




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Talk-LD and Talk-LD+: A pilot trial of school-based interventions to challenge discrimination and promote inclusion

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Abstract

To counteract stigma and discrimination a series of five lessons Talk about Learning Disability (*Talk-LD*) to promote young people's understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities were developed for the Scottish secondary school curriculum. This study examined the feasibility of carrying out a randomised control trial comparing the delivery of the lessons alone with the lessons plus an attempt to promote positive contact between participating students and people with intellectual disabilities. The aim was to recruit and randomise 12 schools to receive the lessons alone or the lessons plus contact. The Attitudes Towards Intellectual Disability (ATTID) questionnaire was completed at baseline and a questionnaire about students' understanding of the lesson content was completed at follow-up alone. Twelve schools were recruited and randomised. The lessons were delivered to 23 classes across the 12 schools. Baseline data were obtained for 480 participants. However, school closures due to COVID-19 meant that follow-up data were only obtained from 220 students (six schools) prior to school closures. The attitude measure only detected change in one ATTID scale, indicating students may be more willing to interact with a person with intellectual disabilities post intervention. Three of the six schools randomised to the lessons plus contact group had plans in place for joint activities between students and young people with an intellectual disability. Despite the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic, the findings were encouraging in relation to future research on the *Talk-LD* lessons. The schools also engaged positively with the process of promoting positive contact with young people with an intellectual disability.

KEYWORDS

discrimination, inclusion, intervention, school, stigma

Abbreviations: ATTID, Attitudes Toward Intellectual Disability; PSE, Personal and Social Education; RCT, randomised control trial; MRC, Medical Research Council.

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INTRODUCTION

Young people with intellectual disabilities are significantly more vulnerable to bullying and victimisation than their peers, even when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status (Naylor et al., 2012). Victimisation is not restricted to school, and those attending special schools often experience bullying beyond the school gates (Cooney et al., 2006; Kelly & Norwich, 2004). Young people without disabilities also play a disproportionate role in hate crime against adults with intellectual disabilities living in the wider community (Gravell, 2012; Richardson et al., 2016).

The feasibility study described in this paper builds on earlier work, to produce a school resource called Talk about Learning Disability (*Talk-LD*), to promote understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities (Maguire et al., 2019). The lessons were developed to be delivered as part of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum for first and second year students (aged 11–14) in Scottish secondary schools. The lessons refer to ‘learning disabilities’ because this is the most commonly used term for intellectual disabilities in the United Kingdom.

There has been an increasing awareness of the negative impact of bullying and hate crime on the mental health and wellbeing of people with intellectual disabilities (Emerson, 2010). This has resulted in calls to develop more strategic approaches to tackling stigma and discrimination (Scior et al., 2016; Werner & Scior, 2016). School based interventions have been used to tackle stigma and discriminatory attitudes in a number of fields, including mental health, race, and prejudice towards lesbian, gay and transgender communities (*Mind* www.time-tochange.org.uk/get-involved/resources-youth-professionals; *SeeMe* www.seemescotland.org; *Show Racism the Red Card* www.srtrc.org; *LGBT Scotland* www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/pro-toolkit). There have been no published evaluations of school based anti-stigma interventions focused on young people with intellectual disabilities. There is, however, an existing literature on general anti-bullying interventions in schools, like the Olweus programme from Norway (Olweus & Limber, 2010) and the KiVa approach from Finland (Salmivalli et al., 2011). These anti-bullying packages include measures that are likely to benefit all students, including those with an intellectual disability, such as having better monitoring of school playgrounds (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009), and clear procedures for dealing with bullying incidents (Salmivalli et al., 2011). However, these generic approaches fail to address the specific negative societal attitudes that are at the root of discrimination and victimisation faced by people with intellectual disabilities (Frederickson, 2010).

A key challenge for school based anti-stigma and anti-bullying interventions is to ensure that they have the necessary reach and longevity to produce meaningful and lasting effects (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). School based initiatives to change attitudes and behaviour towards people with intellectual disabilities are typically time limited programmes delivered by external agencies. In contrast, *Talk-LD* is the first targeted intervention concerning people with intellectual disabilities that has been developed to be delivered by teachers as part of a school curriculum.

The *Talk-LD* lessons represent a shift from the view that it is discriminatory to label students as having an intellectual disability (Norwich, 2014). This standpoint appears to assume that students and teachers will be less likely to see or treat people with intellectual disabilities as different if they are not labelled as such. Unfortunately, the lived experience of families and individuals with intellectual disabilities contradicts this view (Cooney et al., 2006; Mencap, 2007; Stalker & Moscardini, 2012). The theoretical framework for *Talk-LD* drew on Frederickson's (2010) proposition that young people's understanding of difference and impairment, alongside a recognition of individuals' strengths and humanity, allows them to develop more respectful and helpful relationships with their peers with intellectual disabilities. The aim is not only to change young people's prejudicial thinking or attitudes, but to make them more empathic towards people with intellectual disabilities.

A recent meta-analysis suggested that one of the most effective ways of overcoming prejudicial attitudes is to facilitate positive contact with stigmatised individuals (Mehta et al., 2015). Consequently, the *Talk-LD* lessons finish by exploring ways students can bridge the social gap and get to know people with an intellectual disability better (Carter et al., 2016). However, there has been no opportunity to examine whether it is feasible to facilitate contact between the students and people with intellectual disabilities as part of the *Talk-LD* intervention or to assess whether positive contact is a key factor in changing the young people's attitudes and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities.

Hence, this study, a pilot randomised control trial (RCT), examined the key feasibility factors necessary to conduct a large scale RCT comparing the effectiveness of the *Talk-LD* lessons alone with the delivery of the *Talk-LD* lessons plus positive contact between participating students and people with intellectual disabilities (*Talk-LD+*). The study was conducted in line with MRC guidelines (Moore et al., 2015) and follows Eldridge et al.'s (2016) framework for devising pilot feasibility studies. In addition to the feasibility of study processes

(e.g., recruitment, randomisation, intervention, retention, follow-up assessment) the study also aimed to investigate the feasibility of facilitating actual contact between the students and people with intellectual disabilities in the *Talk-LD+* intervention, and examine the potential added value of *Talk-LD+* compared to standard *Talk-LD*. The data addressing these aims would inform the potential for a later definitive RCT of the effectiveness of the *Talk-LD+* intervention.

The key feasibility questions to be addressed were (1) the recruitment and retention of schools, (2) schools' willingness to be randomised, (3) adherence to the lesson plans, (4) the proportion of classes who completed the intervention, (5) recruitment and retention rates of students, (6) the utility of using an App for data collection from the students, (7) the number of *Talk-LD+* schools facilitating contact with people with intellectual disabilities and the nature of that contact and (8) the sensitivity of outcome measures: whether it is possible to measure a change in young people's attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities, and a change in their understanding.

METHODS

School recruitment and randomisation

Schools were recruited to the project via two principal pathways; schools registered on the *Talk-LD* website or through relationships developed in previous research projects. Expressions of interest were followed up by a visit from the researcher, and engaged schools were asked if they knew of other schools in their local authority area that might consider participating in the study. We aimed to recruit two classes each from 12 schools and to randomise the schools to deliver either *Talk-LD* (five lessons) or *Talk-LD+* (five lessons plus contact) on a 1:1 ratio. Although the lessons were developed for first and second year pupils (11–13 years of age), they were delivered to third year pupils in this study (aged 14–15 years of age). This slightly older age group was chosen because they were likely to have greater maturity, and those in the *Talk-LD+* arm of the study were to be asked to play an active role in establishing contact with people with learning disabilities in their local community.

Intervention: Talking about learning disabilities

Talk-LD is an anti-bullying intervention to promote understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual

disabilities. The aim of the lessons is to achieve this by fostering empathy towards people with an intellectual disability. The intervention consists of a series of five lessons with support materials for teachers available online (Maguire et al., 2019). The idea of the lessons is to move from an understanding of diversity and disability to an appreciation of what it might be like to live with an intellectual disability, and a sense of what it feels like for people with intellectual disabilities to be bullied. The lessons end on a positive note by considering the opportunities and benefits of inclusion. The lessons are designed to be used progressively and delivered as a unit and any activity not covered or completed can be continued in the next session. Table 1 presents an overview of *Talk-LD*.

Talk-LD+

Talk-LD+, the intervention delivered in the second arm of the trial, consisted of the five lessons plus an extra session, to identify opportunities and plan for contact between students and people with intellectual disabilities. The contact could be different for each school but drew on four key principles that derive from Contact Theory (Allport, 1954): intimate (small group) contact, community sanctioned (by teachers/school as a part of *Talk-LD*), valued/equal status role for the people with intellectual disability, and involving a co-operative activity. A researcher was responsible for liaising with the staff delivering the lessons, to provide support and guidance to address the four key aspects of contact theory that might enable students and people with intellectual disabilities to come together in a positive atmosphere.

Procedures

A two-arm cluster randomised control trial (RCT) was used to examine the feasibility of delivering a school-based intervention (*Talk-LD*), with or without positive contact between students and people with intellectual disabilities (*Talk-LD+*), to students in secondary schools and also the feasibility of a definitive RCT examining the effectiveness of *Talk-LD* and *Talk-LD+*.

Whilst participation in the lessons was compulsory for students, participation in the feasibility study was not. The researcher explained the rationale of the project to the selected classes and students were given information leaflets to consider prior to being asked for consent. Only 4 students across the 12 schools declined to take part in the research.

The participant reported outcome measures (ATTID and Knowledge and understanding questionnaire) data

TABLE 1 *Talk-LD* content and aims of lessons.

Lesson	Aim	Content
Lesson 1	To support children and young people to understand and value difference and disability	4 Activities 1. Think, Pair and Share task focused on the ways we are all the same, and yet unique 2. Group task—a matching card game where students have to match an image with a written description. 3. Think, Pair and Share task, focused on the barriers and challenges that disabled people face in their everyday lives. 4. A whole class discussion looking at attitudes to disability.
Lesson 2	To develop children and young people's knowledge and understanding of intellectual disabilities.	2 Activities Students are directed to actively watch, take notes and discuss film clips of people with intellectual disabilities talking about their lives
Lesson 3	To develop children and young people's understanding of what it is like to live with an intellectual disability	3 Activities 1. Group activity focused on deconstructing skills students need for everyday life. 2. Scenarios of everyday life challenges for some young people with intellectual disabilities. 3. Frustration tasks activities.
Lesson 4	To inform children and young people about the nature and impact of disablist bullying and to encourage them to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviours	3 Activities 1. Film about a young woman's experience of being bullied. 2. Questions and discussion on film to reflect on the reality of disablist bullying. 3. Rights based discussion
Lesson 5	To move towards inclusion by exploring potential opportunities for increased contact between children and young people with and without intellectual disabilities.	4 Activities 1. Film focused on schools working together to tackle the bullying of students with intellectual disabilities. 2. Collaborative task to consider key questions raised by film 3. Discussion on inclusion in school community 4. Lesson 5 pulls together the core messages from the resource. Final activity invites students to design a poster focused on one of the themes of the lessons.

were collected using an App designed for the study. The researcher explained to the students how to use the App and was present when the students completed the measures online. Students used school computers, mobile phones or tablets to complete the study measures. The App collated the data into an Excel format.

The individual teacher and student focus group interviews took place in a room that afforded privacy. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Measures

Feasibility outcomes

Feasibility was the primary outcome in this pilot trial and was measured using a combination of descriptive, quantitative and qualitative data to answer the questions detailed earlier, (1) the recruitment of schools, (2) acceptability of research design, (3) adherence to the

intervention, (4) the proportion of classes who completed the intervention, (5) recruitment and retention rates of students, (6) the utility of using an App for data collection, (7) the feasibility of *Talk-LD+* schools facilitating contact with people with intellectual disabilities and (8) the feasibility of outcome measures.

Participant-reported outcomes

The Attitudes Towards Intellectual Disability questionnaire (ATTID; Morin et al., 2013): The ATTID is a 67 item tool to assess attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities. The questions are answered using a Likert-type 5-point agreement scale. Five attitudinal factors are measured by the questionnaire: discomfort; knowledge of capacity and rights; willingness to interact; sensitivity; and knowledge of causes of intellectual disability. In this study, we used the short form of the ATTID questionnaire (35 items) which has good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.67 to 0.87 for the five factors and 0.87 for the overall

questionnaire (Morin et al., 2013). The wording of a number of items was adapted to make sense for young people, for example ‘malnutrition in the mother’ was reworded to ‘mother not getting enough to eat’. The vignettes were also changed to portray young people with intellectual disabilities rather than adults. The ATTID questionnaire was administered at baseline and at 6-month follow-up.

Knowledge and understanding of people with an intellectual disability questionnaire: This was a bespoke questionnaire developed to assess the students’ knowledge and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities and was based on the content of the *Talk-LD* lessons. It consisted of 10 multiple choice questions, including questions on what an intellectual disability is and what it is not, the diversity of people with intellectual disabilities, the difficulties people with intellectual disabilities might face, the different kinds of support they need, and what constitutes a hate crime. There were also five open questions to explore students’ perspectives on the bullying incident depicted in the film and activities young people with and without intellectual disabilities could do together. The knowledge and understanding questionnaire was administered at 6-month follow-up only.

Intervention fidelity

The intention had been for the researcher to observe one lesson delivered to each participating class (23 in total) and to compare their ratings of content delivery with those of the teacher. The fidelity checklist for each lesson covered whether the lesson followed the teaching plan provided, activities completed, areas of confusion, and student engagement. An example of a checklist is provided in Appendix A.

Qualitative data

It had been our intention to conduct semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a sample of teachers and students from both arms of the study. However, as no school was able to complete *Talk-LD+* because of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted with participants who had completed *Talk-LD* only.

We interviewed three teachers about their experience of delivering *Talk-LD* prior to the pandemic and a further five teachers provided written feedback (face to face being impossible because of Lockdown conditions). We held six focus group interviews with students (total $N = 40$) prior to the pandemic.

The topics covered in the teachers’ interview guide included their views on: delivering the lessons, the lessons as a PSE resource, the website guidance, students’ engagement and understanding of the lessons, and the potential of the lessons to have a wider impact. The topics for the students’ focus group interviews

included their knowledge and understanding of the lessons and their views on the impact of the lessons.

Observations

Observational notes were recorded by the researcher on the processes underpinning the schools’ attempts to facilitate contact with individuals with an intellectual disability, in the *Talk-LD* plus contact arm of the study. The researcher had regular communication with teachers from the *Talk-LD+* arm of the study about the process and progress of facilitating contact between students and people with intellectual disabilities.

Data analysis

Participant-reported outcomes

The ATTID questionnaire generates mean scores on five attitudinal factors (discomfort; knowledge of capacity and rights; willingness to interact; sensitivity; and knowledge of causes of intellectual disability) based on students’ responses. The intention had been to compare the scores on the ATTID questionnaire between students on both arms of the study. However, as no school completed *Talk-LD+* due to the pandemic it was not possible to collect data for this purpose.

Students’ scores for the multiple-choice element of the Knowledge and Understanding of People with an Intellectual Disability questionnaire were calculated on the Excel programme. Again it was not possible to compare scores between the two arms of the study because of lack of data due to the pandemic.

Qualitative analysis

Students’ responses to the open questions in the Knowledge and Understanding of People with an Intellectual Disability questionnaire were content analysed (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Interviews were transcribed and analysed using a framework analysis approach (Gale et al., 2013) utilising an analytical framework reflecting the feasibility questions.

RESULTS

Feasibility outcomes

Recruitment and randomisation of schools

It took 5 months to recruit the schools for the study. The Flow diagram for the study is shown in Figure 1.

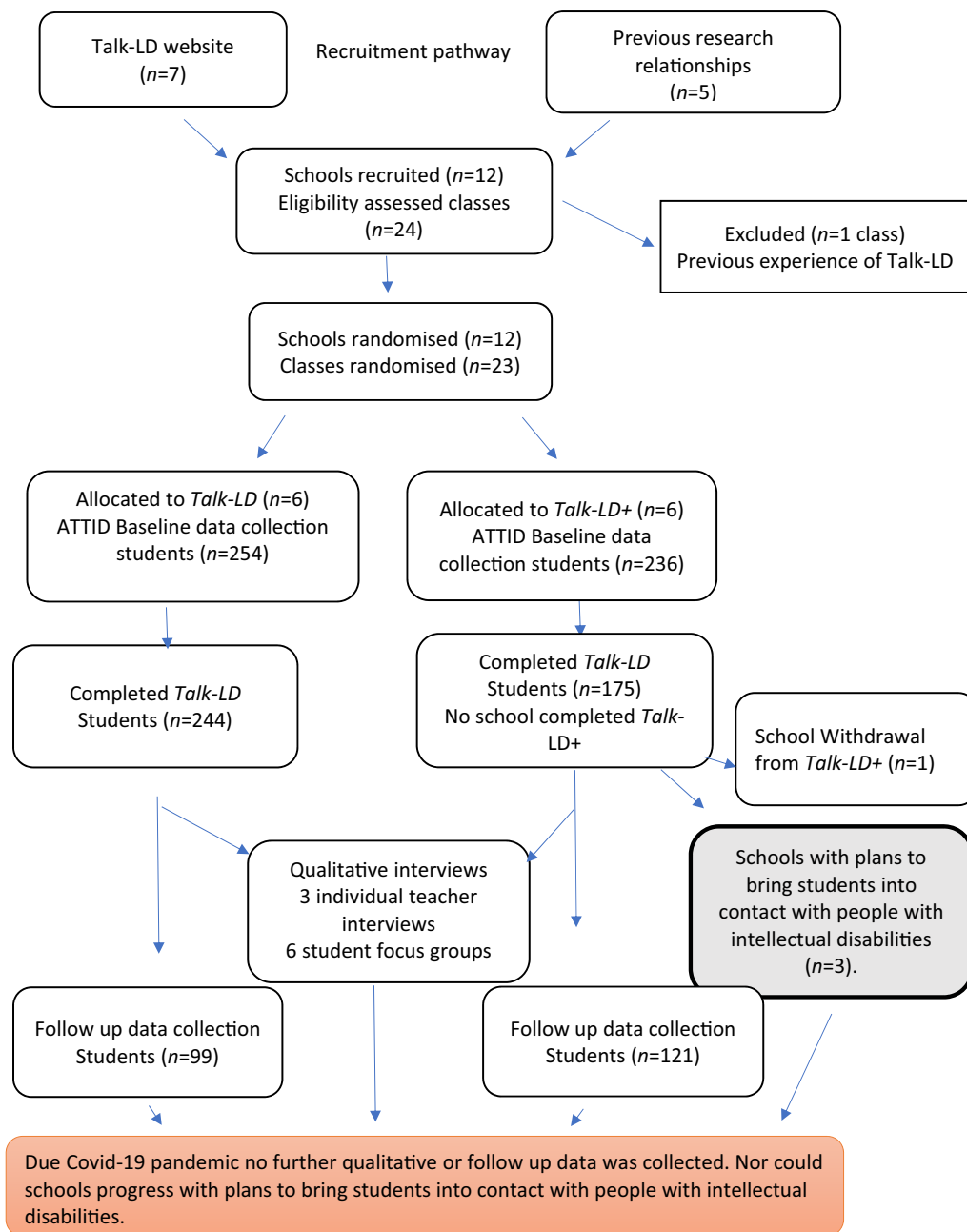


FIGURE 1 Flow chart showing *Talk-LD* study design.

The researcher visited all schools to explain the project to pastoral care staff responsible for delivering Personal and Social Education.

The 12 schools were from six different local authority areas; 8 in large urban areas, 2 in small towns, and 2 in remote rural areas.

Acceptability of research design

The schools were randomised to deliver either *Talk-LD* (five lessons) or *Talk-LD+* (five lessons plus contact) on a

1:1 ratio. Randomisation was balanced by location (urban v rural) and level of deprivation (low vs. high % of students registered for free school meals) as illustrated in Table 2.

All schools were happy with the randomisation process and their allocation although one school subsequently withdrew from the *Talk-LD+* arm of the study. In this school the Headteacher had committed to participate in the research without consulting the teachers delivering the lessons.

Four hundred and eighty students took part in the study, 254 students from 6 schools (12 classes) allocated

TABLE 2 School characteristics and randomisation.

School identification number	Urban rural classification	Free school meals Low<10% High>25%	School roll size	Arm of study
1	Very remote rural	Low	92	<i>Talk-LD</i>
2	Very remote rural	Low	307	<i>Talk-LD+</i>
3	Remote small town	Low	927	<i>Talk-LD</i>
4	Accessible small rural town	Low	629	<i>Talk-LD+</i>
5	Large urban	Low	1240	<i>Talk-LD</i>
6	Large urban	Low	655	<i>Talk-LD+</i>
7	Large urban	High	814	<i>Talk-LD</i>
8	Large urban	High	1080	<i>Talk-LD+</i>
9	Large urban	High	933	<i>Talk-LD</i>
10	Large urban	High	1307	<i>Talk-LD+</i>
11	Large urban	High	428	<i>Talk-LD</i>
12	Large urban	High	360	<i>Talk-LD+</i>

to the *Talk-LD* arm and 236 students from 6 schools (11 classes) allocated to the *Talk-LD+* arm.

Adherence to and fidelity of implementation

Six schools (244 students) in the *Talk-LD* arm and four schools (175 students) from the *Talk-LD+* arm had completed the *Talk-LD* (5 lessons) intervention, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The time taken to complete the lessons ranged between 5 and 8 weeks. The two schools who had not completed the *Talk-LD* lessons had started the intervention later. Although no school had completed the *Talk-LD+* intervention because of the pandemic, three schools were actively engaged in planning to bring students into contact with people with intellectual disabilities.

The logistics of making visits to 23 classes in 12 schools throughout the country, in addition to the visits for data collection pre- and post-lessons, proved problematic. The researcher conducted eight fidelity checks across seven schools. Teachers in two schools did not give permission for the researcher to sit in on the lessons, one emailed to say that she was too stressed and the other did not respond to emails. The teachers delivering the lessons in these two schools had not been involved in the initial discussions about the project. While most teachers were happy to be observed they were resistant to completing a checklist. Hence, the evidence on fidelity is based on the researcher's observations of lesson delivery and teacher and student interviews. Each lesson was observed at least once. All eight observed lessons were

focused, delivered in the correct order and engaging for students. The teachers demonstrated a sound knowledge of the content of the materials with one exception where the teacher had not prepared adequately, resulting in confusion for some students. Teachers reported no difficulties with delivery and commented on students' positive engagement with the lessons, as did the students who took part in the group interviews. Overall, the evidence indicated that *Talk-LD* can be delivered with good fidelity but that in future research it would not be feasible to rely on teachers completing fidelity checklists without making procedural changes.

Retention of participants and utility of an app for data collection

Pre lesson data (ATTID) were collected from 23 classes (480 students) across the 12 schools and post-test data (ATTID and post *Talk-LD* questionnaire) from 12 classes (220 students) across six schools. There was a high level of retention of school students (87%) from these six schools and there was only a small percentage of missing data (0.4% ATTID, 2.8% post lesson questionnaire). We were unable to collect post-test data from the 6 schools in the *Talk-LD+* arm because no school had completed contact prior to the pandemic. The findings suggest that it is possible to retain students in a follow-up study of this nature and that an online App can successfully be used to collect outcome measures. The measures also appeared to be acceptable to the schools and students, with few missing data.

Delivery of *Talk-LD+*

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the study and the resultant lockdowns meant that no school in the *Talk-LD+* arm of the study managed to complete an activity that brought students into contact with people with intellectual disabilities. However, prior to lockdown, three schools had made concrete plans. Preparation for these events required considerable planning and was a longer process than had been anticipated. The researcher played a pivotal role in facilitating contact between two *Talk-LD+* schools and external organisations in the initial planning. In one school, joint activities were planned with students from a neighbouring school for children with intellectual disabilities, including a joint Christmas show production and an environmental project. A second school was collaborating with a voluntary organisation to set up an inclusive youth club. Students in the third school had decided to have a joint cinema event. Two other schools were having initial discussions with the researcher about joint activities. One school opted out of *Talk-LD+*, the teachers said that they did not have enough time to get involved in planning contact activity for pupils and people with learning disabilities. In this school it was the Head teacher who had agreed to take part in the research and the teachers had not consulted the teachers who would be delivering the PSE lessons.

Thus, prior to the pandemic five out of the six schools in the *Talk-LD+* arm of the study were committed to the idea of making contact with people with intellectual disabilities. This process suggested that it may be feasible to deliver the *Talk-LD+* model in future research, but that thought would have to be given to determine the support schools might need to achieve this.

Outcome measures

Attitudes towards intellectual disability questionnaire

No comparisons were made between the two arms of the study because none of the schools in the *Talk-LD+* arm

of the study were able to follow through on their plans for contact due to the pandemic. However, attitude data for the 220 students who completed baseline and follow-up ATTID questionnaires were analysed in order to examine the suitability of the measure for a definitive RCT.

Using paired *t*-tests, there was no evidence of pre-post *Talk-LD* change for four out of the five of the factors of the ATTID scale: discomfort, knowledge of capacity and rights, sensitivity, and knowledge of causes (Table 3). However, there was a statistically significant pre-post change on the Interaction factor, indicating that participants reported a greater willingness to work or socialise alongside someone with an intellectual disability at follow-up.

Knowledge and understanding of people with an intellectual disability

Students' scores for the multiple-choice questions which focused on lessons 1–4 (difference, intellectual disability, disablist bullying) ranged from 2 to 10 (maximum score), the frequencies of each score are illustrated in Table 4.

The mean for the total knowledge and understanding score was 6.5 (SD = 2.3). Students had different levels of understanding of the material delivered in the lessons, but 68% had correct answers for more than half of the measure items.

Students' responses to the open questions suggested that they were developing an understanding of some of the lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities. Almost half of the students (49%) thought that the teenagers bullied the character in the film because she was different and 25% of students specifically mentioned her intellectual disability.

I personally think she was bullied on the bus because some people just don't like difference in people.

Students' views about whether they would have intervened in the bullying incident varied, with 48% stating

TABLE 3 Paired *t*-test results of attitude factors of ATTID.^a

Attitude factor	Mean pre-lessons	Mean post-lessons	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)
Discomfort	2.50	2.47	1.07	0.32	0.751
Knowledge of capacity and rights	1.84	1.80	.67	0.773	0.44
Interaction	1.80	1.97	.90	−2.64	0.019
Sensitivity or tenderness	3.20	3.12	.93	1.20	0.23
Knowledge of causes	2.43	2.38	.06	0.84	0.40

^aAttitudes Towards Intellectual Disability questionnaire (ATTID; Morin et al., 2013).

TABLE 4 Students' scores on knowledge and understanding of lessons (multiple choice questions).

Frequency of scores									
Score	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No of students	8	12	19	29	31	40	46	19	10
Percentage of students %	4	6	9	13	14	19	21	9	5
Missing data $N = 6$									

they would have helped in some way, 22% stating they would not, and 30% were unsure what they would do in a similar situation. Thus, many appeared to feel that intervening to support a person being bullied or harassed can be difficult.

When asked about ideas for joint activities, the students mainly suggested just spending time together, leisure activities and sports. They also suggested working on joint projects together. Almost all (90%) students highlighted the relational aspect of joint activities. As one student explained:

Make connections, make everyone feel included.

Students' responses to the difficulties of doing things together were more diverse. The most common responses focused on communication issues.

Communication might be difficult. Not understanding each other.

Their responses to the questions on promoting inclusion indicated that, whilst they were aware that there might be barriers to young people with and without intellectual disabilities doing things together, they had an understanding that joint activities had the potential to break down barriers and build relationships.

You could make more friends, and you would probably start thinking differently about people with learning disabilities.

Qualitative Data Teacher interviews

Delivery and usefulness of Talk-LD

The feedback from the teachers was positive. All regarded *Talk-LD* as a high-quality teaching resource and appreciated the support materials.

Very useful, hugely helpful, we need resources like this – good quality materials make our life so much easier.

Overall, teachers reported no issues delivering the lessons. However, one teacher reported struggling to explain the distinction between intellectual disabilities and 'specific learning difficulties' like dyslexia. All teachers stated they would now use *Talk-LD* as part of the PSE curriculum and would recommend it to other teachers.

Students' engagement and understanding

Teachers reported that students had engaged well with *Talk-LD* and valued how the lessons stimulated open discussion. They commented on how the lessons had increased students' understanding of the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, including the challenges they face.

The kids really understood that something is disabling rather than disability being the person's responsibility. The lessons 'made them (students) think in a different way – moved from "Oh what a shame" to "What can we do to remove the barriers?"'

Impact of the lessons

Most teachers felt that *Talk-LD* would increase young people's understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities. In particular, teachers suggested that the film of the bullying incident and subsequent class discussions helped students develop empathy.

Raising awareness in schools will impact on them outside of school. They were enraged by the bullying on the bus and we had a long

chat about what they might have done and what they would do now. I think it really affected them.

However, in another school, one teacher was less certain of the impact.

In general students tend to drift in and out of Personal and Social Education and don't see it as hugely important. I think they contributed well in class but I'm not sure how much it would have changed how they act.

Student focus groups

Knowledge and understanding of the lessons and people with intellectual disabilities

Students in the focus groups had good recall of the lessons and stated that the lessons had helped them learn and understand more about people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

We got to see things from their perspective and their families' they highlighted the problems and if you didn't know about them it gives you an understanding of what people with learning disabilities might go through.

Students described their reaction to the bullying of a young woman with Down syndrome as one of shock, disgust, anger. They spoke of how the lessons had increased their knowledge of how society can disable people and how attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities need to change.

made you think about how attitudes make a difference to how people are treated

Students were enthusiastic about engaging in joint activities with people with intellectual disabilities and made many suggestions.

Ones that involve working with someone 'cos then you get to know them. We could go to other schools that have more students with learning disabilities and do something with them, maybe arrange trips with local schools, do sports activities – gym football, shopping.

Impacts of the lessons

While students thought that the lessons had the potential to change attitudes, no student spoke of the lessons challenging their own attitudes.

I think that the lessons help to stop students getting the wrong idea about people with learning disabilities. They would help stop people having bad attitudes.

However, they suggested that the lessons might impact on their behaviour in the future and spoke of how the lessons had made them feel more at ease around people with intellectual disabilities.

Made you think differently – I'm usually not one to get involved in stuff but I feel that if I saw something like the bullying incident I would want to act.

In the focus groups the students spoke of how they thought the questions on the ATTID were too general and admitted to giving prosocial responses.

You can see what the right answer is

DISCUSSION

The findings from this research suggest that it would be possible to recruit and retain schools and students for an RCT of *Talk-LD* versus *Talk-LD+*, and that randomisation was acceptable to the schools and participants. Recruiting schools to participate in research projects is challenging but having a teaching resource to offer schools can be an incentive for participation (Oates & Riaz, 2016). Both arms of the study were offered access to the *Talk-LD lessons* (www.talkingabout.org.uk) and the teachers who were interviewed held the view that the offer of a resource to all schools made randomisation more palatable. That said, it did take 5 months to recruit the 12 schools for the study, suggesting that more resources and careful thought would be required to recruit a larger number of schools. Research has shown that schools are more likely to engage with interventions that are consistent with school priorities (McIsaac et al., 2016), and the resource now has the support of the Scottish Government which should help facilitate recruitment in Scotland (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2021).

The teachers did not complete the fidelity checklist, as they regarded it as a burdensome administrative task. However, the evidence from the researcher's observations and the teachers' and students' interviews, indicated that *Talk-LD* has the potential to be delivered with good fidelity. Whilst teachers admitted they did not always have time to read the online guidance, they thought that amending the online support materials to emphasise the need for preparation would be useful.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic no school managed to deliver a contact activity as part of the *Talk-LD+* intervention. However, the committed engagement with the planning process, and the plans made in three of the schools, suggest that it may be feasible for schools to organise positive contact between students and people with intellectual disabilities as a part of the intervention. That said it is important to note the active role of the researcher in this process. The observations completed with the three schools who were planning contact events in the *Talk-LD+* arm of the intervention, highlighted that this is a time-consuming process that requires considerable thought. While the schools had come up with a range of ideas, support and guidance was needed to help them. This is not something that it is possible to achieve in a single lesson format and the *Talk-LD+* version of the intervention would need some adaptation to ensure its successful delivery in any future research.

During the initial discussions between the researcher and schools about what type of activity schools could do to bring young people with and without intellectual disabilities together, the focus was on a one-off activity. However, as the discussions developed there were concerns that this would be tokenistic and would not provide the opportunity for meaningful relationships or mutual understanding to develop (Allport, 1954). Hence, the plans were for a series of activities or longer-term initiatives between the students and peers with an intellectual disability. It was also thought that sustained contact activities would be needed to facilitate joint participation. This resonates with the findings of a recent review (Kármán et al., 2022) which concluded that longer-term interventions to promote the acceptance and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities were more effective and more likely to positively influence attitudes towards them. Thus, whilst the evidence suggests that a sixth lesson is feasible, this may only be as a first step in planning positive contact between students and people with intellectual disabilities.

Using an online App to collect questionnaire data proved to be successful with few missing data. Moreover, the adapted ATTID questionnaire (Morin et al., 2013) appeared to be acceptable to study participants. It was not possible to assess the sensitivity of the *Talk-LD+* arm

of the intervention, as no school completed contact. However, it is not clear if this measure is sensitive enough to pick up on attitude change over the course of an intervention like *Talk-LD*. The positive responses on all dimensions of the ATTID, pre and post the *Talk-LD* intervention, suggests that the transparent nature of the questions may elicit socially desirable responses. This interpretation is consistent with the views expressed by the students participating in the group interviews. Hence other outcome measurement options should be explored in any future research, perhaps with a focus on the respondent's willingness to interact with individuals with an intellectual disability, given that there was a statistically significant change in this dimension of the ATTID between the pre and post data. It was not possible to consider the sensitivity of the ATTID with the *Talk-LD+* intervention, as no school had completed the contact element when the study had to be closed due to the COVID pandemic.

It is interesting to note although that no student in the focus groups spoke of how *Talk-LD* had challenged or changed their *own* attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities, many spoke of how they thought *Talk-LD* would help challenge *other* young people's attitudes. This distinction may be worth examining in more detail in future research.

LIMITATIONS

Ideally, it would be best to compare the students' knowledge of people with intellectual disabilities and the contact they had with them, prior to the delivery of the intervention. However, the reason that we did not do this is because in previous work (Maguire et al., 2019), the research team had found that young people were often unsure as to what an intellectual disability is. In part this is due to their confusion about the wide range of terminology that is used. Careful consideration needs to be given to how people's understanding of an intellectual disability and their contact with people who have an intellectual disability, can be reliably measured in a future study. Thought also needs to be given to ways of ensuring that teachers complete fidelity checklists after each of the lessons. A future trial could seek agreement from teachers prior to implementation and include the checklist in the online support materials, to ensure that they are easily available.

The main limitation of this study clearly concerns the fact that it had to be closed suddenly, due to the COVID pandemic restrictions. This meant that it was not possible to complete any of the *Talk-LD+* interventions and that follow-up data were only obtained from 6 of the

11 schools that remained in the study. Hence, further work is needed to establish the feasibility of *Talk-LD+*.

CONCLUSION

The positive way that the lessons were received by both the teachers and pupils highlights that talking about people with an intellectual disability in schools and making them visible, is an essential first step to tackling the stigma that they face. Evidence from this study suggests that further research on the *Talk-LD* lessons would be feasible. Moreover, demonstrating that it is possible to deliver an intervention as part the routine school curriculum, to promote greater understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities, is important in its own right. Research to look at the impact of the intervention, including what measures should be used to evaluate impact is also of interest and relevance to the broader literature on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. The potential of schools to promote positive contact between young people and people with intellectual disabilities in their communities is an exciting opportunity to make a real difference to the lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval for the feasibility study was granted by the University of Glasgow, College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences Ethics Panel.

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APPENDIX A

A.1 | *Talk-LD* FIDELITY CHECKLIST

(Teacher reflections)

Lesson 1

As a teacher, I had a sound knowledge of the content of this lesson	Yes/no
The lesson was focused throughout. If not, why do you think that was?	Yes/no
All of the activities of the lesson were covered. If no, please specify which activities were omitted and why.	Yes/no
The majority of pupils engaged well with the lesson. Lesson 1 had the following four activities: Activity 1: Think, pair, share (We are all the same and each of us is different) Activity 2: Group task (Matching Card game) Activity 3: think, pair, share (Barriers disabled people face) Activity 4: Class discussion (Attitudes to disability) What activity was the most engaging for pupils?	Yes/no
Where there any areas of confusion for pupils? Please specify	

For lessons 2–5.

Lesson...

The lesson began with a recap of the previous week's lesson	Yes/no
As a teacher, I feel I had a sound knowledge of the content of this lesson	Yes/no
The lesson was focused throughout. If not, why do you think that was?	Yes/no
All of the activities of the lesson were covered. If no, please specify which activities were omitted and why.	Yes/no
The majority of pupils engaged well with the lesson. If not, why do you think that was?	Yes/no
Where there any areas of confusion for pupils? Please specify	