (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). These findings are reflective of the national concerns for school staff wellbeing and job satisfaction (Education Support, 2024) and are troubling due to the cyclical nature of staff stress in causing absence from work and putting pressure on the remaining staff (Brown et al., 2025). This will likely have negative implications for the effectiveness of EC. However, staff views in the current research illuminate systemic issues, e.g., government funding cuts at a macrosystem level that underpin these challenges within these specialist settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, this offers avenues for systemic change and support to benefit staff and CYP.

Subtheme Two: "We haven't got the space" – The Impact of Special School Capacity and Physical Space.

Staff reflected that due to the increasing number of special school placements, there are limited quiet, private, and calming spaces to use EC appropriately within these settings. It was felt that this impacted the effectiveness of EC and raised concerns about equal access to wellbeing-promoting opportunities for CYP who attend these settings.

> ***Participant 8:*** *"I think our biggest thing about the environment, you know, being able to have places to do those, sometimes particularly with those bigger emotions, erm is a big, a big factor, and we're an expanding school.*

We know our role is always expanding. We haven't got any additional space for it. So, you know, making those, having those kind of areas of school that you can do some really good Emotion Coaching work and letting a student process those big emotions as well when you do is difficult sometimes in the space that we have."

Participant 8: *"Every class is going to get bigger as we move forward. Without that additional space that you can do that, and those moments then get missed and… we don't want those young people to miss out because we haven't got the space."*

Calm and therapeutic spaces are required in special schools that support CYP with LD and autism to minimise pupils' overstimulation and to support their emotional wellbeing, resilience, and emotional regulation (Shimokura, Yanagisawa & Sasaki, 2023; Cocking et al., 2020). However, schools have limited capacity to offer nurture spaces despite observable evidence of their impact in supporting the use of whole-school wellbeing approaches (Brown et al., 2025). Staff views within the current research suggest that the effectiveness of EC within special schools is impacted by a lack of appropriate physical spaces to use EC and to co-regulate with pupils to support their emotional regulation and wellbeing. These findings align with research that found that the effectiveness of EC is influenced by a lack of private and appropriate spaces to use EC in youth mentoring programmes (Weiler et al., 2025).

These views reflect national concerns, as 63% of special schools are currently oversubscribed, and there is a government commitment to increase the number of special school places for CYP with complex needs (Public Accounts Committee, 2025). This limits the amount of available space to appropriately support pupils at

times of distress. For example, calm spaces are often converted to classrooms. These findings have implications for government policy and decision-makers at the macrosystem level to address these concerns, e.g., by adequately re-balancing the SEND system and by providing appropriate funding (Public Accounts Committee, 2025; DfE, 2023a). These findings also contribute to the literature by highlighting unique challenges to the implementation of EC in special school contexts.

Subtheme Three: Training Capacity Challenges

Many staff also reflected that EC use was impacted by limited opportunities to refresh and review training. Staff described that this impacted their confidence and increased gaps in the knowledge and training between staff. Staff viewed that the reduced capacity for training impacted the consistency and effectiveness of EC use in these settings.

> ***Participant 4:*** *"I think because probably the training was so long ago, it has been adapted to yourself, how you think it should be worked. Which maybe isn't the right thing to do… we are not trained on it again frequently, so yeah, I guess it's trying to remember from all the way back then. So, it's adapted to how you think it should work."*

> ***Participant 8****: "I know that it's obviously, it's been quite a few years since we've done our initial training, and we have had quite, erm, we always obviously have staff who have been here for that length of time, but we have also got a lot of new staff that actually we haven't done any training for since… Again, with practice, erm, I can say I know how I model my practice in my classroom setting, but I couldn't say that's consistent with how another teacher might model their practice to their own TAs and stuff like that."*

From these findings, it can be inferred that limited opportunities to revisit EC training and reflect on its use as a whole-school team impacted the way that EC is used in these settings. For example, over time, staff reported a lack of confidence in how they were using EC and felt that this led to inconsistent EC practice across these schools. This could impact the effectiveness of EC in these settings, as gaps in teacher training are considered to be problematic for the use and effectiveness of whole-school wellbeing approaches due to a lack of consistent application and intervention fidelity (O'Reilly et al., 2018b). Research suggests that EC "falling off the school agenda" can be a barrier to EC use and sustainability (Krawczyk, 2017). Therefore, opportunities to re-visit EC principles in staff meetings should be facilitated to promote positive EC outcomes within these settings.

Staff reflected that the high staff turnaround experienced in special schools that support CYP with LD further limited the capacity for all staff to have been trained in EC. Staff felt that this impacted EC use and its effectiveness as a whole-school approach.

> ***Participant 5:*** *"One of the problems with an implementation cycle in a place like this is the high turnover of staff, particularly support staff who are the staff who work directly with children. You know, we have long-standing members of SLT, but they spend less time with children, erm, you know, so it, it needs to be refreshed all the time."*

To overcome these barriers, staff described that regular opportunities for refresher training, e.g., "in-house" or by external professionals, would support EC use within this special school context.

Participant 7: *“So having a high turnover of staff sometimes means that not everybody has had that training now… Erm, so if you could have cheaper refreshers annually or maybe even somebody who is a champion that could deliver the training a little bit more. But then you know you’ve got funding and getting that sorted.”*

Participant 5: *“We refresh the training and talk through the steps, you know, quite frequently, maybe two or three times a year. So, erm, you know that helps with high-ish staff turnover in a setting like this erm and… You know, I think that those things help to facilitate it 'cause, as usual, you know, the staff in these settings are the greatest resource and erm, you know, if they're on the same pages, you know, it's effective, you can implement it effectively.”*

Participant 6*: “I think just the continuous training, um. Kind of like new staff coming in. Um, we have a lot of supply staff, so having kind of… some kind of training and stuff for them, um, would be really good. So, like they're aware of it as well 'cause sometimes you can get different staff in and out on a kind of weekly, daily basis um, so it is hard to give that training to everyone, but I think by doing it every, maybe every half term or something having like a refresher session is yeah, something that we need to keep on doing.”*

These views are supported by research that found that staff turnover was a barrier to the sustainability of school-based wellbeing interventions due to a lack of capacity to train new staff and a loss of staff who have been trained (March et al., 2022; Darlington et al., 2018). The high staff turnaround within these special schools also likely impacted the fidelity of EC, as research suggests that a high staff turnaround can result in some staff partially using approaches without sufficient

training (March et al., 2022). This is a specific challenge to EC within special schools, as difficulties with staff recruitment and retention and a lack of specialised professional development opportunities negatively impact the appropriateness and effectiveness of the support available to CYP with SLD and PMLD (DfE, 2013a). Therefore, this could impact the effectiveness of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD (Humphrey, 2013).

These findings are supported by research on EC use in mainstream schools that found that difficulties with knowing how to access training for new starters impacted EC consistency (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). To overcome this, staff within these special schools suggested a need for regular refresher training to ensure that all staff were able to use EC consistently. This is supported by research that found that a structured “within-house” training programme that provides opportunities to revisit and refresh EC practice supports its sustainability and consistent use in mainstream schools (Gilbert, 2018). This has implications for prioritising EC refresher training on the school agenda.

Staff also felt that the inclusion of EC into mandatory induction training for new starters would support the use of EC as a whole-school approach in special schools that support CYP with LD.

> ***Participant 1:*** *“I think currently we've got it [Emotion Coaching] at quite a good place, so if we've got new staff starting, I'll just pull them and get the training in with them. So, they've got it right from the off and things. So, it's not kind of like… staff are coming in, and then they’re waiting a while before we get the training. We're kind of trying to do it as soon as they start.”*

> ***Participant 8:*** *"To have it on the mandatory training, I suppose, in a sense. We know… some other strategies form a mandatory training part for our new staffing. Emotion Coaching isn't a mandatory training requirement; it is just things that we did at a particular time."*

Desires to include EC in staff induction training suggests that EC is highly valued in these settings and emphasises that staff view that consistent EC use is important for its effectiveness in these settings. These views are shared within mainstream EC school literature (Krawczyk, 2017). Previous research suggests that when staff turnover is a barrier to the implementation of whole-school approaches, effort must be made to include nurture-based principles and interventions within staff initial induction training to support the consistent use of the approach (Coleman, 2020). Therefore, this is likely to be an appropriate suggestion for supporting EC within special schools that support CYP with LD and has important implications for SLT in ensuring commitment to EC through supporting sustained practice (Gilbert, 2024).

Theme Five Summary

In summary, staff who work in special schools that support CYP with LD highlighted a number of capacity restraints that impacted their use of EC and its effectiveness within these settings. These factors operated at various ecosystemic levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, limited appropriate spaces to use EC in the school at a microsystem level, restricted access to mental health services and support, e.g., from EPs at an exosystem level, and pressures related to funding cuts, overcapacity in special schools, and policy initiatives at the macrosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In highlighting these factors, this research offers practical

suggestions and potential avenues for systemic, solution-oriented change to support the wellbeing of CYP who attend special schools that support LD and SEND.

Summary of Research Findings

A summary of the themes developed from the analysis of participant responses are discussed in relation to the research aims and in answer to the research question (RQ).

RQ: What are staff views on the use of Emotion Coaching in special schools that support CYP with learning difficulties?

Staff viewed that EC is an effective approach to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP, staff, and the wider school community within special schools that support CYP with LD. Staff within these settings reflected that EC had become embedded within their interactions and whole school life and had supported the development of their emotionally responsive practice, e.g., within their daily interactions with pupils, policy development, and in shifting staff attitudes. This has positive implications for supporting the emotional wellbeing, emotional competencies, and behaviour and learning outcomes of CYP with LD and SEND.

While all staff viewed that EC is an effective approach in these settings, many staff expressed that EC needed to be adapted to meet the needs of CYP with LD and SEND within these special schools to achieve its intended outcomes. Special school staff felt that often the unique characteristics of special schools facilitated EC use in this context. For example, the alignment between the special school ethos and EC values and staff's enhanced skills in adaptation to meet pupils' needs. However, staff reflected on barriers to EC use within these settings that operated

across multiple ecosystemic levels, such as a lack of SEND-oriented training and pressures on time, space, and capacity for EC training. Attempts to address these issues at a systemic level are required to support the use and effectiveness of EC within special schools that support CYP with LD.

Overall, these findings addressed gaps within research by exploring how EC is used to support the wellbeing, behaviour, and learning of CYP with LD in an understudied special school context (Gus et al., 2017; Attwood, 2021). This will have positive implications for research, policy, and practice to better support CYP with LD and SEND who are at a greater risk of wellbeing and behaviour difficulties within the current education and systemic context (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). These findings also provide implications for professionals, such as EPs, by highlighting contextual factors that influence EC use within specialist settings to better inform tailored support. It is hoped these findings will support the use and effectiveness of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD and associated SEND.

Implications For EP Practice

A range of implications for EPs and supporting professionals have been identified in light of the findings from the current research. These are discussed in reference to government reports and academic literature that present the holistic role of EPs. Possible suggestions for EP involvement are discussed below with the aim of facilitating appropriate EC implementation support to benefit CYPs' wellbeing and behaviour within special schools that support CYP with LD.

EC Training

Delivering whole-school training to schools, e.g., to support emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation, is a core function of the EP role and can facilitate organisational change by supporting staff to embed inclusive principles and meet CYP needs (Scottish Government, 2002; Farrell et al., 2006; Atfield et al., 2021). The current research highlights that EC is a promising intervention to support pupil wellbeing and behaviour in special schools that support CYP with LD. This addresses gaps within research and practice and suggests that EPs have a role in recommending and delivering EC training and supporting its use within these special schools to support the wellbeing outcomes of CYP with LD and SEND (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020).

The current findings also suggest that EC within these settings can reduce the use of physical intervention. This aligns with government initiatives that aim to minimise the use of physical restraint in special schools through training in prevention, regulation, and de-escalation (DfE, 2024b). Therefore, these findings suggest that EC training should be recommended within policy/guidance and delivered in practice, e.g., by EPs, as a way of achieving this within special school settings. These findings may also have wider implications for supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD in other settings, e.g., mainstream schools through EC training. However, this would need to be evaluated through further research.

In exploring staff views on the use of EC within this special school context, the current research highlighted a number of facilitating factors related to EC training. For example, opportunities to practice, the use of EC scripts, modelling, example

videos, and incorporating psychological and neuroscientific theories. These can inform effective EC training design and delivery, e.g., from EPs to support effective EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD (Chidley & Stringer, 2020). The current research also highlighted the importance of EC training being delivered to staff across the whole school to support its sustainability and effectiveness. This has been found to promote whole school commitment and staff “buy-in” (Gilbert, 2024; Cavanagh et al., 2024). Therefore, EPs should ensure that EC training is delivered as a whole-school approach with as many stakeholders as possible to facilitate positive outcomes. Future research should also look to understand the involvement of parents and pupils in EC training to understand this impact further.

Staff also suggested that current EC training can feel “mainstream oriented”, which can impact staff confidence and “buy-in” when using EC within this context. This has implications for EPs, as they can apply psychological theory and problem-solving frameworks and their knowledge of effective adaptations within this context to amend EC training content. This will support the delivery of EC training that more appropriately meets the unique needs of these settings and CYP with LD and SEND.

Staff also reflected on the need for refresher training to support EC use to be sustained. Research suggests that one-time staff training is rarely impactful in changing staff practice and that a sustained CPD programme is required to ensure high-quality implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Ruttledge, 2022). This has implications for commissioning EC training, as the current research suggests that regular opportunities to refresh core EC principles and reflect on contextual implementation experiences should be planned for and delivered. This process can

be facilitated by EPs in liaison with school SLTs to support the sustainability and effectiveness of EC in these settings.

Intervention Implementation Support

The current research highlights barriers and facilitators to EC use within this setting, such as the need for EC to be adapted to meet CYPs' needs, the influence of the school ethos and leadership, and the impact of pressures within the wider educational system. EPs are well placed to provide post-training implementation support through supervision, consultation, and applying evidence-based frameworks, research, and their knowledge of education systems to support organisational decision-making (Fixsen et al., 2009; Chidley & Stringer, 2020; Farrell et al., 2006,). By identifying factors that influence EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD, the research findings better prepare EPs to support schools in overcoming barriers to EC use. It is hoped that this will support the effectiveness of EC in these settings (Chidley & Stringer, 2020). This aligns with guidance that schools should seek EP support to advise on emerging emotional wellbeing needs to facilitate early and effective intervention (DfE, 2018).

Staff viewed that EC needed to be adapted within these settings, e.g., through using alternative communication approaches alongside EC and increased procedural flexibility to support its accessibility for CYP with LD. Adapting EC can impact the fidelity of the intervention but can also improve its relevance in meeting the needs of CYP with LD in special schools (Lendrum, Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2013; Humphrey, 2013). Support to make appropriate adaptations facilitates the sustained use of whole-school approaches (Freeman, Wertheim & Trinder, 2014). Therefore, the research findings have implications for EPs in supporting schools to make

evidence-based and feasible adaptations to EC use based on their contextual needs, whilst maintaining the integrity and core principles of EC to optimise its effectiveness (Humphrey, 2013; Lindsay, 2016). These findings also provide specific guidance for schools on how to make “reasonable adjustments” and adaptations to support CYP’s wellbeing and inclusion in line with the Equality Act (2010) and SENDCoP (2015).

The current findings also suggest that EC use is influenced by the ethos and practice within special schools that support CYP with LD. For example, the extent to which EC is prioritised by SLT and embedded as a whole-school approach. EPs can use this knowledge to guide EC implementation support. For example, EPs can work with SLTs to inform them of the benefits of EC within these settings and emphasise their role in prioritising EC and creating a positive wellbeing climate to support sustained EC use (Chidley & Stringer, 2020; Gilbert, 2024). The current findings can also offer insight into how EC use as a whole school approach can be fostered and sustained as a “way of life” in these settings and suggests how barriers to EC use can be overcome. This can guide EP recommendations. For example, encouraging colleague support, such as a “change of face” and idea sharing on adaptations. EPs can support these principles to become embedded within school policy and practice to improve the quality and sustainability of EC use within these settings.

Supervision

The findings from this study suggest that opportunities to reflect on contextual EC use, share examples of good practice, and collaboratively develop ideas for EC adaptations to meet pupils’ needs are required to support effective EC use within this special school context. EPs have a role in offering supervision to special schools through the application of evidence-based models of supervision (Dunsmuir, Lang &

Leadbetter, 2015; Callicott & Leadbetter, 2013). Supervision supports the implementation of school-based emotional wellbeing and behaviour approaches by helping staff to understand, appropriately apply, and adapt interventions to the existing practices and context (Domitrovich et al., 2016). Therefore, this research suggests that EPs can support staff in effectively using and adapting EC within this context through supervision. Previous research has suggested that EP supervision is fundamental to supporting the use of alternative school wellbeing approaches, such as ELSA. For example, EP-facilitated group supervision with ELSAs provided a useful framework for staff to share ideas and develop their knowledge, support each other, and collaboratively problem-solve to improve their confidence and effectiveness in supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP (Osbourne & Burton, 2014). Therefore, findings from the current research suggest that EPs could facilitate group supervision with special school staff to support the effective use of EC within this context.

Additionally, findings suggested that staff in special schools that support CYP with LD are experiencing significant pressure and associated stress due to the higher intensity of CYP behaviour and needs that they are supporting within these settings alongside systemic pressures, such as the increasing number of special school placements and limited capacity to effectively manage the emotional and learning needs of CYP. This aligns with key concerns for supporting the special school workforce (DfE, 2013a). This could impact staff wellbeing and their ability to effectively co-regulate and use EC to support positive emotional outcomes for CYP (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). Within whole-school wellbeing implementation guidance and research, it is recommended that school staff access development opportunities to improve their wellbeing and promote self-reflection,

especially when working with CYP who present with high levels of distress (DfE, 2021; Hanley, 2017; Ruttledge, 2022). EP supervision to support the use of wellbeing approaches, provides staff with emotional support, and helps special school staff to feel valued (Osbourne & Burton, 2014; DfE, 2013a). Therefore, the current findings suggest that EP-facilitated supervision could support staff wellbeing in this context. This could alleviate difficulties with staff capacity and yield better outcomes following EC use.

The current findings also have implications for encouraging EP-facilitated supervision for SLT within these settings. Staff within this context suggested that the prioritisation of EC by SLT influenced its uptake and the extent to which it was embedded in school policies and practice. Research suggests that EPs are well placed to provide supervision to SLTs to support whole-school, systemic problem-solving and provide non-biased emotional support (Cort & Newman, 2025; Osborne & Burton, 2014). Supervision with senior employees has supported the implementation of EC in Norwegian Kindergartens, e.g., by supporting the generalisation of EC skills across different emotional contexts and by supporting settings to overcome barriers to EC use (Havighurst et al., 2024). Collective problem-solving could overcome some of the challenges associated with the changing roles of special schools and the increasing complexity of CYPs' needs that they support (DfE, 2013a). Therefore, EPs should offer regular supervision to SLTs within this context to highlight the importance of their support and to collaboratively discuss and resolve EC implementation difficulties, e.g., by utilising their knowledge of special school systems, psychological theory, and systemic, solution-oriented approaches. This will support effective and sustained EC use within these settings (Gilbert, 2024).

Organisational Change and Ecosystemic Awareness

These findings highlight that EC can effectively support the wellbeing of staff and pupils within this context to improve CYP's social, emotional, and learning outcomes. However, the effectiveness of EC in these special schools was found to be influenced by organisational and ecosystemic factors. Staff viewed that EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD was influenced by systemic factors, such as financial cuts, limited access to external mental health services, overcapacity in special schools, and interpersonal factors, e.g., staff-pupil relationships and parent-school connections. This has implications for EPs, as they can offer a holistic view of EC use in this context through applying Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This can provide special schools with a greater understanding of the ecosystemic influences on EC use to guide decision-making and problem-solving and provides a well-informed theoretical grounding to facilitate effective organisational change.

Special school staff highlighted a range of organisational factors, such as the school ethos, staff attitudes, and the prioritisation of EC refresher training. EPs have a key role in supporting special schools in strategy planning and in overcoming difficulties through the application of organisational change and systems theories, systemic consultations, and implementation frameworks (Farrell et al., 2006; Chidley & Stringer, 2020; Ruttledge, 2022). Research suggests that EPs have a positive impact on supporting the implementation of whole-school relational approaches through promoting staff awareness of ecosystemic influences, relational classroom management, and altering staff perceptions of challenging behaviour (Ruttledge, 2022). Therefore, the current findings suggest that EPs can effectively support EC

use and its effectiveness within special schools that support CYP with LD through facilitating organisational change processes to create optimal conditions to support the effectiveness of EC.

Subsequently, this research could be utilised by EPs to support schools to develop relational school wellbeing and behaviour policies that consider contextual and ecosystemic factors and incorporate EC. It is hoped that this would support the efficacy of wellbeing and behaviour policies within special schools that support CYP with LD. Findings could also be used to support a shift in perspectives of the applicability and effectiveness of EC in supporting CYP with SEND within this context and supporting the understanding of "behaviour is communication". This would provide a more supportive climate for EC implementation and could influence the use of relational approaches to support the wellbeing and behaviour of CYP with LD and SEND.

Advocacy, Research, and National Policy Development

A key role for EPs is to work across multiple levels of the education system, e.g., from individual work to policy development, to advocate for developing inclusive environments that supports CYPs' development and wellbeing (Education Scotland, 2019). Limited research has focused on how to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD in special schools (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). This impacts the use of relational approaches (Attwood, 2021). However, the current findings suggest that EC can be effective in supporting CYP with LD and SEND and offers insight into "reasonable adjustments" and adaptations that can be made to support its effectiveness and accessibility. This challenges perceptions that EC "does not work" for CYP with SEND (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022) and can be used by

professionals, e.g., EPs, to advocate for adaptations to school wellbeing approaches to support the inclusion and needs of CYP with LD and SEND.

The current research provides a contextual understanding of staff views on the use of EC within special schools that support CYP with LD. This can be used to appropriately inform national policy development that advocates for meeting the wellbeing needs of CYP with LD and SEND, e.g., by outlining EC as an effective strategy and contextually appropriate adaptations. EPs also have a role in creating, using, and critically reflecting on research to support the development of educational practices and policy (Kaplan, 2023; HCPC, 2023). Therefore, the current findings provide an opportunity to address current gaps within SEND, emotional wellbeing, and behaviour research, policies, and practice to support pupils' wellbeing and behaviour management within special schools that support CYP with LD nationally (DfE, 2024b; Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020; Allan & Youdell, 2017).

Wider Implications for Practice

The current findings also offer a range of implications for supporting the effectiveness of EC and school wellbeing practice in special schools that support CYP with LD. For example, this research highlights key facilitators to EC use in these settings, such as providing opportunities for staff to share their ideas, integrating EC into school behaviour policy, SLT prioritisation, and releasing staff from their other duties to develop their EC practice. The findings also highlight potential barriers to EC use in this context, e.g., limited space and time to use EC and limited SEND-oriented training. These factors should be considered and incorporated into decision-making and strategic wellbeing support plans to improve the effectiveness of EC in supporting pupils' outcomes in these settings.

Additionally, these findings offer suggestions for developing contextually appropriate adaptations to EC procedures. For example, using visuals alongside EC, reducing the reliance on language, and using EC more flexibly. Therefore, special schools can use this information alongside their existing expertise to tailor EC to meet the needs of pupils in these settings. This will likely improve the accessibility and effectiveness of EC in supporting pupils' wellbeing and behaviour outcomes in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Limitations and Future Research

This research contributed to the limited literature that investigates how the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD and SEND can be supported and how whole-school, relational approaches are used, experienced, and adapted in special schools that support CYP with LD (Fox Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020; Attwood, 2021). This has important implications for supporting policy and practice. However, it is important to highlight potential limitations of the research to guide future research and to promote transparency.

Potential limitations of this study could be the characteristics of the sampled population. The current research aimed to recruit participants who held a range of roles within special schools that support CYP with LD to gain perspectives from staff across the whole-school staff team. This aimed to be representative of the people who use EC in these settings to aid transparency and transferability (Flick, 2014). Whilst there was some variation in the roles of participating school staff, e.g., teachers, HLTAs, and SLT within this research, some roles were not included, e.g., administration staff, lunchtime supervisors, and pupil support assistants. Therefore, potentially unique views and variations of EC use may not have been captured. This

may have limited the holistic understanding of EC within this context. Similarly, despite the research poster encouraging any staff members who use EC in this context to take part, it was felt that the majority of participants who were interviewed had a high level of investment in EC and used it frequently, e.g., they were an EC trainer, mental health champion, or behaviour lead in these settings. This may have positively biased accounts of EC use within these settings (Tight, 2023). Future research should look to recruit a wider range of school staff who use EC in these settings to gain a more representative, holistic, and varied view on the use of EC in this context to guide whole-school practice.

Additionally, by their nature, whole-school approaches should include stakeholders from the whole-school community, including pupils, parents, school governors, and supporting professionals, e.g., EPs. During the initial design of this research, it was proposed that pupil's views on the use of EC within these settings would be captured in line with guidance from the SENDCoP (2015) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 1989). These advocate for the inclusion of CYP's views in informing decisions which could affect them. However, due to ethical considerations in asking CYP to reflect on potentially distressing emotional situations, their limited explicit awareness of EC use, and the impact of potential communication and cognitive difficulties that could present as a barrier to their participation in interviews, it was felt that including CYP within this research would not be appropriate or feasible. This may have reduced considerations of different perspectives of how EC can be effectively used and supported within this context (Rudduck, 2007; Roffey, 2013). Nevertheless, the inclusion of parent and EP views could have added greater depth to the understanding of EC use within special schools that support CYP with LD and could have offered a more ecosystemic

perspective. Future research should look to include the voices of CYPs, their families, and wider school stakeholders to explore more nuanced perspectives of EC use and to ensure that CYP and families are involved in decisions that may influence them (DfE & DfH, 2015; UNICEF, 1989).

Furthermore, contextual differences in the settings recruited, e.g. variation in the types of additional SEND supported and differences in the practitioners/organisations that delivered the EC training, may impact the transferability of findings to other settings. The researcher attempted to mitigate this by transparently describing the nature of the school settings that participants worked in and by using reflexive journalling. Future research could address this, e.g., using case-study methodology to explore in-depth EC use in one special school that supports CYP with LD. This research provided insight into the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD which had previously been underexplored and had positive implications for supporting the wellbeing of CYP with LD. However, future research should investigate EC use in a wider range of settings, e.g., special schools that support CYP with communication and interaction difficulties, short-term Specialist Resource Bases, and alternative provisions to investigate the use and impact of EC for a wider range of potentially emotionally vulnerable CYP.

The findings of this research may also have been impacted by restrictions on time availability during the overall research process and data collection phase. For example, face-to-face interviews were shorter due to restrictions imposed by gatekeepers around participants' working hours. This was somewhat mitigated by the use of online interviews as an alternative. However, it may have impacted the depth of participants' accounts and, therefore, the richness of the data analysis.

Similarly, previous research highlighted the need for further longitudinal investigation into the use of EC in education contexts (Gus et al., 2017). This was not deemed feasible due to the relatively short timescale available to complete this research. To overcome this, participants were recruited from schools that had had sufficient time to embed EC. This provided new perspectives on sustained EC use in these settings. However, future research should look to address gaps in longitudinal EC research. For example, by completing follow-up interviews, e.g., five years after initial training.

Finally, the researcher reflects that their potential bias and influence due to their current role as a TEP and previous experiences could be perceived as a limitation of this research. However, qualitative research literature suggests that the researcher's positioning is fundamental to qualitative research and can be supported through reflexivity to improve the quality of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, this potential limitation was managed through reflexive journalling and regular research supervision. Nevertheless, future research could use quantitative or mixed-method methodologies to offer an alternative and more "controlled" perspective of EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD that can be "generalised" to wider settings.

Conclusion

This research provides a rich, contextualised understanding of the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. Within the school-based emotional wellbeing support literature, limited research has focused on specifically identifying and understanding effective strategies to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD, particularly within a special school context (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury,

2020; Attwood, 2021). This left a gap within evidence-based practice, which resulted in approaches being implemented with a lack of knowledge of the impact for this population and required adaptations. This likely negatively impacted the outcomes of these interventions and the wellbeing, behaviour, and inclusion of CYP with LD (Humphrey, 2013; Lavis, Burke & Hastings, 2019). The current research addresses this research-practice gap by providing insight into how EC, a whole-school, relational approach, is used, adapted, and experienced in special schools that support CYP with LD. This knowledge can be used to guide effective and tailored wellbeing support for CYP with LD and SEND within special schools to improve their wellbeing and lifelong outcomes (EEF, 2024).

The current research identified that EC can successfully be embedded within whole-school wellbeing practice in special schools that support CYP with LD. However, its success and sustainability is influenced by systemic factors, such as SLT support, whole-school training, and capacity restrictions. As this was a previously under-researched education context in relation to wellbeing support, these findings provide novel insight into how EC is used and identified contextual challenges and facilitators to its success. These ideas can be drawn upon to guide effective and sustainable emotional wellbeing practice within these settings.

CYP with LD are at a greater risk of developing mental health difficulties and disproportionately experience the use of behaviourist and restrictive approaches to “manage” their behaviour in schools, particularly in special schools (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; DfE, 2025a). These factors can negatively impact their wellbeing, relationships, and learning (The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2019; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). However, there has been limited investigation and guidance on

the use of relational interventions and alternative behaviour management approaches to support this population of CYP in special schools (DfE, 2024b; Attwood, 2021). The current research addressed this by identifying key themes within staff views that demonstrated the positive impact of EC in supporting pupils' emotional wellbeing, behaviour, learning, and emotional competency in special schools that support CYP with LD. This suggests that EC is an effective approach to revolutionise wellbeing support in these settings to improve CYP's outcomes. This has implications for guiding special school practice and EP support.

The research findings also identified that EC can support the emotional wellbeing and professional development of school staff in these settings, e.g., by boosting their confidence and shifting perspectives. This knowledge can be used to guide support to overcome the unique challenges to staff wellbeing and retention in special schools (Amstad & Muller, 2020). This will likely improve the effectiveness of EC and school wellbeing support in these settings (March et al., 2022).

Finally, this research illustrates how EC can be effectively adapted to meet the needs of pupils in special schools that support CYP with LD. Very limited research has identified how wellbeing approaches need to be adapted for special schools (Attwood, 2021). However, these findings suggest that the use of visuals and alternative communication approaches alongside EC and using EC more flexibly can support pupils' communication and cognitive needs. This offers an insightful contribution to the EC literature and can be used to guide contextually appropriate adaptations, guidance, and training to improve the accessibility and effectiveness of EC within special school contexts.

Overall, these findings offer a unique perspective on the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. This presents a range of implications for supporting EC practice in this context and for guiding EP support. For example, by providing knowledge of effective adaptations and unique systemic challenges and highlighting the need for SEND-oriented EC training. It is hoped that this research will support the effective use and adaptation of EC within special schools that support CYP with LD to facilitate positive outcomes for pupils, their families, and the school staff who support them.

Chapter Three: Reflective Chapter

Introduction

Developing research skills is fundamental to the learning and development of Trainee Educational Psychologists (TEPs) and the evolution of evidence-based practice within the field (Topping & Lauchlan, 2013; HCPC, 2023). This chapter provides a reflective account of my motivations, positioning, decision-making, and research actions throughout the research process and illustrates my learning as a developing researcher. This reflective engagement aims to facilitate transparency and trustworthiness to promote research quality (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Initially, I will present reflections on the professional and personal influences that guided my motivation to investigate this topic, the process of identifying gaps within the literature, and the influence of my philosophical positioning. I will then critically reflect on key decision-making points during the research process, such as developing the research design, research question, and methodology. I will then reflect on key areas of learning throughout my research journey. For example, managing recruitment challenges, navigating data analysis, and the importance of prioritising wellbeing and reflexivity. Finally, reflections on the implications for EP and special school practice and proposed plans for disseminating this research will be reflectively discussed.

Influences and Motivations for the Research Topic

For most of my life, I have observed a close family member and their peers navigating school life in an education system that was neither well-informed nor well-equipped to support their needs. This sparked my motivation to pursue a career to

make a positive difference in the lives of CYP with additional needs and their families. Along my professional journey, I was blessed with the opportunity to work in a special school that supported CYP with LD. Through my roles as a teaching assistant and the school's pupil wellbeing and parent liaison assistant, I was introduced to Emotion Coaching. I experienced the profound benefit that this approach had in supporting the wellbeing of pupils and staff and in revolutionising behaviour support practice. From this professional experience, it became apparent that despite the high level of CYPs' needs, there is relatively limited evidence-based guidance and support to appropriately and sustainably promote the wellbeing of CYP within these settings. Therefore, in my role as a TEP, I aspired to address this through research to make a positive difference to the wellbeing of CYP with LD. These influences informed my motivation for researching this topic and the values I brought to the research and decision-making process (Cena et al., 2024).

Reviewing the Literature

Once I began to explore school-based emotional wellbeing support literature, it became apparent that this was a vast research topic with an extensive evidence base. This literature appeared to have evolved with changes to the conceptualisation of wellbeing and behaviour within society and subsequent revisions of policy and practice (Jones et al., 2024). Therefore, due to the explorative nature of the review, breadth of the literature field, and a lack of pre-determined research questions, I chose to conduct a narrative literature review present a story of the literature to articulate a rationale for the research and provide a contextual and theoretical grounding to the study (Lucas et al., 2007).

As I immersed myself in the literature, I started to notice gaps that had potential implications for educational practice and supporting CYPs' wellbeing (Mayer, 2008). For example, only a small amount of research has investigated the use of whole-school relational approaches, e.g., Jones et al. (2024) and Hibbin and Warin (2020). I found this interesting, as government guidance recommended the use of whole-school wellbeing approaches for supporting CYPs' wellbeing and behaviour (DfE, 2022). Subsequently, I was not surprised when I found research suggesting that wellbeing interventions are often not embedded into whole-school practice (Svane et al., 2019; Brown, 2018). I also noticed that specific approaches to achieve this, e.g., EC, were almost never mentioned within associated policy guidance. At this point, I felt that this was a significant research-practice gap. For example, the lack of evidence base and implementation support impacted the use, effectiveness, and sustainability of relational, whole-school approaches. Therefore, I felt that this could be addressed within my research to support the development of school wellbeing practice.

Following my initial scoping of the literature, I noticed a growing area of research that was investigating the use of EC in UK schools. This sparked my interest due to my previous professional experiences of using EC and the positive impact that this seemed to have on wellbeing and behaviour in mainstream schools (Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015; Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). Additionally, through exploring EC literature, I learned that EC has a strong theoretical basis, e.g., it is underpinned by Attachment Theory and Polyvagal Theory (Bowlby, 1988; Porges, 2011) and has the potential to support systemic change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gilbert, 2024). Therefore, I felt that it would be appropriate and meaningful to focus my research on EC due to its alignment with my personal

interests, strong theoretical grounding, and potential implications for supporting educational practice (Mayer, 2008).

I noticed that relatively few published EP papers had explicitly focused on approaches to support the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD. This was confusing to me, given that CYP with LD are at an increased risk of mental health difficulties (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). When reviewing EC literature, I found that only a small number of EC studies focused on supporting CYP with SEND, e.g., Chronis-Tuscano et al., (2016), Wilson et al., (2013), and Kloes (2015). However, none of these studies specifically investigated EC use with CYP with LD. This highlighted a key gap within the EC literature that I hoped to address within research. Two recently published books written by EPs to guide practitioners through supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020; Rees, 2024) and an unpublished thesis (Attwood, 2021) have focused explicitly on supporting the wellbeing of CYP with LD. However, EC was not noted in these publications, and generally, it appeared that this topic is under investigated. I reflected that this may be because of a lack of awareness of the connections between LD and emotional wellbeing difficulties and that the majority of research in this area focuses on CYP with SEMH needs (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury, 2020). Nevertheless, I felt that exploring EC use for CYP with LD and SEND could address key gaps within the literature and make an insightful contribution to supporting EP and SEND practice.

Similarly, I noticed that very little research has focused on supporting pupils' wellbeing in special schools, and those that did were often unpublished theses (Attwood, 2021) or conducted comparisons between mainstream and special schools (Nisar et al., 2024). One study investigated the use of EC in SEMH special

schools (Gus et al., 2017). However, limited focus was placed on how EC was adapted to meet CYPs' needs and the specific influence of the special school context on EC outcomes. This was interesting to me, as the pace of the implementation of school wellbeing approaches is exceeding the pace of intervention research (Domitrovich et al., 2008) and a lack of focus on how SEL approaches are contextually used and adapted impacts their effectiveness (Humphrey, 2013). Initially, I felt disappointed by this because of the need for evidence-based, effective, early intervention within the currently strained SEND system (Public Accounts Committee, 2025). I reflected that this lack of research may be due to a perceived decrease in the popularity of special schools, e.g., due to a shift in goals towards supporting SEND inclusion in mainstream schools (DfE, 2023a; Merrigan & Senior, 2023). Nevertheless, special schools remain a significant part of SEND education provision plans (Public Accounts Committee, 2025; DfE, 2023a). Therefore, this further inspired me to address this gap within the EC literature and to offer fresh, contextual insight to guide effective practice.

Developing the Research Question

Once I had decided on a topic for my research, I worked on developing a research question that could address gaps within the literature and contribute to creating useful new knowledge that can address practical issues within current EP and school wellbeing practice (Mayer, 2008). After reviewing previous EC literature and their methodological procedures, I decided that I wanted to explore participants' views in order to gain an in-depth understanding of EC practice in special schools. Subsequently, I developed and proposed two initial research questions that aimed to explore staff and pupil views on the implementation of EC in complex needs schools.

However, following reflective engagement with the literature, consideration of methodological implications, and supervisory support, I re-worked this to develop the current research question:

> "*What are staff views on the use of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD?"*

I designed this question to be broad to capture a range of staff views on how EC is used in daily practice in these settings. I decided to focus on EC "use" to avoid potential constraints that could be imposed by "Implementation Science" initiatives, such as a focus on intervention fidelity and dosage (Humphrey, 2013). I felt that this aligned better with the explorative nature of the research in investigating EC in a new context.

On the other hand, I tailored the question to be more specific in describing the type of special schools that would be investigated, e.g., special schools that support CYP with LD. The organisation of special schools in the UK is complex and regionally variable. For example, some settings, e.g., "complex needs schools" support CYP with LD and a range of associated SEND, whereas other special schools specifically support CYP with cognition and learning needs (GOV.UK, 2024a; DfE, 2013a). Therefore, I decided to clearly specify the types of school that would be investigated to aid transparency, transferability, and clarity. Overall, I felt that this question sufficiently aligned with my interests, could feasibly be explored, and could contribute to advancements in educational psychology theory and practice (Mayer, 2008).

Reflection on the Philosophical Positioning of the Research

Considering the influence of philosophical positioning on research and practice was a new and somewhat daunting process that I was introduced to when I started my doctoral training. Previously, my undergraduate psychology studies had strong positivist underpinnings. Therefore, there were limited opportunities to consider and understand alternative perspectives on reality and the knowledge produced through research. Through my TEP training, I have endeavoured to understand alternative views and adopt a philosophical positioning that I felt aligned with my worldviews and was appropriate for EP research and practice. Subsequently, through reflective thinking, research, and discussions with my supervisors and peers, I identified Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1975) as a “good fit” for me and my research journey.

CR holds an ontological realist and an epistemological relativist position (Pilgrim, 2019). CR poses that an independent reality exists but that the knowledge that can be produced about it through research is fallible, subjective, and dependent on language, culture and context (Braun & Clarke, 2022). CR aligned with my research aims and research question in exploring participants’ subjective and contextually mediated views to explore an objective reality and explanations for EC use within a special school context (Hauser, 2024; Willis, 2023). Therefore, I used a CR philosophy to guide my decision-making, e.g., in my choice of research methods and data analysis methods and when interpreting my findings to ensure methodological coherence and high-quality research (Brown & Dueñas, 2020). In adopting a CR positioning, I hoped that this research would facilitate positive change for CYP and support EP practice (Brunson et al., 2025).

Methodological Decisions

Participant Sample

I decided to recruit any staff members who have been trained in and use EC in special schools that support CYP with LD. I felt that this aligned well with notions of EC being a whole-school approach and could capture a variety of perspectives to gain a holistic understanding (Gilbert, Gus & Rose, 2021). I was pleased that I conducted interviews with a range of staff, such as SLT, Teachers and HLTAs. However, upon reflection, some key staff roles were not included in the sample, e.g., Lunchtime Supervisors. These individuals have been identified as having a nuanced and key role in using EC in schools (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022). Therefore, I felt that this may have been a missed opportunity to gain a holistic perspective of EC use in these special school contexts. Additionally, upon later reflection and research on applications of EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), I felt that the inclusion of parent and EP views on the use of EC in these settings could have provided useful insight to support systemic change and EC practice. Nevertheless, I felt that my sample was a good starting point for understanding EC use in this previously unexplored context and that future research could look to recruit a wider range of people within children's systems, e.g., parents and EPs.

Initially, I had hoped to involve CYP in my research. For example, through the use of focus groups to explore pupils' views on EC use within their schools. A main motivation for this was to ensure that CYP were able to freely "express their views, feelings, and wishes in all matters affecting them" (UNICEF, 1989, Article 12, p.5) in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) and the SENDCoP (DfE & DfH, 2015). I also felt that incorporating pupil views could give a

more holistic perspective of EC use in these settings. However, upon reflection and following discussions with my supervisor, I felt that this would not be feasible or appropriate for this research. I made this decision because CYP often do not explicitly know that EC is being used. Therefore, asking them to speak about it would perhaps be too abstract. I also considered ethical implications. For example, asking CYP to reflect on potentially distressing and emotive experiences and the additional ethical challenges, e.g., gaining informed consent from CYP and parents. The decision not to include CYP was not taken lightly and at the time, I felt quite disappointed because I felt that this was a significant gap in EC literature. However, ultimately, I feel that this was the right decision for this research. Nevertheless, it remains a limitation of the research and needs to be carefully considered by future researchers who aim to explore the use of EC in educational contexts.

Qualitative Methodology

From my literature review, I identified that EC has previously been studied through quantitative methods, such as randomised control trials (Havighurst et al., 2009), qualitative methods, e.g., semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (Romney, Somerville & Baines, 2022), and mixed methods, e.g., using questionnaires, school behaviour data, and interviews (Gus et al., 2017). All of these approaches have contributed useful knowledge to inform evidence-based practice. However, I felt that using a qualitative research methodology would most appropriately support me in addressing the aims of my research in exploring participant views on EC use (Willis, 2023). For example, qualitative methodology supports the understanding of participants' views and experiences through the application of qualitative data collection and analysis procedures, e.g., semi-

structured interviews and RTA that acknowledge and value researcher subjectivity (Willig, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

At first, I found conducting qualitative research daunting, as I had not used qualitative methodologies beyond a small-scale research project in my first year of training. I also felt a sense of increased responsibility in credibly representing the participants' views to improve trustworthiness and quality. As my confidence grew in using qualitative methods, I began to value the flexibility and richness this approach brought to my study that may have been lost through quantitative research (Lim, 2024). I also valued the acceptance of "researcher subjectivity" throughout the process. This enabled me to "own my perspective" and acknowledge my influence over the research project rather than be fearful of its interference (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Perhaps a follow-up to this study may wish to explore an alternative methodology, e.g., a mixed-method longitudinal analysis of pupil academic, behaviour, and wellbeing data within this context following EC training. However, I feel that choosing a qualitative approach for this research facilitated an in-depth understanding of EC use in this context to guide practical support and further study (Lim, 2024).

Semi-Structured Interviews

I wanted to use a methodology that aligned with qualitative research and CR assumptions. I considered a range of potentially suitable approaches, e.g., focus groups and narrative interviews. However, I decided to use semi-structured interviews because they support flexibility, allowing me to capture the authentic views of EC use in this context, whilst structuring discussions that could usefully answer my research question (Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

My guiding interview questions were informed and developed from my literature review. They aimed to explore key topics and issues raised in emotional wellbeing support literature alongside EC implementation studies, (e.g., Romney, Sommerville & Baines, 2022). For example, I focused on how EC is used and adapted and the barriers and facilitators to its use in this context. This ensured that the questions were relevant and could orient to the research question in a meaningful and interesting way. I revised the proposed interview questions following supervisory feedback. For example, I reduced the number of questions and developed prompts that could be used to elicit further contextual information and discussion. This allowed me to more flexibly explore the research topic while maintaining a structure and focus to support the data analysis. I edited the questions and prompts slightly throughout the interview process based on participant responses. This supported conversational flow and enabled me to gain a holistic understanding of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD.

I chose to use a hybrid of online and face-to-face interviews to overcome the potential challenges of using a singular approach. For example, using both methods supported geographical accessibility whilst also enabling more in-depth conversations through rapport building and the interpretation of non-verbal cues (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2022). I conducted the face-to-face interviews at participants' schools/workplaces within a private and quiet room to facilitate the engagement and anonymity of the participants (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Permission was granted from the headteacher. However, they stipulated that the interviews must be conducted outside of the participants' working hours. This limited the time slots for the face-to-face interviews. For example, they needed to be completed before or after school. Initially, I did not think this would be a problem.

However, the tight time restrictions led to the interviews feeling a bit rushed and at times, some participants seemed distracted, as they needed to get ready for the day. I felt that this unforeseen variable impacted the quality and length of these interviews. Therefore, after the third face-to-face interview, I decided to encourage future participants to complete their interviews online to overcome these challenges. All participants were happy to do this.

I also reflected on how my confidence as a scientist-practitioner grew throughout the interview process (Hagstrom et al., 2007; HCPC, 2023). Despite developing confidence in my consultation skills throughout my doctoral training, I felt nervous conducting the first interviews. I was worried about asking potentially "leading" questions when deviating from the interview schedule, and I was concerned about being efficient, as time is precious to staff who work in special schools. However, over time, my confidence grew, and I became more skilled at individually tailoring the interviews to suit the participants. This resulted in the final interviews feeling more natural and conversational. I feel that this improved the depth and quality of these interviews and more appropriately aligned with views in qualitative research that interviews are constructions between researchers and participants.

Data Analysis

When deciding on an appropriate approach for the data analysis, I considered a range of options that could be compatible with qualitative research and CR. Initially, I considered Grounded Theory, as exploring the use of EC in a special school context is under-explored (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Carless-Kane & Nowell, 2024). Therefore, I felt that developing a theory inductively from the

participants' data may have yielded interesting explanations and developments for theory and practice in the field of CYPs wellbeing (Robson-Kelly & Van, 2016). However, I reflected that my participant sample was likely to be quite small, that there are already identified theories associated with EC that could apply in this context, and my research was limited by time. Therefore, I decided that GT may not be the most appropriate choice (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021a). I also considered using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to understand participants' lived experiences of EC use. However, ultimately, I decided that RTA seemed to be the most appropriate data analysis approach for this research, as it can locate participant views within wider socio-cultural contexts, leading to clearer implications for practice (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). I also valued the focus on embracing researcher subjectivity and the theoretical and methodological flexibility of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This aligned with my proposed ideas of using semi-structured interviews to understand participant views on EC through a CR lens.

When starting to use RTA, I initially felt a bit overwhelmed. However, by familiarising myself with the guidance and stages outlined in Braun & Clarke (2022) and referring to a worked example of RTA that explored a similar topic to my research (Byrne, 2022), I began to feel more confident. I started familiarising myself with the data when transcribing the interviews. I decided that using orthographic transcription would be useful to support the credibility of my findings (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Ahmed, 2024). However, upon reflection, I think that, at times, this could have reduced the flow of my analysis for the reader. Writing familiarisation notes supported me to understand the participants' perspectives of EC use on a

deep and surface level and begin to reflect on my influence on the interpretation of their views (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

I initially enjoyed the coding process, as it helped me to notice initial patterns of meaning in relation to my research question and participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, upon the second iteration of coding, I recall feeling quite frustrated, as I felt that there were too many codes that represented similar meanings and that revisiting coding sometimes felt like I was going "backwards". However, I reflected on the iterative and recursive nature of RTA and the guidance from Braun & Clarke (2022) to overcome this. This reassured me that this is a normal part of the process when conducting RTA.

Upon reflection, I felt that generating initial themes was the most enjoyable part of completing the data analysis. I was pleasantly surprised by how easy I found it to group codes together, and I developed interpretations that were different from what I had initially expected from the coding phase. For example, "EC becoming a way of school life" in these settings was not something that I had considered before. When it came to refining the themes, I felt that I had developed sufficient confidence in using RTA by re-referring to guidance and taking my time to reflect (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This helped me to notice times when I could be falling into common traps that could impact the quality of my analysis. For example, creating a topic summary by grouping barriers and facilitators that I had identified (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I found it particularly helpful to note my thoughts in my reflective research diary at this point to consider why I had grouped these codes together and what this meant in relation to participant views on EC use within this context.

Initially, I found it difficult to start writing up my analysis and commit my themes to paper. I think this was because I had spent a long time tweaking and refining my codes and often strive for “perfection”. However, once I had started, I felt that writing-up the analysis flowed naturally, and that there were clear links to theory, research, and legislation that I had explored through my literature review. This reassured me that I was producing a good-quality analysis. I knew that I wanted to write the results and discussion together to aid the richness and contextualisation of the data in relation to theory (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In hindsight, I feel that this was the right decision for my research, as it allowed me to deeply and richly explore my interpretation of participants’ responses in relation to the literature and aided the flow of the narrative that I was presenting.

Reflection on the Research Findings

Overall, I am pleased with the findings from my research. I felt that the findings aligned with my aim to conduct research that could add to the understanding of EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD and support future education and EP practice. For the most part, I was not surprised by the themes that were developed. For example, I had anticipated that EC needed to be adapted in this context to meet pupils’ needs and I had experienced first-hand the positive impact of EC on pupils’ wellbeing and behaviour in this context. This was reassuring to me and confirmed my hypotheses. On the other hand, I was surprised by some of the final themes. For example, I had not anticipated the significance of the impact of capacity restrictions on EC use in this context. However, when reading literature and legislation about current pressures within the education system, staff wellbeing concerns, and the unique challenges for the special school sector, this finding was

unsurprising and feels pertinent to supporting current wellbeing practices (Public Accounts Committee, 2025; Brown et al., 2025).

Key Learning Points as a Developing Researcher

Patience and Perseverance Throughout the Recruitment Process

One of the key learning points that I have reflected on over this research journey is the development of my patience and perseverance in the face of uncertainty and challenge. I found the recruitment of participants to be a particularly challenging aspect of this research process. I received ethical approval relatively early on in Spring 2024. I felt that this put me in a good position when starting the participant recruitment process. However, I had not fully considered how difficult it can be to contact “gatekeepers”, such as headteachers. I found that many schools did not publish the headteacher’s contact details. Therefore, I was often relying on school administration teams to forward my “gatekeeper request” email. This added an additional step that I felt contributed to a lack of initial gatekeeper responses. For example, emails becoming lost or forgotten about.

Additionally, I reflected that it was difficult to see which schools used EC from their websites. This added additional time for research and inquiry, e.g., calling and emailing schools. I also reflected that the time of year likely impacted my recruitment process. For example, initially, I was attempting to recruit participants towards the end of the summer term 2024. This is often a very busy time for schools, particularly special schools, where changes to routines, e.g., end-of-year trips, can be distressing for pupils. Therefore, I felt that this contributed to fewer participants expressing an interest in participating in my research at that point. Subsequently, I decided to pause recruitment until the start of the autumn term of 2024 and focused

on updating my literature review. Whilst I felt quite worried about the lack of participants at this stage, I felt that this demonstrated my ability to effectively manage uncertainty (HCPC, 2023).

Re-starting participant recruitment in September 2024 presented new challenges and opportunities. For example, in one school, updates in staff organisation meant that the gatekeeper had changed. Therefore, to promote respect and ethical practice (BPS, 2021; HCPC, 2023), I decided to contact the new headteacher as a new gatekeeper. This resulted in them kindly sharing my research poster. This time, more staff expressed that they wanted to take part in the research from this setting. This was a relief to me, as I knew that I then had enough participants to feasibly and effectively use RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I was also invited to present my research poster to a couple of EC interest groups associated with Emotion Coaching UK. Whilst the presentations did not yield additional participants, I felt that this was a good way to boost interest and awareness of my research in this area and likely helped to “spread the word” about my research and recruitment.

Upon reflection, some of the recruitment challenges may have been because I was exploring a specific and relatively new wellbeing approach within a very niche context. This, unfortunately, excluded some staff members who were willing to participate. For example, staff members who worked in SEMH specialist settings. This was very frustrating for me at the time. However, I am glad that I persevered and upheld my inclusion and exclusion criteria due to the lack of existing research on supporting the emotional wellbeing of CYP with LD (Fox, Laverty & Chowdhury,

2020) and the limited mention of specific whole-school relational interventions within research and legislative guidance.

Good Things Take Time

One of the key things that I have learned throughout the research journey is the importance of time management. Despite being warned that data analysis will "probably take twice as long as you expect" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.76), I was still surprised about how much time I spent on the data analysis. I reflected that allowing myself plenty of time to reflect, re-visit, and revise my coding and themes ensured a better-quality analysis that meaningfully conveyed the participant's views. Additionally, balancing research and placement responsibilities throughout this process further taught me to value and uphold my time management and organisation skills to ensure the best interests of service-users and the interests of my research and professional development (HCPC, 2023). I plan to utilise and develop these skills throughout my future career as an EP.

The Importance of Supporting Your Emotional Wellbeing

HCPC guidelines stress the importance of caring for one's own wellbeing and seeking support when dealing with the uncertainty and emotional impact of TEP practice (HCPC, 2023). Despite the key focus on emotional wellbeing within this study, I wish that I had prioritised this for myself a little more throughout the research process. Upon reflection, I have learned about the importance of taking breaks and doing other things that I enjoy during the research process to support my emotional wellbeing and ability to produce high-quality and meaningful research. I also reflected on the value of supervision and seeking support. I often sought support from my supervisor, family, and friends when I needed to throughout this journey. I

feel that this supported my emotional wellbeing and my ability to fully engage with and embrace the research process.

The Role of Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is a key aspect of RTA and was fundamental in ensuring the quality of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Throughout this process, I learned the value of reflecting and questioning the influence of my assumptions, position, and status on my interpretation of the data. I found tools, such as the Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS model (Burnham, 2012), useful for structuring my reflections and in developing an understanding of my influence on the research. For example, I reflected on how my education and employment experiences and my current role as a TEP have influenced this research. Being a TEP positioned me outside of the participant group who were studied (Holmes, 2020). This allowed me to gain a holistic perspective that was informed by my knowledge of psychological theory and research. However, my previous experience of using EC in a special school that supports CYP with LD placed me somewhat within the participant group (Holmes, 2020). This enabled me to have a greater contextual understanding and influenced how I named codes and represented themes. For example, the use of contextual language, such as “crisis” to describe emotional dysregulation. I feel that this supported me in creating a rich interpretation of EC use in special schools that support CYP with LD.

Additionally, I also reflected on the influence of power and sought to minimise potential power imbalances wherever possible (HCPC, 2023; Cena et al., 2024). For example, I gave participants flexibility in how/when they would like the interviews to be completed, encouraged them to speak freely, expressed that I valued their

experiences, and reflexively engaged throughout the research process (Campbell, Harvey & Shanahan, 2024). However, I acknowledge that there may still be an aspect of power imbalance due to my role as a researcher and the pre-determined research aims and questions. Through rapport building and tailoring individual interviews, I hope that the participants felt that I conducted this research “with them” (Scholz, Gordon & Treharne, 2021). I also valued opportunities for research supervision throughout the research process. This allowed me to openly discuss my ideas and experiences and be positively challenged on my decisions and assumptions to support my reflexive engagement during the research process (Douglas, 2003).

Reflections on the Implications for Practice

When reviewing the themes from the participants’ interviews, I was pleased that key areas to support future EC and EP practice had been identified. The participants’ commitment to adapting interventions to meet CYPs’ needs and in supporting pupils’ wellbeing was evident throughout their discussions and highlights the key role that school staff have in positively shaping CYPs’ wellbeing and emotional regulation (Somerville et al., 2024b). I identified key implications for EP practice, e.g., facilitating supervision, EC implementation support, tailoring EC training, and advocating for positive systemic change on a whole-school and national level. It is hoped that this will address some of the gaps within current wellbeing-promoting intervention guidance to facilitate improved outcomes for CYP (Brown & Carr, 2019). I also felt that there were many implications for supporting special school wellbeing practice more generally. For example, ensuring that SLTs are on board, regular refresher training, and opportunities to share ideas and practice. Staff

also described that using visuals alongside EC, reducing the reliance on language, and using EC more flexibly supported the effectiveness of EC in meeting CYPs' communication and cognitive needs within these settings. It is hoped that these findings and implications will facilitate effective EC use in these settings to support the wellbeing of CYP with LD.

Dissemination Plan

Having a clear dissemination plan supports a reduction in the research-practice gap and facilitates the implementation of evidence-based EP practice (Sedgwick & Stothard, 2021). To disseminate this research, I hope to publish these findings in journals, such as Educational Psychology in Practice, to facilitate the visibility, accessibility, and reach of this research to benefit pupils and practitioners. I will also present my research findings to EPs and associated professionals within my LA placement to promote an awareness of the positive impact of EC in special schools that support CYP with LD and ideas on how EC can be adapted for these settings. I also aspire to take an active role in disseminating these findings throughout my future career as an EP. In particular, I would like to be involved in supporting EC training for special schools that support CYP with LD within my LA. I will also draw on these findings when making recommendations to support the wellbeing of CYP with LD within future TEP/EP assessments and consultations.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented my honest and considered reflections on my decision-making, learning, and experiences throughout this research process. Through conducting this research, I have developed confidence in my abilities as a practitioner-researcher (HCPC, 2023). This journey has supported me in

appreciating the importance of reflexivity, perseverance, and emotional self-care (HCPC, 2023). I have also learned how to promote philosophical and methodological coherence and ethical research practice to ensure good quality research (Cena et al., 2024; BPS, 202; HCPC, 2023). Throughout this process, I have valued the opportunity to deeply explore the use of EC within special schools that support CYP with LD. This topic was previously under-explored, and the findings have produced positive implications for developing school-based wellbeing support and EP practice. I endeavour to take my learning from this research experience to guide my future TEP/EP practice. Ultimately, I hope that this research will make a positive difference in the lives and wellbeing of CYP with LD, their families, and supporting adults.

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Wright, A.-M. (2009). Every Child Matters: discourses of challenging behaviour. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *27*(4), 279–290.

Wright, R. W., Brand, R. A., Dunn, W., & Spindler, K. P. (2007). How to write a systematic review. *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, *455*, 23–29.

Wu, Q., & Hooper, E. G. (2023). White and Black parents' emotion coaching beliefs: Differential associations with preschooler's behavioral problem tendencies. *Journal of Family Psychology: JFP: Journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*, *37*(4), 486–496.

Zhu, D., Lozada, F. T., Smith, C. L., Bell, M. A., & Dunsmore, J. C. (2025). Maternal emotion coaching and child emotion regulation: Within-interaction sequences in early childhood. *Affective Science*, 1–10.

Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

University of East Anglia

Study title: Exploring School Staff Views on the Use of Emotion Coaching within Special Needs Schools for Children and Young People with Learning Difficulties.

Application ID: ETH2324-1540

Dear Hannah,

Your application was considered on 9th April 2024 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st August 2025**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

[Anonymised Name]

Ethics ETH2324-1540 : Miss Hannah Gray

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Documents

Research Poster

Request for School Staff Participants

Exploring School Staff Views on the Use of Emotion Coaching in Special Needs Schools for Children with Learning Difficulties.

My name is Hannah Gray. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. As part of my doctoral research project, I am looking to explore the views of school staff on the use of Emotion Coaching (Gottman et al., 1997) in special schools for children with learning difficulties.

About This Research	This research aims to understand how Emotion Coaching approaches are used and experienced in special school settings for children with learning difficulties. This research aims to support Emotion Coaching use in these settings and improve Educational Psychologist advice and training to meet the needs of special schools and the children and young people who attend them.
What does this study involve?	• You will be invited to complete an online or in-person interview (at the school) with the researcher. • Interviews will take no longer than 1 hour. • You will be asked questions about your experiences of using Emotion Coaching in special needs schools for children with learning difficulties. This could include questions about perceived barriers and facilitators to its use and recommendations for how the approach can be adapted to meet pupil/setting needs.
Can I participate ?	• I am looking to recruit school staff e.g., Teachers, Teaching Assistants, Senior Leadership and Lunchtime Support Assistants who work in special needs schools for children with learning difficulties. • Staff must have received training on and use Emotion Coaching approaches in their work with children and young people. • If you know me professionally or personally please be aware that participation is entirely voluntary. If you choose not to participate this will not affect our relationship. • School staff must be aged 16 plus to participate
Project Lead and Contact Details	• If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact the researcher: Hannah Gray, Trainee Educational Psychologist via email [redacted] by following the **QR code/link** [redacted] Participant Interest Form • Supervisor: [redacted]
Ethical Review Committee/ Application Number	ETH2324-1540

Participant Interest Form

Participant Interest Form

Thank you for taking an interest in participating in this thesis research study.
The study aims to investigate school staff views on the use of Emotion Coaching in special needs schools for children with learning difficulties.
You will be asked to complete an online or in-person interview with the researcher, Hannah to discuss your views on how Emotion Coaching is used and applied within your setting.

If you are happy to participate, please provide your contact details below. A Participant Information Sheet/Consent Form will be emailed to the email address that you provide. Please can you send your completed forms to the researcher via email at [Anonymised Email].
Thank you again for your time and interest.

1. What is your name?

2. What is the name of your school?

3. Please provide an email address that you are happy to be contacted through and for information about this study to be shared to

Presentation Delivered to Emotion Coaching Interest Groups

Exploring School Staff Views on the Use of Emotion Coaching in Special Schools that support Children and Young People with Learning Difficulties.

Hannah Gray

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Aims of the research

- This research hopes to investigate staff views on the use of Emotion Coaching in special schools that support children with learning difficulties.
- This hopes to add to the evidence-base of how the wellbeing of CYP with learning difficulties can be supported through relational, whole-school approaches.
- Research has previously explored how Emotion Coaching is used in SEMH settings. This research hopes to add to that to explore how it is used and adapted in other special school contexts.
- This hopes to provide wider contextual understanding of EC use and aims to inform support recommendations.

Who can participate?

- All school staff e.g., Teachers, Teaching Assistants, Senior Leadership and Lunchtime Support Assistants who work in special needs schools that support children with learning difficulties.
- Special schools can be complex needs schools or learning difficulty specific, so long as they have a focus on supporting CYP with learning difficulties e.g., not SEMH or ASD focused settings.
- Staff must have received training on and use Emotion Coaching approaches in their work with children and young people.
- School staff must be aged 16 plus to participate.

What will the research will involve?

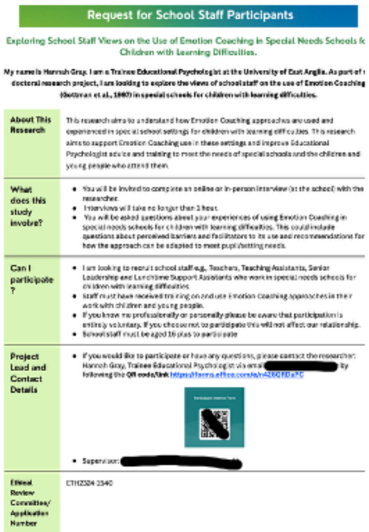
- Staff will be invited to complete an online interview with me via Microsoft Teams.
- Interviews will take no longer that 1 hour.
- Questions will focus on how Emotion Coaching is used and adapted in the setting and barriers and facilitators to its use.

Potential contribution to the research base

- Adding to our understanding of how Emotion Coaching is used in a range of settings e.g., special needs.
- Providing a greater understanding of how the approach can be used in schools specifically to support CYP with learning difficulties.
- Guiding potential recommendations to schools and similar special needs settings.

A request for support

- I would like to recruit some more participants. I will share my research poster with the necessary information.
- If you work in a special school that supports children with learning difficulties, and would like to participate, please email me at [Anonymised] to express your interest.
- If you know of a school that may be interested in participating, please share my poster with their **headteacher** (they are my recruitment gatekeepers) and ask them to contact me at [Anonymised]



Request for School Staff Participants

Exploring School Staff Views on the Use of Emotion Coaching in Special Needs Schools for Children with Learning Difficulties.

My name is Hannah Gray. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. As part of my doctoral research project, I am looking to explore the views of school staff on the use of Emotion Coaching (Gottman et al., 1997) in special schools for children with learning difficulties.

About This Research	This research aims to understand how Emotion Coaching approaches are used and experienced in special school settings for children with learning difficulties. This research aims to support Emotion Coaching use in these settings and improve Educational Psychologist advice and training to meet the needs of special schools and the children and young people who attend them.
What does this study involve?	• You will be invited to complete an online or in-person interview (at the school) with the researcher. • Interviews will take no longer than 1 hour. • You will be asked questions about your experiences of using Emotion Coaching in special needs schools for children with learning difficulties. This could include questions about perceived barriers and facilitators to its use and recommendations for how the approach can be adapted to meet pupil/setting needs.
Can I participate?	• I am looking to recruit school staff e.g., Teachers, Teaching Assistants, Senior Leadership and Lunchtime Support Assistants who work in special needs schools for children with learning difficulties. • Staff must have received training on and use Emotion Coaching approaches in their work with children and young people. • If you know me professionally or personally please be aware that participation is entirely voluntary. If you choose not to participate this will not affect our relationship. • School staff must be aged 16 plus to participate
Project Lead and Contact Details	• If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact the researcher: Hannah Gray, Trainee Educational Psychologist via email [redacted] by following the **QR code/link** [illegible] [redacted] • Supervisor: [redacted]
Ethical Review Committee/ Application Number	ETH2324-2540

Thank you.

Please let me know if you have any questions. You can email me at [Anonymised]

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet/Consent Form

Miss Hannah Gray
Trainee Educational Psychologist

5th April 2024

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: Anonymised Email.
Tel: N/A
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Exploring School Staff Views on the Use of Emotion Coaching in Special Needs Schools for Children with Learning Difficulties.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?
You are invited to take part in a research study investigating school staff views on the use of Emotion Coaching (Gottman et al., 1997) within special needs schools for children with learning difficulties.

This research aims to understand how school staff use Emotion Coaching in special schools for children with learning difficulties. It hopes to explore recommendations for how the approach can be improved or adapted to meet the needs of the staff and children who work in and attend these settings.

Within an interview, you will be asked to describe your experiences of using Emotion Coaching to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people with special educational needs/disabilities (SEND). You will also be asked about your views on the facilitators and barriers to Emotion Coaching use in special needs schools and for your ideas on how the approach can be adapted to better meet pupil needs.

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a staff member, such as a Teacher, Teaching Assistant, Pupil Support Assistant, Lunchtime Support Assistant or a member of the Senior Leadership Team who works at a special needs school. Participants must be aged 16+ and have received Emotion Coaching training from a suitably experienced professional.

You have been invited to participate because your knowledge and experience of using Emotion Coaching within a special school for children with learning difficulties is invaluable to inform emotional wellbeing support for children with SEND. Your contribution will also provide insight into the development of Educational Psychology advice, training, and support in this area.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?
This research is being conducted by Miss Hannah Gray (Anonymised Email) Postgraduate Researcher in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at UEA. This study forms part of her thesis research project.
This will take place under the supervision of Anonymised Name, Lecturer at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning (Anonymised Email)

(3) What will the study involve for me?
You will be asked to volunteer (opt-in) and consent to participate in this study by signing and returning this this consent form to the researcher via email (Anonymised Email).
You will then be invited to attend an interview with me, Hannah either at your special school setting or online over Microsoft Teams.
Interview arrangements will be agreed upon together at a time that is convenient for you.
The interview will take no longer than 1 hour, and a copy of the interview questions will be emailed to you beforehand. This will allow you to prepare your answers if you wish.

Within the interview, you will be asked questions about how you use Emotion Coaching within your special school setting. For example, how often do you use Emotion Coaching? You will also be asked about barriers and facilitators to Emotion Coaching use in special schools and for any recommendations for how the approach can be adapted or improved to better meet the needs of the children or young people that you work with.

I will record our interview on an audio recording device to support with my data analysis. All names and identifying information will be anonymised or pseudonymised as far as possible to protect your confidentiality.

Once I have transcribed your interview, you will have the opportunity to review your transcript prior to publication. You will have 7 working days from the receipt of your transcript to request any amendments, such as factual inaccuracies by contacting the researcher via email (Anonymised Email).

You have the right to withdraw your data from this study (fully or sections from your transcript) at any point up until the point of formal data analysis. After this point, anonymised data will be analysed and reported within the research findings.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?
Interviews are scheduled to take no longer than one hour. Reviewing your transcript is likely to add extra time (approximately 30 minutes).

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?
Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.
Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised and analysed. You can do this by emailing the researcher at: Anonymised Email

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?
You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study, your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?
I hope that you do not feel adversely impacted by participating in this study. However, discussing children's emotional wellbeing and mental health associated with Emotion Coaching could be considered a sensitive topic.
If you feel that discussing these topics has caused you distress in any way, please contact the researcher for a supportive discussion [Anonymised Email] and seek the support of professional organisations, such as:

- RedCross: https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-with-loneliness/wellbeing-support#Wellbeing

- Samaritans: https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/schools/compassion-education/

- Education Support: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/

Please note, that the researcher and the University of East Anglia are not responsible for the support that these external services provide.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?
Contributing to this study will afford the opportunity to discuss and reflect on your own and your setting's emotional wellbeing support practice with a Trainee Educational Psychologist. This is likely to highlight aspects of your practice that are going well and shape your use of Emotion Coaching in the future.

Your participation will also directly contribute to research that will inform recommendations for how Emotion Coaching can be used in special schools for children with learning difficulties. This will support improvements to intervention success for children with SEND.

Your contribution will also support the development of tailored Educational Psychology advice and training for emotional wellbeing support in special school settings.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?
Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but you will not be identified if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?
When you have read this information, the researcher, Hannah Gray (Anonymised Email) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?
You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the Consent Form. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page summary and will be available following thesis submission, marking, and approval.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?
If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact the University of East Anglia at the following addresses:

Researcher
Miss Hannah Gray
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich
NR4 7TJ
Email

Research Supervisor
Name
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich
NR4 7TJ
Email
If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning:

Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Name
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
Norwich
NR4 7TJ
Email

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?
To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?
According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [email]
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at email in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?
If you are happy to take part, please can you complete and return the attached consent form to Hannah via email at Anonymised email

Please keep the letter, information sheet and a second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information
This information was last updated on 5th April 2024.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by an email from the researcher.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study, and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Reviewing transcripts YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐

Reviewing transcripts YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

Appendix D: Draft Interview Questions

Purple text illustrates potential interview question follow-up prompts.

Draft Interview Questions

"I am going to ask you some questions about your use of Emotion Coaching in your special school setting. Please reflect on your practice honestly and do not worry if you are unsure of an answer, just try your best. If you would like to skip a question, please let me know."

- What is your role in the school?
- When did you receive Emotion Coaching Training?
- Who delivered your Emotion Coaching Training?

- Do you feel that Emotion Coaching has been useful/effective in this setting and why?
    - Using examples from your practice can you describe how emotion coaching has been helpful or unhelpful in this setting and why?
    - Can you give examples of aspects of EC that you have found useful or unhelpful in this setting and why?
    - When is Emotion Coaching useful/not useful in this setting and why
    - What has been the impact of EC use on pupils and staff in this setting?

- Who do you feel EC has been useful for? – how has it been useful for them and why do you think that?
    - Do you feel that the usefulness of emotion coaching is different depending on the pupils that you are working with? - Which pupils do you feel that Emotion Coaching works well for or not and why?

- How have pupils responded to the approach? Please provide examples.

- How is Emotion Coaching used on a day-to-day basis in this setting? Please use examples from your practice
    - Is it used as part of a whole school approach?
    - When is it used/not used?
    - Who uses EC most often?
    - To what extent and how are the 5 steps followed?

- If applicable what changes/adaptations have you made to the way that you use Emotion Coaching to support children in this setting? Please provide examples from your practice.
    - Why did you feel that these changes were needed, what challenges did they overcome?
    - To what extent and how do you feel that these changes impacted the success of EC use for children in this setting?

- What factors/approaches are helpful in supporting the use of Emotion Coaching in this setting and why?
    - Training?
    - School environment?
    - Leadership and support?

- What factors/approaches present as challenges to the use of Emotion Coaching in this setting and why?
    - Training?
    - School environment?
    - Leadership and support?

- How could Emotion Coaching use be further supported in this setting?

“Thank you for participating in this interview. Do you have any questions or concerns? Please feel free to email me if you need any support after this interview”.

Appendix E: Participant Debrief Sheet

Debrief Sheet

Thank you for your participation in this interview.

Research Aims
This research aimed to explore school staff's views on the use of Emotion Coaching within special schools for children with learning difficulties. This information will be used to inform future educational psychology advice and training and will support effective Emotion Coaching use in special schools that support children with learning difficulties who may also have additional Special Educational Needs and/or disabilities (SEND).
The findings will also contribute to educational psychology literature base by adding valuable insight into the use of Emotion Coaching to support children and young people with SEND.

Data Protection
The information gathered will be fully anonymised and data will be stored in line with the University of East Anglia's data protection guidelines and UK GDPR guidance.

Contact Details
I hope that you found participating in this interview interesting. However, if you have any questions, concerns, or felt negatively impacted by any part of the research, please contact the researcher (Hannah Gray) via email: [Anonymised]

You may also contact the:

- Research Supervisor (Anonymised) at: Anonymised
- Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning (Anonymised) at: Anonymised
- EDU S-REC School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee at: Anonymised

Further Wellbeing Support
For further wellbeing support, please consult the wellbeing support organisations below:
Please note that the research team are not responsible for the actions or support offered by these services

- https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-with-loneliness/wellbeing-support#Wellbeing
- https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/schools/compassion-education/
- https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/

Right to Withdraw

- You have the right to request amendments to your transcript, e.g., factual inaccuracies within 7 working days of receiving your transcript. Requests can be made by contacting the researcher via email at: [Anonymised].

- You have the right to withdraw your interview data from this study at any point before the data is analysed. Withdrawn data will not be included within the research findings. Please contact the researcher via email [Anonymised] if you wish to withdraw your data.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix F: Example from the Data Analysis Familiarisation Notes

Familiarisation Notes

These notes are based on the procedures outlined in Braun and Clarke (2022) and the question familiarisation prompts, e.g., "what messages were coming through? how did it make me feel?" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.44). I listened back to the interviews once, then transcribed by hand. Byrne (2021) did similar. This allowed me to reflect on individual messages whilst considering how they fit with other participant responses. I then re-read the entire data set and reflected on the experience and knowledge I brought into the analysis and how this could impact my interpretation.

Researcher reflection: I acknowledge that my interpretation of participant views is likely influenced by my pre-conceived ideas about how the approach is used in special school settings like these. I have previously worked as a wellbeing assistant in a special school that supported children with learning difficulties. Therefore, my knowledge of how the approach was used in that setting and the challenges faced will have influenced my understanding and interpretation of participant's views on the subject. Whilst not currently working in this setting, I reflected on my experiences and could empathise with participants about their experiences. This potentially gave richer accounts, as I was seen as within-group rather than external to their views.

Participant 1:

- Participant 1 is an Emotion Coaching Trainer. This appears to drive their passion for speaking about the topic and knowledge about its use in their setting. There is a sense that they are a key driver of Emotion Coaching use in this setting, e.g., they speak about the need for adapting EC to meet needs and seem to have placed this responsibility on themselves, e.g., to make these changes.
- Participant 1 makes sense of the impact of EC in terms of the evidencable data it has produced, e.g., a reduction in the use of physical restraint to manage behaviour. I think this is quite normal/common for schools due to the budget/staffing pressures placed on them and the need to evidence intervention effectiveness to justify their continued use.
- Participant 1 also makes sense of the effectiveness of EC in terms of the adherence to principles underpinned by EC. For example, they describe a success story with a student in terms of achieving co-regulation and building trusting relationships. This indicates that their prior knowledge of what EC should look like has impacted their understanding of what successful EC in this setting looks like.
- Participant 1 holds a view that EC and other wellbeing approaches are more mainstream oriented. They say this in reference to the reliance on language and cognitive abilities, characterised by the approach. This influences their view that EC use must be adapted to meet the needs of the children in the setting. As the researcher, I share this view based on my previous experiences working in these settings and using the approach. Another way I could have interpreted this is that EC use in its raw form is inappropriate in these settings. However, I feel that this is not the essence of what the

participant is saying. They make sense of EC in terms of adaptations being necessary to support its use rather than EC being ineffective in this school.

- Participant 1 makes assumptions that supporting relationships and adapting the approach through visuals to allow students to make choices is key to the success of EC in this setting.
- Participant 1 makes sense that the use of EC is supported by SLT support and colleagues supporting each other e.g., creating ideas.
- Participant 1 defines successful EC use if pupils can eventually use the strategies independently to self-regulate their emotions. This is in line with previous research that co-regulation is required to support self-regulation.
- Participant 1 views effective EC use as been hinged on an understanding of the underlying neuroscience behind emotions and behaviour. I think this is due to their role as a trainer and the training they have been given.
- Participant 1 references psychological theory, e.g., the window of tolerance when describing their use of EC. This demonstrates their understanding of EC principles.

Overall data set familiarisation notes

Key things I noticed when reading through the data:

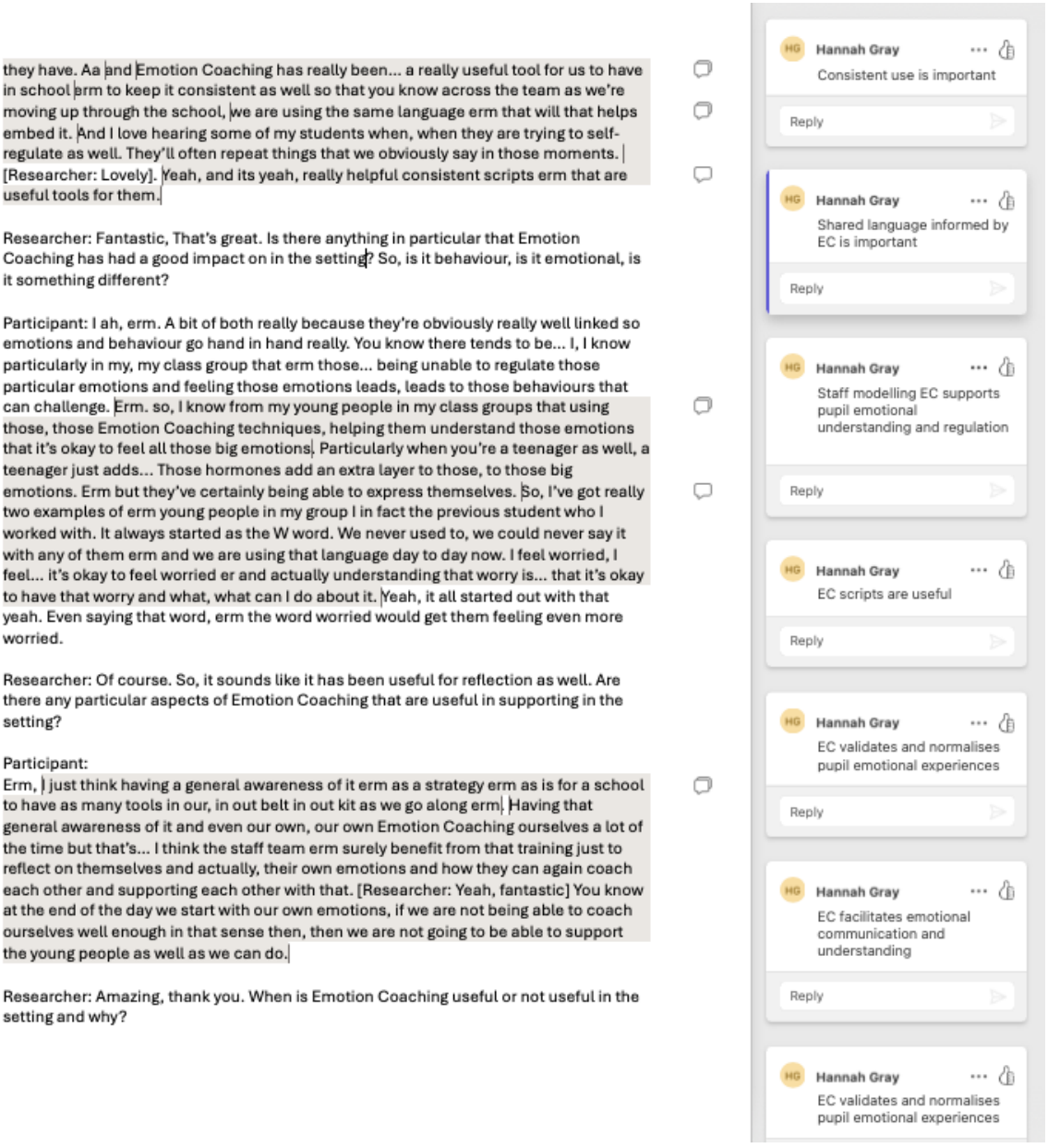
- That the role staff held in the school influenced the depth of understanding of EC and commitment to its use in their settings. For example, EC trainers could talk more confidently about EC use than support staff.
- There is a strong view that EC use is only successful if it is used consistently with the support of the whole school, especially SLT.
- There is a narrative around the approach being too language heavy at times and a need for the approach to be adapted, e.g., with visual elements to support the effective use of EC. From my previous experiences using EC in a special school setting this is something I expected but I was amazed at the creativity demonstrated by some of the participants in how they have achieved this.
- I noticed that there seems to be an assumption that EC and other wellbeing approaches can be applied in the same way in special schools as mainstream schools. However, the participants implied that they are useful but there is a heavy onus on them as individuals to make the adaptations with no mention of external professionals supporting them to do that. Whilst I expected this, it does make me frustrated and feeds my curiosity into what the role of the EP may be to support staff with this.
- However, there is a narrative that adaptations are just part of staff's role in special schools. They are the experts of supporting their students individually.
- Many participants mentioned combining EC with other approaches, especially Zones of Regulation. At times I felt frustrated because it was difficult to tell if some participants were still talking about EC but overall, I think this does tell me something about the use in these settings. As one participant mentioned, maybe they aren't giving interventions enough time to work or maybe they really are complementary.
- Overall, all participants appear to be enthusiastic about the use of EC in their settings. Although clear feelings of frustration around the lack of SLT support, staff turnaround and refresher training come through.

Central ideas coming through
Consistency
Flexibility
Adaptations are required
Impacted by student’s verbal abilities.
Refreshed and continuous training is required due to high staff turnaround.
Used alongside other approaches, e.g., Zones of Regulation.
SLT support

Appendix G: Examples from the Coding Phase

Example of a Coded Transcript

All participant interview transcripts were coded manually by the researcher using the "comments" function on Microsoft Word.



they have. Aa and Emotion Coaching has really been... a really useful tool for us to have in school erm to keep it consistent as well so that you know across the team as we're moving up through the school, we are using the same language erm that will that helps embed it. And I love hearing some of my students when, when they are trying to self-regulate as well. They'll often repeat things that we obviously say in those moments. [Researcher: Lovely]. Yeah, and its yeah, really helpful consistent scripts erm that are useful tools for them.

Researcher: Fantastic, That's great. Is there anything in particular that Emotion Coaching has had a good impact on in the setting? So, is it behaviour, is it emotional, is it something different?

Participant: I ah, erm. A bit of both really because they're obviously really well linked so emotions and behaviour go hand in hand really. You know there tends to be... I, I know particularly in my, my class group that erm those... being unable to regulate those particular emotions and feeling those emotions leads, leads to those behaviours that can challenge. Erm. so, I know from my young people in my class groups that using those, those Emotion Coaching techniques, helping them understand those emotions that it's okay to feel all those big emotions. Particularly when you're a teenager as well, a teenager just adds... Those hormones add an extra layer to those, to those big emotions. Erm but they've certainly being able to express themselves. So, I've got really two examples of erm young people in my group I in fact the previous student who I worked with. It always started as the W word. We never used to, we could never say it with any of them erm and we are using that language day to day now. I feel worried, I feel... it's okay to feel worried er and actually understanding that worry is... that it's okay to have that worry and what, what can I do about it. Yeah, it all started out with that yeah. Even saying that word, erm the word worried would get them feeling even more worried.

Researcher: Of course. So, it sounds like it has been useful for reflection as well. Are there any particular aspects of Emotion Coaching that are useful in supporting in the setting?

Participant:
Erm, I just think having a general awareness of it erm as a strategy erm as is for a school to have as many tools in our, in out belt in out kit as we go along erm. Having that general awareness of it and even our own, our own Emotion Coaching ourselves a lot of the time but that's... I think the staff team erm surely benefit from that training just to reflect on themselves and actually, their own emotions and how they can again coach each other and supporting each other with that. [Researcher: Yeah, fantastic] You know at the end of the day we start with our own emotions, if we are not being able to coach ourselves well enough in that sense then, then we are not going to be able to support the young people as well as we can do.

Researcher: Amazing, thank you. When is Emotion Coaching useful or not useful in the setting and why?

Hannah Gray
Consistent use is important
Reply

Hannah Gray
Shared language informed by EC is important
Reply

Hannah Gray
Staff modelling EC supports pupil emotional understanding and regulation
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC scripts are useful
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC validates and normalises pupil emotional experiences
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC facilitates emotional communication and understanding
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC validates and normalises pupil emotional experiences

and we compared data from prior to using Emotion Coaching to after, and we found that our rate of physical intervention dropped by 50%. [Researcher: Oh wow] So, it was huge, erm sort of a huge thing for us. Erm staff appeared unaware just how much they were using it. Erm, they thought that it was going to be very rigid, that they had to follow all 5 steps, until they realised that actually they were just using it in their day-to-day conversations. It's that idea of validation, I think was the one that staff really got on board with 'cause it's easy to tell a child. Well, actually, yeah, I felt this way. I've done this and just giving them that moment of validation has been really helpful. So, we, we use it every day. It's up on all of our notice boards in the class. Staff have got a little mini checklist on the back of their lanyards that they can use as well with the five steps. [Researcher: Oh, great]. And we've done some other coaching in school as well. I'm an Emotion Coach, Practitioner, Practitioner, Trainer, sorry. So, I can train staff, not just here, but within our Academy erm as well. And yeah, it, it has been very useful, and I think it has taken a while to embed. Like with any new initiative, it's taken a while to leave behind the behaviourist thought on, for every action there should be a sanction. Erm and

Why do you think that has been difficult or has taken more time than perhaps you expected?

Participant: When... a lot of staff that come into Special Ed are from a mainstream background and you have very different behavioural policies and I think just from my experience, I spent 9 1/2 years in mainstream. [Researcher: Yeah], and I vividly remember being told erm that I had a difficult class, or you know, and and it's just in your head. The labels that we use with children were very... They were banded around as if they meant nothing, you always heard the word "deviant" or "disruptive" or those negative connotations and I know through my studies in in labelling theory just the impact that that can have on children. So actually, when you're labelling emotions rather than the person, you actually change the the connotation, and you change that feeling for the child as well. [Researcher: Yeah], I think that's been really helpful but it's understanding that. Erm so, through Emotion Coaching you, you do shift from that behaviourist theory to a more humanistic approach, and I think that's what Special Ed does very, very well. There has to be that understanding that all behaviour is communication [Researcher: Absolutely]. And what it what is it that the child is trying to communicate, especially for our children who are non-verbal, that needs to be sort of really key in a staff member's mind. Erm and children do get angry. They get angry across any setting. Understanding why and then having the tools to support them, to regulate, I think that's really important.

Researcher: Yeah, that's fantastic thank you for sharing that. If I was to ask you to sum up the impact that it has had, perhaps on staff or perhaps on pupils as well, what would you say that is? What was the impact?

Participant: It's It's really positive so one of the key things that you learn through Emotion Coaching is the idea of co-regulation. If a... If an adult is not regulated themselves, they can't help to regulate a child. And that has come through in our sort of analysis of erm when there has been a dispute or a fallout between an adult and a child.

Hannah Gray
Visual reminders of EC steps are used
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC Practitioners train beyond their initial setting
Reply

Hannah Gray
Staff reluctance to shift perspectives/practice is a barrier to EC use
Reply

Hannah Gray
Behaviour principles/ language in special schools are more in line with EC than mainstream.
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC shifted behaviour management from behaviourist to relational
Reply

Hannah Gray
EC aids the understanding of behaviour as communication.
Reply

Hannah Gray
Helps staff understand pupil emotions and behaviours and

Examples of Tracking Coding Iterations

All the iterations/changes to the initial codes, e.g., code names or assimilations were tracked on a Microsoft Excel Document.

Ref N'o	Participant ID	Example quotes	Iteration 2 (coding)	Iteration 3 (coding)
1	P1	So, for us, it's been all about the adaptations that we've made so we won't use the kind of traditional EC scripts. We might use symbols or the communication boards, or the zones of regulations. It's just tailoring it to our specific children.	Adapted to meet the needs of pupils in the setting.	EC use is adapted to meet the needs of pupils in the setting.
2	P9	Um verbal children that can look like er going for a walk around our school field. So doing a lap and having those conversations and having that verbal conversation that erm you know that that works really well. With your non-verbal erm children with multiple difficulties, you can't just walk around doing a lap and sort of discussing what happened	Adapted to meet CYP communication needs	EC use adapted to meet CYP communication needs
			Adapted to meet CYP cognitive needs	Omitted
3	P1	It's been a lot... lot of work and a lot of kind of "how are we going to adapt this, so that its effective for our children?"	Adapting EC for pupils in the setting adds extra workload	Adapting EC for pupils in the setting adds extra workload
4	P6	So, we've found you know our young people are able to erm kind of talk about how they're feeling more, instead of just like lashing out or throwing a chair or hitting or whatever erm. They're able to like point to how they're feeling, erm what they think they might need, and, and that types of stuff.	Adaptations to support emotional communication	Visuals used alongside to support pupil communication of emotions/needs
5	P2	Well because, but because I worked there when I went to learn it, it doesn't seem like adaptations to me. But that's why [Emotion Coaching UK Trainer] is always saying, "oh, can you speak to this person? or can you send me that?" Because for me it's just normal, it's not adaptations. That's how I do it.	Special school staff are experts at adapting EC	Embedded and comes naturally in practice.
6	P1	Some of them prefer it to be less sort of scripted. So, I'll go in and go right, "how are we feeling today? or what's it now?" And it's that, they kind of enjoy that banter. So, it's kind of trying to tailor things to them so you're not triggering them but you're still getting it in there	Tailored to individual pupils.	EC use needs to be tailored to pupil needs/interests
7	P5	It's not suitable for everybody because it is quite wordy and quite often when children are in crisis or approaching crisis, escalating behaviour, really in this setting and with this cohort sort of stripping language back is more beneficial. But I think the ethos is still relevant like sitting in with it and sitting in the feeling and sort of co-regulating. You know, it might be without words, but I think the facial expressions and the sort of gestural expressions would be the same.	Simplified/language minimised to meet needs	EC Simplified and language minimised to meet pupil needs
8	P1	So, it's, it's really, you can see that it's been effective. We've got the evidence base to back it up, if that makes sense.	Useful/effective in the setting.	Useful/effective in the setting
9	P1	So, I think what we've got at the minute is working really well and I'm hoping just to kind of continue with that.	Current EC use works well in the setting	Useful/effective in the setting
39	P7	Erm it's in our behaviour policy, its, it's just everywhere once you realise what's going on if that makes sense.	Incorporated into school behaviour policy.	Incorporated into school behaviour policy.
40	P5	I think it's, particularly when erm, you know a behaviour is occurring, you know a sad behaviour or an angry behaviour. You know it's really useful to sort of... rather than saying "stop, get down" or "feet on the floor" or whatever, it addressing the reason why they're behaving in that way. Erm, you know the like "behaviour is communication" thing erm can really be sort of exemplified through Emotion Coaching because you can say like "I can see that you're quite angry because you know you're trying to stand on the table and throw items at me."	EC aids the understanding of behaviour as communication.	EC aids the understanding of behaviour as communication.
41		omitted no quote	EC supports behaviour management	omitted
42	P5	You know it's really useful to sort of... rather than saying "stop, get down" or "feet on the floor" or whatever, it addressing the reason why they're behaving in that way	EC addresses the reason for behaviour.	EC aids the understanding of behaviour as communication.
43	P6	For me, the main one is things like you know the physical interventions coming down by 70.9% that was like, that was huge, kind of as soon as it was introduced, and that came right down, and everyone was just like really in awe from that really and that's	EC reduced the need for physical intervention	EC reduced the need for physical intervention
44	P8	Emotion Coaching has really been... a really useful tool for us to have in school erm to keep it consistent as well so that you know across the team as we're moving up through the school, we are using the same language erm that will that helps embed it.	Consistent use is important	Consistent use is important
45	P5	it happens a lot you know throughout the day.	Used consistently throughout the day	Used consistently throughout the day
46	P2	Erm children who are really pre-verbal, it is harder erm, especially if they've got complex needs which means that even kind of indicating is hard.	EC use is impacted by CYP communication needs	EC use is impacted by CYP communication needs
47	P7	Erm... It, again, it does require a certain level of verbalisation and cognitive understanding to be able to access it fully.	EC use is impacted by CYP communication and cognitive difficulties	EC appropriateness is impacted by CYP communication and cognitive difficulties
48	P9	Some of our children's needs mean that we we need to do a bit more work with them, certainly working	EC use is impacted by pupil needs	Omitted
49	P5	I think it's a really, it's a useful teaching tool in terms of emotional education for verbal, you know verbal children on the autism spectrum specifically because it's an interaction that's an intervention. It's an opportunity to say, you know... talk through what those emotions are.	EC is useful for verbal students with the cognitive capacity to understand emotions	EC is useful for verbal students with the cognitive capacity to understand emotions

Appendix H: Examples from the Theme Development Phase

Initial Theme Development Completed by Hand.

The researcher printed off the code labels and organised them into initial themes that had a unifying central concept. They later further sub-divided these codes into sub-themes where they felt that this was necessary.

Example Themes and Grouped Codes.

The researcher organised the codes of their proposed themes within a Microsoft Word document. This allowed them to flexibly move codes around and check for within-theme and overall coherence.

Emotion Coaching is embedded in school life

Embedded and comes naturally in practice.

EC is used alongside other wellbeing approaches.

Used daily in practice.

EC is useful for everyone in the setting

Incorporated into school behaviour policy.

Consistent use is important

Used consistently throughout the day

Whole-school training/use supports effectiveness.

Used as a whole-school approach

EC is used "in the moment" of emotional dysregulation.

EC is used for all pupils in the setting.

Organisational prioritisation impacts use

Shared language informed by EC is important

EC Shifted behaviour management from behaviourist to relational.

Senior Leadership support impacts use

Time to embed EC is required to support its effectiveness

EC use has evolved in the setting over time

EC alignment with school ethos supports use

EC has been written in to school strategic goals to improve behaviour and needs regulation

All staff use emotion coaching in some way

Table of Themes, Codes, and Relevant Quotes

The researcher created a table of their proposed themes which listed all of the corresponding codes. The researcher then selected data extracts to illustrate each code that they felt were meaningful to the participants, the research question, and the central organising concept. An example from this table is provided below.

Theme	Code	Ppt	Data Extracts
A way of school life	Embedded and comes naturally in practice.	6	It was really really good, and I think now it's just kind of so embedded that people use it without even realising they're using it. So, it's definitely something I would, I would definitely champion for.
		2	I mean there are some people I would say who have really, really taken it on board and it's in... you know it runs through like a golden thread through all of their interactions
		6	But the staff that I've been using it since we introduced it kind of just do it without even thinking, it's just a daily just a daily thing.
	EC is used alongside other wellbeing approaches.	8	Erm, we use it alongside Zones of Regulation. At the moment, that tends to be a big, big driver within this erm. Obviously, things from our Team Teach training that we, that we, that we use as well. So, some of the strategies that we, we worked on in there, certainly, they work quite well and even looking at sort of the trauma-informed practise that we've had, so we had some training on trauma,
		7	er we talk about it in other trainings as well. So, when we do... I deliver Team Teach training, so when we deliver Team Teach training we talk about how Zones of Regulation, Emotion Coaching, Thrive, Team Teach all interlink together to help people understand behaviour. It's not er a one thing approach if that makes sense.
		1	So, we use them alongside the zones of regulation, alongside the emotion coaching.
	Used daily in practice.	1	So it is, it is, absolutely adopted into daily practice throughout the day.
		8	I can't say how many times a day 'cause it's quite a lot. [Researcher: Yeah?] Yeah, again yeah. Its erm I certainly use them daily
		9	Yeah, so, it's part of our daily rhetoric now.
	Used consistently throughout the day	1	So, it is used across the board 'cause our children they're very much peaks and troughs all day. So, it is used consistently throughout the day.
		2	So, it's used kind of throughout, at the beginning of the day. It' s used in reflection as an STR, it's used in any calm zones, it's used...
		5	It happens a lot you know throughout the day.

Appendix I: Examples from the Refining and Writing-Up Phases

Ideas for Theme Groups and Definitions

RQ: What are staff views on the use of Emotion Coaching in special schools that support CYP with learning difficulties?

Theme: 1 Emotion Coaching has become a way of school life

Description – EC is used as a whole-school approach consistently within daily practice. School staff feel that it is embedded within their interactions, policy, ethos, has evolved over time, and is used alongside their existing wellbeing approaches. Staff identified that the extent that EC is embedded within school life is influenced by senior/organisational leadership support and whole-school training.

Theme 2: Emotion Coaching has a positive impact on pupils

Description – Overall, staff felt that EC has supported pupil's emotional wellbeing and regulation. They felt the use of EC supported pupils to feel better understood which supported relationships with peers and staff. They felt that EC supported pupils to communicate their needs, e.g., both emotional and physical, which allowed them to be met, Staff also felt that EC has shifted behaviour management from behaviourist to relational, e.g., resulting in fewer incidents and a reduction in physical restraint.

Subtheme 1: Supports emotional understanding and regulation

Subtheme 2: Facilitates relationship development

Subtheme 3: Supports pupils to communicate their needs

Subtheme 4: Transformed behaviour and its management

Theme 3: Emotion Coaching supports staff to develop emotionally responsive practice

Description: Staff described that EC supported them to have a framework and confidence in supporting pupils relationally within challenging emotional situations and an awareness of their own emotional needs and the need to collaborate with colleagues to facilitate this. They felt that the high staff turnover in special schools and staff reluctance to shift perspectives acted as a barrier to this development.

Subtheme 1: EC provides a framework to improve staff confidence in managing emotional situations relationally.

Subtheme 2: EC improves staff awareness/regulation of their own emotions

Barriers and facilitators to this are the lack of external support reluctance to shift perspectives, and staff collaboration.

Theme 4: The usefulness/appropriateness of EC in the setting is influenced by pupil needs and learning difficulties.

Description: Staff felt that EC was not always effective, accessible, or appropriate for the students within the setting. Staff highlighted that EC has a strong reliance on language that is often abstract and requires a level of cognitive ability to understand and reflect on emotions that can be difficult for CYP with communication and cognitive difficulties. They also felt that it can be difficult for CYP who have experienced trauma or who have a fixed emotional understanding.

Theme 5: Emotion Coaching is adapted to effectively support pupils' needs within the setting.

Description: Staff explained that EC use is naturally adapted and tailored to meet the needs of the pupils in the setting. For example, EC language is simplified and accompanied by visuals to support communication needs and steps are flexibly applied, e.g., problem-solving is often skipped, returned to later, or supported with visuals, to support its usefulness and accessibility.

Subtheme 1: Visuals are used alongside EC to support communication and understanding.

Subtheme 2: Flexibility in how EC steps are followed.

Subtheme 3: Simplified language and broader EC principles used in special schools.

Barriers and facilitators EC training is mainstream oriented so training on how to tailor it for students with SEND will be helpful. Adaptations add extra workload.

Theme 6: Emotion Coaching is well aligned to the practice and ethos of special schools.

Description: School staff felt that the practice and ethos of special schools aligned more closely with Emotion Coaching principles than mainstream settings which supports its use. For example, the prioritisation of emotional support, greater staff availability, relational behaviour principles, and a more holistic understanding of pupil needs.

Theme 7: Capacity restrictions impact the use of Emotion Coaching in the setting

Description: Staff identified that EC use was impacted by a lack of time, space, staff availability, and training capacity. For example, they explained that there is not always time to use the approach whilst teaching. They said that there is not enough

time to train new staff and refresh training, which creates gaps due to the high staff turnaround in special schools and that a lack of physical space to have emotionally responsive conversations restricts EC use in the setting.

Subtheme 1: Lack of time and staff availability.

Subtheme 2: Lack of space.

Subtheme 3: High staff turnaround in special schools and a lack of refresher training.

A Visual Thematic Map to Illustrate the Refinement of Themes and Theme Order.