

# AN EVALUATION OF THE EMOTIONAL LITERACY SUPPORT ASSISTANT (ELSA) PROGRAMME



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The Research & Evaluation Unit conducted this independent evaluation on behalf of the local authority. The original data are available should anyone wish to check, question or challenge the information reported. Any opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Hampshire County Council's Children's Services Department.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent years, education policy has continued to be preoccupied with issues of curriculum structure; however, there seems to have been a growing appreciation that standards cannot be raised solely through attention to the academic curriculum. The importance of emotional literacy as an integral component of education is not a new concept but appears to be undergoing a resurgence of interest.

Work on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) broadened our understanding about the nature of human potential. Gardner drew attention to the importance of being intelligent about our own emotions and the emotions of others. He also suggested that these emotional and social abilities tend to be more influential than conventional intelligence for personal, career and school success. Implicit in developing children's emotional literacy is raising their awareness of emotions and the critical link between thoughts and feelings.

The case is made for teacher training to reflect an awareness of the role of emotions in education, particularly given current concerns about bullying, substance abuse and violence in schools. However, most teachers and classroom assistants have little or no training on emotional literacy.

Increasingly, local authorities within England are developing initiatives aimed at supporting the emotional literacy of pupils in more targeted ways. Examples of these include The North & East Devon School Nurse Innovation Project (Buckland et al, 2005), and a student assistance programme (Carnwell & Baker, 2007).

The aim of the current study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme and particularly its impact on the children and young people it supports. Hampshire's ELSA programme is founded on work initiated in Southampton (Weare & Gray, 2003). As Hampshire is a large local authority, a school-based approach was considered a more appropriate system and a pilot project was established in one area of the county (Burton & Shotton, 2004). In light of the positive feedback received (Burton, 2008), the initiative has now been extended beyond primary schools to include secondary and special schools (MLD and BESD).

Training for ELSAs is conducted in five one-day sessions, delivered two to three weeks apart over the course of one/two terms. ELSAs are given an overview of what constitutes emotional literacy. The training is followed by group supervision sessions, which are two hours long and are provided twice-termly by the educational psychologist for the schools involved. The initial training is not exhaustive and other topics have subsequently been covered, either during supervision or in additional conferences.

Identifying children for ELSA support is a matter for the school. They tend to work with pupils who have a wide spectrum of emotional needs. ELSAs become involved with these children over at least half a term. The length and frequency of sessions depends upon individual circumstances but are generally weekly. In their supervising role, EPs receive anecdotal feedback of successful outcomes.

This work has enjoyed success, as indicated by the growth in participating schools and the number of ELSAs who have now completed training. In 2005, 22 schools were sent questionnaires to be completed by ELSAs, their line managers, pupils and teachers. The ELSAs commented on how empowering the training and supervision had been and how much more valued they felt in their new role within the school. Of primary pupils, 85% indicated they felt happy and 83% felt they were improving in relation to the areas they were working on with the ELSA.

During the academic year 2007/8 we attempted to gain more objective evidence of impact on children via the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997). In total, we received 107 matched (pre- and post-intervention) teacher-rated questionnaires. Following the ELSA involvement, a significant decrease was observed in the total questionnaire score, indicating that teachers perceived there to be an improvement for the child. There were also significant decreases in what the SDQ defines as emotional problems, peer problems and conduct disorder and a significant improvement in pro-social behaviour. Despite a decrease in hyperactivity following intervention, the decrease was not statistically significant.

Fifty-two matched (pre- and post-intervention) parent-rated questionnaires were also received. The analysis for these data revealed a significant decrease in the total SDQ score

following ELSA intervention, as well as a decrease in hyperactivity.

In looking for evidence of impact on children and young people, the results of the SDQ revealed that there was a statistically significant change in both teacher and parent ratings following ELSA input. However, whilst teacher responses revealed significant changes across all categories of the SDQ, parent responses revealed significant changes only in the total score and hyperactivity. One possible explanation is that behaviour is context-related and there are different social pressures operating within the home and school contexts.

In summary, this document explores a role that has been developed for Learning Support Assistants in Hampshire in supporting the emotional well-being of pupils. A training programme is described that develops ELSAs' capacity to help children and young people address a wide variety of emotional challenges. The rapid growth of this programme in a large county, as well as early evaluation results, suggests that ELSAs are making a significant contribution to the ability of children and young people to engage more effectively with school.

## **BACKGROUND**

The main emphasis within the English education system over recent years has been on raising academic attainments. This agenda was initially flagged approximately ten years ago with the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (DfES, 1998a, 1998b). Teacher training has subsequently focused almost exclusively on delivering the national curriculum. Whilst the objective of raising the standard is valid, some have argued that the means by which this has been addressed may have been ill-conceived, serve to undermine pupil motivation (Sainsbury, 2003) and consequently limit the impact. Whilst in recent years policy has continued to be occupied with issues of curriculum structure (the Rose review, DfES, 2006a), there seems to have been a growing appreciation that standards cannot be raised solely through attention to the academic curriculum. Education is about children and a more holistic perspective of pupil needs is required. In line with this, the concept of emotional literacy has become more widely recognised in recent years.

### **Why is emotional literacy important?**

The importance of emotional literacy as an integral component of education is not a new concept but appears to be undergoing a resurgence of interest. Work on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) broadened our understanding about the nature of human potential. He argued that education had become dangerously obsessed with the notion of abstract intelligence; aspects he defined as linguistic ("word smart") and logical-mathematical ("number/reasoning smart") intelligence. In his multi-faceted model, Gardner drew attention to the importance of being intelligent about our own emotions (intra-personal intelligence – "self smart") and the emotions of others (interpersonal intelligence – "people smart"). Moreover, he suggested that these emotional and social abilities tend to be more influential than conventional intelligence for personal, career and school success.

Gardner's interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions are akin to the concept of emotional intelligence, first proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990). Salovey and Mayer conceived of emotional intelligence as having five principal components:

1. awareness of one's own emotions
2. ability to manage one's own emotions
3. sensitivity to the emotions of others

4. ability to respond to and negotiate with other people emotionally
5. ability to use one's own emotions to motivate oneself.

Hence, implicit in developing children's emotional literacy is raising their awareness of emotions and the critical link between thoughts and feelings.

Goleman (1995) popularised the term *emotional intelligence* in his influential book of the same name. He defined emotional intelligence as the ability to recognise and understand one's own emotions and the emotions of others, to manage one's emotions and to appropriately express emotions. He proposed that individuals with emotional intelligence exhibit the attributes of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and good social skills. Goleman suggested that emotional intelligence can be learned, improves with age and can ultimately matter more than IQ in determining career success. Cherniss (2000) provided some evidence to support the assertion about career success. In a longitudinal study of 450 boys in the USA he found that conventional IQ had little correlation with success in later life. However, childhood abilities to handle frustration, control emotions and get along with other people were the more influential factors.

Kassem (2002) makes the case for teacher training to reflect awareness of the role of emotions in education, particularly given the current concerns about bullying, substance abuse and violence in schools. She argues that as the limbic system (which regulates emotional responses) is much quicker to react than the frontal lobes (which mediate information processing), it is essential for schools to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere. In a negative climate there is an increased risk of an aroused '*fight or flight*' response in students who are anxious, stressed or have inadequate coping strategies. However, most teachers and classroom assistants have little or no training about emotional literacy.

A study of Malaysian secondary school students (Liau, 2003) found that lower levels of emotional literacy were associated with higher levels of negative internalised behaviours (e.g. stress, depression, somatic complaints) and a higher level of inappropriate externalised behaviours (e.g. aggression, delinquency). He asserted the need to develop emotional literacy programmes to help young people manage situations in healthier and more appropriate ways.



### **Curriculum approaches to emotional literacy**

Whole-school curricula designed to promote social and emotional thinking have received positive endorsement in the USA. Greenberg et al (2003) conducted a review of a variety of classroom-based social and emotional programmes and found a number of key outcomes. The programmes led to improvements in interpersonal skills, quality of peer and adult relationships, and academic achievement, as well as reductions in behaviours such as substance abuse, high-risk sexual behaviour and aggression.

The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies – PATHS (Kusché & Greenberg's, 1994) is one of the most researched sets of materials of this type. Greenberg et al (1995) found that children who received the PATHS curriculum showed significant improvements in their emotional vocabulary, emotional understanding, tolerance, social skills and peer relations when compared with those in the control group. The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (1999) similarly found that students in intervention classrooms were less aggressive (according to their peers) and observers rated the classroom atmosphere as being more positive. This study also found that the quality of implementation significantly correlated with positive outcomes, hence highlighting the importance of facilitator competence in the effectiveness of the programme. Kam, Greenberg and Walls (2003) provided further support for the importance of quality of implementation on the impact of the PATHS curriculum. Significant intervention effects were only found in schools where both headteacher support and implementation quality was high; however, neither of these factors alone predicted effectiveness. Kusché (2002) summarises three studies in which the PATHS curriculum was followed over the course of a year. As a result, children showed improvements in emotional understanding, self-control, ability to tolerate frustration and use of effective conflict resolution strategies. Kam, Greenberg and Kusché (2004) looked at the long-term impact of PATHS. The results showed that over time ratings of externalising behaviour for the intervention group decreased, whereas those for the control group increased.

Evaluations of the PATHS curriculum in the UK are less common. Kelly et al (2004) evaluated the introduction of PATHS within a class of 9-10 year olds within a Scottish primary school. The children's emotional understanding and

problem-solving were significantly better after experiencing PATHS. Questionnaires revealed that staff recognised positive changes in pupils in relation to emotional vocabulary, empathy, managing emotions and handling relationships. However, the results are limited due to a small sample size and the lack of a control group. In a much larger study involving nearly 300 children in Hampshire, Curtis and Norgate (2007) found a significant improvement on all five dimensions of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) for the intervention group but not the control. Teacher interviews also indicated that they perceived the programme to have helped children acquire a better understanding of emotions and develop better empathy and self-control skills.

Whilst American studies tend to refer to 'emotional intelligence', 'emotional literacy' is the term more commonly used within the UK. The concept of emotional literacy has become better recognised in the UK over recent years. There are a number of groups and organisations promoting interest in the subject (e.g. National Emotional Literacy Interest Group (NELIG); Antidote: The Campaign for Emotional Literacy in London). The government also appears to have recognised the importance of emotional literacy:

*"...emotional literacy is beginning to show encouraging outcomes and policy makers are taking these seriously....there is ample scope for promoting emotional literacy across the curriculum and through current developments in inclusion, citizenship, healthy standards and PSHE work".*

(Ministerial speech at the Antidote Conference, 2002;  
cited in Weare & Gray, 2002)

In 2002, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a study into how a child's emotional and social competence and well-being could most effectively be developed. The findings and recommendations of the study included the need to prioritise work on emotional and social well-being, the benefits of taking a holistic approach (which centred on a whole-school policy), and the importance of starting this work early and taking a developmental approach (Weare & Gray, 2002).

These recommendations were partially implemented through the introduction of Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

(SEAL) materials (akin to PATHS). SEAL is a curriculum resource for all primary-aged children that aims to develop social, emotional and behavioural skills through a structured whole-school framework. These were first introduced into primary schools as part of the behaviour and attendance strategy (DfES, 2005) and this approach was subsequently extended into the secondary sector (DfES, 2007). Their introduction recognises that effective learning is dependent upon a broader range of issues than the academic curriculum alone. As the introduction to the secondary SEAL materials indicates, these materials aspired to provide:

*“a comprehensive approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools”.*

(DfES, 2007, paragraph 1.2)

The introduction of the SEAL materials is an important milestone in the English education system. However, its impact is yet to be properly evaluated, although an evaluation of the small group aspect was completed in 2008 (Humphrey et al, 2008)<sup>1</sup>.

### **Targeted programmes**

Increasingly, local authorities within England are also developing initiatives aimed at supporting the emotional literacy of pupils in more targeted ways. The North & East Devon School Nurse Innovation Project (Buckland et al, 2005) developed and piloted ways in which school nurses could help to reduce the incidence of school exclusion in primary schools. They worked with whole classes to promote emotional literacy and offered targeted support to children who had either been excluded or were at risk of exclusion. They received training in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, anger management, counselling and parenting skills. The project was positively perceived by staff, children and the parents interviewed in the evaluation study (Kelly et al, 2005). Key features identified as contributing to the success of the programme were that the school nurses were approachable, provided continuity of care, were perceived to be non-threatening, maintained client confidentiality, had local knowledge of the school and community, provided a link between home and school, and

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<sup>1</sup><http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publicatio ns&ProductId=DCSF-RR064&>

could act as a signpost to other services. However, teachers who thought that the school nurses had an overly high expectation of their ability to support the interventions, given competing pressures on time, expressed some reservations about the programme.

Carnwell & Baker (2007) reported the evaluation of a student assistance programme involving group work being conducted in primary and secondary schools. A key feature of the groups was the creation of a safe place to share feelings. Both staff and students referred to the development of trust and relationships, leading to changes in behaviour. Facilitators spoke of students developing social skills and becoming friendlier towards their peers. Challenges for staff in running the programme included coping with the group size, issues around obtaining an appropriate mixture of students and finding support for their role as facilitator. Some students who were challenging in class equally presented challenges in the group context. Some also found it difficult to relate to teachers as facilitators, due to the role they normally played in the life of the students.

The research highlighted within this review suggests that programmes designed to enhance emotional literacy can, on the whole, have a positive impact on pupils. Consequently, programmes designed to nurture emotional literacy should constitute a valuable part of the school curriculum. One such programme has been established within Hampshire: the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant programme. The aim of the current study was to evaluate the effectiveness of this particular programme and, specifically, its impact on the children it supports.

### **HAMPSHIRE'S EMOTIONAL LITERACY SUPPORT ASSISTANT (ELSA) PROGRAMME**

Hampshire's ELSA programme is founded on work initiated in Southampton (further details of the Southampton strategy are provided in Weare & Gray, 2003 p.99). Southampton Educational Psychology Service originally appointed five peripatetic ELSAs whose role was to visit local primary schools and deliver bespoke programmes of support to children who had been referred for various types of social and emotional needs. The support was well received by schools, many of which started to appoint their own Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to work in a similar way with the wider group of children on roll. The peripatetic service consequently

cascaded their skills to those being appointed and increasingly started to function in an advisory and supportive role.

As Hampshire is a large local authority with approximately 500 primary schools, a school-based approach was deemed a more appropriate system from the start and a pilot project was established in one area of the county (Burton & Shotton, 2004). The evaluation (Burton, 2004) indicated a positive response from both schools and pupils and this led to a rollout of the initiative across the whole county. In light of the feedback received (Burton, 2008) the initiative has now also been extended beyond primary schools to include secondary and special schools (MLD and BESD).

### **The ELSA training and supervision approach**

The training for ELSAs is conducted in five one-day sessions, which are delivered two to three weeks apart over the course of one/two terms (further details in Shotton & Burton, 2008). The programme includes psychological theory and practical guidance about working within a school context.

ELSAs are given a basic overview of what constitutes emotional literacy (Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1995) and their attention is drawn to the fact that many children have a limited emotional vocabulary. Extending this vocabulary facilitates self-expression and reduces the need for children to exhibit problematic behaviours as a mode of expression. Children suggested for support typically need assistance in enhancing their sense of self-worth. Consequently the programme also includes:

- Maslow's hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1970). This highlights the need for safety, security and a sense of belonging as a foundation for building self-esteem and respect for others, which in turn contributes to the capacity for self-actualisation (to enjoy and achieve)
- Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This draws attention to the impact of social relationships on emotional development, and accentuates the notion that emotional literacy is modelled more than it is taught
- Esteem Builders (Borba, 1989). This provides a broader understanding of what constitutes self-esteem. It also introduces security, selfhood and affiliation as the three main building blocks that allow a child to develop personal goals and a sense of competence.

Self-regulation is another aspect that prompts referral, and therefore the training includes a module on anger management (Sharp, Herrick & Faupel, 1998). This helps to build an understanding of how and why angry behaviour is initiated and suggests a range of calming strategies suitable to different contexts. Many children are referred to ELSAs for help in developing social skills. The training consequently includes a module on the purpose of social communication and its constituent skills (Hutchings, Comins & Offiler, 1991). Since there is an increase in the number of children being identified with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who are likely to require support to develop social skills, the programme also provides some support in understanding thinking patterns. Awareness of the triad of impairments (Wing & Gould, 1979) and theory of mind (Frith, 1989) are included in an introduction to autism, and trainees are introduced to the use of social stories (Gray & Garand, 1993) as a method of teaching children socially appropriate behaviours. Allied to social skills is the area of friendship; here, the programme looks at approaches for supporting young people in developing the skills they need to initiate and maintain friendships. One approach adopted is *Circles of Friends*, which was first developed in Canada (Pearpoint & Forest, 1992) and subsequently introduced to the UK (Newton, Taylor & Wilson, 1996) where it has become widely used in schools. Group work was also explored and support given in devising plans for friendship groups. Included within this module is an introduction to therapeutic story writing (Brett, 1986), a technique that allows children to consider challenging issues from a more objective perspective. By focusing initially outside of themselves, the children can be helped to generalise their learning to their own *hot* issues.

The training is followed by group supervision sessions, which are two hours long and are provided twice-termly by the educational psychologist for the schools involved. Supervision provides an opportunity for problem-solving concerning casework, the sharing of ideas and resources, and further exploration of psychological approaches.

The initial training is not considered exhaustive, and topics have subsequently been covered either during supervision (e.g. loss and bereavement) or in ELSA conferences (e.g. attachment).

### **ELSA intervention**

Identifying children for ELSA support is a matter for the school. They tend to work with pupils who have a wide spectrum of emotional needs. Examples of the kind of difficulties for which ELSAs have offered support include parental separation, bereavement, selective mutism, school refusal, frequent outbursts of anger, friendship difficulties, challenging behaviour and anxiety. It is generally recommended that ELSAs become involved with these children over at least half a term, generally offering weekly sessions, although the length and frequency of sessions would depend upon individual circumstances. Many programmes continue for a longer period. It is, however, intended that the work be proactive and planned. It is most helpful when clear and achievable outcomes are identified in advance; this also allows an ELSA to judge when a programme can be drawn to a close. In their supervising role, EPs receive frequent anecdotal feedback of successful outcomes, of which the following are just a few examples. These examples provide a flavour of the variety of work being undertaken by ELSAs in different Key Stages of education.

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### **Examples of ELSA activity**

- An ELSA worked with a Year 2 child whose parents had separated. The child had found this difficult to comprehend. He regularly spent time with both parents after school and during weekends. The child was angry and unsure about what his parents expected of him. The ELSA and pupil played therapeutic games and made a personal diary. In this way the boy was able to communicate his feelings of loss, anger and confusion. After several weeks he shared his diary with his parents. They were surprised by his emotional awareness. The child now regularly completes a feelings diary, opening up communication between himself and his parents.
- An ELSA worked with a boy in Year 4 who had both friendship and anger issues. He decided for himself he would like to work on his anger management as he thought his temper was one of the main reasons other children did not like him. The ELSA used ideas from *'A Volcano in my Tummy'* (Whitehouse & Pudney, 1996) and solution-focused brief therapy. The boy was committed to the work and ideas discussed. His manner (body language, self-confidence and smile) changed and was noticed by staff. His parents were pleased with his progress but, more

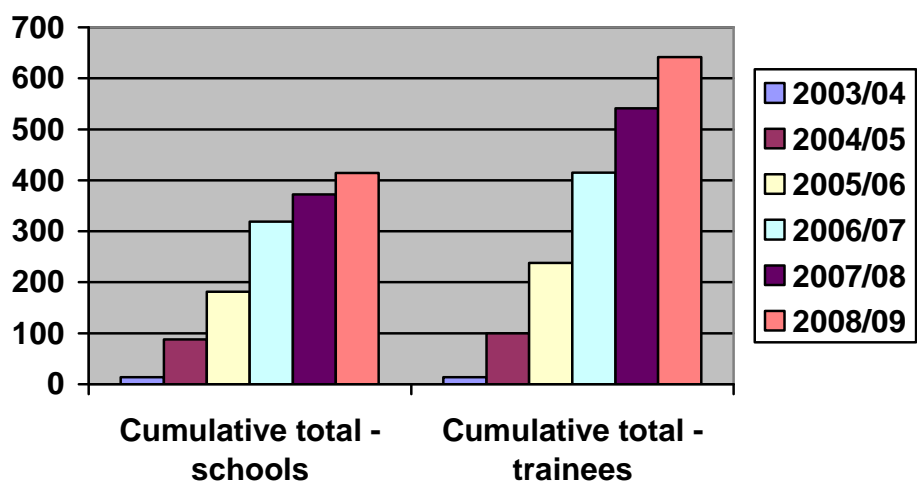
importantly, he feels different about himself. He manages friendships and his anger much better and is able to put calming strategies into practice.

- A secondary ELSA worked for over a year with an upper school pupil who was not attending regularly. She met with her every two weeks in order to discuss her lack of self-esteem and other problems she was facing. The girl would also seek her out at other times when she was not coping. Over a period of time her attendance increased dramatically. On her last day at school she thanked the ELSA for her support and asked to keep in touch by e-mail. She achieved excellent GCSE results.

### HOW DO SCHOOLS PERCEIVE THE ELSA PROGRAMME?

This work has already enjoyed considerable success, as indicated by the growth in participating schools and the number of ELSAs who have now completed training. Once they have had one member of staff trained, many schools have asked to have additional staff trained as ELSAs. It is recommend that secondary schools have two people trained from the outset because of their size and organisational complexity. Figure 1 shows the cumulative increase in the number of participating schools in the county and the growth in the number of ELSAs over the six years from the inception of the project to the end of the academic year 2008-9.

**Figure 1** – Cumulative totals of participating schools and ELSAs trained





In 2005, 22 schools were sent questionnaires, to be completed by ELSAs, their line managers (Headteachers or SENCOs), pupils and teachers. Questionnaires were received from 13 ELSAs, 58 pupils (ten of whom were at secondary school) and 14 line managers. Teacher questionnaires were completed on 54 pupils (seven of whom were at secondary school).

All the ELSAs who responded reported that being part of the project had helped them better support vulnerable pupils. They rated the quality of the training on a Likert scale of one to five, (where five was high), and the mean response was 4.4. They were asked to rate the quality of support provided by educational psychologists in the supervision sessions in a similar way and the mean response was 4.2. The ELSAs commented on how empowering the training and supervision had been and how much more valued they felt in their new role within the school.

Pupils were asked to indicate whether they felt happy, OK or sad about working with the ELSA. Of primary pupils, 85% indicated they felt happy (60% of secondary pupils), with the remainder saying they felt OK. Of primary pupils, 83% felt they were improving in relation to the things they were working on with the ELSA (50% of secondary pupils). The remainder thought that 'sometimes' they were getting better. Their comments reflected their appreciation of having someone to talk to, someone who listened to them without criticising and who kept their confidences. They also referred to specific ways in which they had been helped (e.g. managing their feelings, developing friendships, and improving relationships at home and school).

For 44 out of the 47 primary pupils (and four of the seven secondary pupils), teachers claimed that progress had been made in relation to the targets identified prior to ELSA involvement. All but one of the 54 teachers felt that the ELSA input had been beneficial (the exception indicated that it was too soon to judge). Comments from primary school teachers referred to pupils' improved understanding and management of emotions, improved social and friendship skills, increased self-esteem and confidence, and improved behaviour:

- *a therapeutic story has helped him relate to his feelings and difficulties*
- *he has made huge progress in considering other people*

- *she is now building some good relationships.*

Secondary school teachers commented on how pupils had benefited from time to talk about their feelings, relationships and coping strategies:

- *now much happier although still needs some input from the ELSA*
- *benefited from opportunity to talk about feelings and discuss possible strategies, which might be useful.*

Fourteen questionnaires were returned from the line managers of ELSAs and their comments about the project were overwhelmingly positive in respect both to the professional development of the ELSAs and the ELSAs' impact on the pupils they had worked with:

- *this project has been a great success for us – just what we were looking for*
- *outstanding impact from Year R through to Year 6*
- *children showed improved confidence, self-esteem and overall a more positive persona*
- *the LSA had excellent common sense and practical skills but lacked confidence to support pupils' emotional development. Following the training she now feels more secure and is doing a very good job, much valued within the school.*

### **OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Gray (2001) makes the point that methods used to evaluate services tend to be over-dependent on activity monitoring and customer satisfaction surveys. Whilst these data are important they are not complete, nor are they the most critical indices. We also need to address what impact the service actually has on the children concerned (a point also strongly made by Friedman, 2005, in his aptly named book "*Trying hard is not good enough*"). The key question we need to pose is - *Is anyone better off?* We know that schools liked the ELSA programme to the extent that they were willing to commit resources to the programme and elaborated on why, in their questionnaire responses. Importantly, they also cited subjective evidence of how it had improved outcomes for children.

During the academic year 2007-8 we attempted to gain more objective evidence of impact on children via the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman 1997). The SDQ is a

brief behavioural and emotional well-being questionnaire that can be completed within 5-10 minutes by a teacher or a parent.

### Methodology

Letters were sent to all schools where an ELSA had undergone ELSA training. The letters explained the purpose of the evaluation, what would be expected of them and asked whether they wished to participate. Consent was obtained from parents/guardians for their child to be involved in the ELSA evaluation. Parents and teachers completed an SDQ prior to the children attending sessions (September-December 2007) and then again towards the end of sessions (January-March 2008). Teachers also provided information on whether ELSA sessions with a named child had been either an individual or group session.

### Teacher-rated results

In total we received 107 matched (pre- and post-intervention) teacher-rated questionnaires. The total score on an SDQ can be converted to a clinical classification of either 'normal', 'borderline' or 'abnormal'. Table 1 shows the frequency with which children were classified under these criteria, both before and after the intervention. It is clear that teacher perceptions improved post-intervention, such that far more children's behaviour was classified as 'normal' and less was classified as 'abnormal'.

**Table 1:** SDQ classifications pre- and post- ELSA intervention

	Number of children classified as:		
	'normal'	'borderline'	'abnormal'
Pre-intervention	32	21	54
Post-intervention	48	18	41

Matched pair t-tests were conducted to examine changes in the scores. In keeping with common practice we set a threshold value for statistical significance of  $P < 0.05$ <sup>2</sup>. A significant decrease was observed in the total questionnaire score (pre: 15.36, post: 12.87;  $t(106) = 5.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This supports the analysis above that teachers perceived there to be an improvement in the children's behaviour. Hence although these changes cannot be directly attributed to ELSA intervention, it is evident that teacher's views of the children's behaviour improved substantially as the input from the ELSA progressed.

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<sup>2</sup> A difference of this magnitude is likely to have arisen by chance in less than one in 20 occasions.

Analysis of the subtest scores indicated where most of this difference lay. There was a significant decrease in what SDQ defines as emotional problems, peer problems, conduct disorder and a significant improvement in pro-social behaviour.

- **Emotional problems** - decrease (pre: 3.29, post: 2.42;  $t(106) = 4.12, p < 0.001$ )
- **Pro-social behaviour** - increase (pre: 4.93, post: 5.70;  $t(106) = -3.57, p < 0.01$ )
- **Peer problems** - decrease (pre: 3.15, post: 2.63;  $t(106) = 3.11, p < 0.02$ )
- **Conduct disorder** - decrease (pre: 2.93, post: 2.44;  $t(106) = 2.98, p < 0.04$ )

Whilst the scores on the hyperactivity scale were in the anticipated direction (a decrease), the differences failed to reach the criteria for statistical significance.

- **Hyperactivity** - decrease (pre: 5.98, post: 5.37;  $t(106) = 2.77, p < 0.07$ ).

**Type of intervention** (teacher-rated SDQ)

We asked teachers to identify the nature of the intervention sessions ELSAs were providing, in order to explore whether group or individual interventions were having more perceived impact. We received 38 responses, which were linked to matched pre and post data. Of these, 23 children were receiving ELSA support on an individual basis and 15 were having ELSA intervention in a group context. A problem is that the numbers are small and this introduces problems about how representative these data might be.

Converting the SDQ scores relating to individual sessions to a classification table indicates that following intervention there was less behaviour classified as 'abnormal' and more classified as either 'borderline' or 'normal'.

**Table 2:** SDQ classifications pre- and post-intervention for individual sessions

	Number of children classified as:		
	'normal'	'borderline'	'abnormal'
Pre-intervention	9	2	12
Post-intervention	11	4	8

As might be expected by this perceived improvement in behaviour, a statistically significant decrease in the total SDQ score was observed (pre: 15.57, post: 12.87;  $t(22) = 3.28, p < 0.03$ ). This was also the picture in relation to peer problems (pre: 3.48, post: 2.83;  $t(22) = 2.29, p < 0.03$ ). The other subscale scores moved in the desired direction, but none was statistically significant.

Similar results were found in the analysis of the data relating to those children receiving support via group work. Again, the classification table indicated a marked improvement with more ratings being classified as 'normal' and 'borderline' and fewer as 'abnormal' following intervention.

**Table 3:** SDQ classifications pre- and post-intervention for group sessions

	Number of children classified as:		
	'normal'	'borderline'	'abnormal'
Pre-intervention	3	3	9
Post-intervention	6	5	4

However, whilst there was a sizeable decrease in the total SDQ score (pre: 16.13, post: 13.93;  $t(14) = 1.88, p < 0.08$ ), the difference did not reach statistical significance. Similar results were apparent in the analysis of the individual subscale differences. The limited number of matched data sets was particularly problematic in looking at the impact of group work.

### Parent-rated results

Similar to the discussion above, we received 52-matched (pre- and post-intervention) parent-rated questionnaires. Table 4 shows the frequency with which children were assigned to the various clinical classifications, before and after ELSA intervention. We can see that parental perception did change between pre- and post-intervention but the differences were less dramatic than that found in the teacher submissions. Whilst more children's behaviour was classified as 'normal', and fewer 'borderline', the same number of children were classified as 'abnormal' both pre- and post-intervention.

**Table 4:** SDQ classifications pre- and post-intervention

	Number of children classified as:		
	'normal'	'borderline'	'abnormal'
Pre-intervention	18	9	25
Post-intervention	26	1	25

On closer analysis there was more turmoil within the ratings than is apparent at first glance. Of the 25 children classified as 'abnormal' post-intervention, 22 of them had been classified in this way both pre- and post-intervention; the other three children were originally classified as 'borderline' pre-intervention. Hence there were some dramatic improvements and some deterioration in pupil ratings.

Again, a series of matched pair t-tests were conducted on these data to examine changes in more detail. This analysis revealed a significant decrease in the total SDQ score (indicating a perceived improvement in the children's behaviour) and in the scale defined as hyperactivity. In other words, children were perceived by parents to be calmer post-intervention:

- **Total SDQ score** - decrease (pre: 16.09, post: 14.87;  $t(51) = 2.30, p < 0.03$ ).
- **Hyperactivity** - decrease (pre: 6.23, post: 5.65;  $t(51) = 2.62, p < 0.01$ ).

None of the other differences in individual scales reached statistical significance.

We looked to compare type of intervention (group or individual) in respect to parent ratings but only had matched data for 18 children (nine under each condition). There was a significant decrease in the total score, (pre: 16.00, post: 13.22;  $t(8) = 2.52, p < 0.03$ ), for those pupils receiving support on an individual basis but these data were too few to be considered of any real value.

## **DISCUSSION**

A number of issues need to be considered in relation to the evaluation of an initiative of this sort, but two key questions are:

- What do people think about the service – do they judge it to be useful?
- Is anyone better off as a result – what impact is it having on children, staff or families?

We will discuss each of these points in turn during the discussion.

The expansion of the number of ELSAs trained over the past six years provides one index of the value schools place on this initiative. Not only do ELSAs attend the training but there is also

an expectation that schools will then allocate them time to promote the emotional development of pupils and attend supervision sessions on an ongoing basis. Hence, there are financial implications for schools. Despite this disincentive the ELSA programme has increased significantly and feedback suggests that schools perceive there to have been tangible benefits.

The educational psychologists facilitating the supervision groups have acknowledged the quality of work being carried out by ELSAs. They also recognise the benefit of having a trained member of staff within schools who is capable of implementing recommendations made with regard to specific pupils in relation to behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. As with the PATHS curriculum, an advantage is that members of staff employed by the school deliver the support within the school. It is not dependent on trained specialists. This gives greater accessibility to support for larger numbers of young people within the community and builds capacity within schools.

As found by Carnwell & Baker (2007) and Kelly et al (2005), pupils receiving ELSA support have highlighted the importance of being able to share their feelings safely and confidentially with adults who have time to listen to them. Support over time leads to the development of trust in which the possibility of behavioural change can be explored in a non-threatening way. As ELSAs are readily accessible, children can approach them for informal support outside of designated sessions. Moreover, as the majority of ELSAs spend part of their working week in the role of general classroom assistants, they are able to assist pupils in generalising newly-developed skills to classroom and playground contexts.

Our experience concurs with the findings of Carnwell & Baker (2007) that some pupils who are disruptive in class continue to be disruptive in a small group context. Such pupils are likely to require individual support before they are ready to work in a group of peers. The ELSA initiative is designed primarily to be an individualised intervention and may be more suited to such pupils, where a secure relationship with an adult can be encouraged without competition for attention. That ELSAs are learning support assistants rather than teachers may also more easily facilitate the development of a relationship of trust for those pupils who find it difficult to cope with the dual role of a teacher as both an authority figure and pastoral support worker. The difficulty of adequate support for people in this role

(identified by Carnwell & Baker, 2007) is overcome by regular supervision sessions led by educational psychologists and through the support the school's link educational psychologist can provide. ELSAs are encouraged to contact their link educational psychologist by telephone or e-mail if they encounter any additional difficulties. Feedback suggests they feel well supported by access to educational psychologists in this way.

Kassem (2002) argued for the need for teachers to take the emotional needs of pupils into consideration in their teaching. The ELSA initiative is an example of how an educational psychology service can make a large-scale contribution to increasing the awareness of staff in schools to the importance of emotional literacy. This work, while focusing on the professional development of LSAs, has also stimulated schools' requests for staff training in the area of emotional literacy.

Since the ELSA initiative is predicated on the view that educational psychologist time for this work is legitimately taken from that which is available for school and community work, little direct cost is passed to the schools. This has proved attractive to schools as they view the training and supervision as excellent value. It is viewed by the educational psychology service as building the capacity of schools to manage a greater proportion of pupil needs from within their own resources, without the need for recourse to external agencies. It is not suggested that the support of such agencies will never be required but that earlier intervention should reduce the extent to which external support is needed. By developing the skills of staff within schools to support children facing emotional challenges, educational psychologists are able to focus on the more complex cases that require a greater degree of psychological input. This seems to address one of the concerns raised in the review of the function and contribution of educational psychologists (DfES, 2006b) about the nature of their distinctive contribution and the need to be involved only in work that requires an appropriate level of knowledge and experience.

In looking for evidence of impact on children and young people, the results of the study using the SDQ suggested that there was a statistically significant change in teacher ratings following ELSA input. This was most marked in the difference between the total questionnaire scores and indicates that teachers perceived there to be an improvement in the children's behaviour. Analysis of the subtest scores also indicated



statistically significant changes at this level - a decrease in teacher perception of emotional problems, conduct disorders and peer problems, and an increase in pro-social behaviour. However, it should be noted that these changes cannot be directly attributed to ELSA intervention, although this was the most significant change for the child (during school hours) and hence it is likely.

It is interesting to note that while teachers' responses suggested significant changes across all categories of the SDQ, parents' ratings revealed that they found a significant improvement only in the total questionnaire and the scale classified as hyperactive. It is difficult to say why this is the case, given that they refer to the same children. It needs to be noted that perceptions of parents and teachers tend to be very different, probably because behaviour is context-related and there are different social pressures within the home and school contexts. It is possible that ELSA interventions were most evident within school and had not generalised to the home. Teachers may have been more attuned to the outcomes ELSAs were trying to achieve and consequently more sensitised to any change of this type. We also need to acknowledge that the SDQ is assessing a person's perception of the behaviour rather than objective aspects. Hence simply knowing an intervention was taking place may alter perceptions even if the behaviour remains the same. Additional research would be required to explore this issue in further detail.

The data were analysed further to explore whether it mattered if the intervention was delivered in the form of individual or group support. They indicated a statistically significant change in the total ratings of the SDQ by teachers and parent in respect to individual support. Teachers also perceived a significant decrease in peer problems under this condition. However the numbers were extremely small when analysed at this level and need to be treated with caution. This analysis consequently failed to contribute substantially to value for money discussion as to what form of ELSA intervention appears the more successful. This aspect is further complicated by different outcomes being associated with the different intervention approaches. Group work is often the favoured approach when addressing social or friendship skills, so any further investigation of this would also need to distinguish between areas of intervention focus.

## **CONCLUSION**

This document has explored a role that has been developed for Learning Support Assistants in Hampshire in supporting the emotional well-being of pupils. A training programme has been described that develops their capacity to help children and young people address a wide variety of emotional challenges. The rapid growth of this programme in a large county, together with the early evaluation results, suggests that teachers are recognising the significant contribution that ELSAs are making to enable children and young people to engage more effectively with school.

As this approach is both time- and cost-effective, there may be scope for this approach to be adopted more widely in other local authorities. Whilst the Social & Emotional Aspects of Learning (DfES, 2005, 2007) and the PATHS curriculum (Kusché & Greenberg, 1994) are designed as a whole-school approach, the ELSA initiative provides a framework to enable individualised and small group support for those pupils who need more intensive input to overcome emotional challenges and develop the kind of resilience that will lead to better personal outcomes.

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