

Evaluating the perceived impact of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention in Powys Schools: Eliciting the views of the children.

History/background

This research aims to replicate and extend the quantitative stage of an earlier study which investigated the perceived impact of ELSA in London (Hills, 2016). Hills' research involved a 2 stage design, first involving a self-reported questionnaire which was followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews. Hills (2016) targeted 16 primary schools across London, involving 53 children between 4 and 11 years old.

Previous findings

Hills' (2016) findings indicated the children felt ELSA was successful because of the therapeutic relationship they developed with their ELSA, and they had learned to deal with feelings and build resilience.

Improving Implementation

Children indicated they would appreciate being informed about the reason for referral, and what was going to happen and when. They reported feeling nervous when this didn't happen. They appreciated being consulted on the timing (what they missed in class). Emphasized more activities and more space, importance of having fun, non-academic activities such as drawing instead of writing. This 'sense of fun' was important to them. The children didn't want their ELSA sessions to end. They asked for more time, more weeks and more support.

The Current Study

Scope and Purpose

To elicit the views of the child on the impact of ELSA in Powys improve ELSA implementation and outcomes for children and young people. This research will methodologically replicate Dr Hills' initial stage by completing a self-reported questionnaire with the children across Powys schools. It is an extension of the previous work because all children who have seen an ELSA from age 4-25 years are eligible to participate regardless of level of need. The current research is particularly interested in

- 1) **How ELSA has helped children in Powys.**
- 2) **What children in Powys like about ELSA.**
- 3) **How children think ELSA could be improved.**

Method

Measures

'All About Me' Questionnaire (see *appendix 1*; Hills, 2016)

Dr Hills kindly agreed for us to use her questionnaire in personal correspondence. This questionnaire is a 17 item self-report measure with a number of sections. The first section is designed to collect demographic information asking for the child's name

(later anonymised), age, gender, and school year. This is then followed by a question asking children whether they saw their ELSA in a group of other children or alone. The second section is a 9 item Likert scale where children read or have read to them statements about their ELSA experience which they then rate as 'Yes', 'A Little Bit', 'Not Really' or 'No'. An example item is: 'ELSA has helped me to make friends'. The third and final stage involves three open questions with space below to collect verbatim answers. The three questions are 1) What did you like most about ELSA? 2) How did ELSA help you? And 3) What do you think would make ELSA better? These answers map on to the specific interests of this research as detailed above. Please note the wording of question three was slightly adapted from Dr Hill's original which was framed 'What would make ELSA even better?' as this was determined to be a leading question.

Data Collection

Children were asked to complete the questionnaire '*All About Me*' in a room with the researcher. The ELSA was asked to check with the child whether their presence was required. The child then either entered the room to complete the questionnaire with the researcher alone or with the ELSA present. The child was asked if they would be willing to participate after being shown the questionnaire and were briefed on the content and what was expected of them. After verbal confirmation of consent, the researcher asked the child whether they would prefer to complete the questionnaire by writing or have it read to them and answer orally. In the latter case the researcher wrote down the child's verbatim responses for coding later. Children were then thanked for their participation and the ELSA or the researcher returned the child to class.

Data Analysis

The answers to the open questions at the end of the questionnaire were coded thematically. The information from the second stage of the questionnaire was tallied into quantitative data for analysis. Findings are presented below.

Results

The research elicited the views of 24 children from 7 schools (5 Primary Schools, 1 Secondary School and 1 Special School). Findings are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1 – Quantitative Phase

Questions	Percentage for Yes	Yes	A little bit	Not Really	No
ELSA has helped me to make friends	63%	15	6	1	2
I feel happier in school after ELSA	83%	20	1	2	1
I enjoyed going to ELSA	79%	19	4		1
I would like to go to ELSA again	92%	22	1		1
I enjoyed the activities in ELSA	96%	23	1		
I liked my ELSA teacher	79%	19	2	1	2
I think my friends would like ELSA	63%	15	8		1
I think ELSA has helped me	88%	21	2		1
I liked going to ELSA	88%	21	2	1	

*Percentages rounded to nearest percent.

Quantitative Highlights

96% of children enjoyed the activities in ELSA, 92% would like to go to ELSA again, 88% enjoyed going to ELSA, 88% thought ELSA had helped them in some way, 83% felt happier in school after ELSA and 79% liked their ELSA teacher.

This is broadly reflective of previous research results in this area (Hills, 2016). Overall children in Powys seem very supportive of ELSA, enjoy it immensely and think that it is helping them overcome their problems and feel happier and more connected to school. ELSA seems therefore to be increasing a sense of belonging which is a known protective factor against negative outcomes (Baumeister, & Tice, 1990; Baumeister & Leary 1995; Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996).

Please note that the child who gave most of the 'no' answers in Table 1 also said ELSA had helped them.

Qualitative Coding (Open Questions) Table 2 (a, b and c)

Table 2a

Question 1: What did you like most about ELSA?

Response category	Number of Instances from children
Games	5
Talking	3
Activities	12
Helping me	6
Having fun	3
Food and drink	2
ELSA teacher	2
Trips	1

Highlighted answers: Similar to the previous research ‘Activities’ and ‘Games’ were popular choices. However, ‘Helping me’ was the second highest rated answer in this sample. Given the small sample size the other categories should also be taken in to consideration for quality implementation because where there is one voice it is likely there are others.

Table 2b

Question 2: How did ELSA help you?

Response category	Number of instances from children
Talking	4
Friendship	7
Improving confidence	12
Anger Management	3
Family problems	2
Bullying	1
Difficulties in school	7
Having fun	6
To stop worrying	6
Improved Self-esteem (happier)	6
Did not help	1
Reading and writing	2
Don't Know how it helped but it did	2
Understanding how to act (appropriately)	4

Highlighted Answers: Children indicated that ELSA was effective in helping them across a variety of issues. They rated ‘Improving confidence’, ‘friendship’, ‘difficulties in school’, ‘talking’, ‘having fun’ and ‘to stop worrying’ highest. Other interesting

highlights include being taught how to act appropriately, improved self-esteem, anger management and improved reading and writing.

Table 2c

Question 3: What would you do to make ELSA Better?

Response category	Number of instances from children
Nothing would make it better	9
More ELSA (frequency)	10
More ELSA (session duration)	5
More games and activities	6
More children	2
More information on how to stop self-harm	1

Highlighted answers: Most children asked for more ELSA sessions in the week and for longer ELSA sessions. More time was the highest rated request. The second highest feedback was that '*Nothing would make it better*' and the third was a request for more games/activities. This emphasizes the importance of the maintaining and enhancing the 'sense of fun' to ELSA's positive reception among Powys children.

Limitations

Although efforts were taken in research design and implementation to prevent/minimise the effects of social desirability and impression management the study uses self-report measures and therefore some data may be subject to reporting bias. Given the voluntary sampling utilised by this research caution must be exercised when generalising these results to populations outside of the sample. Similarly it is not realistic to think of ELSA helping children with severe and complex difficulties to completely overcome them all. However, coupled with previous research results encourage a positive trend for ELSA in increasing positive outcomes for children and young people and is perceived positively by both parents and children (Hills, 2016; Wilding & Claridge, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Parents were given information sheets and opt-out consent detailing all necessary ethical information. Opt-out consent forms were chosen due to the large number of potential participants. Informed consent was assured and parents and children with informed of their right to withdraw at any time until data analysis when anonymization will occur, and their right to refuse participation (this was verbally checked again with each child at the beginning of the data collection). Questionnaires were kept safe in a locked drawer until data analysis when they will be confidentially destroyed and a copy of the final report is available to all who request it.

Conclusion

Powys pupils indicated that a sense of fun and activities and games were the most enjoyable parts of the ELSA sessions but also stressed that it helped them learn to overcome some of their difficulties. To improve implementation Powys pupils asked for more time (session frequency and duration) and more games and activities. Interestingly, the second highest rated answer was that '*Nothing would make it better*'.

This research suggests that ELSA increased perceived self-esteem, happiness, social skills, problem solving skills, friendship, belonging, communication and confidence whilst decreasing perceived anxiety, anger and bullying through the training in emotional literacy. Thus creating greater resilience for Powys children and young people from within a classroom context (Cefai, 2007). The ELSA intervention is popular and may effectively contribute to these positive outcomes which are linked to both school and life success (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Jazaieri, Morrison, Goldin & Gross, 2015; Marshall, S., Parker, P., Ciarrochi, J., & Heaven, 2013; Murphy, & Fonagy, 2012); Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012)

Results suggest that ELSA is an effective intervention in building resilience and contributing towards positive outcomes across primary, secondary and special school contexts. Coupled with the previous research this may indicate that ELSA is an effective preventative and reactive intervention for psychologically 'at risk' children across a diverse range of backgrounds including but not limited to prematurity, early trauma, poverty, neurodevelopmental conditions, poor mental health, additional learning needs and social/foster care. This may be a useful vehicle for schools to increase and buffer children's mental health and wellbeing against negative risk factors (Murphy & Fonagy, 2012; Sowislo, & Orth, 2013).

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Appendix 1

All About Me

Name:

Age:.....years old

I am a:  girl  boy

I am in year

Did you see your ELSA:



On your own

Or



With other children

	Yes	A little bit	Not really	No
ELSA has helped me to make friends				
I feel happier in school after ELSA				
I enjoyed going to ELSA				
I would like to go to ELSA again				
I enjoyed the activities in ELSA				
I liked my ELSA teacher				
I think my friends would like ELSA				
I think ELSA has helped me				
I liked going to ELSA				

1) What did you like most about ELSA?

2) How did ELSA help you?

3) What do you think would make ELSA better?