

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties



ISSN: 1363-2752 (Print) 1741-2692 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rebd20

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To cite this article: Bryony R. Nicholson-Roberts, Matthew P. Somerville & Frances Lee (23 Jul 2025): A multiple case study exploring how the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme operates in secondary schools, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, DOI: 10.1080/13632752.2025.2536983

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2025.2536983

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A multiple case study exploring how the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme operates in secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a small-scale qualitative approach to examine how the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme operates in secondary schools, focusing on facilitating factors and challenges in its implementation. Research on ELSA interventions in secondary schools is limited; this study seeks to address this gap and provide insights to inform its implementation in these settings. A multiple case study design and semi-structured interviews were conducted in two secondary schools in one South England Local Authority with 14 participants, including ELSAs, Special Educational Needs Coordinators, pupils, and school staff. Cross-case thematic analysis identified four overarching themes: 'ELSA programme links with wider systems'; 'a structured and flexible intervention'; 'core ELSA skills and qualities'; and 'challenges for ELSAs and pupils'. These findings contribute to understanding ELSA programme implementation in secondary schools and have implications for enhancing its effectiveness and impact

KEYWORDS

ELSA; emotional literacy support assistant; secondary school; mental health intervention: implementation

Introduction

The mental health of children and young people (CYP) in England is of growing concern, with recent figures indicating that in 2020 one in six CYP experienced mental health difficulties (NHS Digital 2020). Similarly, Young Minds' survey (2020), commissioned by Censuswide, reported that since the COVID-19 pandemic, 80% of young people with mental health needs agreed that their mental health had worsened.

Whilst the reasons for the increase in poor mental health and related outcomes for CYP are likely multi-faceted, it is timely to consider early interventions that aim to support CYP's mental health. As CYP spend a large amount of their time in school, schools have been recognised as key sites for social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) support (2022; Department for Education and Department of Health 2017). Proposals for increased school-based mental health provision are also supported by the finding that two-thirds of respondents in the Young Minds' survey (Young 2020) indicated that they would prefer to access mental health support without having to visit their GP. The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme is one example of a school-based SEMH intervention, which this current study will explore.



Theoretical framework

A developmental model that aims to explain how interactional processes and systems impact on CYP's development is Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, and its theory of Process-Person-Context-Time (P-P-C-T) (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). This model outlines, with the child at the centre, five nested systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem) that form the Context element of the P-P-C-T theory. The first system within this model is the microsystem, which includes contexts that are small and proximal to the individual, such as the family and school. The mesosystem represents the interactions and processes that occur between different contexts within the child's microsystem, this could include interactions between school staff. The exosystem encompasses systems that indirectly impact on the child and their microsystems, for example, local authority education policy. The macrosystem comprises of social and political systems that are large and distant from the child, such as government, culture and belief systems. Changes over the course of the child's development are considered through the chronosystem, which also captures the Time element of the P-P-C-T model.

Interactions between individuals and objects in their microsystem and exosystem (such as interactions between a pupil and school staff members), are known as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner 2001). Proximal processes can impact either positively or negatively on development when they occur frequently over periods of time. Within-person characteristics can also influence development, proximal processes, and systems, and include: demand characteristics (e.g. personal identity), resource characteristics (e.g. cognitive and emotional resources and access to basic needs), and force characteristics (e.g. temperament) (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

Supporting CYP's mental health through the P-P-C-T model enables schools and educational psychologists, who have a role in developing school-based SEMH practices (Department for Education 2022), to consider how interventions can best support CYP's SEMH.

The emotional Literacy support Assistant (ELSA) programme

Since its development by Sheila Burton, an educational psychologist, in the Southampton local authority (Burton 2008), the ELSA programme has been utilised by local authorities across the UK. The ELSA programme is a school-based intervention delivered by teaching assistants, known as ELSAs. The ELSA programme aims to extend schools' capacity to support primary and secondary school-age pupils who are experiencing mild to moderate SEMH difficulties through individual or small-group sessions.

ELSA intervention is recommended to consist of 6-10 weekly, 30-minute to 1-hour sessions (Burton 2011, 2018). ELSAs are trained and supervised by educational psychologists – a key unique feature of the ELSA programme (Burton 2011).

ELSA research

Although a widely utilised intervention within UK schools (ELSA Network 2017), the ELSA programme research base is small, with only a handful of published articles alongside educational psychology service (EPS) review papers and Doctoral Theses.

ELSA training and supervision

Educational psychologist-led ELSA training and supervision is a key unique component of the ELSA programme, and research has indicated that ELSAs report general satisfaction with educational psychology-led supervision (Burton 2008; France and Billington 2020; Osborne and Burton 2014) and that ELSAs' self-efficacy improved post-ELSA training (Grahamslaw 2010).



The impact of ELSA intervention on CYP's SEMH

The impact of ELSA interventions on CYP's SEMH needs have been explored utilising quantitative tools with varied findings. Using wait-list control groups, Burton, Osborne, and Norgate (2010) identified that teachers reported significant improvements for pupils' total Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 1997) and Emotional Literacy Checklist scores (ELC) (Faupel 2003a, 2003b), compared to pupils on an ELSA programme wait-list. However, pupil self-report ELC scores did not show significant differences. Lack of significance in pupil self-report data could reflect CYP considering their emotionality across different contexts (school, peer group and home-life), compared to teachers who may only reflect on CYP's class-based behaviour.

As the ELSA programme is a non-manualised intervention with individualised targeted outcomes, quantitative measures that explore general improvements in SEMH (such as the SDQ and ELCs) may not be sensitive enough to identify CYP's progress towards specific ELSA programme targets. To overcome this, Silver, Emanuel, and Jones (2024) utilised non-standardised ELSA programme specific emotional literacy measures – intervention assessment records (ELSA Support 2024) completed by ELSAs and teachers, and social and emotional support assessment questionnaires (ELSA Support 2024) completed by primary and secondary aged pupils who either received 6-week ELSA interventions or were on ELSA wait-lists. This method found significant positive increases in emotional literacy skills for pupils who received ELSA interventions and that emotional literacy gains were maintained 10-weeks post intervention.

Whilst quantitative data is beginning to highlight that ELSA can positively impact on pupil SEMH, quantitative studies cannot provide information about the processes that help or hinder effective ELSA interventions. To enable a deeper exploration of this non-manualised intervention, qualitative accounts from key ELSA stakeholders can provide helpful insights into the functioning of the programme.

Qualitative research has highlighted that key ELSA programme stakeholders (pupils, ELSAs, school staff, and parents) perceive ELSA interventions to improve pupils' SEMH (Barker 2017; Bravery and Harris 2009; Burton, Traill, and Norgate 2009; Grahamslaw 2010; Hills 2016; Krause, Blackwell, and Claridge 2020; Leighton 2015; McEwen 2019; Wong et al. 2020). However, it is worth noting that only one study, a doctoral thesis, has focused solely on secondary school-based ELSA interventions (Begley 2016).

ELSA and pupil relationships

Possible processes present within interactions between ELSAs and pupils that may facilitate positive SEMH outcomes have been highlighted in ELSA programme research. Firstly, the importance of the relationship between ELSAs and pupils receiving ELSA intervention has been identified by a range of primary and secondary school-based ELSA programme stakeholders (Begley 2016; Hills 2016; Krause, Blackwell, and Claridge 2020; McEwen 2019; Miles 2015; Wilding and Claridge 2016; Wong et al. 2020). Recognition of the importance of relationships between ELSAs and pupils could indicate that ELSA interventions offer similar attachment processes outlined in extensions to attachment theory that highlight the role that positive teacher and pupil relationships can have on child development and functioning (Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman 2003).

However, whilst trusted and secure ELSA and pupil relationships may be beneficial, some ELSA programme research has indicated that pupils supported by ELSAs may become too dependent on their ELSA (Begley 2016; Krause, Blackwell, and Claridge 2020; Mann 2014; Wong et al. 2020), leading to some pupils not developing independent emotion regulation skills.

In-line with the importance of relationships, ELSA programme research (Begley 2016; Hills 2016; McEwen 2019; Wong et al. 2020) has indicated that ELSAs' unique qualities and skills facilitate a safe space where pupils feel able to express themselves. Evidence of ELSAs' unique qualities enabling pupil talk could indicate their use of attunement (Trevarthen 1979) and containment (Bion 1961) principles.

The importance of having a space to talk through issues has also been identified as a key process in previous ELSA programme research (Barker 2017; Begley 2016; Hills 2016; Krause, Blackwell, and Claridge 2020; McEwen 2019; Wilding and Claridge 2016). Encouraging pupils to talk about their concerns and emotions is outlined as a key aim of ELSA intervention (Burton 2011); however, it is worth considering critiques that highlight some negative effects of encouraging talk and rumination (e.g. Craig 2009), particularly when emotional talk is encouraged within an intervention led by school staff with low levels of therapeutic expertise (e.g. teaching assistants).

The present study

The current study aims to expand the research base and explore ELSA programme implementation within secondary school contexts.

From a P-P-C-T perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), the influence of any intervention on an individual is mediated by their surrounding environments and the proximal processes within them. Therefore, the success of an intervention, such as the ELSA programme, may depend on wider contextual issues and whole-school approaches (Roffey 2016; Weare and Nind 2011). To date these factors have received limited attention in the secondary school ELSA programme research literature. Therefore, by recognising P-P-C-T influences, this research aims to explore how ELSA stakeholders (pupils, ELSAs, and school staff) perceive the implementation of secondary school-based ELSA programmes.

Specifically, the current study's research questions (RQs) were:

RQ1: How does the ELSA programme operate in secondary schools?

RQ2: What facilitates the implementation of the ELSA programme in secondary schools?

RQ3: What challenges affect the implementation of the ELSA programme in secondary schools?

Materials and Methods

Design

This research worldview was based on a social constructionist paradigm. Research conducted from this perspective requires one to question sweeping assumptions of how the world appears, and to acknowledge that the concepts we understand are relative to factors like power structures, culture, and history (Burr 2003). This research utilised a multiple case study design within a qualitative methodology. A case was defined as 'a secondary school within the focus local authority where the ELSA programme had been running for at least one year'.

Two secondary schools were recruited from one local authority, as the ELSAs received similar training from the local authority EPS.

Participants

Two schools who met the case study criteria were identified by educational psychologists working in the focus local authority. Following the agreement of the schools' SENCOs and ELSAs to participate in the study, snowball sampling with the SENCOs and ELSAs was utilised to identify school staff and pupils who could talk in detail about their school's ELSA programme. Across the two schools, 14 participants were recruited and interviewed. Informed consent was obtained from ELSAs, school staff, pupils' parents, and pupils. Participant information from School-1 and School-2 are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1.	Participant	information.
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Table 1. Faiticipal	it iiiioiiiiatioii.			
Schoo	l-1	School-2		
SENCO) -1	SENCO-2		
Fema	ale	Female		
Assistant	Head-1	Home School Link Worker-2		
Male	e	Female		
Teach	er-1	Teacher-2a	Teacher-2b	
Fem	ale	Female	Female	
ELSA-1a	ELSA-1b	ELSA-2		
Female	Female	Female		
Pupil-1a	Pupil-1b	Pupil-2a	Pupil-2b	
Male	Male	Male	Male	

Procedure

To gain an in-depth understanding of how the ELSA programme operates in the two case study schools, semi-structured interviews were utilised. Guided by the research questions, three interview schedules were developed to structure the interviews for ELSAs, pupils, and school staff. The ELSA, and school staff schedules were piloted with an ELSA and a Head of Year from a local secondary school. The pupil interview schedule was trialled with an educational psychology colleague. Feedback from these pilot processes was discussed between the authors and amendments were made to the interview schedules. Amendments included adjusting question orders and the introduction of a scaling question to the pupil schedule to enable pupils to explore their feelings about their ELSA intervention. Interview questions were open-ended and included prompts to encourage participants to offer their views without restraint.

All interviews took place in quiet confidential spaces within each school, and pupils were interviewed in the familiar space of the ELSA intervention room. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour 20 minutes, with pupil interviews being the shortest.

Data analysis

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013), as this approach allows for patterns across cases and participant data sets to be reported (Braun and Clarke 2013). The interviews were transcribed by the second author, and initial codes were first identified inductively, before coding relevant to the research questions was completed. Initial codes were reviewed and collated using NVIVO-11 data analysis software. Codes within each school-case were collated into synthesised cross-case thematic groups (Yin 2014) which answered the research questions. This cross-case synthesis involved triangulating themes between the two school case studies and creating an overarching thematic map (see Figure 1).

As only the second author coded the interview data, to decrease researcher bias, codes and themes were frequently reviewed and discussed by all the research authors during research supervision sessions.

Ethics

Ethical approval was gained from the Institute of Education, UCL Psychology and Human Development Department's ethics process. Research information sheets were given to all participants and pupils' parents prior to written informed consent being gained. To reduce the risk of harm to participants, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without question, offered post-interview debrief and follow-up contact with the interviewer, and were signposted to further support in school and within the Local Authority. The interviewer also utilised psychological attunement skills throughout the interviews to support participants through any perceived distress or discomfort.

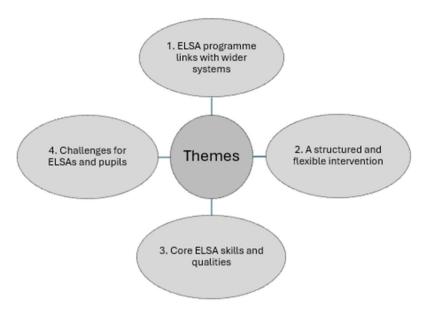


Figure 1. Cross-case thematic map.

Results

The cross-case thematic analysis identified four overarching themes, these were: 'ELSA programme links with wider systems', 'A structured and flexible intervention', 'Core ELSA skills and qualities', and 'Challenges for ELSAs and pupils'. A thematic map of the cross-case findings can be seen in Figure 1.

Theme 1: ELSA programme links with wider systems

The interviews indicated that the ELSA programmes had links to wider systems within the schools, and externally to the local authority EPS through supervision. In both schools, the ELSA programme was one part of the schools' tiered SEMH provision.

If it's an emerging need then I'll just go to [Home School Link Worker]. If it was a pupil who already had SEND then I would go to the [SENCO] she would then refer it on to [ELSA-2]. (Teacher-2b)

ELSA-related communication with wider school systems appeared to happen, but mostly via SENCOs and other senior managers. Improved links between ELSAs and school staff were highlighted as an area for improvement.

To do something that ties up better with the teachers and utilises that you know kind of teacher-ELSA link which hasn't really been forged yet or forged well enough. (SENCO-2)

Communication with parents appeared limited and happened predominantly at the beginning of interventions. Staff in both schools indicated that these communications could be increased. However, Assistant Head-1 also shared caution towards this.

The link with families at home could potentially be more with an ELSA but then you're extending the ELSAs' job to work with the family. (Assistant Head-1)

The interviews highlighted that support from and links with school staff, other ELSAs and educational psychologists was recognised as vital in ensuring that ELSAs felt supported in carrying out their role in school.



The ELSA is supported by the EP [educational psychologist] and she has supervision from the EP and they go "Oh phew it's all legit" and they do rest assured. (SENCO-2)

The need for additional support from educational psychologists was also raised.

In an ideal world maybe it would be nice to have a hotline to an Ed Psych who I could run something by. (ELSA-1b)

Supportive and challenging factors related to running the ELSA programme within and alongside the complex systems of secondary schools and pupils' home lives were also highlighted. There was acknowledgement that ELSA support can only do so much as wider systems impact on CYP's mental health.

You have to look at some of the backgrounds that students come from, you know you're a little drop in a very big pond and I think sometimes you have to take that onboard. (ELSA-1b)

You're a little pebble in a pond (ELSA-1a)

The impact of shifting priorities and a continual need to raise the status of ELSA and SEMH support amongst school staff was highlighted through the recognition that competing demands within schools can deprioritise ELSA interventions.

From May all the way through to July I had to be in exams along with doing the ELSA training, so to be honest you know it had a massive, massive impact on the provision and on the students. (ELSA-2)

Theme 2: a structured and flexible intervention

Interviews indicated that from beginning to end, pupils' ELSA interventions were both structured and flexible. Structure was present in the referral systems and the planning of sessions. Flexibility was indicated in the timetabling of pupils' ELSA sessions.

It will either be once a week, and the sessions last for an hour each, or it will be every fortnight. (ELSA-2)

For pupils, flexibility was noted to be present within the approaches used by their ELSA to meet their needs.

She sometimes scales things and does charts and sometimes gives me a wheel of different adjectives that could describe different emotions and sometimes she gives me strategies to deal with the anxiety. (Pupil-1a)

Flexibility in the length of pupils' ELSA interventions beyond the recommended 6–10 weeks occurred in both schools. Time taken to build strong relationships between ELSAs and pupils, and working within complex school systems, were given as key reasons for this.

The first few sessions it's so important to build that relationship with the student so you know, sometimes I find two-three sessions they may not be structured it may just be us playing a game, chatting, really getting to know each other. (ELSA-2)

The difficulty of resourcing and planning a flexible intervention was also highlighted. For ELSA-1b the lack of a set programme was noted to be a challenge at times.

What was lacking for me was that it wasn't a programme, so then you have to go through the folder and trying to find out "What is the programme I am looking for?" and put your own programme together. (ELSA-1b)

Theme 3: core ELSA skills and qualities

The ELSA programme was perceived to operate through the deployment of uniquely able, ELSA programme-trained, and skilled teaching assistants. It was apparent from the interviews that the ELSAs' unique personal qualities and their specific skillsets were viewed as a key factor that enabled them to build effective relationships with pupils.



She's [ELSA] not patronising in our sessions and she doesn't try to dismiss what I say because if I try to explain how I feel to some people they try and rationalise things. (Pupil-1a)

The use of tacit but active applications of psychology by ELSAs to support pupils' emotional growth was described. Processes related to attachment and containment appeared frequently throughout the interviews, and it became apparent that these psychological processes were a core part of the ELSAs' approach.

[It is] more about letting things out and promoting "You should speak about this, if you're feeling this", so it's less kind of you keep it in. (Assistant Head-1)

The interviews highlighted that as a result of strong relationships between ELSAs and pupils, ELSAs were able to utilise a range of psychologically informed activities, including psychoeducation, strengths-based approaches, and narrative approaches. Pupil-2a explained some of the psychoeducation approaches used in his ELSA sessions.

I had started talking to Miss about certain sounds that sort of set me like off, either I'll just get a little bit annoyed or it's either my face will go bright red and most of me will go bright red and it's like a pain rushing through my head. (Pupil-2a)

ELSA-2 shared how she applied narrative-based approaches in her work.

We write little comic strips and stories and things together. (ELSA-2)

Theme 4: challenges for ELSAs and pupils

Whilst the interviews highlighted the positive effects and processes within ELSA interventions, challenging effects for both ELSAs and pupils were also described. For the ELSAs the role appeared to be emotionally intense and could cause emotional exhaustion. These emotional effects were believed to surface from the high level of empathy and containment of pupils' feelings that the role requires.

I've dealt with some quite tricky situations and everyone's been busy and then you internalise that for quite a long time and then it's not until you go and cry in the toilets you think actually I need to really go and talk to someone. (ELSA-2)

Other difficult feelings that surfaced for ELSAs included: feelings of guilt when having to prioritise trainings or school meetings above ELSA sessions; and an initial lack of confidence in their role. ELSA-1b shared how she felt whilst developing her ELSA role.

My background wasn't in SEND whereas the other people you've interviewed might have had more experience so I am very much learning and it's a steep learning curve. (ELSA-1b)

Challenging effects on pupils were also identified in the interviews. Firstly, difficult emotional responses, such as paranoia and embarrassment, were noted to occur for some pupils after they had opened up to their ELSA.

[He] has found a little bit of paranoia actually about the fact that he's opened up to me and he's told me stuff that he's never told anybody else. (ELSA-1a)

The second challenging effect on pupils related to pupil readiness to open up and talk with their ELSA. This factor was described as one reason why pupils' ELSA interventions may be longer.

At first I think I was a bit hesitant because there was a lot of emotions that I was bottling up inside of me for more than a year so it took me some time to get things out. (Pupil-1a)

Additionally, interviews indicated that there can be a reluctance among pupils to end their ELSA intervention. Home School Link Worker-2 raised a concern that pupils can become dependent on their FLSA



The other thing obviously is that they're not dependent on it. I think it's very important that they learn resilience and then transition you know going up to college and everything else. (Home School Link Worker-2)

Difficult endings were also highlighted in Pupil-2b's interview.

End of ELSA itself or, I don't particularly like to think about the end of things I just prefer to have the happy times whilst I still can really. (Pupil-2b)

Discussion

This current study explored how ELSA programmes operate in secondary schools and identified facilitating factors and challenges relevant to ELSA programme implementation in these settings. Below, the findings are discussed in relation to each research question and key theories and previous research, including Bronfenbrenner's P-P-C-T model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006).

RQ1: How does the ELSA programme operate in secondary schools?

Data from both schools indicated that ELSA programmes were part of wider SEMH support within the secondary schools. However, contrary to recommendations (e.g. Roffey 2016) these targeted supports were not embedded alongside structured whole-school SEMH approaches. In-line with governmental guidelines (Department for Education 2018; Department of Health 2015), the level of whole-school SEMH support across both schools was considered to be developing, as examples of a growing awareness and acknowledgement of the need to support CYP's SEMH needs were demonstrated in the interviews. This finding links to the Context and Process elements of Bronfenbrenner's (e.g. Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) P-P-C-T model. Minimal SEMH provision embedded throughout the school system, and thus less whole-staff understanding of SEMH needs, could result in fewer supportive interactional processes between pupils and wider school staff, as was indicated by some comments made by participants in this research. Therefore, generalisation and maintenance of SEMH skills developed through ELSA interventions would be less likely to happen in school settings where whole-staff SEMH awareness is limited. In light of this finding, it is important that schools and educational psychologists involved in ELSA programmes consider how ELSA interventions can be complimented by whole-school approaches to ensure school environments encourage as many supportive proximal processes between pupils and school staff as possible.

Although noted as present in both schools, the level of interactions between ELSAs and school staff and ELSAs and parents was found to be minimal, reliant on ELSAs' own initiative, and often indirect. Although pupils believed some teachers were aware of their ELSA intervention, due to them missing lessons for ELSA sessions, ELSA and school staff communication appeared to happen between pastoral and SEND staff, and indirectly between ELSAs and teachers. Parents were informed that their child was being offered ELSA intervention, and communication beyond the beginning of the intervention was rare. From a P-P-C-T perspective, where interactive proximal processes are limited, it is theorised that they are less likely to lead to developmental change (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Therefore, where ELSA and school staff communication is limited, wider support for pupils' SEMH development could be less available. Therefore, educational psychologists and schools will need to plan how to better facilitate broader ELSA programme communication pathways.

A notable deviation from the core elements of the ELSA programme was identified in the length of pupils' interventions. Data from both schools indicated that pupils' intervention lengths usually far exceeded the 6–10 weeks recommended by the ELSA programme literature (Burton 2011; ELSA Network 2017). To our knowledge, extended intervention length is a finding that has only been identified in one other study looking at primary school children's views and experiences of ELSA intervention (Wong et al. 2020). Our findings highlight how aspects of the P-P-C-T model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) present within the ELSA programme impact on pupils' ELSA

intervention length. Firstly, within-person characteristics of pupils could impact on intervention length, where factors such as a pupils' level of SEND could lead to activity adaptations or a greater level of support provision, which prolongs the progress of the ELSA intervention. Furthermore, factors such as pupil readiness could also impact on an ELSA's willingness to end a pupil's ELSA intervention.

Secondly, the reasons for lengthier ELSA interventions identified from the interviews also correspond to the context element of the P-P-C-T model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), where events occurring within the microsystem of the school were considered to impact on the length of pupils' ELSA interventions. Secondary schools are large and complex social systems, therefore, ELSA programmes can often face timetabling disruptions within the setting as wider school events may clash with ELSA sessions.

Additionally, the interview data suggested that it can take a few sessions to establish trusting ELSA and pupil relationships. ELSA and pupil relationships are recognised within the ELSA programme literature as key to the intervention. As a result of these findings, it is vital that those involved in secondary school ELSA programmes are made aware that, although building relationships with pupils can extend the length of pupils' ELSA interventions, this time might be crucial to intervention success.

ELSA sessions can be understood as micro-time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) within the P-P-C-T model, and therefore attention should be given to the activities and processes that happen within sessions, as, through consistent occurrence, they can influence the development of pupils' emotional wellbeing. Interviewee accounts highlighted that a range of psychologically based approaches were applied by the ELSAs within their sessions and that these matched the approaches outlined in ELSA programme literature (Shotton and Burton 2008). The most predominant references to psychology related to attachment (Bowlby 1969), attunement (Trevarthen 1979) and containment (Bion 1961) principles. Application of these principles appeared to occur through the ELSAs' skilled interactions with pupils, and as such they can be understood as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). ELSA intervention was described by pupils to offer a space to be listened to and emotionally contained. The presence of ELSA to pupil relational processes has been recognised in previous ELSA programme research in primary school (e.g. Wong et al. 2020) and secondary school (Begley 2016) contexts. Thus, this current research provides further evidence for the presence of relational processes within secondary school ELSA programme contexts.

RQ2: What facilitates the implementation of the ELSA programme in secondary schools?

The interviews indicated that there were factors related to both the schools' ELSA programmes and wider systems that were believed to support implementation within secondary schools.

ELSAs were identified as holding unique skills and qualities that appeared to be key to the success of ELSA interventions. Interviews highlighted key ELSA qualities, akin to humanistic therapeutic principles (Rogers 1957), including: being caring, showing genuine interest, and unconditional positive regard towards pupils.

The presence of these qualities appeared to enable ELSAs to build attuned and trusting relationships with pupils, a previously recognised facilitating factor for SEMH support (Green 2006) and ELSA interventions (Begley 2016; Hills 2016; McEwen 2019; Wong et al. 2020). Therefore, it is likely that ELSAs demonstrate their care for pupils and promote the development of an emotional secure base or secondary attachment figure (Bomber and Hughes 2013; Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman 2003), indicating ELSA and pupil relationships as a proximal process (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) that support pupils' SEMH development. This finding suggests that schools will need to carefully consider who they deploy as ELSAs, ensuring they have these fundamental attributes.

In accordance with the P-P-C-T model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), factors that do not directly interact with CYP (e.g. factors in their mesosystems and exosystems) can still influence their development if the processes within these systems occur regularly. Therefore, it is

important to recognise that this current research identified that the process of support and supervision for ELSAs from both educational psychologists and the school community were believed to benefit ELSA programmes, as they were described to help ELSAs reflect on and develop their work with pupils. This finding supports previous research that identified supervision as facilitative for ELSA programmes (e.g. France and Billington 2020; McEwen 2019; Osborne and Burton 2014).

Additionally, the support and training that ELSAs receive from educational psychologists was viewed to give the intervention a heightened status above other school-based interventions by the SENCOs. Although noted as an intervention valued by key stakeholders in previous ELSA programme research (e.g. Grahamslaw 2010; Wilding and Claridge 2016), the finding that, as well as the perception of positive pupil outcomes, the support and supervision from educational psychologists led to a greater perception of the intervention is of importance for ELSA programmes and other educational psychologist-led interventions.

The flexibility within ELSA programmes was believed to facilitate successful intervention processes. In particular, the freedom of ELSAs to adapt both their approach and the intervention length enabled the intervention to be pupil-centred. Whilst, extended ELSA intervention length has not received much attention in previous research, flexibility as a general facilitating factor has (e.g. Begley 2016; McEwen 2019). With teaching assistants deployed to deliver ELSA interventions, these research findings counteract evidence that has indicated that teaching assistants, due to their apparent lower skill level, can be less adept at working flexibly to meet pupils' needs (Giangreco 2010).

RQ3: What challenges affect the implementation of the ELSA programme in secondary schools?

Interview accounts from school staff and ELSAs indicated that supporting pupils' SEMH needs can provoke difficult emotional responses for ELSAs. Whilst all of the ELSAs talked about the importance of seeking support from others, there is a risk that ELSAs' experiences of emotionally charged work with pupils could lead to emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Jackson 1981). This finding is important as the experience of difficult emotions by ELSAs has received little attention in previous research, with only one out of the three secondary school ELSAs in Begley's (2016) study identifying negative effects of being emotionally involved in pupils' lives.

An area related to ELSAs' emotional responses that has been highlighted in previous research is ELSAs' lack of confidence in their work (e.g. Begley 2016; McEwen 2019). ELSAs in this current study highlighted this as a key area of challenge for their work. Such a finding throws some doubt on Grahamslaw's (2010) findings of increased ELSA self-efficacy post-training. Whilst increases may have occurred, there is no assurance that new levels of ELSA self-efficacy are sustained over time. To deliver pupil-centred support via non-manualised ELSA intervention requires adaptability, therefore ELSAs' self-efficacy may not be stable, as different pupils will raise different challenges and threaten ELSAs' feelings of competence. These findings indicate that whilst ELSAs' self-efficacy may rise post-training, continued support and guidance is needed to ensure their self-efficacy remains elevated to help them respond to the broad and complex range of pupils' needs.

With emotional exhaustion a possibility, and ELSAs' confidence at risk, supervision and support should be a fundamental focus for ELSA programmes. Findings also highlighted that more frequent support from educational psychologists was wanted, particularly when ELSAs felt uncertain. It may be that working as an ELSA in a secondary school is more difficult due to secondary pupil characteristics, including higher levels of mental health difficulty (NHS Digital 2020). With supervisory processes occurring in pupils' mesosystem, between ELSAs and educational psychologists, and the theorised impact that more frequent processes can have on CYP's development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998), the most successful ELSA interventions may be realised when ELSAs receive more educational psychology support, in addition to half-termly group supervision.

Another challenge for ELSA interventions identified in this study that has rarely been identified in previous research is that of negative effects for pupils. When negative effects for pupils have been identified it has been for secondary school pupils (Begley 2016).

In the current study, paranoia, embarrassment, and reluctance to engage were all reported as difficult emotional responses that could affect pupils' engagement during ELSA sessions. Paranoia and embarrassment were reported by ELSAs to have surfaced for pupils within ELSA sessions after pupils had disclosed their thoughts and feelings. Issues related to disclosure appeared frequently in Begley's (2016) research, but this has not been identified in research conducted on primary school ELSA programmes. Therefore, it may be the case that due to adolescence being a developmental stage where greater self-awareness develops (Blakemore 2018), secondary school pupils may be more likely to experience feelings of paranoia and embarrassment within ELSA sessions. Additionally, whilst these negative effects were not reported to be long-lasting for pupils, and that the nonjudgemental and sensitive approach of the ELSAs was described to create a safe environment for disclosure, critics of school-based emotional literacy support (e.g. Craig 2009) could argue that further investigation is needed into the risk of any negative emotional effects that ELSA interventions may cause.

Within the interviews, there was also mention of pupils' dependency on their ELSA. This finding could indicate that ELSA interventions do not consistently enable independent emotional regulation as pupils may become dependent on their ELSA to manage difficult feelings. Pupil dependency was also highlighted as a factor in previous research for some primary school (Wong et al. 2020) and secondary school (Begley 2016) pupils. Dependency could explain why previous ELSA programme research has found less improvement in pupils' SEMH outcomes amongst parental reports, as regulation skills may be less easily generalised beyond school contexts. Dependency within the ELSA and pupil relationship may also explain why, in the current study, ELSA interventions extended beyond the length recommended within ELSA programme literature, as self-regulation is not easily achieved. Therefore, further investigation into levels of dependency and the development of selfregulation skills within ELSA interventions is needed.

Interviews indicated the challenges of working with pupils within complex contexts, namely the microsystem contexts of home and secondary schools (Bronfenbrenner 1979). As ELSA interventions happen independent of pupils' wider microsystems and with limited communication happening between ELSAs and these systems, generalisation of any newly learnt SEMH skills beyond the ELSA intervention could be a challenge. For pupils who were described to have adverse home contexts, including loss or poverty, ELSA intervention was described similarly by both ELSA-1a and ELSA-1b, with ELSA-1a stating that an ELSA is 'a little pebble in a pond'. This quote indicates a recognition that the cause of SEMH difficulties is complex, and by working solely with pupils, only small ripple-effect changes for pupils may be possible. Additionally, with ELSA and parent communication being limited, there was recognition amongst some school staff that connections between ELSA interventions and pupils' home contexts could be improved.

The application of the P-P-C-T model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) to the implementation of the ELSA programme could support wider systemic ELSA programme impact, as time could be given to support ELSA programme schools to consider how to include pupils' wider contexts and enhance the proximal processes between key adults and pupils, so that more emotionally attuned school and home environments can be developed. Focusing on ELSA sessions and wider factors, such as including parents, also shifts the focus from CYP changing, to one that encourages adults in CYP's lives to consider how processes and interactions can affect CYP's SEMH needs.

Limitations

A limitation for this current study is the relatively small sample size (n = 14). A small sample size could impact on how representative the findings are for secondary school ELSA programmes. However, the focus of this study was generating theories of how ELSA programmes operate in secondary schools,



so that similar themes can be considered for ELSA programme implementation in secondary school contexts. Future ELSA programme research could look to include larger samples and explore whether the themes highlighted in this study reflect themes across broader samples of secondary schools who implement ELSA programmes.

Secondly, ELSA research can often be critiqued for its inclusion of either only school staff or parental voice alongside pupil voices; rarely are all three voices triangulated. This could also be a critique of the current study, as only school staff members' and pupils' voices were included, and not parents. Future research should consider how parent views related to secondary school ELSA programmes can be included.

Future implications for the ELSA programme and research

Despite these limitations, the current study has added to the limited secondary school–related ELSA programme research and identified key themes regarding the implementation of secondary school ELSA programmes. These key themes have important implications for this intervention and related educational psychology practice. Firstly, schools need to consider how well the ELSA programme fits within their understanding of SEMH needs, as this current study highlighted how limited school-wide understanding of SEMH can impact on how ELSA interventions are prioritised, in terms of timetabling, and its influence on whole-school SEMH understanding. Therefore, key considerations for educational psychologists and secondary schools include ensuring that all school staff are well informed about the ELSA programme and the importance of protecting ELSA sessions from disruption. One way that whole-school understanding of the ELSA programme could be improved is through educational psychologists providing whole-school staff training to schools with ELSA interventions so that its aims and best practice can be outlined.

Secondly, it was also highlighted that consideration needs to be given to how ELSAs can be better supported to build their communication with teachers and parents. To achieve this, it is recommended that educational psychologists provide more information about the importance of communication between ELSAs, parents and teachers during ELSA training and supervision. SENCOs may also need to consider whether ELSAs require additional time allocated to their role to help ensure that communication with teachers and parents can occur.

A further implication relates to the finding that secondary pupils' ELSA interventions were found to be longer in length than recommended within the ELSA programme literature. As time taken to build ELSA and pupil relationships appeared as a key factor related to longer intervention length, educational psychologists will need to outline the importance of beginnings and make ELSAs aware of approaches that can support the development of relationships with pupils during their training and supervision sessions. School management will also need to be made aware that ELSA interventions may take longer than the 6- to 10-week recommendation. Additionally, pupil dependency on ELSA was also identified as a factor relating to longer ELSA interventions and so ELSAs will also need guidance in their training and supervision to plan for effective intervention endings and ensure that pupils are supported to develop independent self-regulation skills.

As ELSAs in this study were identified as having core skills and the ability to utilise supportive psychological principles such as attunement, containment, and empathy, it is important that educational psychologists support secondary schools to carefully consider which staff members they deploy as ELSAs and ensure they have appropriate contingency plans for ELSA programme staffing.

Finally, due to the identification of challenging feelings for secondary school ELSAs and pupils, the role of supervision from educational psychologists to further alleviate these challenges requires more in-depth exploration and research. It could be argued that educational psychologists need to offer additional support and supervisory contact to ELSAs to improve positive outcomes. This support could include more frequent email or telephone contact with ELSAs or additional bookable consultation sessions in-between half-termly group supervision.



We sincerely thank the school staff and pupils for their generous participation and for welcoming us into their schools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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