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# **Professional Training Programme**

# **In Educational Psychology**

**Doctorate in**

**Educational**

 **Psychology**

Research Commission

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ELSA Training: Impact on Thinking and Practice

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**Executive Summary**

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme is an Educational Psychologist (EP) led intervention, which aims to support children and young people's (CYP) social, emotional and mental health (SEMH). Gloucestershire EPS, who commissioned this project, wished to explore ELSAs' experiences of the training they are currently enrolled on. A qualitative approach was used to gather information through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis identified five key themes: *Increased understanding of supporting children's needs, child-centered practice, training delivery, whole-school approach* and *challenges.* Positive conclusions can be drawn from the ELSAs' perceptions of the training programme as a positive, worthwhile experience that has changed both their thinking and practice when working with CYP in schools.

**Introduction**

The ELSA programme was initially developed in Southampton Educational Psychology Service (EPS) (ELSA Network, 2017). Following a positive evaluation within Hampshire, the programme was utilised in schools throughout the UK (Burton, Traill & Norgate, 2009). The ELSA programme is an EP led training programme with ongoing supervision for Teaching Assistants (TAs). The purpose of the training is to combine practical guidance with psychological theory to provide support for a range of SEMH issues including anxiety, self-esteem and social communication difficulties (Shotton & Burton, 2008).

Gloucestershire EPS, who established their ELSA programme in 2017, commissioned this project. At the time of the commission, Gloucestershire were training their first cohort of 15 ELSAs, following a seven-day training structure adapted from the six-day Hampshire training model (ELSA Network, 2017) to incorporate a focus on resilience. The EPS aspire that the ELSA programme is not seen as an isolated form of training, but that the roles and practices associated with it become embedded in each schools’ ethos and values. Thus, the researchers were commissioned to inform further iterations of ELSA within the EPS, inform the supervision and ongoing support of ELSAs and to contribute to a wider evaluation coordinated by the service.

**Literature Review**

*Background and Growth of the ELSA Programme*

Within the last decade it has been identified that schools need to be concerned with the holistic development of CYP as well as educational attainment (Burton, 2008; Hill, O’Hare & Weidberg, 2013). This holistic perspective recognises the significant impact social and emotional development can have on CYPs’ learning, behaviour, achievement, health and future economic well-being (Department of Health, 2015).

The growing emphasis on social and emotional development has led to an increased interest in an evidence-base of emotional literacy (EL). This interest in EL is thought to have contributed to the introduction of Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), a curriculum tool designed to support and develop primary and secondary aged pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills (DfES, 2007). Furthermore, research into EL and its possible links with educational outcomes contributed to the development of a measure of EL (Southampton Psychology Service, 2003), along with the individualised intervention programme, ELSA. A rationale for this approach is grounded in psychological theory, for example Maslow’s theory of motivation asserts that basic needs such as love, and safety must be met in order to achieve (Maslow, 1970). Furthermore, Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory highlights the importance social relationships have upon one’s development.

*Impact of ELSA Training*

Although there is limited research regarding ELSAs’ experiences of the ELSA programme, evaluations completed by local authorities (LAs) indicate that it is associated with positive changes in ELSAs’ self-efficacy beliefs (Grahamslow, 2010). It has also been attributed to numerous positive outcomes at a whole-school level, such as increased academic achievement and a raised awareness of EL (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Grahamslaw, 2010). However, it is notable that much of the evidence to date has been contributed to by either the implementers or authors of the programme, thus we must be aware of possible experimenter bias (McEwen, 2015). Moreover, where ELSAs’ experiences have been captured, they are mainly gathered using quantitative methods, whereby ELSAs’ responses are limited to predetermined questions. McEwen (2015) suggests that conducting qualitative research may be useful in gaining a deeper understanding of ELSAs’ experiences of the programme.

In a report evaluating the impact of the ELSA programme in Cheshire West and Chester (CWaC), ELSAs rated the five-day training highly, (between 4.69 and 4.91 on a 5-point scale), with positive aspects of training including the training approach, gaining resources, the theoretical and detailed overview and the opportunity to reflect (Edwards, 2016). Suggestions for improvement included the need for more in-depth practical information about ELSA, meeting the needs of secondary school ELSAs, and logistics and environment. Although this was an in-depth evaluation of CWaC ELSAs’ perceptions of the training, this report looked solely at this Psychology Service’s programme, the generalisability of this study in a wider context is questionable.

With regards to the ongoing supervision ELSAs receive during and after the training, Osborne & Burton (2014) found that these sessions were perceived to be very helpful with 89% of ELSAs feeling that it met their needs. The greatest impact was perceived to be in relation to ELSAs’ own development, with a positive impact on their personal and professional development, as well as on colleagues and pupils within the school. Interestingly, a small minority felt supervision had a negative impact as a result of the time out of school having a potentially negative impact on children in school.

*Challenges Associated with ELSA Training*

In a mixed-methods evaluation of the ELSA programme, Mann (2014) found that challenges facing ELSAs in their day-to-day role included being restricted by time particularly regarding the pressure to support pupils imminently, rather than also having time to plan effectively to meet a range of often complex needs. With this in mind, Rees (2016) highlights the importance of ELSAs being provided the opportunities to practice their new skills and interventions in order to master them, yet in his research it emerged that after completing the training, ELSAs often experienced feelings of reduced confidence in their ability to apply their future role as an ELSA. Some ELSAs expressed a lack of support from other colleagues and unrealistic expectations regarding their role and their impact on pupil outcomes. Participants’ comments also appeared to reflect the need for closer peer support following the training, to give them the opportunity to share good practice and network (Mann, 2014).

Taking these findings into account, McEwen (2015) emphasises the need to understand ELSAs’ experiences of the ELSA programme. Firstly, it may offer key insights into how the programme is implemented in schools and secondly it is likely to broaden current understanding of the programme and how it is perceived by those who facilitate and use it. This information is likely to have positive implications on how EPs conceptualise the role of the ELSA, as well as the support and training they may provide. It could be said that listening to and valuing ELSAs views, and in turn developing on areas of improvement, is likely to have a positive impact on not only the ELSA-child relationship but also future ELSA practice.

**Research Aim and Research Questions**

The proposed research aims to understand ELSAs’ reflections on what has changed for them and their role since the introduction of the ELSA training course. In doing so, the study aims to explore the four following research questions (RQ):

 1. How do the ELSAs’ perceive that their thinking has changed, if at all?

2.   How do the ELSAs’ perceive that their practice has changed, if at all?

3.  If participants feel there has been a change, what do the ELSAs feel has contributed to the change?

4. What do the ELSAs feel would further support them in their role?

**Methodology**

*Study Design*

Due to the research study's aim to elicit the views of ELSAs about the Gloucestershire training programme, the researchers felt the interpretivist (also referred to as qualitative) paradigm to be the most appropriate approach as it provides a deeper understanding of people and what they have revealed (Somekh & Lewin, 2011) and aims to explore perceptions, ideas, thoughts and feelings (Thomas, 2013). Data was collected using semi-structured interviews as valuable insights can be gained, and “subjects can be probed, issues pursued, and lines of investigation followed.” (Denscombe, 2014, p.201).

*Participants*

Four participants were interviewed from four local authority primary schools after giving consent and having agreed to be a part of the study. All participants were currently enrolled on the 7-day ELSA training programme that began in September 2017.

*Procedures*

The researchers agreed the inclusion criteria, research aims and questions with the commissioners prior to the study commencing. In order to give each ELSA an equal opportunity to participate in the research, ELSAs were approached during a training session by the commissioner whereby they received a participant information sheet (Appendix 1) and consent form (Appendix 2) and were invited to take part. Examples of these forms can be found in the appendices. It was planned that of those who expressed interest, one participant from each school would be selected using random sampling. However, a total of four consent forms were returned, thus this was not necessary. The researchers then contacted each ELSA via email to arrange a suitable data and time to carry out interviews and give the opportunity for them to ask any additional questions they may have about the study.

The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of ELSAs’ reflections on what may have changed for them and their role since the introduction of the ELSA training course. The researchers visited the four participating schools over two data collection dates and interviewed one participant from each school, totaling four participants. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed subsequently. In order to maintain confidentiality, these files were only accessible to the researcher and protected by a security code on the device on which it was stored. Furthermore, participants were aware that recordings and transcriptions would be permanently deleted upon submission.

*Analysis*

The researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim. Due to logistical and time constraints, the interviews transcribed two interviews each. The researchers used Braun and Clarke’s (2013) method of thematic analysis. The transcripts were coded by both interviewers together to uphold inter-coder reliability. Themes and subthemes were then established simultaneously and can be seen in Table 1.

**Findings**

Theme 1: Increased Understanding of Supporting Children’s Needs

ELSAs clearly communicated that the training led to an increased understanding of supporting children’s needs. Two subthemes were identified within this theme:

*Psychological Theory*

Participant 2: *“Erm its kind of we’ve got the theories behind what we’re doing, and so I think that really helps to just give it a more professional role...”*

*Depth of Training*

The word *depth* was used consistently throughout interviews to describe the training programme:

Participant 1: *“The course is just fantastic…I’ve had lots of training before on social skills and communication issues, but it’s obviously much more in depth and focused and I’ve really enjoyed it”.*

Theme 2: Child-Centred Practice

The participants indicated that they had become more child-centered in their practice. Two subthemes were identified within this theme:

*Child-led Sessions*

Participant 3: *“I’ve realised that actually the children hold all the answers almost to their own wellbeing, and it’s facilitating that as an ELSA”.*

*Relationship Building with Child*

Participants used language such as *relationship, patient, tolerant, bonds, take the time.*

Participant 4: *"I’m always thinking about how I can build a relationship, what I can do with that child and how I can bond with that child …"*

Theme 3: Training Delivery

Participants commented upon how the way the training was delivered had a positive impact on their learning through two subthemes.

*Educational Psychologists expertise*

Participant 3: *“It’s awesome [laughs], I just love it…it’s amazing. And the variety of speakers we’ve had in and the expertise has been amazing”.*

*Peer Learning*

Participant 1: *“We’ve spent quite a lot of time actually all sharing our own experiences and what’s gone well and that’s been absolutely valuable hearing other people’s ideas”.*

*Continued Support*

Participant 4: *“…obviously things are always changing in the environment and safeguarding children and so continued support from the EP is essential, and continued training…”*

Theme 4: Whole-School Approach

The ELSAs felt that a whole-school approach was important to enable and support them in their role. This was highlighted through three subthemes:

*Acceptance and understanding of role*

*Participant 4: “Erm again, support from the staff around us in school. Understanding that our role is just as important as being in a classroom environment”.*

*Education for staff team*

Participant 3: *“I’d love to sort of have the confidence and the knowledge to sell it to the whole school, because I don’t think they quite get it in terms of what I’m doing and what’s happening and how the children are benefitting”.*

Theme 5: Challenges

Participants highlighted challenges that they have faced in implementing their training in their setting. The broader theme of challenges can be considered in three subthemes:

*Lack of space*

Participant 3: *“So we kind of commandeered a little section of a room…, but it’s not ideal. And it’s quite difficult, and quite noisy and there’s people in and out, so that’s a huge barrier”*

*Funding*

Participant 1: *“To accumulate all the resources has been quite expensive as well…so yeah the cost is a bit of a barrier”.*

*Time for planning and preparation*

Participant 2: *“I come away with ideas like oh that’d be great but actually trying to hone it down into this is what’s manageable in the time that we’ve got.”*

The themes and subthemes are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Key themes

|  |
| --- |
| **Theme 1: Increased Understanding of Supporting Children’s Needs** |
|  |  |
|  Subthemes: | Psychological theory |
|  | Depth of training |
| **Theme 2: Child-Centred Practice** |
| Subthemes: | Child-led sessions |
|   | Relationship building with child |
| **Theme 3: Training Delivery**  |
| Subthemes: | Educational psychologists’ expertise |
|   | Peer learning  |
|  | Continued support |
| **Theme 4: Whole-School Approach** |
| Subthemes:  | Education for staff team |
|  | Acceptance and understanding of role |
| **Theme 5: Challenges** |
| Subthemes:  | Lack of space |
|  | Funding |
|  | Time |

**Discussion**

The aim of the research was to explore the ELSA’s reflections on what has changed for them and their role since the introduction of the ELSA training programme. The benefit of adopting a qualitative approach was recognised by McEwen (2015) to build on earlier research and gain a deeper understanding of ELSAs’ experiences of the programme. The four research questions agreed with the commissioner informed the semi-structured interview questions. The thematic analysis of the interviews led to the identification of five themes and subthemes which will now be discussed in context.

Theme 1 ‘Increased understanding of supporting children’s needs’ links directly to our first research question. The analysis suggests that ELSAs perceive that their thinking has changed as a result of the in-depth approach to training and also the wide-ranging psychological theory discussed throughout the sessions. This supports the findings of Edwards (2016) who also highlighted the theoretical content and detail as positive aspects of the course. One participant also indicated that this was different to other courses she had received and therefore implies a unique quality of the programme.

Theme 2 ‘Child-centered practice’ could be considered as a result of theme 1 and therefore these themes are interrelated. However, theme 2 also addresses RQ 2 and suggests that ELSA’s practice has changed to become more child-centered following the training. Changes in practice can be seen through ELSAs allowing the child to lead the sessions and building relationships with the children by finding out about their *interests* and *insights*. ELSAs also spoke about their developing *patience, empathy* and *tolerance* when working with children.

Theme 3 ‘Training Delivery’ emerged from participants comments about what has influenced changes in their thinking and practice, linking to RQ 3. Three subthemes emerged that suggested the participants valued the peer-learning elements of the course which involved sharing *experiences, resources and perspectives.* Participants also valued the EPs’ sharing their expertise, knowledge and experiences. Case studies were also mentioned several times by one participant indicating these were the most valuable to her learning. ‘Continued support’ was a final subtheme and represents another unique element of the training programme. Participants frequently mentioned the on-going support they will have through supervision which they felt will help them in continuing to apply their learning in practice. This is reflective of Mann’s (2014) findings that ELSA’s felt EP support would enhance their practice. The subtheme of ‘Continued support’ also links to RQ 4.

A ‘Whole-school approach’ emerged as a theme which was related to both ELSAs current and future success in applying their role and therefore links to both RQ3 and RQ4. Two subthemes were identified within this. Participants reported the need to educate their colleagues to help them to understand the ELSA role through leaflets or disseminating information through presentations at staff meetings. This is interrelated with the subtheme of ‘Acceptance and understanding of role’. Participants implied that better understanding and acceptance would lead to them feeling more able to practice as an ELSA effectively. One participant commented on the value of the EPS advising the senior leaders of the school of the programme ethos and expectations before and after training delivery. The positive impact of a whole-school approach and understanding of ELSA was identified by Bravery and Harris (2009) and Grahamslaw (2010).

Theme 6 ‘Challenges’ is in response to RQ4. Whilst the theme is negatively framed, it is possible to reframe the codes to consider what ELSAs would need to be further supported in their role. This theme is made up of three subthemes; lack of space, funding and time. These subthemes reflect logistical and environmental barriers which are generally indicative of the current economic climate. However, some of these challenges may be addressed through the education and understanding of senior leaders within schools to acknowledge and commit to the value of the ELSA role in enhancing the social, emotional and mental health of children (Shotton & Burton, 2015).

Considerations and implications

The research took place in Gloucestershire schools and solely with participants who had attended the ELSA training delivered by Gloucestershire, which limits the generalisability of this study. Participants were obtained through availability sampling at one of the ELSA training sessions. As such, there is the possibility for participant bias, social desirability bias or demand characteristics. It is hoped that these effects were minimised through our method.

There are several potential implications from our research which can be considered in terms of future training delivery and contributions on a wider scale. Implications for further iterations of ELSA training could include the continued or increased use of case studies to embed learning, and opportunities to share experiences, resources and successes through group discussions. The benefit of potential ‘top-up’ training for qualified ELSAs was eluded to by some of the participants to help them keep up to date with new research and resources and to support their continued professional development. In addition, this study contributes to the growing evidence base of ELSA in the UK. It has particular implications in informing research into the impact of ELSA in the school system and wider scale studies across different Local Authorities to increase generalisability. The findings from this study also suggest the possible benefits of exploring Senior Leaders’ perceptions of ELSAs in schools to better inform how to promote whole school understanding and awareness of the role in the future.

**Concluding comments**

This study informs the initial stages of Gloucestershire’s wider evaluation of their implementation of the ELSA training programme. Positive conclusions can be drawn for ELSAs perceptions of the training programme as a positive, worthwhile experience that has changed both their thinking and practice when working with CYP in schools.

In the words of Participant 1, “*… it’s fantastic, it’s just a fabulous course”.*

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Appendices

**Appendix 1**

**Participant Information Sheet**

***Study Objective –*** *To understand ELSAs’ reflections on what has changed for them and their role since the introduction of the ELSA training course.*

Dear ELSAs,

Thank you for taking the time to consider your participation in our research. We are two Trainee Educational Psychologists in our first year of training at the University of Bristol, and we have been commissioned by Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service to carry out an exciting research project. Before deciding whether you wish to take part, it is important that you read and understand the following information outlined below.

Interviews with four ELSAs will be carried out. We feel it is important to make you aware that although you may be keen to participate in the research study, we are unable to select more than four participants due to its small-scale nature. Further to this, we will be looking to interview no more than one ELSA per school; this selection will be made at random should the opportunity present itself. The study’s objective is to gain an understanding of ELSAs’ reflections on what may have changed for them and their role since the introduction of the ELSA training course.

A report will be compiled for Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service, which will be used by the service to develop and inform further iterations of the ELSA programme within the local authority. Elements of the study may be used by the service in other materials. The findings from this study will also be fed back to a group of research commissioners, including those from Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service, and members of staff from the University of Bristol. The report summary can be shared with you during your ELSA supervision with your Educational Psychologist (EP). There is also the possibility of publishing the research for a wider audience, or the research may be made available on the ELSA network website.

We would be grateful if you could participate in an interview with us during the month of May. The interview will last for approximately 30-45 minutes. We will be asking you some questions relating to how you feel your thinking and practice may have changed since beginning the ELSA training programme, what you think may have contributed to the change and what you feel would support you further in your training. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed, with all names remaining anonymous. Every effort will be made to ensure no names are linked to comments, however, with any small-scale research project, certain elements of the information may be identifiable due to the unique nature of the project. Should participants disclose concerning information, they will be reminded of our responsibility as researchers to follow the appropriate channels e.g. safeguarding procedures.

You are under no obligation to participate and may withdraw from the research study up to two weeks from the day that the interview was conducted. When we have received your signed consent form, we will contact you to organise a suitable date and time for the interview to take place in your school.

If you are happy to participate, we would be most grateful if you would sign and return the consent form directly to the EP who is leading your training. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Kind Regards

Sarah Bland & Elle Macro

Trainee Educational Psychologists

**Appendix 2**

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 **Participant Consent Form**

***Study Objective –*** *To understand ELSAs’ reflections on what has changed for them and their role since the introduction of the ELSA training course.*

I confirm that I have been given, read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.

I agree to take part in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way. I have up to two weeks from the day of the interview to withdraw from the study.

I will not disclose any personal information that could identify children, schools or individuals involved.

School: Primary Secondary Specialist provision

Please sign here \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Contact number\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Email address\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Data Protection Act

I understand that data collected about me during my participation in this study will be stored on computer and that any files containing information about me will be made anonymous. I agree to the University of Bristol recording and processing information about me.

I understand that this information will only be used for the purposes of this study and my consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act.

Please tick if you agree.

Thank you, please return this form to your trainer.

**Sarah Bland and Elle Macro – Trainee Educational Psychologists.**

Questions and/or concerns with the conduct of the investigation or other details you do not wish to discuss with the researchers, please contact Dr John Franey, DEdPsy Research Director at John.Franey@bristol.ac.uk