



**A qualitative evaluation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA)
initiative in West Cumbria from the perspective of ELSAs**



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Section 1 - Introduction

This study aims to develop an understanding of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants' (ELSA) perspectives and experiences in regard to ELSA training and carrying out the ELSA role in school. It was conducted in response to a request from a local authority Educational Psychology Service to evaluate the ELSA training programme and begin to explore its impact.

During the spring term 2018 – 19 educational psychologists and an assistant educational psychologist from the County Psychological Service (CPS) (West) provided ELSA training for nineteen teaching assistants from thirteen West Cumbrian schools (Burton, 2018). Although ELSAs did complete quantitative rating questionnaires linked to the training days, this evaluation report is based upon qualitative research. Three ELSAs from the 2018 – 19 ELSA cohort were interviewed in July 2020, and thematic analysis was used to explore two research questions and identify sub themes.

Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) training

The ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) project is a targeted professional development intervention for teaching assistants which is delivered and supervised by educational psychologists (EPs) (Hills, 2016). The ELSA project was designed to build upon the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of their students from within their own resources (Shotton & Burton, 2019). It is widely recognised that children are more open to learning and are happier in school if their emotional needs are addressed (Shotton & Burton, 2019). The ELSA project was originally developed within Southampton Educational Psychology Service in 2001, by Sheila Burton, EP, and is underpinned by a growing body of research (<https://www.elsanetwork.org/elsa-forum/>).

The ELSA intervention is now widely implemented by EPs in the UK (Shotton & Burton, 2019). EPs have expertise in how to best meet the needs of children and young people in regard to their social and emotional development. ELSAs attend a 5- or 6-day training course delivered by one or more fully qualified EPs and then attend half-termly supervision in small groups led by a qualified EP(s). ELSAs are required to deliver bespoke programmes of support to individual pupils and sometimes small groups (Shotton & Burton, 2019). ELSAs also have access to written materials (Shotton & Burton, 2019; Burton, 2018) and a virtual network (www.elsanetwork.org). Some ELSAs belong to local network groups.

ELSA 2018 – 19 in West Cumbria

The CPS in Cumbria (West) implemented an ELSA programme during the academic year 2018 – 2019. This training programme was offered to primary and secondary schools in West Cumbria. Nineteen teaching assistants from thirteen schools (including one secondary school) attended the training and all attendees completed the course and attended subsequent supervision sessions. Informal feedback from ELSAs and senior leaders from participating schools indicated that the pilot ELSA training had been successful in terms of building a sustainable system for supporting the emotional wellbeing of targeted students within the participating schools.

Evaluation

In the course of this evaluation an assistant EP carried out semi-structured interviews by Skype / telephone with three ELSAs who volunteered to participate anonymously in this evaluation. Interviews took place in July 2020. Two of the participating ELSAs worked in schools where two ELSAs had attended the training together. All three participants worked in a primary school setting. Interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. Interview data was analysed by EPs using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Two research questions were identified prior to analysis:

- The experience of the training course
- How well ELSA's feel able to support children's mental health and wellbeing

This research will be shared with the wider County Psychological Service, senior leaders with CCC Schools and Learning, school leaders and ELSAs.

Section 2 - Literature Review

National Context

Schools in the UK have traditionally focused upon improving student attainment but over the past two decades there has also been an increased government focus on supporting the emotional wellbeing of children and young people within educational settings. “Experience suggests that children learn better when their emotional needs are met” (Shotton & Burton, 2019, p3). The United Nations Children’s Fund reported on child wellbeing in the World’s richest countries in 2007 and the United Kingdom came at the bottom of 21 developed countries for overall child wellbeing (UNICEF, 2007) (this research was repeated in 2013 (UNICEF, 2013) when the UK was ranked 16th out of the World’s richest 29 countries in regard to children’s wellbeing and was also repeated in 2020 (UNICEF, 2020) when the UK was rated 27th out of the World’s richest 41 countries).

Under the Labour government (1997 – 2010) there were a number of initiatives which focused upon children’s wellbeing: The National Healthy Schools Programme (1998); The Children’s Act 2004 (Every Child Matters); Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (DfES, 2005) and Targeted Mental Health in Schools (DfCSF, 2008). The Mental Health Foundation (1999) proposed that schools and educational psychologists should have a centralised role within a multi-agency support system to help young people experiencing mental health problems.

The global financial crash of 2008 led to austerity measures in the UK which affected funding for Children’s Services, voluntary organisations and NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). In *Future in Mind* (DH, NHS England, 2015) there was a focus on how services could improve the access of children and young people to evidence-based interventions. The value of being able to seek help in non-clinical settings and the role of schools in identifying concerns and being able to offer early intervention was recognised (Thorley, 2016; Lavis & Robson, 2015).

The Coalition government (2010 - 2015) brought in a new Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Code of Practice (DfE, DH, 2014). The terms BESD (Behaviour Emotional Social Development) and EBD (Emotional & Behaviour Difficulties) were replaced with social, emotional & mental health (SEMH). SEMH being one of the four broad areas of children’s SEN. This change of wording indicated an appreciation that behaviour is often a form of communicating deeper rooted difficulties (McEwen, 2019). There is a converse risk with the change of terminology that behaviour could be pathologised by teachers as a mental health issue and diminish the social and emotional aspects of the children’s needs (Roffey et al., 2016).

Recent government publications include: Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools (DfE, 2018); Timpson Exclusion Review (DfE, 2019) and Improving Behaviour in Schools (EEF, 2019). There remains a strong link between poverty, disadvantage and school exclusion. Children eligible for free school meals (FSM) are around four times more likely to be excluded permanently, or for a fixed term period, than

children who are not. School exclusion is linked to psychological distress and a host of poor outcomes (DfE, 2019).

One in eight children and young people in England are currently experiencing MH difficulties (NHS Digital, 2018). This data indicates an increase from similar national surveys. In 2004 ten percent of children were found to be experiencing MH difficulties (ONS, 2004). This rise thought to be primarily due to an increase in the presence of emotional disorders. UNICEF found that 36% of fifteen-year old's in the UK rated their mental health as poor (UNICEF, 2020). Children account for 20% of the total population of England but only 10% of total health spending. The Children's Commissioner for England recently stated, "there is still a chasm between what children need and what is provided in regard to CAMHS support." (www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk).

With long waiting times for some CAMHS services the government suggests:

"Schools have an important role to play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children by developing whole school approaches tailored to their particular needs, as well as considering the needs of individual pupils" (DfE, 2018, p. 3).

There is general consensus that early identification and intervention is considered important for supporting student's wellbeing in school and in reducing the likelihood of mental health difficulties in future (DfE & DoH, 2014; DfE, 2018).

Many school workers have attended training courses such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). This is a national training program which teaches members of the public how to help a person developing a mental health problem, experiencing a worsening of an existing mental health problem or in a mental health crisis (<https://mhfaengland.org>). School based staff have also been able to access other national training courses which aim to meet the social and emotional needs of children, for example, Emotion Coaching (<https://www.emotioncoachinguk.com>) and Nurture Groups (<https://www.nurtureuk.org>). Some Local Authorities have promoted educational policy and practice based upon building relationships between staff and students rather than focusing upon behaviour management (Babcock & Devon County Council, 2020; Brighton & Hove City Council, 2018).

ELSA: An Overview

Emotional literacy underlies much of the ELSA training. Psychologists, Salovey and Mayer (1990), first made the link between emotional and cognitive aspects of development with their theory of emotional intelligence. Emotional literacy tends to be the term used within education and this involves the ability to recognise, understand, manage and express emotions appropriately. Children need adult support and guidance to enable them to develop emotional literacy from both primary and secondary caregivers. Underdeveloped emotional literacy can lead to behaviours which can be challenging, or to withdrawal. Emotional literacy leads to better relationships, as an emotional literate child is also able to recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to the emotional states of other people (Shotton & Burton, 2019).

‘There will always be some children in our schools whose ability to learn is adversely affected by emotional and psychological difficulties. If we give them the chance to think about these difficulties within the context of a relationship that is supportive and safe, we can help them to become more resilient in the face of adversity. As they feel better able to recognise and manage their feelings, they will engage more readily with the learning challenges presented to them in school.’ (Shotton & Burton, 2019, p. 7)

Shotton and Burton (2019) suggest that schools should recognise the need to plan additional support to address the emotional needs of students in the same way that support would be provided to enhance academic learning for children experiencing learning difficulties. ELSAs were originally trained to develop interventions in the areas of:

- Emotional awareness
- Anger management
- Self-esteem
- Social and communication skills
- Friendship skills

Support for children experiencing loss and bereavement has since been added to the training; as has coping with anxiety and building self-esteem and developing resilience. Programmes of support are designed by the ELSAs to meet the specific needs of the children who they are working with whilst building a trusting relationship with the child. There is a body of research around the positive impact of ELSA intervention. This includes published papers (Bravery and Harries, 2009; Burton, Osborne and Norgate, 2010; Grahamslaw, 2010; Hills 2016; Hill, Hare & Weidburg, 2013; Hill et al., 2013; McEwen, 2019; Wilding and Claridge, 2016; Wong et al., 2020), Local Authority evaluation reports and doctoral theses (<https://www.elsanetwork.org/elsa-forum/>).

Educational Psychologists

There is potentially an educational psychologist attached to every school in the UK. Core services provided by EPs include assessment (including MH assessment), intervention (including therapeutic interventions), training, research and policy (Scottish Executive, 2002).

‘In terms of training, they (educational psychologists) are the most generic psychologists with more postgraduate training time devoted to the child and adolescent sphere than for any other branch of psychology. In terms of role, they are the most contextualised, working across the domains of home, school and community. In terms of background, their knowledge of educational settings is unparalleled.’ (MacKay, 2011, p.11)

As part of their role EPs routinely consider and promote the social and emotional development of children. EPs could be considered a somewhat underused resource in regard to meeting child and adolescent mental health needs. Greig, MacKay and Ginter (2019) carried out a survey of Scottish educational psychology services in

regard to meeting the mental health needs of children and young people. Services were routinely involved in a certain amount of mental health work in schools and had confidence in their knowledge and skills and experienced a high demand from schools for their expertise but their actual involvement indicated that their role was on the periphery and was restricted to indirect work, general advice and onward referral to other services. Reasons given were time constraints and staffing issues. Hoyne and Cunningham (2019) found that EPs in Ireland were applying therapeutic approaches and were keen to provide more. Barriers to therapeutic practice were deemed to be time, government policy, school factors, EP role and training. Through providing ELSA training, an evidence-based programme, EPs are able to ensure that children's social and emotional needs are better understood and supported within the schools they serve.

Section 3 - Methodology

Qualitative methodology was used to capture the views of participants. A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed by researchers (see appendix). Some questions were designed to elicit information pertinent to the two research questions:

- The experience of the training course
- How well ELSA's feel able to support children's mental health and wellbeing

Data Collection

An email was circulated to all ELSAs asking for volunteers to take part in this evaluation. All ELSAs had been undertaking the ELSA role for approximately twelve months and had accessed supervision sessions (although these has ceased during school closures). Three participants were interviewed by the same researcher by Skype / telephone. Face to face interviews were not possible due to school closures. Prior to the interview, ethical considerations were discussed with participants and any questions answered. Interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were recorded, using a digital audio recorder with participants' consent. Audio recordings were stored confidentially, on a secure computer, and later deleted. Participant's responses were anonymised. Participants were made aware that they could contact researchers, or service managers, with any further questions or concerns after the interviews had taken place.

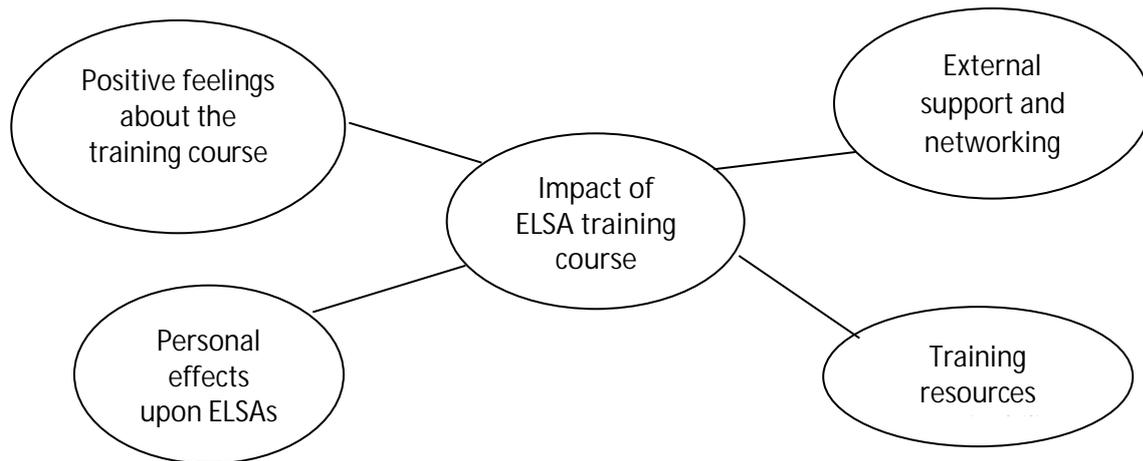
Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised to ensure a systematic approach for identifying themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data set consisted of verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Braun and Clarke recommend seven stages of coding and analysis to ensure rigorous analysis and these stages were followed: transcription; reading and familiarisation; complete coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes and producing a provisional thematic map; defining and naming themes; and report writing. During the coding stage, phrases were employed to represent meanings, within single lines or larger chunks of data. The entire data set was coded by two researchers to ensure inter-rater reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then physically grouped into subthemes by two researchers which also ensured inter-rater reliability. A wide variety of themes emerged from the data. Themes that emerged were grouped under two over-arching themes / research questions. Each subtheme is described by a researcher and verbatim extracts from interview transcripts are provided as supporting evidence.

Section 4 – Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis identified multiple sub themes within the two overarching themes / research questions. Each subtheme is described and verbatim extracts from interview transcripts are provided as supporting evidence. Relevant literature is also discussed.

Theme One – The experience of the training course



Positive feelings about the training course

All ELSAs spoke positively about the training course. They spoke of the quality, usefulness and value of the training sessions. ELSA training built upon existing knowledge and skills:

ELSA 1 - I feel like, I've had this training, I feel like I know a bit about what I'm doing and know who I can ask for guidance

ELSA 1 - The bereavement training was really helpful . . . to be honest the whole thing was really good

Strategies and practical ideas were particularly valued and ELSAs gave examples of how these had been utilised in practice:

ELSA 2 - Me and [other ELSA in the school] talked about what was provided and agreed that it was far better than many of the other courses we had been on. We've been on lots of courses where awareness makes up 75% of the content and then only a small percentage at the end were strategies to deal with it . . . that's what I think ELSA hit the nail on the head with, was the strategies, I don't think that happens a lot in other training

ELSA 2 - The ASC day brought back for me some training I had done in Social Stories, so I got going with those again

ELSA 2 - for me, the anger management day was probably the most helpful because I found the strategies really helpful

ELSA 2 - the anger management things I've picked up from ELSA really gave me a lot of . . . just the confidence to deal with it . . . sometimes we'd be sitting in meetings as staff and think . . . what are we going to do . . . what is the next step with this child? And I now feel I can bring some new ideas to the table and think about the reasons these behaviours happen

ELSA 3 - I really like the Circle of Friends element of the training . . . I've used that a lot of times, and . . . also the social stories and the therapeutic stories

ELSA 3 - the element of the training where you learn to write your own Social Stories was really useful so I took that back to share with staff, and then off the back of that some SEND staff have gone on to do further training

ELSA 3 - the puppets and things, and the little mouse and things like that, to take around the different classrooms. There may be some children who . . . aren't confident you know to speak up for themselves . . . I did buy a little puppet mouse; it was exactly the same as the one from the training

ELSAs spoke about the need to train more ELSAs and the value of having another ELSA in school:

ELSA 1 - and we'd love to train another ELSA, because I think it's definitely having an impact."

ELSA 2 - for us it would be to maybe get more ELSAs trained, because we could definitely use more of us

ELSA 2 - what's great too is that we get to chat together because there are two of us in school, so we can sort of have staffroom meetings just over lunch where we talk about how things are going and share and swap ideas and strategies.

Training resources

ELSAs spoke of how they had used particular materials and resources from the training course in their day to day ELSA work:

ELSA 1 - We've been using some of the resources, and we do find the child questionnaires really helpful . . . and the referral forms, the ones staff fill in when they want you to work with a child. It opens up a way to sort of, start a discussion, you can talk to the child about why they have scored themselves say a 5 on one of the statements, it helps you dive in instead of going in blind and wading through every possibility. The other thing we've used a lot of is the session templates, especially for our group work

ELSA 2 - I know one of the resources was the ELSA referral forms, and we use something similar to that, particularly in staff meetings

Members of staff would ask the ELSA for resources but would also share resources they thought may be helpful with the ELSA:

ELSA 1 - Another way it has developed is that staff often come to us asking for a resource, book or game to help with a class issue like friendships, kindness, social skills and what have you. And they also sometimes come to us with something they think we could find useful

ELSA 3 - staff members will turn to me to ask for things

External support and networking

ELSAs had all appreciated sharing experiences with other ELSAs during the training days:

ELSA 1 - I saw a lot of value in the training sessions, talking to others was so helpful

ELSA 2 - I think the whole-group discussions were so beneficial

ELSA 1 - I think one of the biggest benefits of the ELSA training was being able to talk to other schools, to find out the sorts of issues their kids had, or how staff supported their roles

ELSAs spoke of the importance of the supervision element of the course (Osborne & Burton, 2014). They also appreciated the links made with the outside professionals who delivered the training as they knew where to go for advice and support and felt confident to ask:

ELSA 1 - we would really like to get together with the group again for one of those follow up sessions, you know, where we could talk about cases, share experiences and come up with solutions or ways forward . . . the supervision sessions. They were really good. I know you were going to do one but then lockdown hit us, so everything is on hold now. But we'd definitely be there for the next one

ELSA 1 - it's that links with other agencies [Bereavement UK worker] and outside professionals [EP] who can offer a bit of guidance, instead of just worrying that you're handling it wrong

ELSA 2 - The other thing we really liked was the follow-up sessions, the supervision with the group where we could bring our experiences and talk about any cases, to share ideas or help each other solve problems . . . and then we could also have that connection with you and the Ed Psychs to ask advice or sometimes just clarifying that we're doing the right thing, cos sometimes you wonder, am I on the right track? . . . It was just really good to share experiences with other schools, and see that all schools have similar, sort of . . . issues and types of children. And being able to email you with questions and things was great too, because you could get back to us straight away with ideas or advice from the EP's

ELSA 3 - I think one of the most valuable things is, just spending time with the other ELSA trainees and obviously the trainers, and just . . . just bouncing off each other and finding out you know, what's going on and how did they deal with, and just getting other people's experiences

One ELSA spoke of a prospective ELSA from another school visiting her to find out about ELSA training:

ELSA 3 - we had a TA come from . . . I'm not sure, but she came to see our ELSA space and talk to me about it as the school had signed her up for the training. So, yeah, we had a good chat about it and she got to see what ELSA work actually looks like and what it's all about. I think it was just as valuable for me as it was for her I think, for me to be able to just talk through what I did, and so for her, I think it gave her a bit of confidence and she really wanted to do the training when she had left

Personal effects upon ELSAs

School leaders appeared to have selected members of staff who already had some knowledge and experience in meeting the social and emotional needs of students and who carried out a pastoral role in school. ELSAs spoke of being reminded of previous training and building upon their existing skills, knowledge and interest in child mental health:

ELSA 2 - my job was very much about focussing on mental health and looking at therapy-based things we can do in school . . . and we both had a big interest in working with kids, you know, on that level

ELSA 3 - I think my role was already sort of taking that direction, of . . . sort of nurture, sort of looking after the more withdrawn children, and that's how I came to be the ELSA

ELSA 3 - ELSA helps me in my other roles . . . I'm also the KIDSAFE UK tutor and Talk Boost Tutor, so these roles really overlap, and I can take my ELSA knowledge into these areas and they really complement each other

Taking the role of ELSA in school had led to a change in their day to day work. ELSAs spoke of reflective practice, a sense of agency, job fulfilment, increased autonomy and confidence, feeling inspired, loving the role as well as enthusiasm and enjoyment:

ELSA 1 - One of the big things for me, professionally was...that it made me reflect on my role, what I'm doing and how I can do more

ELSA 1 - I think also one of the major things is that it has really defined my role in school. I've grabbed the bull by the horns, so to speak, and I love it

ELSA 1 - I'm just really enjoying it. I love my one-to-ones. I'm enjoying it a lot more what I do now than being a more general classroom assistant. Not that I didn't enjoy it, but I love what I'm doing a lot more

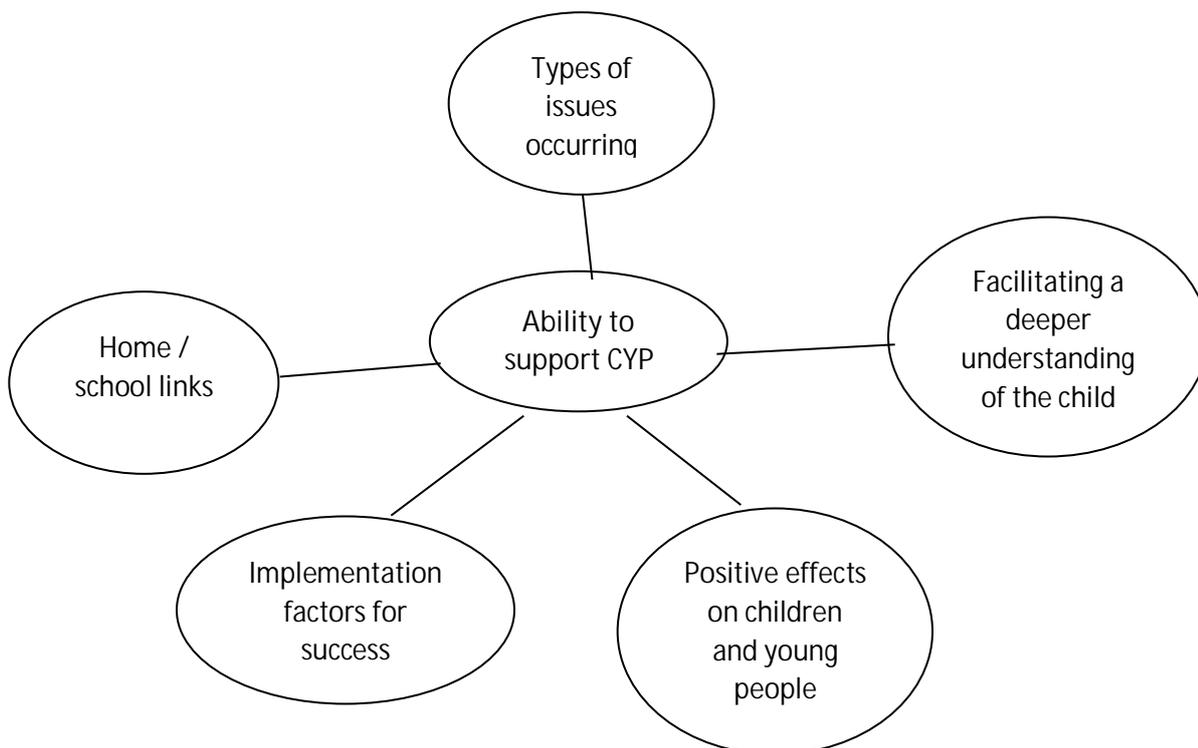
ELSA 2 - We feel really lucky that we've been able to do it, and we've both said how much more fulfilled our jobs are too

ELSA 2 - it has spurred me on to further my skills, so I'm always seeking more training and things like that to keep it going. I feel like I'm where I want to be right now in my role and really love it

ELSA 3 - I think doing the ELSA training has really given me a lot of confidence and given me like a . . . more secure kind of role within the school

McEwen (2019) found that the ELSA / child relationship is central to both ELSA's and children's experiences of the ELSA programme. 'Relationships' were found to be pivotal to the change process. Factors influencing the formation of this relationship were also identified, for ELSAs, these included ELSA qualities, such as self-confidence. Wong et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of a positive therapeutic relationship with an ELSA for participating children.

Theme Two – How well ELSA's feel able to support children's mental health and wellbeing



Implementation factors for success

ELSAs spoke of the importance of ensuring that all members of staff were made aware of the ELSA role. They also spoke of the importance of school leaders being 'on board' with ELSA:

ELSA 2 - staff have been really supportive of it all, they get what it's about and I think, sometimes, say if they've had a tricky morning with a child, then they are happy to have them out of the class for a little bit in the afternoon . . .

ELSA 2 - Our head has been so on board with it and recognises mental health as pivotal to the curriculum and driving that forward

ELSA 2 - Our head is really supportive and was so keen to give us the time and space we needed to get it up and running . . .

ELSA 3 - everybody has been . . . my SENCo in particular has been, she's been amazing, yes, and really fighting my corner for time. I know that's the issue for everybody isn't; it, in school, so it was great to be supported, it spurred me on

Environmental factors such as having a designated base or space for ELSA work and access to resources were identified as important. Also, school leaders and staff ensuring the ELSA time for children is protected as well as ELSAs feeling empowered to work in an autonomous and flexible way:

ELSA 1 - one thing I quickly realised is that we need a designated ELSA space

ELSA 2 - my ELSA time is the same every week in the afternoons and we have a designated space with resources and things like that. We know that if we need things like books or activities, and we haven't got them in school that we can ask for them and can get them no problem

ELSA 1 - I think it's [the ELSA role] been developing since we finished the training. At the moment the developing part is us getting this area decorated so it is child-friendly . . . a nice space, children can come to talk to us. We've got lovely plans for this room

ELSA 1 - As long as we've been proactive and asked for things we need, it's been okay...I have to speak to the head if I need anything, and she's great. We've now got our spaces to work in, resources and everything, but like I say, it's the head has implemented all that

ELSA 2 - We've tried to do it so that ELSA time is in the afternoon every day and other therapy time. We try to look across the board at need so we can be strategic

ELSA 1 - most of my time is ELSA time. It's also flexible, so if I need to see a child one-to-one instead of doing maths, for example, I can do that too. You can't timetable when children need you as an ELSA

McEwen (2019) highlighted the importance of implementation factors, for example, supportive leadership and access to resources. ELSAs in Leighton's study (2016) reported obstacles from their senior management team (SMT) and colleagues. They perceived this was due to a lack of understanding emotional literacy (EL).

Types of issues occurring

This sub theme could be seen to tie in with the impact of the training as ELSAs use knowledge gained during training sessions to support individual and groups of children with differing needs. ELSAs also alluded to having gained greater understanding of the underlying causes of behaviour:

ELSA 2 - I work with lots of...angry boys, I've got a little group of them. But I think the anger, as we learned in the training, isn't the primary need, its things like self-esteem or home life and things that make these kids angry or aggressive. So I use the strategies from all the training really . . . they feel safe around me, and now I know that about anger and how long it can last I

know that they need space after an outburst, and they won't be ready to talk about it until maybe the next day or later that day. So, my approach has changed in a way that I can avoid making it worse by trying to ask them about it too early, you know, while they're still coming down from it all

ELSA 1 - I have also had quite a few girl groups from the upper school, WhatsApp groups, some really nasty stuff going on . . . there was a big group of parents also involved so my work extended out to them too. It's affecting their relationships because they come into school mulling over what's happened the night before . . . then you've got sometimes conflict between parents. One of the things I used some resources on was the self-esteem when I did the small group work with that group, and they do seem to be getting along a bit better now

ELSA 1 - It's helped the girls to see how they've had a part in the fall out, and we've worked on how to resolve conflict

ELSA 2 - ranging from anxiety . . . anger . . . ADHD . . . autism and all things like that . . . I have a few boys who work with me, one has ADHD, another has some past-trauma difficulties, in particular one child who displays aggressive, explosive behaviour, all based on past trauma . . . anger management

ELSA 3 - when we do the circle of friends and things like that you can really get a better idea of how a child feels and sees themselves within a group . . . and how they see themselves in different situations

ELSA 3 - I've used that [puppets] with one of our SEND children, an autistic child . . . as a calming tool for him because he has to be, because the mouse is shy and frightened, he has to be calm and gentle around the mouse

One ELSA spoke of not knowing how to respond to 'hard questions' from a child bereaved by the suicide of his mother:

ELSA 1 - . . . and I just didn't know how to respond to that. He asked me 'what do you think I could've done?' So, some practical tips would have been useful there

ELSAs participating in Leighton's study (2016) reported that the training had provided them with a greater understanding of their pupils' emotions and that they felt more competent in supporting their pupils with their emotionality.

Dunn (2020) examined the effectiveness of ELSA in nurturing emotional literacy and supporting the mental wellbeing of primary school students with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). The role of the ELSA was found to be effective in nurturing emotional literacy for students with SEND. In addition, the results found a strong correlation between the students' emotional literacy skills and their social success (and also academic success). The results also found a strong positive correlation between the student' emotional literacy skills and mental wellbeing.

Positive effects on children and young people

ELSAs spoke of the perceived positive effects on the children who they work with; both formally and informally:

ELSA 2 - They seem to love it and we can see big improvements in their behaviour too

ELSA 1 - I think they relish it. For example, my little girls in year three, who both have anxiety, they come in, to me in the morning to do a jigsaw. So, they really value the ELSA time

ELSA support was identified as a preventative measure as children could be helped quickly without needing to wait for an external professional to become involved:

ELSA 2 - we've also done a lot with children that have been on Early Help suffering from anxiety and tied these in with groups of children who, we feel, it just wouldn't do any harm for them to be part of a little group to boost their confidence and things, so those children although they don't highlight as an issue, if you actually see some of the sessions that I've done and our other ELSA has done you can see that they're not 'on my radar' . . . the withdrawn, those with social difficulties, particularly those in the year 4/5 age who are struggling socially, friendships and fallouts etc. For those type of children, they've been like pit-stop type sessions, as and when needed. I do a lot of this type of thing, where it doesn't need to be laboured or drawn-out too much if not needed. I can 'drop in' where I need to and keep it quite fluid . . . It's nice that we've got our base and that's where you can always find me, so . . . they can dip in and out too. It might be a lunchtime or break time and they can pop in voluntarily and sometimes that little chat is all they need, or sometimes we'll schedule some proper time one-to-one

ELSA 2 - because we've got [other ELSA in the school] at the lower end of the school – getting in there early with these kids instead of opening Early Help's, waiting to hear back from the right people, be seen then get advice, we can just crack on ourselves here in school

ELSA 2 - Me and [names the other ELSA in the school] work a lot with kids who, before we had ELSAs, would have most likely been on Early Help. I work with a lot of kids who are already at Early Help level, but I do think that some of the others, where we've considered Early Help, it has been held off to do some ELSA work which seems to help them

ELSA 3 - I think it does mostly come down, you know, it is building up that resilience from an early level, yeah. And that's where I'd like to, that's where I'd like to be more proactive rather than reactive with things

It was acknowledged that ELSA impact can be hard to 'measure':

ELSA 3 - because the work of an ELSA is sort of unquantifiable really isn't it, you don't, know where it would have gone without the ELSA

ELSA 3 - I'd like to think it has helped children to avoid reaching a point where they can't cope, and just learning the skills to cope

ELSA 3 – just . . . realising and making sure that I keep realising myself that even if you can't see what you've done, you know, it's not the same as teaching someone long division where you can see the effect instantly, I think it's making sure that I keep thinking like, you know . . . even if I feel like "Hmm, I don't know what I've achieved there" Just spending time with that child is gonna have a positive effect, so . . . I just need to remember that, yeah

ELSA 1 - When I see them come into me with the weight of the world on their shoulders and leave after 30 minutes or an hour looking like much more happy, then I know I've done some good

Hill et al. (2013) highlighted that building a strong trusting relationship between the child and ELSA is important when considering the success of the intervention as did Wong et al. (2020).

ELSAs spoke of the importance of the ELSA environment as a safe place where children can talk. ELSAs know the children; they are predictable and available and have time to listen to children and form relationships over time. An ELSA can offer a responsive and flexible approach:

ELSA 3 - the other child hadn't come into the ELSA space at all but they had said something to their parent, who spoke to the class teacher who referred the child to me . . . the child had said to their parent "I think I need to talk to Mrs X"

ELSA 3 - the ethos and feelings of the ELSA space . . . it has this kind of calming effect on them

ELSA 1 - we all have a pep talk and he more than often goes off to his class happy and more ready to learn

ELSA 1 - Just being able to 'check in' with some children of a morning before they head into their classrooms. Forming relationships with them too, because you can be involved with them for a few years

ELSA 1 - Being that person who's looking out for them, who they can come to

ELSA 1 - Understanding that children need someone to talk to in a nice, comfortable space to work in

ELSA 2 - I'll go and see the class teacher and say, you know, Johnny's just been to see me at lunchtime, and I think he might need half an hour this afternoon before class time to have a bit of one-to-one time. It's not always possible, but if it is then it works out well

One ELSA spoke of providing ELSA support for a child who had moved from out of county and who had worked with an ELSA in his previous school:

ELSA 3 - he was able to come straight into the school and continue with his ELSA sessions. It was lovely because he came into the room, he knew what it

was all about, it was like a big sigh of relief for him when he came in it was lovely

A number of studies have focused upon children's views of ELSA (Hills, 2016; Wong et al., 2020). Findings of Balampanidou's research with children (2019) informed the development of a theory *"The Uniqueness of the ELSA approach makes the difference in children's lives."*

Krause, Blackwell and Claridge (2020) found that the ELSA programme had a perceived positive impact on multiple components of pupil wellbeing which included positive emotions, negative feelings, engagement, resilience, optimism, accomplishment and relationships. The positive wellbeing changes experienced by the pupils occurred through strategies, talking and forming a close relationship with the teaching assistant.

Bravery and Harris (2009) highlighted the positive impact ELSA intervention can have upon children's emotional literacy, behaviour, emotional wellbeing and peer relationships. This research also suggested that ELSAs can support children to develop a sense of self, build their personal skills and improve their emotional wellbeing and resilience.

Hills (2016) found significant factors contributing towards the perceived effectiveness of an ELSA intervention included the importance of the therapeutic relationship with the ELSA, having a space to talk and think about feelings and building resilience, confidence and self-esteem. Aspects of the ELSA interventions which children felt could be improved upon included feeling prepared before starting the ELSA intervention and understanding what happens when the project finishes.

Hill, Hare and Weidburg (2013) also highlighted the factors deemed important in the ELSA project. That children valued specific strategies and practical activities during sessions. Children also valued involvement and transparency and found it helpful to understand the reason they were attending ELSA.

McEwen (2019) found that the child-ELSA relationship was viewed by children as a coping mechanism in itself that children draw on to a varying degree after formal sessions have ended. Children highlighted the qualities of the ELSA, confidentiality and sessions being perceived as fun and enjoyable.

Wong et al. (2020) found that children valued ELSAs teaching specific individualised coping strategies. This research also highlighted the importance of listening to children and employing alternative methods, such as drawing, to support them in sharing their views. Children participating in this research identified the importance of good interpersonal skills on the part of the ELSA, such as being kind, caring, thoughtful and caring as important. They described the ELSA role as distinctly different to that of other members of school staff. Participating in practical activities supported their emotional development and ELSAs supported children in developing a greater self – awareness which enabled them to begin to manage their feelings.

Home / school links

ELSAs spoke of ELSA support being positively regarded by parents and of the positive effect of ELSA support on parents as well as children. ELSA involvement could be seen as strengthening home / school links. As with the previous sub theme, the accessibility and familiarity of ELSAs could be viewed as important from a parent's point of view.

ELSA 3 - the majority of parents are really on board and happy for their children to access some help in school.

ELSA 1 - I've also had a few parents who've come to me asking "can I have a little chat?" or even me asking them "can we have a little chat", sometimes with the child there, sometimes not. But it's great when the child is there too because their voice is important and be involved in discussions about them. Reminding them that we're all working towards the same thing - we all want what's best for them

ELSA 1 - All my parents know where I am, and they can come for a chat whenever . . . we often have a morning chat/cup of coffee

ELSA 1 - I've had parents bring their children to me in the mornings to explain that something happened the day/night before and we get to do some pep talks before the day starts

ELSA 2 - Our parents have been really good; I think most of them are grateful that we can offer them some help in school. We've had no-one not want us to work with their children yet . . . I am always out at the front of school in the morning so I can sort of check in with parents, and I'll often get a parent tell me "oh, we've had a nightmare this morning" or sometimes difficulties around divorced parents where kids spend alternative weekends at mum's and dad's houses, they might have come home in a bad mood for whatever reason, and they carry that with them, so I think for parents, they kind of . . . it's helpful to know that we know what's going on and we can help in school . . . and they know my face, which helps when we're talking, say, on the phone

ELSA 3 - quite often parents will come in and we'll have a one-to-one about . . . and come into the ELSA room and see what it is all about and then they can discuss any differences between school and home and any problems or anything that might have happened at home or . . . yeah just getting to know a bit more about the child really

One ELSA spoke of the need for clarity with parents in regard to ELSA:

ELSA 3 - Sometimes I think they get a bit confused about what it is . . . I think they see the word 'literacy' and they think it's reading and writing . . . but once we've talked it through, they're clear and happy to go ahead

Wilding and Claridge (2016) explored parents' views of the programme. The majority of parents perceived the programme to impact positively on social and emotional aspects of development, with skills learned during the ELSA sessions transferring to the home context. Parents also noted several ways in which the programme could

be enhanced: improved home / school communication; agreed and measurable targets and outcomes; and plans for children's next steps.

Price and Stewart (elsanetwork.org/ research) explored factors that influence parental engagement in the ELSA programme. Parents were more interested in feedback throughout the intervention as opposed to an information pack. Not only information about the programme but also feedback on progress was important to parents. Parents found a conversation with the ELSA more useful than reading an information booklet. It was helpful for parents to know that their child was receiving individual support and parents felt involved in the intervention because many of the children talked with them about ELSA.

Facilitating a deeper understanding of the child

Having an ELSA in school seemed to lead to a shift in thinking amongst staff and was linked to a change in whole school ethos and practice:

ELSA 2 - it has changed the school really. We have that book 'When the Adults Change, Everything Changes' and it's because of the ELSA training that we got that. Like, we banned rhetorical questions in school, because they just don't work

ELSA 3 - The positive mind-set, like the growth mind-set, I've just done some more on that. Just before lockdown I did a big display in school, and . . . the resilience of the class as a whole rather than looking at individual assessments for children we're trying to be more proactive than reactive, so looking at the classes and trying to do more PSHE on resilience . . . being more proactive...

ELSA 3 - the wellbeing of the staff seems to be much more paramount on everybody's minds now in school

ELSAs spoke of their role facilitating a deeper understanding of children's social and emotional development amongst staff, for example, being able to recognise the importance of emotional wellbeing in relation to children being able and ready to learn:

ELSA 1 - we get the support we need to do our work with the children and they (teachers) understand that we need this time to help the kids be prepared for learning . . . I think everybody's happy and welcomed it. If you've got a child in your class who is unhappy . . . not ready to learn and they can come out for 15 minutes . . . half an hour and go back to class happy and ready to learn, then they appreciate that, they don't see it as missing learning at all, as they know that if a child is in a state one morning, that they're not going to learn anyway

ELSA 1 - it's been useful to open up dialogues with teachers, you can be working on self-esteem with a child, but the class teacher thinks they're confident. You can challenge their views by saying, "well, actually, he finds literacy really hard and that's why he constantly talks and gets in trouble"

ELSA 2 – (ELSA is) A key person in your school who looks beyond the academic side of children’s lives in school. Looking at the social and emotional side, all the things that . . . understanding that children don’t all fit into the same box, so an ELSA helps bring staff round to seeing the differences in children with regards to mental health and wellbeing, and recognising that not all children come into school ready to learn

Leighton (2016) found that ELSAs considered that they were more confident discussing the pupil’s emotionality with teachers (and parents).

One ELSA recognised the ongoing need for ELSA support in schools:

ELSA 3 - I think the need for ELSA is only going to, to grow isn’t it. I mean, not only as a result of lockdown but . . . as a result of the pressures on children . . . in all areas you know, without lockdown, without even factoring that all in

Section 5 - Conclusion, including limitations and next steps

Research suggests that around one in eight school aged children in the UK today are experiencing mental health issues (NHS Digital, 2018). This is likely to have increased with the ongoing COVID – 19 pandemic and its impact on society. School leaders have clear roles and responsibilities in regard to meeting the SEMH needs of their students (DfE, 2018; Ofsted, 2019). A school based ELSA has been trained by EPs to understand aspects of children’s behaviour and she, or he, has access to a bank of resources which can be employed in order to support children who are experiencing social and emotional difficulties; often by helping children to develop their emotional literacy (Burton, 2019). The professional development of ELSAs is ongoing as they participate in group supervision sessions with EPs and can join ELSA networks. Interest in the ELSA training course from senior leaders of schools in West Cumbria was high. This indicates an appreciation of the importance of having members of staff in school who are trained to support the emotional wellbeing of children.

EPs involved in the ELSA training in West Cumbria 2018 – 2019 sought qualitative feedback from ELSAs who were already undertaking the role in school. Participating ELSAs spoke positively about the training course; the transformative impact of the training on their own professional development; and the perceived impact on children, parents and the wider school community. The views of ELSAs participating in this study are mirrored in much of the existing ELSA research and literature (Bravery and Harries, 2009; Burton, Osborne and Norgate, 2010; Grahamslaw, 2010; Hills 2016; Hill, Hare & Weidburg, 2013; Hill et al., 2013; McEwen, 2019; Wilding and Claridge, 2016; Wong et al., 2020). A limitation of this research is that the views shared are that of three participants and therefore could not be considered representative of all ELSAs.

As stated in *Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools* (2018, p. 5) school staff cannot act as mental health experts but ELSAs have been trained to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. ELSAs participating in this research spoke of being able to work in preventative ways to meet children’s needs ‘in house’ without the need for referral to an outside agency such as EP or CAMHS. They felt able to problem solve in regard to children’s difficulties but lines of communication with the school EP had also been established so that they could ask for advice in an informal and timely manner. ELSAs could help children experiencing SEMH to increase the amount of time they felt able to cope in the classroom by understanding their difficulties and meeting their social and emotional needs. ELSAs also spoke of being able to further an understanding of children’s behaviour amongst staff and parents. ELSA support brings about behaviour change in children and increases their emotional wellbeing (Wong et al., 2020); this lessens the risk of school exclusions for some participating children.

With regard to supporting children and young people, ELSAs perceive that their availability and predictability makes them an accessible and effective human

resource. ELSAs are able to develop a relationship with children over time, and because they are situated within the school, are able to offer a quick response. Through the ELSA training they are able to help children and young people to develop emotional awareness; manage anger; increase self-esteem; improve social and communication and friendship skills. They can also support children and young people experiencing loss and bereavement; cope with anxiety and develop resilience. In the literature children spoke of a need to know what would happen during an ELSA intervention, and how it would end (Wong et.al, 2020). Parents spoke of valuing regular feedback. These are learning points for EPs and ELSAs to consider.

Although ELSAs are able to work at a universal, whole school level and informally; participating ELSAs valued resources which helped them to work in a systematic way, particularly when supporting individual and groups of children, for example, referral forms for teachers to complete; questionnaires for children (to be used as a starting point for ELSA intervention); and planning templates. ELSAs spoke of the impact of ELSA intervention being hard to measure but KPIs include measures of children's increased wellbeing for example, Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (www.sdqinfo.org), to be used pre and post intervention. ELSA could be made aware of the resource, *Measuring and monitoring children and young people's mental wellbeing: A toolkit for schools and colleges* (Public Health England, 2016).

Further / future research could involve researchers seeking to explore the views of participating children, their parents, their teachers and EPs delivering the ELSA training.

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Appendix: Interview Schedule

How did you come to be the ELSA for your school?

What is an ELSA?

Are there any elements of course that made you feel more equipped to deal with certain situations and issues?

Did you find any training days to be more beneficial?

Are there any aspects of ELSA training that you have used more than others?

What are the common issues arising in the children that you work with?

Do you feel that the children engage well with ELSA support?

How has ELSA been received within the wider school community?

How do you involve parents?

Have you been able to overcome any challenges / obstacles in the ELSA role?

Are other members of staff aware of your work as an ELSA?

Is your ELSA time protected?

How do you see ELSA developing in your school and do you think that any further training is required?

Would you like to be a part of a Local ELSA network?

Do you feel that ELSA work is preventative i.e. leading to a reduction in Early Help referrals?

How has the ELSA role impacted on your own professional development and confidence?

Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not already covered?