

Research Briefing

A study exploring the nature of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) role in secondary schools, and the barriers and facilitators to its implementation.

The ELSA programme is a targeted intervention aimed at developing the social and emotional skills of primary and secondary school aged children. However, previous research on the ELSA intervention has a dearth of representation from the secondary school population, and the implementation of the programme in this setting is not well understood. This study aims to address the gaps in understanding of ELSA in secondary schools and the barriers and facilitators to this support being implemented.

Key Findings

Implications

ELSA sessions in secondary generally run in line with expectations. The intervention lasts on average 8 sessions in secondary schools, but this can vary.

Schools should be aware that the intervention can run for longer than six sessions and consider this when allocating time.

The focus of ELSA support for secondary pupils mostly focuses on self-esteem and managing feelings such as anger and anxiety

Any additional resources and support developed for secondary ELSAs could be tailored to these types of session focus

A high % of ELSAs in secondary experience a lack of protected time for planning and delivery as a key barrier to the intervention in terms of prioritising the role

Schools implementing ELSA should endeavour to protect the time allocated to delivering and planning for the intervention

A high % of ELSAs in secondary identified a lack of space that is accessible and private as a key barrier, leading to difficulties in building trust with pupils and confidentiality

Schools should endeavour to designate a room or area for the programme to run that is consistently available to them and quiet

ELSAs identified the support of other ELSAs as helpful. However, a high % of ELSAs were not receiving regular support within school for the role

Schools should consider allocating regular protected time to support ELSAs and encourage links with other ELSAs

The Research

Background:

There has been a rise in children and young people with mental health needs in recent years (Sadler et al., 2017), and the limited resources has meant schools have had to provide support for children in this area (Humphrey, 2018). Models around school support for mental health highlight the need for targeted interventions as part of a wider whole-school approach (Carroll & Hurry, 2018; Weare, 2015). Research on these interventions, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning resources, suggests that there are differences in primary and secondary in terms of how they are implemented and the impact they have (Humphrey, Lendrum & Wiglesworth, 2010). ELSA is a popular targeted intervention aimed at developing social and emotional skills of children and young people (Burton, 2008), but thus far research into the programme in secondary is limited, with only two studies with a direct focus on ELSA in a secondary school setting (Begley, 2015; Nicholson-Roberts, 2019).

Aims of the study

This research aims to address the limited available literature around ELSA in secondary schools and gain insight into how the programme is implemented, as well as exploring the barriers and facilitators to running ELSA in this setting.

Methodology

An exploratory questionnaire was developed and distributed virtually. The questionnaire included a combination of open and closed questions around the implementation and perceived barriers and facilitators of running the ELSA intervention. 112 secondary school-based ELSAs, who were recruited through Educational Psychology services, completed the questionnaire.

Results

Implementation of the programme

The programme in secondary runs in line with the expectations of programme developers. Sessions are typically 1:1 and last 45 minutes covering a range of areas. However, results suggest sessions last for eight sessions on average, compared to the recommended six.

Lack of time allocated:

A high percentage of ELSAs reported a lack of time allocated to planning and delivering the intervention, with other roles in the school taking priority over ELSA. This was cited by many as a barrier to the success of the programme.

Supervision and Support

The majority of ELSAs were regularly attending supervision from the Educational Psychology service and rated this support highly. However, many ELSAs were not receiving any formal support for their role within school, leading some to seek support elsewhere from fellow ELSAs. Those who were accessing support in school found this support to be helpful, which suggests this could be a facilitator to its successful implementation.

Lack of space

Access to a consistent and appropriate space was also experienced by many respondents. This was reported to raise issues concerning confidentiality and building relationships.

Focus of support

Findings indicated ELSAs typically provide support with self-esteem and managing feelings such as anger and anxiety. A lower percentage of ELSAs reported offering support with understanding feelings, which suggests a shift in focus in secondary to managing feelings rather than understanding them.

Conclusions:

The findings from this research have key implications for schools and Educational Psychology services running the ELSA programme in secondary schools. Findings highlight some important factors which may need exploring by key staff when planning to set up the programme in this setting, such as considerations of time, space and support within school.