

Evaluating the impact of ELSA in Staffordshire through analysis of ELSAs own views, views of children and young people and headteacher/ SENCo views.

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Abstract

The present study aimed to evaluate the impact of ELSA on children and young people across Staffordshire. This was achieved by quantitative data sought from questionnaires completed by headteachers and SENCOs, thematic analysis of transcribed focus groups of ELSAs who were asked to discuss a statement relating to the impact ELSA has had within their setting. Finally, thematic analysis was used to analyse the results of semi structured interviews held with young people from schools across the county. The results found a significant positive impact of ELSA on children and young people. Young people reported that they felt happier since completing ELSA, they also shared that they enjoy school more. ELSAs themselves felt that their role was important and recognise the importance of supervision. ELSAs shared that they felt the need for their support was greater post-covid and this was also attributed to the needs of parents. The report details recommendations and implications for future cohorts and considerations that should be made by EP Services looking to establish ELSA.

Introduction

The past few years have been undeniably challenging for everyone, not least for our children and young people (CYP). As a consequence, pupil wellbeing has been high on the agenda for many schools and local authorities (Ofsted, 2021). The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme is an Educational Psychology led intervention designed to upskill teaching assistants (TAs) to meet the emotional needs of CYP (Burton, 2008). In the hope that by meeting the emotional needs CYP can start to fulfil their academic and social potential in school.

Many local authorities have commissioned reports to assess the impact of ELSA. ELSA has been found to improve relationships, behaviour, and wellbeing (Bravery & Harris, 2009). Research has also found a statistically significant effect of ELSA on CYP when The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used as a pre and post measure (Burton, Traill & Norgate, 2009). One of the key elements of ELSA is the relationship that is formed between the CYP and the ELSA themselves (McEwen, 2019). Building this trusted relationship allows CYP to develop resilience and try-out strategies within a safe zone (Krause, Blackwell & Claridge, 2019). When asked, children and young people felt positive about their ELSA experience (Hill, 2016). This could be, in part, due to ELSAs focus on SMART targets and short-term tailored interventions (Derbyshire County Council, 2018).

The scope of these interventions is wide and varied however common areas include self-esteem and social skills (Bradley, 2010).

Similarly, embedding the ethos of ELSA within school is deemed to be important to ensure that the school is committed across all levels (Hill, O'Hare & Weidberg, 2013). The commitment from school is a crucial part of the programme as ELSAs are required to attend EP led supervision. Not only to continue their development, but to work as a mechanism to problem solve, share, and built rapport with other professionals (Osbourne & Burton, 2014). The support from Educational Psychologists cannot be overlooked due to commitment to professional development (McEwen, 2019).

In January 2021 Staffordshire County Council Educational Psychology (EPS) Service ran a pilot ELSA training course across Burton. Since then, the EPS have coordinated and trained an additional four cohorts of ELSAs. The uptake and feedback sought so far has been positive and the training has been well received by schools and ELSAs.

As a local authority, it is important to evaluate the work done in order to best meet the needs of children and young people within schools and settings. To do this, Staffordshire EPS undertook a research project to evaluate the impact ELSA has had on the wellbeing of children and young people (CYP). The present study aimed to investigate the positive impact ELSA has had through questionnaires, focus groups and semi structured interviews from those coordinating, delivering, and receiving ELSA interventions.

We hypothesised that, based on what we already knew about ELSA and the literature, the findings would show a significant positive impact on CYP wellbeing.

Method

The present study employed a mixed method design to ascertain both qualitative and quantitative data. In order to ensure the data was reliable, the inclusion criteria were used. This being that ELSAs must have been practicing for at least one full term. The study took place in three parts, the first being the completion of questionnaires by headteachers or SENCOs. The second two focus groups where ELSAs were asked to discuss as specific statement and the final being semi structured interviews with young people.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling based on their expertise, job role and knowledge (Coolican, 2004). In total, 9 headteachers and SENCOs completed a questionnaire, 7 experienced ELSAs attended the focus groups, and 22 young people were

interviewed from 5 schools across the county. Consent was gained from all participants who were also provided with an information sheet which explained the rationale for the research.

Data was gathered from headteachers/ SENCOs through completion of a questionnaire designed to investigate the perceived impact ELSA has had on their school and pupils. This was sent out virtually through email and as part of a newsletter all schools within the county receive.

Feedback from ELSAs was gathered through a focus group where ELSAs were asked to discuss the following statement '*ELSA has had a positive impact on the wellbeing of children and young people.*' Due to the present study taking place across the county, it was important that participation was accessible. Therefore, the focus group took place via Microsoft Teams, an online business communication platform.

Finally, to follow a child-centred approach, semi structured interviews were used with children and young people to look at the impact of ELSA on them directly. The children and young people were asked a series of questions related to the impact of ELSA; they were able to speak freely.

Parents of the children interviewed were given the opportunity to speak to those involved in the study and provide their consent. Children were also asked to sign an age-appropriate consent form and were provided with the opportunity to ask any questions.

Results

Phase One

The results from the questionnaires completed by headteachers or SENCOs can be seen below.

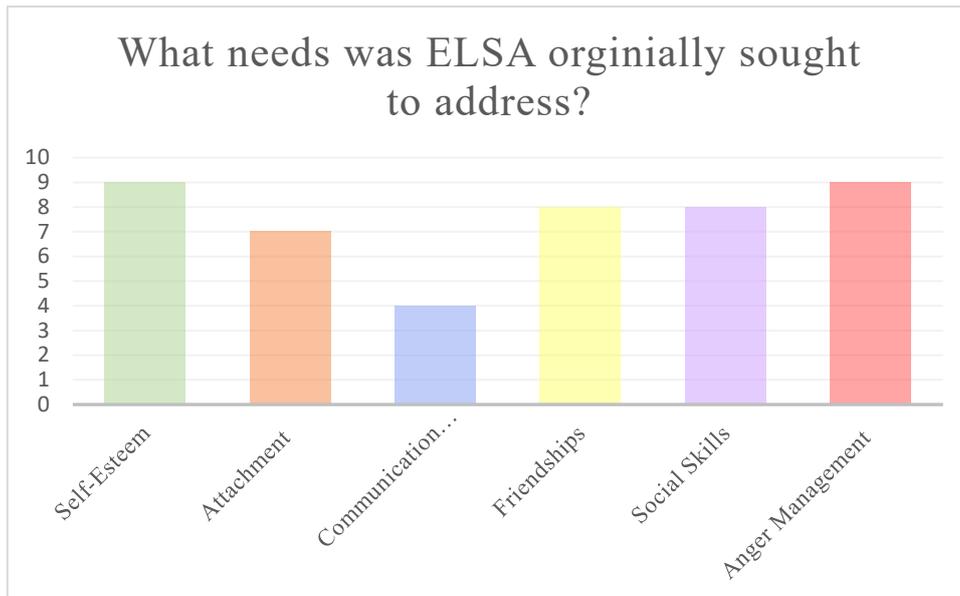


Fig 1. Chart illustrating answers to the question “what needs in your school was ELSA originally sought to address?”

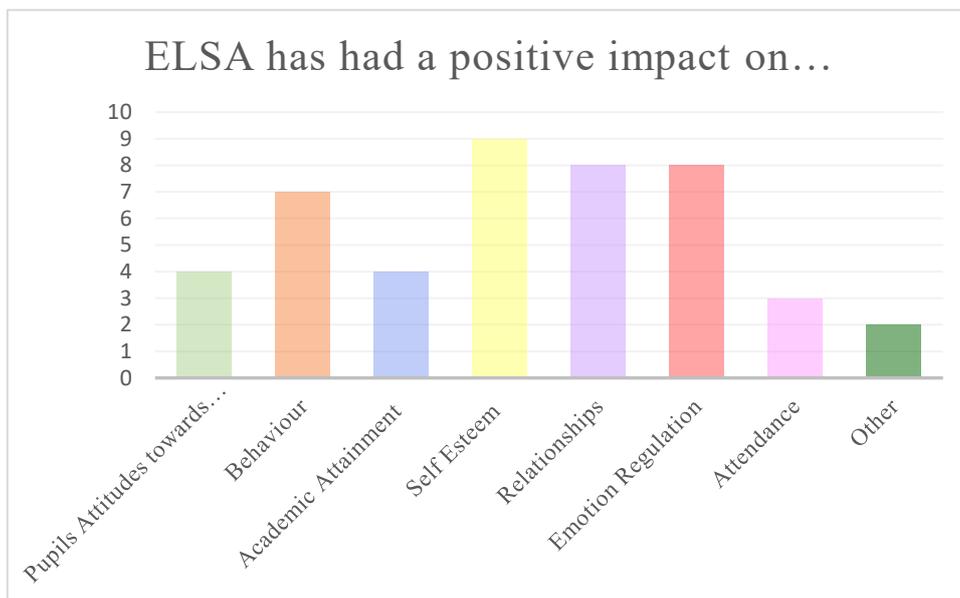


Fig 2. Chart illustrating answers to the question “ELSA has made a positive impact on the following. Please tick all that apply”

The results from the questionnaires revealed that 100% of Headteachers/ SENCOs said they strongly agreed that the work done by their school ELSA is highly valued. Additionally, 88.89% of headteachers/ SENCOs said they strongly agreed they would recommend ELSA to a colleague.

Phase 2

Seven Participants volunteered to take part in a choice of two focus groups. The participants were asked to discuss the following statement:

ELSA has had a positive impact on the wellbeing of children and young people

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed and then analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA). TA was chosen to help consolidate the vast amount of data, it was important to recognise patterns and themes in the data set in order to identify the impact ELSA has had on children and young people.

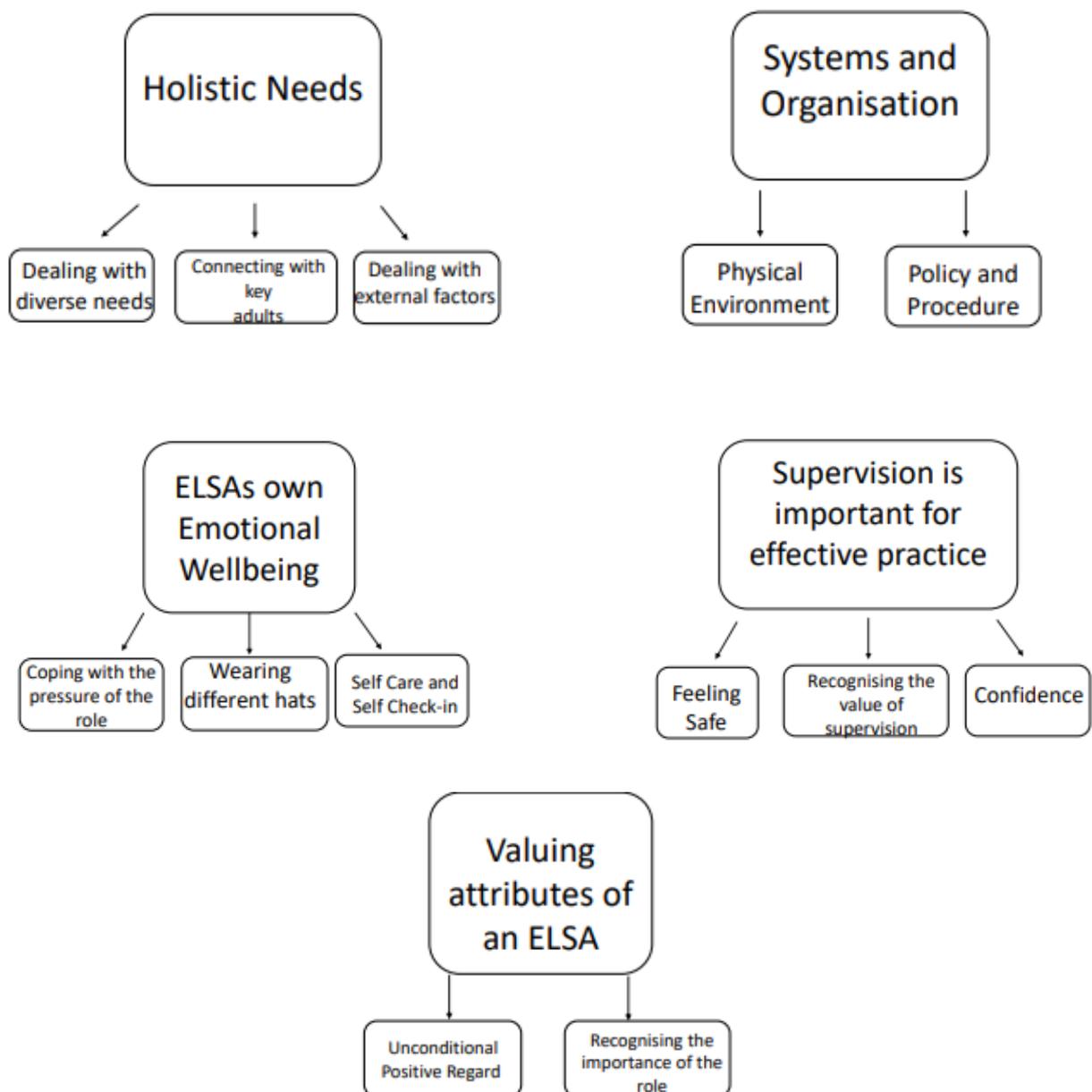


Fig 3. Thematic Map ELSA Focus Groups

Theme 1: Holistic Needs

One theme identified from the focus groups was the holistic role of the ELSA. ELSAs felt their role was wide-reaching and varied, it is important that they are able to deal with a range of needs, external factors such as Covid-19 and make connections with key adults around the child. A significant part of ELSA was forming relationships and building trust with adults at home to carry on the ELSA work.

Subtheme 1.a: Dealing with Diverse Needs

The ELSAs reported that we work with a wide variety of children whose needs span a spectrum from anger management, self-esteem, bereavement to trauma. This shows that the remit of ELSA is wide and ELSAs need to be prepared and confident dealing with this.

An ELSA said that they are *“working with a child whose father is terminally ill”* another explained they are working with students who have *“queries around suicidal thoughts.”* Additionally, an ELSA explained they are working with a pupil going *“through an autism diagnosis”* and work on friendships.

Working with such a diverse range of needs could be seen as being rather unique to the role of ELSA. This is further complicated by not being sure or informed what the primary need is when ELSA commences. One ELSA said *“I started planning.... Then I started talking to them and thought hang on.... This isn't self-esteem this is friendships.”* Therefore, ELSAs have to be flexible to the needs of the young people they work with and have to be able to adapt planning should the session go differently.

Subtheme 1.b: Connecting with Key Adults

In the focus groups, ELSAs shared that they often find themselves not only working with young people, but with their parents and families too. The ELSAs shared that this had been magnified post Covid-19 pandemic, they felt that the needs of families became more apparent, and this had had an impact on the young people they work with. ELSAs from secondary settings felt that parents almost wanted a more primary school relationship with them where they had more contact. This is likely due to the impact of Covid and the thought that parents and families have missed out on making key connections particularly where children spent the majority of their primary school career in lockdown.

This was particularly relevant in relation to anxiety. One ELSA shared *“parents at the moment... are so anxious that their children are behind where they should be.”* Another ELSA said, *“There's a lot more contact from parents to say they are worried.... you're almost doing ELSA with the parent as well to give them the skills to be able to encourage their child.”*

This demonstrates the importance of ELSAs being able to build relationships and connect with key adults around the child. ELSAs feel it is important that key adults are also engaged with their child's ELSA sessions in order to create a more holistic approach and continue work in the home.

Subtheme 3.c: Dealing with External Factors

The holistic nature of the ELSA role is further demonstrated by the ability of ELSAs to cope with external factors. The ELSAs in the focus groups spoke extensively about the impact Covid-19 has had on their work and on young people. They felt that the needs of children, young people and families had increased and become more complex. This is supported by findings from Young Minds (2021) who stated that around 67% of those asked felt that lockdown will have a significant long term negative effect on their mental health. ELSAs were forced to deal with external factors in order to achieve the best outcome for children and young people. ELSAs have to be flexible and adapt to external factors which present themselves, further demonstrating the uniqueness of the role. ELSAs in the focus groups spoke about the impact ELSA has had on young people, one ELSA said

“ELSA has made a huge difference, I think for some of these children because they’ve missed so much with Covid... social skills, friendships, not just academic. It’s been an emotional, holistic loss.”

Theme 2: Systems and Organisation

A common theme within the focus groups were issues around systems and organisation of ELSA. This was particularly pertaining to areas deemed to be beyond the ELSAs control and largely senior leadership responsibilities. Systemic issues included those in relation to policies, procedures, and environmental considerations.

Subtheme 1.a: Physical Environment

During the training phase of ELSA, Educational Psychologists (EPs) talk about how important it is to have a safe, reliable, and nurturing environment for the sessions. This is particularly important where young people speak openly it is imperative that the area can remain confidential. Having a nurturing environment also fits with the ethos of ELSA, to open up and be vulnerable about feelings and be able to communicate them. This becomes more difficult if the environment feels uncertain and insecure.

In the focus groups, ELSAs discussed how important they felt the environment was. All ELSAs felt that they needed the correct space which wasn’t just an office or worse, a corridor. Having an ELSA room was deemed crucial to the fulfilment of the role. One ELSA spoke about their room *“we call it The Den, it’s got sofas, tables, chairs. It’s covered with all the resources, bean bags, lights. And we have a note on the door whenever we want to use it.”* Another ELSA told of how she is currently creating an ELSA room *“Now I’m setting it up, I’ve got my books out. I’m going to do some mental health and wellbeing displays. I’m hoping that having my own space.... Year five and six can come and have timeout when they feel stressed.”*

Being provided with an ELSA room or being given creative independence over a room was also seen as having the ‘buy-in’ from senior leadership. Those who had their own space were seen as ‘lucky’ and felt ‘fortunate’, it was no secret that not all ELSAs were in this position. The ELSAs felt that having their own space allowed ELSA to have a greater impact on children and young people.

That said, not all ELSAs were fortunate enough to have the space in their settings for dedicate a room just for ELSA. This was problematic for those ELSAs and resulted in them getting interrupted. One shared *“our setting it is very hard at the moment, we’re fighting for places to go when we do get a place we get disrupted. I’ve told the children it is confidential, it’s a safe place and then people are coming in.”* This is significant, as ELSA relies on a trusting bond formed, this can’t happen if session is being disrupted. It emerged it is not just the space that it important but the type of space also. One ELSA said *“I share an office... and it’s okay... I do most of my sessions in here. But I wish I’d got a softer space, so it was a bit more comfortable and because it is an office, at the end of the day it’s quite clinical. It would be nice to have a softer room... have comfortable chairs and dimer lighting... you know make it a bit more homely.”*

There was an overwhelming sense of ELSAs trying to make the best of what they had. They had made adaptations to make the setting more comfortable or completely redecorated the room itself. ELSAs realised that the right environment would lead to better outcomes for children and young people and allow them to feel cared for and nurtured during their sessions. However, ELSAs also recognised that having a space isn’t everything and actually it is *“all about relationships,”* and this can be improved by having a dedicated space.

Subtheme 2.b: Policy and Procedure

A crucial aspect of undertaking ELSA training is the support from senior leaders within the setting. This is not only vital for ELSAs to feel supported and valued within their role but also for schools to set out policies and procedures for the benefit of other staff, parents, and pupils. As with all interventions, academic or otherwise, there is a requirement for clear targets, policies, and processes. Without guidance from Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) the ELSA role is made exponentially more difficult. One ELSA shared challenges around lack of time and this being uncertain or unprotected saying:

“I feel guilty...about having to say to a pupil, I can’t see you this week... or I will give up my own time and try and fit it in in your lunch time or even at the end of the day.”

This raises challenges around ELSA time being protected by senior leaders and its importance being embedded within the school’s policy. ELSAs whose school had embraced ELSA spoke positively of their experience and shared they were able to *‘control their own time’* and could see young people as much as necessary and without time constraints. Therefore, increasing the impact ELSA has on young people.

However, this illustrates the individual differences apparent between those who become ELSAs and how much time they and SLT are able to dedicate. This is further demonstrated by the differences apparent in the ELSAs referral processes between settings. Some ELSAs shared they have a ridged referral process whereby they meet with their SENCo, however another shared ELSA is so embedded within the school there is no need to ‘refer’ per say, if it is deemed necessary for that young person, they have ELSA as they would any other intervention such as literacy. That said, not having a referral process further complicates the issues around not knowing what the primary need is before commencing ELSA, as previously mentioned.

Therefore, it became clear that having well-established policies and procedures in place is important for ELSAs to be able to practice efficiently. It is crucial that SLT give ELSA the time it requires and recognise it as a significant standalone intervention.

Theme 3: ELSAs Own Emotional Wellbeing

ELSAs will find that they deal with an entire spectrum of different needs and therefore sessions can feel emotional, stressful, and heavy at times. It is important that ELSAs take account of their own emotional wellbeing and ensure that they are at their best before engaging in a session. Supervision helps to elevate some of the stress ELSAs can feel, but it is crucial that ELSAs are able to take care of themselves between supervision.

Subtheme 3.a & 3.b: Coping with the pressure of the role and wearing different hats

ELSAs shared that they felt the role was much bigger than they anticipated and can often feel under pressure. This is often as a consequence of managing their newfound role as an ELSA as well as their existing role within the school. This is particularly relevant for ELSAs who have a teaching assistant responsibility and are therefore required to be in class. One ELSA said *“The ELSA role is forever growing, I think... I was slightly naïve as well as to how it can take its toll on you.”* There is also an element on the ELSAs wanting to do their best for the children they see but being under time constraints and trying to manage this. Another ELSA said, *“We’d love to be able to go with what the child wants to talk about, because it does feel so constricting when you know its half an hour at a push 40 minutes.”*

Similarly, for ELSAs who use their own lunch time as a time to do ELSA with children negates their own need for rest and recuperation. There is a sense that ELSAs feel under pressure and hold a sense of *“guilt”* and want to do as much as possible for the young people they work with, even if that means sacrificing their own time to do it. In keeping with this, ELSAs find that when they have classroom responsibilities, they are forced to use their own time at weekends and after school to write reports, records, and plan sessions.

Subtheme 3.b: Self-care and Self check-in

In order to cope with the pressures of the ELSA role, it is important for ELSAs to engage in self-care and make time for self-check-in. During the six-week ELSA training, ELSAs are told of the importance of self-care and will often hear the phrase ‘you can’t pour from an empty cup’. This highlights how important it is to take care of yourself first, before taking care of others. In order for ELSA to have a positive impact on young people it vital that ELSAs selfcare is in place. One ELSA shared they are able to manage their self-care by ensuring they have time to *“sit quietly on a Friday at lunchtime after all the sessions, because I need to digest all those 6 children I’ve just seen, and that helps me.”*

However, as with most aspects of ELSA, ELSAs self-care and check-in depends almost entirely on the setting. It is not always possible for ELSAs to have time to reflect or check-in with themselves as they have other responsibilities within school. This will, in time, negate the effectiveness ELSA has on young people.

One ELSA shared *“Sometimes I do think, I’m not sure I can cope with another ELSA session because some of them are quite harrowing.”* Additionally, another ELSA said, *“sometimes I*

have felt like I could do with a week off ELSA this week and just refocus.” This is echoed by another ELSA, *“I absolutely adore doing ELSA, and I would do it more than once a week if I could just focus on that, but I just feel when I go home, I’m like what’s happened?”* It is therefore important that ELSAs have the time that they need to ensure they feel ready for their sessions and don’t take on too much. EP directed supervision provides ELSAs with a good opportunity to offload and share any concerns, however, ELSAs said that it is often the little things that mount up. There is also the element that EP supervision is in a group and sometimes ELSAs do not feel they are able to share to the group. One ELSA offered that they find it helpful that there are two ELSAs in their school, so they are able to offload and bounce off of each other. Having this support allows them to keep up to their selfcare and consequently have a greater impact on the young people.

Theme 4: Supervision is Important for Effective Practice

Part of the condition in undertaking ELSA is the attendance of EP lead group supervision sessions. Part of the ELSA contracts states that ELSAs must be released from school to attend supervision, and this is non-negotiable. ELSAs spoke positively of supervision and recognised it as an important part of their dedication to the role and a good opportunity to speak to other ELSAs.

Subtheme 4.a & 4.b: Feeling Safe and Recognising the Value of Supervision

ELSAs spoke positively about supervision and felt that it was beneficial to them. Meeting as a group allowed them to share ideas, resources and speak to others in the same position as them. ELSAs in the focus groups frequently spoke about how *“lovely it is to meet as a group.”* They recognised the value that supervision brings to the role and how beneficial it is to have the guidance of an EP.

That said, meeting as a group does pose its own difficulties, some ELSAs felt it prevented them being able to speak openly. They felt that although they had formed bonds with their supervision groups, they would not necessarily want to share details of some of their sessions due not feeling comfortable or confident enough.

One ELSA shared *“I think sometimes it’s nice just to have somebody go through your caseload with you, just on that one to one, because different schools have different needs.”* This was echoed by another ELSA who said, *“we have talked things through, and I have got upset... whereas when I’m in a big group I feel that I wouldn’t have been able to open up that much.”*

ELSAs also felt they needed to be reassured by an EP that they were doing the right thing or be offered extra ideas from a professional. This strengthens the fact that the ELSAs are determined to do their best for the young people they work with.

Subtheme 4.C: Confidence

Supervision allowed ELSAs to improve their confidence within their role. It can feel daunting to take on a new role whilst maintaining an existing role within a setting. Therefore, supervision provides ELSAs with the opportunity to ask questions, receive reassurance and clarify anything with an EP. It also helps to improve ELSA self-confidence by listening to others in the same position and sharing any helpful resources. An ELSA in the focus group

shared they had been offering ELSA sessions to a young person but wasn't sure if they could really call it ELSA due to not working through a workbook in particular. However, they found comfort and support in supervision by asking the other ELSAs and their EP.

Theme 5: Valuing Attributes of an ELSA

The attributes of a good ELSA are crucial in ensuring a positive impact on children and young people. Staff who are trained as ELSAs tend to be of similar disposition, are known in the school and are able to build relationships with children and young people. Additionally, ELSAs themselves recognise the importance of their role within their setting and this is reflected by senior management. It is imperative that senior leaders also recognise and respect the ELSA role and work to disseminate knowledge around the school.

Subtheme 5.a: Unconditional Positive Regard

The building blocks of ELSA are being able to form positive relationships with children and young people. A pertinent aspect of this providing unconditional positive regard to the young people they work with. The ELSA may be the only adult that young person feels comfortable speaking to, therefore it is crucial the ELSA is warm and compassionate. One ELSA said that ELSA has had a positive impact on a young person they have been working with due to them simply having *“a space to come and chat that they know is there.”*

The positive relationships ELSAs have with the young people they work with ensures that ELSA has a positive impact. ELSAs spoke positively of the impact on young people in their setting, they hold ELSA in high regard and attribute the positive change in young people to ELSA. They believe that had their setting not adopted ELSA, the situation would be very different, not least due to the impact of Covid. One ELSA remarked *“they've (young people) got the confidence that I've been able to work on with them, they've been building and building... they hold themselves differently... they just look like they want to be at school, they want to learn.”* Other ELSAs echoed this, talking about the 'clear successes' they have had in their setting.

Subtheme 5.b: Recognising the Importance of the Role

ELSAs understand their role is important for the young people they work with. However, ELSA has the greatest impact on young people when it is adopted and fully invested in at a higher level as a whole school approach.

Some ELSAs spoke of how their setting has truly invested in ELSA and have become dedicated to creating a whole school approach. They feel as ELSAs, they are held within high regard and their achievements are recognised. One ELSA spoke about how they are known around the school as 'The ELSA' and the knowledge they have from taking part in the course is well respected.

That said, this is not always the case for all ELSAs. However, this doesn't seem to have prevented ELSAs from supporting young people and achieving excellent results. For one ELSA working within a high school setting, being known around the school is not possible due to the sheer number of students attending. This is mitigated by ensuring the young people they are working with get to know them and spending time building their relationships before

the sessions start. They said *“I always do get to know you activities to begin with before the actual programme, but once they know where you are and then you’re seeing them to do the programme and encouraging them to come and find you... that helps a great deal. I don’t think you necessarily have to know them before you start... I think it’s how you start that relationship and carry it on going forward.”* This suggests that ELSAs have a certain level of resilience to be able to start these relationships with young people and gain trust quickly, within their allocated time frame. ELSAs are uniquely skilled to be able to do this despite not knowing the young person initially.

Phase Three

After conducting the pupil interviews, thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the qualitative data. TA was used in order to develop a deeper understanding of the impact ELSA has had on young people themselves. In doing this, we are also able to extrapolate and infer the impact of ELSA for future cohorts in Staffordshire. All pupils who took part in the interviews were either currently engaging in ELSA or had just completed their ELSA programme.

The feedback from pupils was positive, they shared what they had learnt and how they had put this into practice. They shared what was important to them for ELSA to work and what aspects they enjoyed most. Some differences between the pupils interviewed were identified such as an awareness of their targets and the content of their ELSA sessions. A thematic map can be seen below.

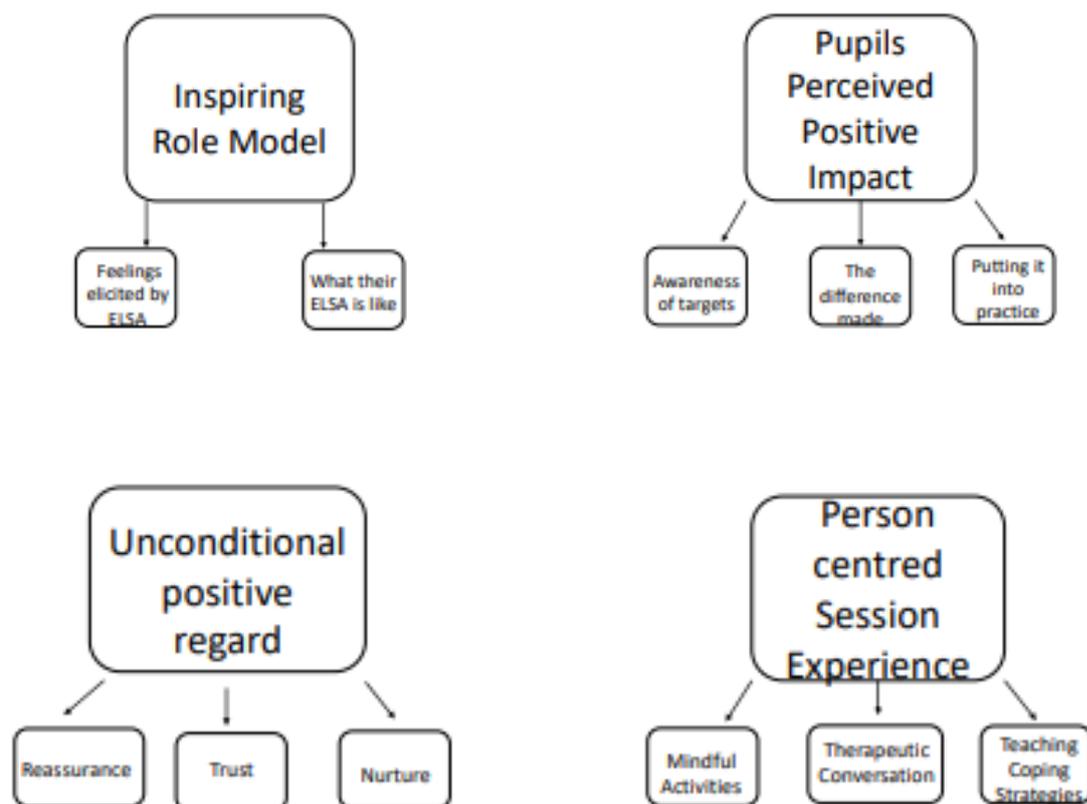


Fig 4. Thematic Map Pupil Interviews

Theme 1: Inspiring Role Model

The first theme identified reflected the importance of the ELSA being a positive and inspiring role model to the children and young people.

Subtheme 1.a: Feelings elicited by the ELSA

All pupils interviewed reported their ELSA elicited positive feelings within them. All pupils had positive comments about their ELSA, they genuinely enjoyed their sessions and looked forward to them.

Eliciting positive feelings was a critical condition of ELSA having a positive impact on the pupil. It was important that they were able to relate to their ELSA and from a mutual respect with them.

One young person interviewed said “*it brightens up my day every Friday*” another said, “*she makes me feel happy.*”

It was important for the young people to have a bond with their ELSA to be able to form these therapeutic connections. Young people interviewed shared the importance of not feeling judged and feeling a sense of relief after their session. To the YP it appeared that ELSA offered them a safe space but also provided them with positive feelings and reinforcement.

Subtheme 1.b: What their ELSA is like

From analysis of the interviews, it became apparent that ELSAs all had a common personality. They all appeared to be, kind, nice, caring and inspiring. This suggests that one of the predictors of ELSA having a positive impact on children and young people is the ELSA being an inspirational and positive role model. It should be someone the young people aspire to be like, who can give them guidance and be seen to practice this guidance. One pupil reported:

“She is really nice, supportive and she is always there to encourage me” another said *“she is really nice, whenever you are feeling down, she comforts you and tells you everything will be okay.”*

This suggests that a crucial element of an ELSA is being empathetic and warm. It is important that adults who are trained as ELSAs have a caring and kind personality, they must be someone who is able to relate to the young people and inspire them.

Theme 2: Pupils Perceived Positive Impact

It is important that pupil views are recorded within the report and are given serious consideration, ELSA is after all, for children and young people. Therefore, it was critical to analyse pupils perceived impact on them as individuals.

Subtheme 2.a: Awareness of Targets

An important aspect of the pupil interviews was asking the young people if they knew *why* they had ELSA. This was a significant question, as it is important that young people have a choice and understand the interventions they take part in. It is particularly crucial for ELSA as young people are encouraged to work on their targets outside their sessions, they cannot do this without knowing their targets.

It became apparent that some young people knew *why* they had ELSA however, there were some young people who didn't. This did present as a concern as it contradicts the importance of choice.

When asked why they had ELSA one young person said: *“we are some of the few in our school who are low on self-esteem and are not really that happy in school.... we build up on that and get better.”* Another young person said, *“because I don't know how I get angry, but I sometimes do, and I can't control it.”* Another young person said, *“I had some stuff I wanted to get out.”*

In contrast, 7 out of the 21 young people interviewed simply answered *“no”* or *“I don't know.”* Additionally, two other young people offered an answer in line with more academic targets such as *“get better at spelling.”*

This is quite problematic as it is important that young people are provided with targets to work towards, not least so that they can celebrate achievements once they are met. But also, so those around the child can work together whether this be wider staff members or adults at home.

Subtheme 2.b: The Difference Made

To explore the impact ELSA has had on young people, it was imperative to explore the difference young people feel it has made to them, from their perspective. Young people were asked to think about the difference and try to describe this to the researcher. Some young people found this quite difficult, however others were excited to express how much they had changed.

One young person expressed *“before I started the sessions, I was really shy, I couldn’t speak to anyone.... now is completely different, I can talk to everyone and I am not as shy as I was.”* Another young person said *“I am a lot happier now... I am enjoying school... I like being here.”* Other young people expressed that they had more friends now, they put their hand up more in class and they don’t cry as much. It is clear that ELSA had made a difference to these young people, and they attributed this difference to not only ELSA as an intervention but also the relationship they had formed with their ELSA. It is worth noting that these young people were engaging in ELSA for different reasons however, a common answer was that they were happier now.

Subtheme 2.c: Putting it into Practice

The next subtheme identified related to how the young people put their ELSA sessions into practice. Many young people reported that they had learnt a lot from their sessions and recalled how they were able to use their new knowledge in class, at breaktime and at home. A large proportion of the young people interviewed spoke about coping strategies they had learnt and were able to put into practice.

A young person said, *“When I get angry, we have the five-finger breath and square breathing.”* Another young person shared that they tell themselves *“You can do this”* and *“not every little thing needs to be a big thing.”* Similarly, a young person shared they have learnt that *“I am who I am, and I can’t change anything about it, that makes it better.”*

Theme 3: Unconditional Positive Regard

The third theme identified relates to the relationship created between the ELSA and the young person. It appeared that the ELSA retains an unconditional positive regard for the young person which allows them to develop and open up in a safe environment.

Subtheme 3.a: Reassurance

Young people reported feeling a sense of reassurance from their ELSAs, they felt that they had a safe space to talk about their feelings. Reassurance was an important factor for the young people interviewed, young people wanted their sessions to be confidential and without judgement. This relied on the ELSA building up a positive rapport with the young person over time.

One young person said, *“she is always there for me, and I will never be judged.”* Another said, *“I believe in myself, I know I can do it.”* This shows that they feel safe with their ELSA and echo the confidence their ELSA has in them. A young person said that their ELSA *“comforts me and tells me everything will be okay.”*

This suggests that it is important for ELSAs to keep the young people contained and work with them to build their confidence in dealing with problems that arise.

Subtheme 3.b: Trust

When the interviews were analysed, a strong subtheme was that of trust. It became apparent that young people who engage with ELSA genuinely trust the adult they are working with. They understand that the sessions are confidential and that they are free from judgement. It appears young people see the ELSA adult differently than the other adults in school. The sessions are built on trust and there is a sense that they won't get in trouble for talking about their worries.

One young person described ELSA as *"a safe place that is always therefore you. You won't get judged or anything."* Another young person echoed this saying *"It's confidential and doesn't get told."*

It is clearly important to young people that they feel they can open up to their ELSA but also that they are not going to get into trouble. Also, that their relationship won't change based on what they talk about, their ELSA will always be there. It is important for young people to feel they can trust their ELSA in order to work on their emotional needs and be vulnerable.

Subtheme 3.c: Nurture

It is well established that ELSA works best in a nurturing environment, this is also recognised by the children and young people interviewed. The subtheme nurture was reflected not only within the environment such as the room but also in relation to the ELSAs personality.

Young people were really keen to talk about the exciting things they do within their ELSA sessions. One young person explained ELSA as *"really fun... you get to have some orange and have some biscuits and read books and go to the sensory room."* Other young people also shared similar experiences *"she is happy, she is kind, and she gives me biscuits and a drink,"* *"She always meets me on a Wednesday and gives me juice."*

Creating this nurturing environment is important for ELSA, offering juice and biscuits makes the young people feel special, warm and welcomed. It emphasises that it is a safe space and is different to their other more academic attainment focussed interventions.

Similarly, going beyond the environment, one young person spoke about how their ELSA helps them reframe their thinking saying *"she is nice, she tells you what you should have done if you have done something wrong"* another saying *"she doesn't shout but tells you when you have done something wrong"* this nurturing deposition allows children to feel that unconditional positive regard. It allows young people to feel safe and wanted while they talk to their ELSA.

Theme 3: Person Centred Session Experience

As with all interventions, it is important that they are person centred, ELSA is no different. ELSA works best when it is attuned to the young person's targets, and they are able to tailor sessions to work best for them. In the interviews, young people shared how their sessions are

organised and the kind of things they do. Some young people shared that they get to pick what kind of activities they do which gives them a sense of autonomy. In general, the activities fell into three distinct categories as below.

Subtheme 4.a: Mindful Activities

Young people shared that in their ELSA sessions they take part in a range of activities related to mindfulness. These including activities such as playing games, crafts and reading therapeutic stories. This not only helps young people to feel grounded and talk about their feelings or worries but helps to facilitate the relationship with their ELSA.

One young person shared they had created a worry box *“my sessions are nice to complete, and I like how we make things and get creative.... My worry box has stickers and a rectangle hole where I post my worries... it is on my desk right now.”* Another young person shared that they had used therapeutic stories to help understand their feelings *“She used to read me books. In one book it talked about rainy days and being sad and sunny days and being happy.”* Other young people shared how they play games together such as ‘top trumps’ or try and identify feelings with games such as ‘shoot the goal.’

One young person shared that they play football together as it is their favourite game, while they play football they talk about worries. This also reinforces that ELSA sessions are used to form relationships where young people feel safe and nurtured.

Subtheme 4.b: Therapeutic Conversations

Young people shared that they used a lot of time in their ELSA sessions simply talking. This involved talking about their worries, feelings, friends, and family. Young people felt they could speak openly with their ELSA and were assured this was confidential. Although young people said they simply talked to their ELSA, during analysis it became clear that they actually had conversations with a significant therapeutic focus.

One young person shared *“we talk about things like what’s going on and if anything has been bothering me..... we drew three houses one was a worry house, one a dream house and one a happy house.”* This young person was able to talk about their worries and categorise them into in or out of their control, which helped them cope. Another young person said sometimes they get to take something from their sessions such as a special pen, take it home and bring it back. Their ELSA offered a transitional object which aids trust, safety, and security. This opens up a topic of conversation for the next session about how well they have looked after their item.

Subtheme 4.c: Teaching Coping Strategies

Being taught coping strategies was something a lot of the young people had in common, and this seemed to be a significant part of ELSA. They were able to practice them in the safety of their ELSA sessions and then transfer this new learning to the classroom, playground or at home. Most of the coping strategies the young people explained focussed on controlling anger, worries and friendships. One young person spoke about how they had started to use meditation techniques that they had learn during ELSA and how this helps them cope with their worries.

A young person shared they had learnt about the ‘five finger breath’ and ‘square breathing’ they are not able to use these coping strategies when they are angry. Another young person

said, “*She has taught me when I get angry to go to her and we learn how to control it.*” Others shared they had learnt how to cope with their worries, to think of something nice or “*go to a nice place in my head.*”

A young person said that ELSA has taught them how to “*cooperate with their feelings*”, rather than work against them.

Discussion

The results of the present study confirmed what was known from the existing body of research regarding the positive effects of ELSA on children and young people. From speaking to young people and ELSAs themselves, it is clear that ELSA has had a significant positive impact on children across Staffordshire.

Results from the questionnaires revealed that headteachers and SENCOs felt there had been a significant positive impact on children and young people in their setting. The questionnaire responses revealed that ELSA has had the greatest impact on self-esteem followed by relationships and emotional regulation. The majority of headteacher/SENCOs agreed that they would recommend ELSA to a colleague which shows how positively ELSA had been adopted within their setting. They also felt that the work their ELSA had done within the setting was highly valued.

A pertinent theme identified from interviewing young people was their own perceived positive impact. Young people felt that experiencing ELSA has made a positive difference to them ranging from having more friends, improved emotion regulation and increased confidence. This supports the findings from Burton (2008) who found ELSA improved young people’s wellbeing. During the interviews, a common answer from the young people was that they were happier now, this was also in part due to the relationship they had formed with their ELSA supported by Krause (2019). This is strengthened by the way in which young people spoke about their ELSA, young people held their ELSA in high regard and had formed a close bond with them. It appears that all ELSAs had a similar disposition and demeanour within the school which suggests that for ELSA to have a positive impact on young people, ELSAs should be carefully selected.

ELSA is a tailored, target led programme where clear outcomes and reviewing such is important. Having an awareness of targets was identified as a theme within the phase two analysis. It appeared that not all young people were aware of their targets, and some did not seem to know why they were having ELSA at all. This could be problematic when the impact of ELSA is assessed through using strategies holistically across school and home life. In fact, research suggests that collaboratively setting targets can help reduce uncertainty about taking part in the programme (Wilding & Claridge, 2016). In the present study, some of the young people interviewed were as young as 6 years old therefore, questions relating to *why* they have ELSA may have been too difficult to answer. This could be the reason the results revealed some young people were not aware of their targets.

Another important finding from the present study as reported by the ELSAs in the focus group is the significance of systems and organisation. The physical environment was deemed particularly significant, all the ELSAs in the study felt that they required the correct environment, and the consequences of not having this would negate the positive impact felt by the young people. Some ELSAs shared that they felt ‘*fortunate*’ to have a room dedicated

to using for ELSA. Using the term '*fortunate*' suggests that this is not always the case and an ELSA has not always been high on the schools agenda.

Others were trying to find space as and when, with being disrupted a common feature of their sessions. This was frustrating and upsetting for the ELSAs as it infringed on the nurturing atmosphere they were trying to create. It also means the young people they work with cannot be certain they have a space to go to which could lead to their session being changed or cancelled. This finding is supported by research by Hill, O'Hare and Weidberg (2013) who found that organisational factors such as a dedicated room were recognised as essential to the programme.

Of particular note in the present study is the theme of 'ELSA's own emotional Wellbeing'. All the ELSAs shared that the role had become a lot of work, this is mostly due to them already having a role within the school. The focus groups revealed that for those ELSAs who have classroom responsibilities the ELSA role was much harder to manage. Groom and Rose (2005) suggested that a teaching assistants' role is already challenging due to its nature. Adding an extra element of responsibility and planning in top could become problematic. That said, all the ELSAs said they loved doing ELSA and most would like to do it more, however it was everything additional to the actual session which was challenging, such as resource finding or creating, organisation and write up. Some ELSAs felt they needed a week off ELSA every so often in order to reframe and refocus, others said they often go home thinking of their sessions. Self-care was a theme throughout the focus groups and managing wellbeing, it is important for future settings who are considering taking on ELSA as an intervention to be mindful of the impact it could have on their staff and how they can manage the demands that are placed on ELSAs. As per the ELSA training manual (Burton, 2009) which sets out the conditions that settings are required to meet.

ELSA's found that their supervision sessions were beneficial, they enjoyed meeting as a group and found being able to speak to an EP beneficial. The supervision sessions were useful to share ideas and hear about what others were doing or how someone else may approach a challenge. The focus group revealed that ELSAs felt it was important to feel reassured by an EP. This maybe as the ELSAs in the present study had been practising for around one year and still fairly new to the role. As their experience increases, they are likely to become more confident and not need reassurance as much. Consistent with this is the ELSAs thoughts around having 1:1 supervision. Although not currently offered, ELSAs felt that this would be valuable to negate the issues of feel uncomfortable or unconfident speaking in a group. Offering 1:1 supervision is likely to pose significant difficulties on educational psychology services (EPS) due to the capacity this would require. However, it is useful for local authorities or EPS' to be mindful of how a group supervision model could be problematic for some ELSAs.

Implications and what next?

The report details several implications EPs should consider when looking to roll out ELSA within their service.

Through analysis of the focus groups, it became apparent that understanding and commitment from SLT was imperative. Some ELSAs shared that they felt they lacked the time to complete their ELSA sessions, even using their own lunch time to see children. This could be

due to SLT not fully understanding the role of ELSA and how much time it requires. Not only the time it takes to complete the ELSA sessions but also the time required for admin, report writing and organisation. ELSAs felt that they didn't realise the extent of the role and perhaps, in some areas, felt unprepared. This is further complicated by the lack of understanding from SLT when aspects such as the physical environment, time and responsibility are considered. In order to support this, it would be useful for members of SLT to be invited on one of the ELSA training days, this would allow SLT to be fully informed about ELSA and how best they can support their trainees. Alternatively, SLT could be invited to a networking or launch session in order ascertain interest, have queries answered and ultimately understand fully what they will be signing up for.

For ELSA to be most effective, it is important for a physical space to be dedicated. Where children and young people can feel safe and secure, they can be certain their session will be uninterrupted. In addition to the physical environment, SLT should protect time for ELSAs to be able to plan their sessions and complete pre and post measures. The ELSAs in the focus groups reported that a significant amount of their time was absorbed by admin tasks and planning the sessions, particularly when they thought the primary need was one thing and it transpired to be another.

It is also crucially important that ELSAs are given the time they need for reflection and self-care. ELSAs are enrolled in supervision sessions typically, once every half term, part of the contractual agreement between the setting and the EPS is that ELSAs must be released for supervision. However, ELSAs reported that this is not always enough, ELSAs also require time to reflect on their session particularly if it has been difficult. Some ELSAs shared they need to take time on a Friday afternoon to reflect, others said they don't get anytime and often go home feeling that they no longer want to do ELSA. It is critically important that ELSAs are supported and encouraged to take reflection and self-care time, settings should work to schedule this time with the ELSAs and ensure it is protected.

SLT should recognise ELSA as an important standalone role and help ELSAs manage this with their existing responsibilities in school. SLT should encourage ELSAs to celebrate their successes and help them problem solve should they need to. SLT should take an interest in the work ELSAs are doing and encourage them to share this with the school community. It would be useful for ELSAs to have a dedicated page in the school newsletter to showcase the work they are doing and get ELSA known throughout the school community.

The focus groups with young people revealed that all ELSAs had a similar disposition and character. The character of the ELSA plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of ELSA sessions for young people, it is vital that ELSAs are able to build relationships with young people in order to get the best outcomes. Therefore, when SLT nominate staff members to be trained as ELSAs, they should consider the staff members character, commitment, dedication and desire to do the training. It appeared from the focus groups that those who had the best outcomes with young people were those who were truly committed to ELSA training. SLT should ensure that potential ELSAs are given the choice and have a genuine desire to complete the training.

ELSAs shared within the focus groups that they would value more supervision and even more so if this supervision was on a 1:1 basis. ELSAs within the focus groups felt that when faced with a large supervision group they were unable to share certain aspects of the role they

found difficult. This could be a particular young person they need advice for, or perhaps simply to go through a session and reflect with an EP. The ELSAs felt that when the groups were large, the recommended size being eight, they were unable to share any concerns. They did however recognise that it was nice to meet as a group and share experiences. On several occasions, ELSAs stated they would really benefit from 1:1 supervision with an EP, this however does pose significant challenges for EP services who are already under time constraints. It is worth considering the demands on EP services who are undertaking training of an ELSA cohort. ELSAs are likely to require ongoing support, especially in the beginning as they begin their sessions, this is outside the regular supervision sessions. EP services should consider if they have the capacity to provide this support to their trainees. In larger services where Assistant Educational Psychologists (AEPs) are used to support the graduated response, they could be enrolled to support with ELSA. It would be useful for trainees to be given contact details of AEPs so that they had a point of contact who is likely to have more capacity than a main grade EP to support with ELSA. Another implication for EP services is to consider the use of a manned ELSA specific inbox where all ELSA enquiries can be sent. This should alleviate the demand on specific EPs who undertake the ELSA training and allow the demands of ELSA and the administration to be shared across the service.

A significant implication which has transpired from the focus groups is the lack of targets given to some pupils. As discussed, it is important that pupils are given ELSA targets and know why they are receiving ELSA. All young people who engage in an intervention should be aware of why and what they are working towards. This allows the intervention to have more gravitas and can be referenced when requesting further specialist support such as Education Health Care Plans. The distinct lack of target setting that appeared from the focus groups suggests that there should be a greater emphasis on admin, organisation, setting up and monitoring during the initial training. ELSAs should be supported in planning their sessions and supported in investigating target setting as well as the use of pre and post measures. It is crucial that pre and post measures are used in order to ascertain the impact ELSA has had on the young person.

A further implication for EP services is the need for quality assurance. Post completion of ELSA training and subsequent supervision sessions, to our knowledge there are no other quality assurance methods used to assess ELSA. It is vital that ELSAs currently practising are adhering to the training and the quality of their sessions are up to a good standard, this means also having pre and post data. From the focus groups it became apparent that the individual ELSA sessions are quite different, some had longer time than others or used their sessions quite differently. Some ELSAs took on a more nurturing approach offering juice and biscuits compared to others. Thus, EP services running the ELSA cohort may find it useful to set up a monitoring schedule whereby EPs visit setting to ensure the quality of ELSA sessions is sufficient.

Limitations

One limitation of the present study is the possibility of bias within the focus groups due to participation being entirely voluntary. Therefore, the themes identified within the present study may not be representative of the wider population. Additionally, it could be argued that seven participants may not be a big enough sample to represent the wider population.

Additionally, while every effort was made to ensure the young people interviewed understood the questions, there is a risk that some of the younger participants failed to understand the questions. For future, it would be useful to have age related interview questions.

Conclusion

The present study found ELSA to have a significant positive impact on children and young people in Staffordshire. ELSA is a bespoke programme which aims to improve the emotional literacy skills of children and young people through target led sessions with a trained member of staff. ELSAs felt they were competent in dealing with a range of needs however at times felt their own wellbeing posed challenges. The use of supervision and reassurance from an EP was valuable. Young people reported they felt 'happier' since starting ELSA and spoke of the positive relationship they had formed with their ELSA. Future research could focus on investigating the views of parents as to whether they agree that ELSA has had a significant positive impact on their children and young people.

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