Teachers' responses to children in emotional distress: A study of co-regulation in the first year of primary school in Norway

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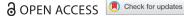Elin Marie Frivold Kostøl and David Lansing Cameron ![ORCID]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-grade teachers respond to pupils in emotional distress within the framework of co-regulation. Co-regulation in this context refers to an adult–child interactive process that supports children in learning to regulate their emotions. We conducted focus group interviews at four primary schools in southern Norway using video clips as prompts to initiate discussions about children's emotions and teachers' responses to them. Findings indicate that teachers' use many of the skills indicative of co-regulation, such as providing affirmation of children's emotions and modelling self-regulation. However, discussions within two of the focus groups were strongly dominated by attention to pragmatic solutions to resolve the conflicts as quickly as possible, which may reduce opportunities for co-regulation. This position poses a challenge with respect to the need for warm, trusting relationships based on an expectation that young pupils' emotional needs will be met.

Introduction

Emotions are one of the most important and profound aspects of the human experience, giving meaning to our existence and deepening and enriching our everyday lives (Ortony, Clore, and Collins 1988; Passer and Smith 2008; Solomon 2007). Yet, how we relate to other people and navigate our social world depends on our ability to understand and regulate our emotions (Siegel 1999). According to Gross, emotional self-regulation concerns the manner in which people control and influence 'the emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them' (1998, 271). Thus, emotional self-regulation involves efforts to maintain or adapt, either by increasing or decreasing, the experience and expression of emotions (Kim, Bigman, and Tamir 2015).

Research in the area of self-regulation is extensive and there is considerable variability regarding the different theoretical approaches and methods used to depict the concept (Vohs and Baumeister 2004). It is nonetheless clear that the ability to control one's emotions develops from an early age: the younger the child, the more limited is his or her ability to handle emotional stimulation and its physical expression. In recent years, there has emerged an increased interest in the relational processes surrounding the development of emotional self-regulation. This research has focussed principally on the dimensions and forms of interaction that occur between the developing child and parents or other significant caregivers in the early years of life and, in particular, how adults seek to understand the child's signals and attempt to accommodate them.

From this perspective, competent self-regulation develops progressively through the child's interactions with caregivers as part of a multifaceted process termed, co-regulation (Guo et al. 2015). In recognising and identifying children's emotional expressions, and then responding to these experiences, parents and other caregivers help to guide the child towards strategies to modulate emotional distress within a relational context (Guo et al. 2015). In other words, co-regulation comprises a set of supportive and reciprocatory interactions between the child and caring adults. As part of this process, 'support, coaching, and modelling are provided to facilitate a child's ability to understand, express and modulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviour'. (Murray et al. 2015, 3)

Many of the elements involved in co-regulation have been clarified through research on the mother–child relationship (Licata, Kristen-Antonow, and Sodian 2016). Through the use of voice, movement, imitation and reaction, the mother supports and calms the infant child, contributing to the development of emotional regulation. According to Pianta (1999), this early connection between mother and infant lays the foundation for children to gain greater awareness of their emotions and slowly learn to interpret and navigate them. Indeed, as van der Kolk (1996) points out, one of the primary duties of parents is to guide and comfort children through periods of emotional arousal (e.g. anger, frustration, joy), thereby teaching them strategies to respond to these emotions. Over time, the child gradually develops from nearly complete reliance on parental co-regulation towards 'independent' emotional self-regulation (Hirschler-Guttenberg et al. 2015).

Supportive co-regulation is built on creating a safe and secure adult–child relationship such that children learn to trust that their caregivers will help them through stressful situations and emotions (Fox 1998). Evans and Porter (2009) examined the development and stability of co-regulation patterns between 101 mothers and their children. The researchers found that, over time, these patterns transformed from unilateral to more symmetrical in nature. Infants who demonstrated secure attachment patterns achieved higher symmetric co-regulation with their mothers at 6 months of age, while children with less secure attachment showed more unilateral interaction patterns. In addition, symmetrical co-regulation was positively associated with the mental and psychomotor development of children at 9 months of age. These findings suggest that early patterns of mother–child attachment are important for co-regulation and emotional development (Evans and Porter 2009).

In addition to the central role that parents play in the emotional development of children, it is important to recognise the child's own active contribution to the interaction (Guo et al. 2015). Decades of research have established that from infancy onward, parent–child interaction is a two-way system where both parties are shaped by each other's emotional state and corresponding behaviours and signals (e.g. Johnson et al. [1991]; Tronick et al. [1978]). Evidence of this mutual regulatory system indicates that already from an early age, infants have an innate ability to change their emotional states in response to parental behaviour. Beyond research in the area of co-regulation between infants and their parents, a number of studies have also considered the co-regulation of teachers and caregivers in preschool settings (e.g. Silkenbeumer et al. [2016]; Whitebread [2015]).

For example, Silkenbeumer, Schiller, and Kärtner (2018) analyzed video recorded observations of socio-emotionally challenging situations among fifteen children in preschool (2-5 years) in order to investigate teachers' co-regulation strategies and where teachers focussed their attention. Teachers were also interviewed about their co-regulation strategies to gain insight into their awareness of the approaches that they used. Their findings suggest that preschool teachers tend to prefer activity-related co-regulation strategies (e.g. directions, response to behaviour) over approaches that specifically address children's emotions in stressful situations (e.g. positive affect, physical soothing). The authors point out that although co-regulation strategies that do not directly relate to emotions can be effective in regulating emotions (for example, by helping the child to manage the situation), these approaches do not provide children with a greater awareness of their own or others' emotions, and may not be as effective at improving children's emotional self-regulation in the long run (Silkenbeumer, Schiller, and Kärtner 2018).

While these and similar studies provide a picture of parent–child co-regulation and the roles of adult caregivers in early childhood settings, little is known about the process and features of co-

regulation between teachers and pupils once children have entered primary school. In part, this may be due to the fact that attention often shifts towards academic skills once children enter compulsory education (Jacobs and Gross 2014). However, students' emotional lives are certainly just as important as their academic performance in school. As Graham and Taylor (2014) argue, students' achievements must be seen in relation to their emotions and the impact that they have on school experiences. Given the lack of co-regulation research in the context of primary school, a greater understanding is needed about how teachers perceive and respond to the emotions of their students in the early years of compulsory education. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how first-grade teachers respond to pupils in emotional distress within the framework of co-regulation.

The Norwegian educational context

Compulsory education in Norway consists of primary school (1st-7th grade) and lower secondary school (8th-10th grade). The vast majority of the nearly 3000 primary schools in Norway are public, while less than 1% of schools in the country are private (Statistics Norway 2019). Children begin school the year that they turn six and automatic promotion to the next grade is standard practice throughout compulsory school. There is little formal evaluation in primary school in terms of final examinations or standardised assessments, and no marks are given prior to lower secondary school (grade 8). In the early years (grades 1-4), there is a legal requirement of a maximum of 15 students per teacher (Norwegian Education Act 2018). With few exceptions, both girls and boys are educated together. Gender equality and respect for diversity are considered major goals of educational policy, and the education system is based on the principles of inclusive, equitable, and adapted education for all (Udir 2016). In this context, the social as well as emotional aspects of the learning environment are emphasized. Within the national curriculum, health and life skills are interdisciplinary topics, which deal with, among other things, children's handling of emotions, thoughts, and relationships (Udir 2020).

Methods

Participants

Four focus group interviews were conducted with 13 educational professionals working in the first grade at four primary schools in southern Norway. Whereas most of the participants were primary school teachers, in three of the groups, paraprofessionals (i.e. teacher assistants) also participated in the interviews. The schools had student populations of approximately 120 pupils and varied from 1 to 3 classes per grade level. Focus group comprised between 2 and 5 participants (Table 1). Participants were between 20 and 40 years of age and, with one exception, were all women. Participants were recruited via a combination of email and telephone requests to the principals of 21 schools in the region. Four of these schools agreed to participate. Principals of the four schools then assisted in putting us in contact with staff and scheduling the interviews.

Our intention was not to explore variation across individual participants. Rather, we were interested in identifying the most prevalent themes across all schools and groups. These themes can be understood as 'group opinion' or the product of collective interactions (Bohnsack 2004). While opinions may vary on the basis of educational background, paraprofessionals nonetheless have a

Table 1. Focus group composition.

	Focus group 1 School A	Focus group 2 School B	Focus group 3 School C	Focus group 4 School D
Teachers	3*	2	3	1
Paraprofessionals	2	1	–	1
Total per group	**5**	**3**	**3**	**2**

*One of the teachers in focus group 1 was a special educator.

major role in teaching activities and will therefore face similar challenges with regards to supporting students through co-regulation (Viktorin 2018). For the sake of simplicity, we use the term 'teachers' throughout the presentation and discussion of findings in this article.

Video stimulation

Two different video sequences were shown as a starting point for the interviews. Descriptions of the videos are provided in Table 2. The videos were intended to stimulate the participants to reflect on and discuss their practices and beliefs about hypothetical situations concerning a complex topic that is difficult to describe directly (Jewitt 2012; Lyle 2003). The idea was to get as close as possible to everyday practice and encourage reflections about these practices. More important, the goal was to expose informants to the types of behaviour where co-regulation could be found in everyday situations.

The two video sequences (Table 2) were taken from videos selected via an extensive internet search. Both were identified as being publicly available under a Creative Commons license, where the creators give permission to others to share and make use of their videos in non-profit endeavours. Several criteria were used in selecting the videos. It was important that the video sequence: (a) involved children who were of an age that was close to the first year of school (6-7 years), (b) did not reveal how adults responded to children's emotional distress, and (c) portrayed a straightforward series of events or interactions leading up to the moment in which emotional distress was expressed. In other words, it was important that the scene move relatively quickly to the situation where the students' emotions were clearly visible.

Interviews

All of the interviews took place at the teachers' respective schools. After watching each video, participants were asked broad questions drawn from a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was derived from a review of research and theory pertaining to co-regulation, an effort to connect to the content of the two videos, and the study's overriding research question (Saariaho et al. 2018). The interview guide included the following topics: (a) immediate feelings or response, (b) reflections on the students' emotional state, (c) approaches to the situation, (d) conceptualising co-regulation. As the interviews were semi-structured, room was provided to adapt questions and follow the course of the conversation when it led in other relevant directions (Creswell 2014).

Analysis

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcripts together with field notes taken after each interview comprised the data for our analysis. The transcripts were first reviewed several times by both authors to gain a general picture of the opinions and experiences of the participants. The next part of the analysis concerned the structuring of data (Barbour 2014). This process involved exploring different themes and determining codes with a focus on finding meaning with

Table 2. Description of video prompts used in the focus group interviews.

Video sequence 1: The events in Video 1 take place in a classroom. The pupils are sitting at their desks, everyone is quiet and concentrating on a sheet of paper in front of them, giving the indication that this is a test situation or similarly important independent activity. A boy in the front of the room appears frustrated. His facial expressions and body language suggest that he is struggling with the tasks. He abruptly crosses an answer and moves on to the next problem. Suddenly, he moans and throws his pencil to the floor. He tears the sheet of paper in two and cries out with his arms crossed, 'I can't do it!'

Video sequence 2: The scene in Video 2 takes place outside where three girls are playing with some large boxes. Two of the girls are actively building with the boxes while the third girl is on the sidelines watching the other two. After a short while, the two girls who were building together disagree about how to set up the boxes. One of the girls turns away and says that she would rather build by herself. The other girl reacts by saying with a strained voice, 'Can't you help me a little?' The third (observer) girl then comes in and tries to help. The girl who had stated that she wanted to build by herself is now left watching the other two and begins to cry.

respect to qualitative differences and similarities among the participants' responses (Creswell 2014). The first author developed the initial system of coding, in which a wide range of themes were identified. The second author then reviewed these themes and assessed their consistency with the statements that were included, attempting to identify the essential ideas, or broader themes, that ran across the four focus group interviews. We then discussed each of these broader themes until we were both in agreement.

Findings and discussion

Findings are presented under three overriding themes that came to the forefront in our analysis: (a) teachers' emotional self-awareness, (b) acknowledging pupils and their emotions (c) pragmatic approaches to the problem.

Teachers' emotional self-awareness

Several factors appear to play a role in determining whether co-regulation occurs in teachers' handling of pupils' emotional distress. The first of these involves teachers' regulation of their own emotions as an initial step in the co-regulation process, which is seldom a conscious effort (Guo et al. 2015). A participant at school B described this challenge:

It may be that there are things that I am not so aware of, but that I really react to the same way every time, but that I still don't really have the feel for […] and that is when I get annoyed or angry (Participant 2, School B).

Findings suggest that teachers were aware of the risks of their emotional reactions (e.g. anger, frustration) becoming 'automatic' and, in a manner, steering their behaviour. Thus, they highlighted the importance of remaining calm or 'holding back' their own emotions as an essential part of dealing with children's distress:

After a while, when you have had students like this, you get better at thinking, 'at the very least, I can't get annoyed.' […] Because you could easily be frustrated the first time, [or] the second time you experience it because you are not used to having had children who react like this. But after you have had students like this, you see that I just have to stay calm. Because it doesn't help anything that we start … or that I, as an adult, get irritated and am, like, 'You can't do that! We don't do that here!' (Participant 2, School C).

As Gillespie (2015) points out, caregivers must learn positive ways to manage intense emotions. When teachers are calm, they are in a much better position to provide support and help children manage their feelings.

Staying calm in the face of children's emotional distress was further placed in the context of professionalism. 'You have to be professional when you are at work' (Participant 2, School D). Teachers argued that they need to keep their emotions at a distance in order to limit possible negative influences on themselves and the situation:

It happens a lot. You get pulled in all directions all the time. So, you end up quickly reacting by getting annoyed, even if you don't want to (Participant 1, School B).

Strategies were used such as 'counting to ten' and 'taking deep breaths' together with trying to think rationally about the situation. Strategies such as these can help teachers to manage the situation, despite their own emotional discontent, while they seek to comfort the child. In fact, Keller et al. (2014) found that teachers suppressed or 'faked' their emotions in a third of all lessons. However, in order to be able to understand and regulate emotions, in terms of maintaining and developing supportive relationships with students, teaching requires a person's attention and awareness (Chang and Davis 2009). Thus, it is important that adults are aware of their emotions and practice self-regulation in order to achieve positive co-regulation with children (Gillespie 2015).

At the same time, several participants noted that one's state of mind and their physical or emotional form on a given day can play a significant role in how they deal with upset pupils and

stressful situations. They noted that factors such as hunger, fatigue, and general health can influence one's level of patience and response:

> Some days you can deal with it ... it has a bit to do with your form that day, too, you know. Sometimes you can cope better with the students than other days, that's for sure (Participant 2, School A).

> ... whether it happens at two thirty or if it happens at nine in the morning also plays a role. If you're stressed out, it's very easy to get annoyed (Participant 2, school B).

Faced with children in emotional distress, it is natural that adults may also experience an undesired emotional response, such as frustration or anger. Under these circumstances, adults' self-regulation is essential if they are to assist the child in gaining control over his emotions (Bath 2008). From this perspective, teachers' emphasis on professionalism and 'holding back' their emotions may reflect positive self-regulation skills that encourage children's emotional growth. Alternatively, teachers perceived need to distance themselves from their own feelings may actually limit their engagement in co-regulation with children.

Acknowledging pupils and their emotions

The second theme reflects teachers' efforts in the realm of emotional co-regulation by acknowledging children's feelings and helping them to find out more about why they might feel the way that they do. In reference to the first video sequence, a participant offered the following example:

> I often try to meet them face-to-face with the feeling that they have right then ... 'Now I see that you are upset, what happened?' and then she tells me, and I might say, 'You know what, I see that you're sad ... .' (Participant 3, School C).

Consistent with research on co-regulation, this approach to 'meeting' the child was described as having a calming effect on children. By communicating their acknowledgement of the child's emotions with a soft and calm voice, adults demonstrate empathy for the emotionally troubled child and provide her with the safety and peace needed to regain control of her feelings (Bath 2008). One teacher described the effect that this approach can have on students:

> I actually see it work if there are children who are upset […] When you say, 'Yeah, but it's OK to be sad, you're allowed to miss your mom.' […] If you do that, you actually see that it's, like, ... it can slow them down a bit when you say it like that (Participant 3, School B).

Individual pupil characteristics also influenced how teachers sought to address their students' emotional well-being. Across all four focus groups, participants reported that close relationships to children and knowledge about their needs were important. This finding is consistent with assumptions about co-regulation and individual temperament, including variability in the intensity of emotions that different children experience and, of course, their innate ability to self-regulate (Berger 2011; Gillespie 2015). Thus, from the perspective of teachers, knowledge about the individual pupil affects how co-regulation occurs and the actions that teachers take.

> Once again, I think it depends a bit on whether you know the student. If I know the student, I know if I can go and put an arm around him and just take him aside, 'Come here, let's go out' (Participant 3, School C).

Participants at each of the four schools expressed the belief that knowing the students gave them the opportunity to be 'ahead of the child' with regard to his or her emotional stressors. Concerns about specific children were discussed in meetings, where children's learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) or social circumstances might be highlighted as underlying variables that influence a given child's emotional state. Accordingly, a teacher who knows their students can more easily see and react to danger signals and obstacles that may trigger potentially difficult situations:

> So, you get to know the student and then you have the background ... Is the pupil having trouble at home right now? Then, it is easier to cope with this kind of thing (Participant 3, School C).

As this excerpt illustrates, there is a relational component that is strongly tied to teachers' capacity for co-regulation with a given child. Co-regulation involves creating a relationship with the child so that the child learns to trust that the caregiver will help them manage stressful or emotionally

complex situations (Fox 1998). When children's needs are met in this way, they learn to trust that the adults in their world care for them (Gillespie 2015). Thus, the impact of acknowledging a child's emotions will also vary on the basis of the teacher's relationship with that child.

In addition, several other factors appear to influence teachers' acknowledgement of their pupils' emotions. For example, teachers in this study noted that certain emotions are more difficult to deal with or relate to than others. In the context of their everyday work, teachers in primary school are clearly faced with a wide range of emotions and physical or behavioural reactions to these. Each of situation can require a different kind of response:

I think we are worse with angry children, like, in general. Yeah, I think we are. It triggers something else … And, so, anger is a feeling that I think that we look a bit down on. It is not a feeling we see so much, and so we may be worse at dealing with it (Participant 2, school B).

In general, it appears that participants viewed sadness to be an easier emotion to relate to than anger. It can be assumed that this is because addressing children's anger offers challenges that are not present when children are sad or withdrawn. This is an interesting observation in light of evidence that pupils with externalising behaviour problems are more often rejected by teachers (e.g. Cook and Cameron [2010]). It is posited that teachers' negative attitudes to these children are a response to inappropriate classroom behaviour, such as defiance and hostility, which require more teacher attention and create instability in the classroom (Cook and Cameron 2010). In sum, findings from the current study suggest that there is a need for more research into how teachers react to the different emotions displayed by children within the framework of co-regulation.

Pragmatic approaches to the problem

Participants' descriptions of their approaches to supporting children in emotional distress revealed a two-step process comprising, first, a brief assessment and overview of the situation and, second, moving quickly to solve the problem. Initially, this means that teachers directed their attention to finding out what had happened and why. For example, in reference to the first video sequence, when participants were asked what they might do if the child simply refused to do the task, one participant responded:

I think, first, I would have said or asked what's wrong […] … 'Why did you give up now? What is it? What went wrong? What happened?' And if he didn't say anything […] I would have maybe tried to help him find the words by saying, 'Is this the part that's hard for you?' or 'Are you tired?' … and so, then they can just nod yes or no. I think that's what I would have done, anyway (Participant 1, School D).

The need to gain clarity in this type of situation was important, but it was also accompanied by clear feelings of sympathy. 'I felt sorry for him, though' stated one participant about the same child (Video 1). Nonetheless, the need to move rapidly towards practical aspects of the situation was prevalent:

And then you start right away somehow thinking about what or… you start to think a lot about where the problem lies. […] I start thinking like that and try to analyze the problem (Participant 2, School B).

Teachers further noted that the circumstances in the videos were readily identifiable based on their previous experience. While suggestions of swiftly moving towards addressing practical aspects of the problem were particularly prevalent in two of the schools (A and D), this tendency could be observed across all four focus groups. Again, with respect to the first video sequence:

I think I would have offered to help. Maybe, 'Should we try again? Should I write for you?' Because you don't know … was it hard for him to write it down? So, I think I would have tried to help and said, 'You know what, I can help write and then you can tell me what it should say.' I mean, you have to find the right solution to try to get through the task (Participant 2, School C).

Despite concerns about resolving the problem quickly, participants also stated that they would have tried to include the pupil in the process of finding solutions to these stressful situations. For

example, in relation to the second video sequence, teachers suggested that the children involved be given the opportunity to provide their version of events in the hope of reaching a common solution. 'How can we try to solve this so that everyone is happy?' (Participant 2, school A). At the same time, participants from school B pointed out that this level of reflection should not be expected until the pupil is calm, after they have gained some distance from the incident. Invitation to reflection can be seen as a response-focussed strategy linked to Gross (1998) process model of emotional regulation, wherein reflection first occurs only after emotions are fully triggered. Reflection will then centre on why the emotion arose and how to handle it in the best way possible. When the child herself is unable to regulate her emotional reaction, an invitation to reflect through conversation can increase and stimulate the pupil's emotional self-regulation (Gross 1998).

In all but one school, participants pointed out that letting the children get away from a difficult situation could help them become calmer and gain control of their emotions. This might entail 'giving them a break' or separating children that are in a conflict. However, teachers were also quick to point out caveats or conditions that might limit their capacity to support the child in this manner. For example, the availability of staff was considered a decisive factor as to whether support could be provided in scenarios such as these. The following excerpts from the interview at school D illustrates this dilemma:

There are always too many who need something or other … Yes, it's never enough. […] But when you're pressed for time and there are 14 others who have to get dressed to go outside, and suddenly they start to fight and then … yeah, so, it's not like one always has the time to stand there and, like, hold their hand (Participant 2).

No, not with the one child … You have to think and prioritise and if you're standing there alone […] and suddenly they start to fight, then you can't stand there and console him for five minutes and then go and take care of the fight (Participant 1).

Given that limits on time are closely related to restraints on resources, it is to be expected that teachers also see time pressures as an explanatory factor with respect to dealing with children's expressions of anger:

When someone gets angry, you don't have that, like … you've got to intervene in a different way. And we don't have time to let that feeling just be there for as long as, like, if someone is sad. … It has to be stopped in a different way (Participant 1, School B).

A final observation with regards to this theme concerns teachers' awareness of this dilemma. Several participants pointed out that in an ideal world, one would have more time to devote attention to the emotional state of children. However, they also saw a need to get through the many other goals and objectives that they are required to meet. The following quote illustrates this perception:

I think, in a way, you tend to move a little too fast. […] that we're just too quick to move on, to try and get them over to something else. […] So, there is a limit to how long they can be allowed to be in that feeling. It's all about the day of the week, and lots of things, of course, but I think probably maybe we're a little too quick […], We're trying to get them on to something else. So, 'why you do that?' … well, there are some practical reasons too. (Participant 2, School B).

Fox (1998) suggests that in some instances, children may need to change their environment in order to regulate their emotions. However, a change of scene will also require, as the teachers in this study suggest, the presence of an adult. This presence, according to Bath (2008), can function as an expression of care and the provision of a sense of safety and serenity for the child. Unfortunately, being 'present' is not always possible.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-grade teachers respond to pupils in emotional distress within the framework of co-regulation. Although all participants expressed concern for emotionally distraught students, they varied in how they responded to the situations displayed in the video prompts. On the one hand, several teachers described how they would acknowledge

pupils' feelings and help them work through negative emotions in a manner consistent with healthy co-regulation. On the other hand, discussion, mainly within two of the focus groups, was strongly dominated by attention to gaining clarity about 'what really happened' and finding pragmatic solutions as quickly as possible. We propose that opportunities for co-regulation, which lead to growth in children's self-regulatory skills (Gillespie 2015), may be lost when emphasis is first and foremost placed on reducing the impact of stressful situations by resolving them too quickly.

In addition, emphasis on a largely pragmatic approach corresponded to participants' reflections and descriptions of their own emotional responses. For example, teachers described the need to 'hold back' their emotions and maintain a professional distance. The reasons for this included concern about time pressures and limited resources. This is unfortunate given that awareness of one's own emotions is an important aspect of co-regulation, allowing the adult to keep calm and soothe the emotionally troubled child (Guo et al. 2015; Silkenbeumer, Schiller, and Kärtner 2018). Indeed, finding ways to 'meet' the child, or provide affirmation of their emotional state, was also described by several participants as having a calming effect on children. Research indicates that helping children find words for difficult emotions can reduce levels of stress with respect to negative emotional situations (Lieberman et al. 2007). Moreover, by ensuring that students experience the feeling of being listened to and comforted, as well as assistance in understanding and articulating their emotions, is likely to result in improved self-regulation over time.

Finally, teachers argued that finding the approach that best suited a particular situation was dependent on strong teacher-pupil relationships and intimate knowledge of the needs and behaviours of the individual child. This finding reflects an apparent limitation with respect to the use of video stimulation in a hypothetical context. We argue that this is a unique approach that can allow access to more dynamic and nuanced information than do traditional interviews about how teachers approach children in emotionally challenging situations. Nonetheless, direct observation of this phenomenon is likely to provide greater insights into how teachers actually address these issues than can be gained from interviews alone.

Several other limitations to the current study are worthy of note. For example, the variation in group composition regarding professional roles may create room for debate or it may stifle the voices of those in weaker positions (Barbour 2007). However, as co-workers, the participants in each group were familiar with one another's strengths and weaknesses, as well as each other's working methods and habits. This offers some assurance that the descriptions that each participant provided were consistent with their actual practices and the perceptions of other members of the focus groups. In addition, the fact that one of the groups comprised only two participants may also be considered a limitation to the study. Yet, given the consistency of responses across groups, a saturation point appeared to have been reached (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015), and further data collection or larger groups does not appear to have been necessary.

While the subtilties of teacher-pupil relationships are difficult to assess, the strategies and responses that teachers described in the current study provide an indication of how they are likely to manage similar emotionally stressful situations in practice. It is well established that emotions are central to teaching (Hargreaves 1998). For example, Keller et al. (2014) reported that in almost 40% of all lessons, teachers experienced enjoyment and anger. How these emotions are handled by students and teachers is crucial for the co-regulatory process to take place. In addition, research indicates that teachers often feel intellectually and emotionally drained when dealing with challenging behaviour among students (Chang 2009). However, if teachers do not approach disruptive behaviour in adaptive ways, this can cause conflicts to escalate (Chang and Davis 2009). Despite several indications of positive co-regulation in this context, taken together, our findings suggest the need for greater attention to this process and its potential impact on young children in the early years of primary school.

Disclosure statement

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