

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Adapting an anti-bullying programme for UK special schools

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Abstract

Bullying is a public health priority but to date, there is a lack of evidence-based anti-bullying programmes or interventions designed for use in special schools. KiVa is a successful anti-bullying programme for mainstream schools currently used in 23 countries. This brief paper outlines the co-development and adaptation of two KiVa lessons into KiVa-SEND lessons and their implementation in two special schools in the UK. One school supports pupils with a primary need of Autism, the other supports pupils with severe and complex learning disabilities. Engagement with the lessons was high from both pupils and staff; the content was perceived as acceptable by staff, complementing the curriculum and perceived as suitable for their pupils. Minor adjustments need to be made to ensure all pupils can comprehend and access the concepts. Further development of the KiVa-SEND programme and testing its potential effectiveness to reduce bullying and associated negative outcomes in special schools is now warranted.

KEYWORDS

anti-bullying, KiVa, peer interaction, programme, SEND

Key Points

- There is a lack of evidence-based anti-bullying programmes for use in special schools. This paper details the piloting of an adaptation of KiVa (a successful, evidence-based anti-bullying programme for mainstream schools) for use in special schools.
- The adaption (KiVa-SEND) was a co-design between a couple of special school teachers, and educational and psychological researchers to ensure the materials and approach were in line with school requirements and teaching practices.
- The KiVa-SEND lesson engagement was excellent from the 12 staff and 62 learners involved and the materials were deemed acceptable via direct feedback and researcher observations. Suggestions were provided on how to make the materials even more suitable for diverse learning needs.
- KiVa-SEND has the potential to be embedded within the special school curriculum and then be tested for its effectiveness at reducing bullying and associated negative outcomes of bullying amongst the special school population.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying can lead to poorer mental health in adulthood (Evans-Lacko et al., 2017). Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are particularly vulnerable to negative peer and social interactions (Brown et al., 2001) and as a group often struggle to effectively understand and communicate their feelings and experiences. Rates of bullying victimisation amongst SEND children has been recorded as high as 69% (Rose et al., 2011). Three systematic

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reviews have been conducted on anti-bullying approaches with SEND pupils (Badger et al., 2023; Houchins et al., 2016; Maxfield et al., 2022) with the most recent showing that internationally, there are no anti-bullying approaches designed for special (education) schools cited in the literature. Fifteen studies conducted in mainstream schools explored the effectiveness of anti-bullying approaches amongst SEND pupils; ten were targeted interventions, four were whole-class and one was a whole-school approach. Content and outcomes varied greatly and only seven studies included more than 20 SEND pupils in their intervention condition. The need for an anti-bullying programme suitable for use in special schools is evident.

KiVa is a Finnish whole-school anti-bullying programme for children aged 7–15 years in mainstream schools (Salmivalli et al., 2013). This world-leading programme used in 23 countries is widely evidence-based including RCTs in Finland (Kärnä et al., 2011), Italy (Nocentini & Menesini, 2016), Netherlands (Huitsing et al., 2020), Chile (Valenzuela et al., 2022) and the UK (Bowes et al., 2023). The programme is embedded within everyday school life (Salmivalli et al., 2013) with the aim of reducing bullying and the associated negative outcomes. KiVa has three fully manualised programme units—Unit 1 for ages 7–9, Unit 2 for ages 10–12 and Unit 3 for ages 13–15—which promote a range of teaching and learning styles and activities as well as indicated actions for school staff to manage bullying cases (see www.kivaprogram.net). This varied approach to teaching, learning and bullying reporting would potentially align well with special schools and pupils.

Current study

This pilot study adapted and trialled two lessons of KiVa Unit 1 for use in special schools (KiVa-SEND). Through lesson observation and classroom staff feedback, we investigated whether these adapted lessons were engaging and acceptable for staff and pupils and whether they were feasible to potentially embed into the special school curriculum.

METHODS

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Warwick (HSSREC 154/22-23); consent was given by schools and classroom staff. Information and opt-out letters were sent to guardians of pupils. One child was opted out and joined a non-delivery class during the lessons.

Participants

Sixty-two young people from six classes in two special schools in England attended the KiVa-SEND lessons. One school supports pupils with a primary need of Autism, the other supports pupils with severe and complex learning disabilities. Classes included 7–13 pupils from years 3 to 10 (approximately ages 7–15); 12 and 11 school staff provided feedback for Lesson One and Two, respectively.

KiVa-SEND lessons

The two 45-min manualised lessons were adapted from KiVa and co-developed with three special school teachers. This included an accompanying PowerPoint and handouts (with and without widgets: a symbol-based language, see [Figure 1](#)). The wording was simplified, the activities were adapted to better suit the learning needs of pupils and classroom staff modelled answers. The range and focus of activities remained the same and included whole-class, small group and pair work. Each lesson contained two main activities. Neither of these first two lessons explicitly addressed bullying and instead were the introductory lessons about getting to know your peers more (building an understanding

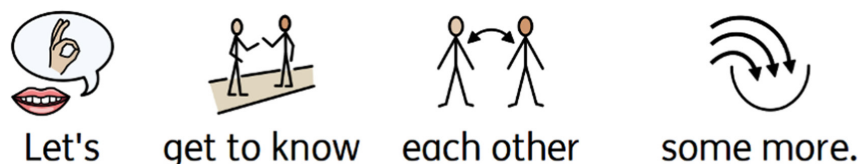


FIGURE 1 Widget symbol example alongside sentence.

that everyone is different). They enabled testing of feasibility, acceptability and engagement of the suggested programme style and content.

Data collection

Engagement and feasibility checklist

Newly developed and completed by researchers during their lesson observations: structured notes about the pupils including *'How did pupils respond? Peer-interaction? Evidence of learning?'* and about the lessons including *'Adaptations/ omissions? How many staff were required? Was the classroom suitable?'* Percentage categories of pupil engagement was also noted.

Acceptability and feasibility questionnaire

Newly developed and completed by teaching staff each lesson: a mixture of statements such as *'To what extent were you able to deliver the KiVa-SEND lessons as set out in the manual?'* with rating responses such as *'not at all'*, *'lots of changes required'*, *'some changes required'*, *'completely'*, and structured notes on the ease and experience of lesson and activity delivery, suitability and enjoyment of the materials and pupil response such as *'Things that went well? Challenges? Pupil response?'*

Delivery of KiVa-SEND

The teachers had 1 h of KiVa-SEND training before delivering the two lessons 2–7 days apart. Each lesson was observed in its entirety by a researcher. After the lesson, the teacher and classroom staff involved in the delivery or support of the lesson could complete the acceptability and feasibility questionnaire.

RESULTS

Lesson length

Across the 12 sessions (six classes and two lessons each), timings ran from 30 to 60 min with an overall average of 41 and 47 min for lessons 1 and 2, respectively.

Engagement

Pupil engagement was high, with 10/12 lesson observations noting 76%–100% pupil engagement (paying attention, following instructions, contributing and interacting with peers). Pupils were eager to get involved and share their responses. In the other two lessons, pupils were engaged but around 25%–30% required prompting to remain engaged. All staff reported enjoying the lesson themselves and reported their pupils' enjoying the lessons and responding positively to the content and the activities. Comments included that the activities meant *'all could join in'*, *'understand the concepts well'*, showed *'great interaction'* enabled *'share[ing] ideas with each other'*. One class teacher said the content was a little *'overwhelming for our pupils—a lot for the learner to grasp'*. Otherwise, learners generally had a good understanding of the content and were able to show their learning by applying taught materials to new situations. They were able to explain why they gave or selected an answer and were able to reflect on how they felt during the activities and discussions.

Acceptability and feasibility

A total of 83% of staff responses said that the materials were suitable in terms of age and ability for their pupils. The remaining 17% felt as though the materials were either too simple (older ages) or overwhelming (a lower-ability class). Teachers noted that they had made some changes during 10/12 lesson delivery plans and 6/12 activity sessions. Three support staff noted some changes they had made during the activity sessions. The remaining reported no changes.

Three main adjustments were suggested by staff and observed by researchers: (1) language, (2) workload and (3) more communication styles.

Adjustment of language

Some of the wording needed to move from abstract to concrete to ensure understanding and learning of the content. Staff with the oldest year group mentioned making the language more complex whereas staff with the lower-ability class mentioned making the language simpler.

Workload

Mixed responses were recorded with the lower-ability class teacher reporting that the lessons included too much to be covered in the 45 min assigned, whereas teachers who completed the lessons in 30–35 min reported that additional ‘optional’ tasks would be useful to extend the session and reinforce learning.

Inclusion of more communication styles

Staff feedback and lesson observations highlighted the need for more communication methods to be used alongside the text and group discussions such as more visual aids, drama and role-playing scenarios, music and songs, videos, hands-on crafts, repetition exercises, question and answer and sorting exercises.

Staff spoke enthusiastically about the lessons, saying how ‘straightforward and easy to follow’ the materials were, how they were ‘nicely prepared’ and ‘practical’ and how the ‘simplified symbols and visuals were really helpful’. They ‘liked being interactive with the learners’ and seeing their ‘thought beyond the session [materials]’. The majority of the staff said there were no challenges. The minority mentioned challenges with pupil comprehension ‘but not more than all other lessons’ and with some pupils finding it a ‘challenge sometimes to talk to someone new, but with prompting and support it worked well’.

CONCLUSIONS

KiVa-SEND was successfully adapted from two lessons of the evidence-based KiVa programme, for use in special schools in the UK. The materials were acceptable to staff and pupils from both schools of differently targeted need, and the content resulted in high engagement. Feedback and observations highlighted the need for more interactive elements to accompany the text to increase comprehension amongst learners and to ensure that all concepts were accompanied by concrete examples. The lessons were best suited to higher-ability pathway SEND pupils in years 3–9; older (Y10) pupils typically found the materials a little simplistic and those of a lower-ability found the materials a little overwhelming. With a lack of an evidence-based anti-bullying programme for use in special schools (Badger et al., 2023), KiVa-SEND has the potential to embed within and complement the special school curriculum. Further, co-development is required to adapt the whole KiVa programme and test its potential effectiveness at reducing bullying and associated negative outcomes of bullying amongst the special school population.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study has been reviewed and given favourable opinion by the University of Warwick's Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC): Reference number HSSREC 154/22-23.

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