

# "It's a strategic toolkit." How can the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme be used to support children and young people post-lockdown?

Imogen Russo

The ELSA programme is a tailored intervention designed to support the social emotional and mental health needs of children and young people. It is typically delivered by school support staff trained in relevant psychological theory. As yet, there is a lack of research on how the recent Coronavirus lockdowns have impacted on the way in which ELSA is delivered. This study aims to address this gap in the literature and also explores the support ELSAs themselves receive in their role.

## Key findings

ELSAs reported an increase in the volume and complexity of their casework post-lockdown; anxiety and social issues were particularly prevalent

Adaptations to ELSA delivery included the length of sessions, overall duration of the intervention and proportion of group sessions

ELSAs' reported having a sense of community, emotional support, logistical support and opportunities for skill development were important in facilitating their work

## Major implications

- Schools should prioritise pupil wellbeing and the development of social skills over pressures to 'catch up' on missed learning.
- Schools should implement evaluation measures to monitor the impact of ELSA over time.
- Increased funding is needed to enable schools to fulfil the requirements of the ELSA programme.
- Wellbeing support should be a regular feature of ELSA supervision.
- ELSAs should receive sufficient development opportunities and protected planning time.

## The Research

**Background:** Recent studies have demonstrated the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on children and young people's wellbeing, including an increase in emotional difficulties (Shum et al., (2021)). In addressing these elevated levels of need, interventions which focus on developing pupils' socio-emotional learning, including their emotional regulation and social skills, have been highly advocated (e.g. Yorke et al., 2020). The ELSA programme is one such intervention, which has been associated with reduced anxiety, positive peer relationships and the development of resilience (Krause, Blackwell & Claridge, 2020). Understanding how ELSA has supported the wellbeing of CYP post-lockdown represents a gap in the current literature, which this research seeks to address.

**Aims:** This study aims to explore ELSAs' perceptions of the predominant SEMH needs of CYP, perceived changes to the nature of their work post-lockdown, the types of support they receive in their ELSA role and whether they perceive certain groups of pupils to be disproportionately likely to be referred for ELSA intervention.

**Methodology:** A questionnaire, consisting of a mixture of open and closed questions, was completed by 301 ELSAs from across the UK, including those working in primary, secondary and special schools. ELSAs were recruited through providers listed on the ELSA Network website.

Paired interviews were conducted virtually with four ELSAs - two ELSAs from each of two London Authorities.

Participants for both the questionnaire and interviews were asked questions relating to their experiences of delivering the ELSA intervention.

Descriptive analysis of the quantitative questionnaire data and Thematic Analysis of the qualitative data from questionnaires and paired interviews was conducted.

**Results:** The five main themes from questionnaire data were:

- **Volume and complexity of need** – ELSAs reported an increase in the number of pupils requiring support and the severity of their needs. Anxiety, self-esteem and social skills were most frequently mentioned as areas of concern.
- **Adaptations to ELSA delivery** – The increase in demand necessitated some changes to the way in which the intervention is typically run. These included altering the duration of ELSA input, an increase in group sessions as opposed to one-to-one work and the introduction of additional forms of support, such as lunchtime clubs.

- **Wellbeing support for ELSAs** – ELSAs described the need for a sense of community, including shared experiences with others and feeling as though other staff understood their role. They also needed emotional containment and reassurance.
- **Practical support for ELSAs** – ELSAs spoke of needing protected planning time, which was often felt to be lacking, as well as sufficient resources and opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills, in order to fulfil their role to the best of their ability.
- **Appropriateness of ELSA** – Some ELSAs felt that the intervention was used to fill a gap where other services, such as CAMHS did not have sufficient capacity or as a 'tick box' exercise before additional support was sought.

Similar themes were generated from the paired interview data, with the addition of '**relationships**'. This theme encapsulated the importance of ELSAs knowing their pupils well and facilitating a sense of belonging as well as containment.

**Major implications:** Schools should prioritise pupils' mental health and wellbeing over and above the need to catch up on periods of missed learning in order to see the most long-term benefit. A major implication from this research therefore concerns the level of funding allocated to SEMH interventions such as ELSA. If schools are to implement the ELSA intervention effectively, the requirements of programme need to be fulfilled. This includes the need for ELSAs to receive sufficient protected time for planning, delivering and evaluating their sessions, access to appropriate development opportunities and sufficient wellbeing support so as to enable them to effectively support the pupils they work with.

Educational Psychologists are in a strong position to support schools with the implementation of the programme. Firstly, through providing high-quality supervision with opportunities for emotional containment, the sharing of resources and seeking of advice which ELSAs needed and, in some cases, lacked. Secondly, EPs should support ELSAs in ensuring that the casework they receive is within their scope of competence, providing advice and support as necessary if it is not. Finally, EPs should support schools to monitor patterns in their referrals, considering where wider systemic support may be needed for overrepresented groups.

